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Symposia. Rethinking Rorty’s Pragmatism: Ethics after Epistemology
Introduction to Rethinking Rorty’s Pragmatism: Ethics after Epistemology

Michela Bella and Chris Voparil

1 We are in the midst of a reevaluation of Richard Rorty’s pragmatism. The last few years have seen a spate of new books on Rorty. This year alone two critical anthologies already are out and two more are in preparation. A new volume of previously unpublished philosophical papers by Rorty will be released in a few months (see Rorty 2020). The intensification of interest since his passing in 2007 spans the globe and shows no signs of abating. Spurred in part by a new generation of readers of American philosophy who have come to the classical figures of pragmatism through Rorty and harbor no preexisting antipathies, the scholarly reception of Rorty as an unhelpful interloper who did as much to distort as to revive the tradition is giving way to fruitful dialogues, constructive engagements, and immanent critiques from which we can learn. Readers are patiently distinguishing Rorty’s more outrageous side from his penetrating insights and incisive criticisms (see Rey 2017). The long delayed “new stage of creative and scholarly work on pragmatism and the several pragmatists,” which one commentator predicted, back in 1982, Rorty’s work would initiate, now finally is upon us (Brodsky 1982: 333).

2 The title of the symposium, “Rethinking Rorty’s Pragmatism: Ethics after Epistemology,” expresses the central aim of this issue: to continue the conversation about the consequences for ethics of Rorty’s famous critique of modern epistemology and its well-known concern with knowledge and representation. The issue features new work that seeks to challenge the divides between and among “classico,” “paleo,” “neo,” and “new” pragmatisms, by rethinking the interconnection of ethics and epistemology through, with, or beyond Rorty’s pragmatism. The opening article of our symposium is Giovanni Maddalena’s “Rorty as a Legitimate Member of the Pragmatist Family,” which is a critical update of the legitimacy of Rorty’s membership in the pragmatist family. Reexamining many criticisms, which mainly focused on Rorty’s problematic relationship with Peirce’s philosophy, Maddalena detects “family resemblances”
between their conceptions and suggests three core topics that prove how Rorty shared central aspects of the classical pragmatists’ common project. These topics are Rorty’s anti-Kantism, the “synthetic drive” animating his philosophical attitude, and his transformative view of philosophy. On the first aspect, Maddalena claims that one can be more precise than Rorty in assaulting Kantianism in the name of anti-foundationalism for “the real problem with the Kantian picture of philosophy, a good representative of the modern tradition of philosophy, is that foundation according to Kant has to be necessary and a priori.” Maddalena is cautious about Rorty’s opportunity to extend his criticism of Kantism to modernity tout court, and accuses Rorty of a certain preconceptual historicism. Indeed, Maddalena envisages the possibility of a convergence between Rorty’s and Peirce’s views on the basis of the mind-world continuity mathematically investigated by Peirce, and what Maddalena defines as Peirce’s a posteriori foundationalism. With regard to the synthetic drive in Rorty’s philosophy, Maddalena acknowledges his profound affinity with the “tendency of the entire classic movement to go beyond the analytic frame that encompasses the epistemology of modern philosophy.” However, he considers Rorty’s exclusive preoccupation with Kantism a limitation on the possibility of rethinking a new epistemology and a new metaphysics in a renewed synthetic perspective. Finally, moving from “systematic philosophy” to “edifying philosophy,” in a transformative sense, and therefore open to political commitment, for Maddalena Rorty’s attack on the separation between the fields of inquiry diverges from classical pragmatists. In the end, Maddalena finds that Rorty underestimates the role of inquiry in his reading of classical pragmatism, and of Dewey in particular.

Four articles concentrate on Rorty’s discussion of epistemology, addressing in new ways different but interconnected topics. In “Does Rorty have a Blindspot about Truth?,” David Macarthur analyses the controversial role normativity plays in Rorty’s conception of truth. He presents his criticisms of several major objections to Rorty’s position, mainly engaging in direct discussion with Huw Price. Macarthur’s defence of Rorty from Price’s “off-target” argument that “Rorty’s norm of communal warranted assertibility suffers the same fate as the norm he calls personal warranted assertibility, namely, that without a distinct norm of truth neither norm can make sense of improvements in one’s epistemic standing whether in terms of the actual community or future extensions and improvements of it” is particularly sophisticated. Against Price’s static or majoritarian conception of justification, Macarthur calls on Rorty’s dynamic conception of justification and the normative pressure deriving from new methods of inquiry, or what Macarthur defines as his “progressive perfectionist conception of communal norms.” Once we renounce the familiar misinterpretation of Rorty as having a majoritarian conception of justification, Price’s criticism loses its strength. Nonetheless, Macarthur identifies another blindspot in Rorty’s conception of truth, which is the lack of coherence in first-person reflection. He argues that Rorty’s notion of truth needs to be complemented by specific attention to the norm of consistency as an integral part of the truth-commitments required by any rational system of beliefs. What, however, survives any criticism and perhaps is Rorty’s greatest legacy, is his neopragmatist perspective about truth – namely, his acknowledgement of the “embeddedness of truth in our linguistic and interpretative practices.”

Michela Bella’s “The Interlacing of Science and Ethics: Rorty’s Critique of Epistemology for a Pragmatist Hermeneutics” focuses on Rorty’s hermeneutical understanding of science and ethics, and their relation, as a way to investigate his pragmatist reshaping
of hermeneutics. Bella insists on the Jamesian and Deweyan element in Rorty’s perspective as deeply inspired by their holistic-syncretic understanding of pragmatism. In this perspective, she identifies an “eirenic strategy” that emerges in Rorty’s approach to moral and scientific issues, which is the result of his movement from epistemology to hermeneutics. The Rortyan reformulation of scientific rationality aligns particularly with the Jamesian intent of confronting scientific dogmatism by questioning the key notion of truth and reconsidering the opposition between scientific and ethical beliefs. Rorty’s personal and historical conception of ethics contrasts with the notion of scientific rationality elaborated in modernity – a notion he harshly criticizes as still belonging to an epistemological worldview – as something that, unlike morality, is able to escape human finitude and contingency. Within a naturalistic hermeneutical framework, Rorty contests the ontological need for necessary connections or disconnections between moral and scientific discourse. Bella’s proposal to read Rorty’s appropriation of hermeneutics along the lines of his recovery of pragmatism may contribute to renovating the current lines of debate around Rorty and pragmatism, especially by reevaluating Rorty’s strong cultural connection to the American philosophical tradition and his commitment to making this pluralistic voice relevant again to contemporary conversations.

In “Pessimistic Fallibilism and Cognitive Vulnerability. Richard Rorty as an Example,” Ángeles J. Perona affirms that rather than rejecting rationality and truth, Rorty’s pragmatism is consistent with a fallibilist model of rationality. However, it differs in an important sense: instead of establishing epistemological fallibilism in relation to truth and objectivity and then extending it to all forms of rational activity, Rorty’s fallibilism emanates from an ethical stance. For Perona, Rorty’s fallibilism “does not focus so much on the permanent possibility of error and the consequent impossibility of achieving unconditional truths, as on the ethical objective of avoiding any relapse into authoritarianism.” Perona offers a frame for usefully evaluating Rorty’s attention to ethics and social relations in the notion of cognitive vulnerability, a broader category than fallibilism which entails an awareness of “the limitations of our cognitive abilities and the conditions to exercise them,” including conditions of power and domination that perpetuate forms of epistemic injustice. Ultimately, she finds that while Rorty “bases the norms of all rational interaction on a democratic social ethics developed on the existential background of vulnerability,” his fallibilism is unduly pessimistic as a result of its reduction of all appeals to the evidence of experience as authoritarian and his related inability to see even the epistemic activity within normal conversational exchanges as playing a role in altering the conditions that give rise to vulnerability.

In “Two Forms of Realism: Making Sense of Rorty’s Controversy with Brandom and Ramberg over Objectivity,” Yvonne Hütter-Almerigi sheds welcome light on an intriguing, Rorty-inspired debate among both neopragmatists and New Pragmatists that turns on the relation of realism, representationalism, and objectivity. Specifically, she interjects several key clarifications regarding Rorty’s perplexing insistence that there is a difference between Robert Brandom’s notion of “made true by facts” and the idea of “getting things right,” which Bjørn Ramberg spurred Rorty to accept. As Hütter-Almerigi explains, there is a substantive change in Rorty’s stance in his 2000 response to Ramberg: where he previously held that there are only causal word-world relations, after Ramberg he recognizes that there are non-causal, though non-representational, relations as well. She pinpoints the precise locus of this shift in a change in Rorty’s understanding of Davidson’s conception of triangulation that seemingly moves Rorty
closer to Brandom. Yet she helps us understand why this is not the case: Brandom’s perspective retains a representational scheme which entails distinct realms for unconceptualized reality and our application of concepts. Brandom’s sense of objects as non-perspectival has “ontological aspirations” that Rorty rightly objects to for its implicit reliance on a scheme-content distinction. For Rorty, claims are not “made true by facts,” but instead are based on the Davidsonian triangle. That is, where Brandom relies on a conception of facts beyond vocabularies to secure objectivity, the view Ramberg and Rorty accept gets there via successful vs. unsuccessful interactions with the world. Hütter-Almerigi holds that for Rorty, “Claims do not have to ‘get things right’ beyond vocabularies since if we ‘get things right’ we cope successfully with our peers and the world.” Fully understood, Rortyan redescription does not absent reality; rather, it rearranges our attention by altering causal dispositions that in turn affect reality.

Emil Višňovský’s expansive, in-depth elaboration of “Rorty’s Humanism: Making it Explicit” helpfully contextualizes the neopragmatist’s humanistic and Romantic commitments in relation to a wide historical array of humanists, both within and outside the pragmatic tradition. His reading expands our understanding of Rorty’s humanism to encompass not only the standard romantic fare but the pragmatist notion of human “coping” with reality and his antirepresentationalism. Even Rorty’s metaphilosophical orientation is informed by “his reaction to what can be termed the anti-humanism of professional philosophy.” Rorty’s ethnocentrism, which entails that “Philosophers must reflect on who they are as members of a particular, historically concrete community and culture,” for Višňovský also is a “pillar” of his humanism. Višňovský affirms Kate Soper’s identification of the elitism and gender-blindness endemic to Rorty’s humanism, while raising questions about her assumption that Rorty’s anti-realism is incompatible with humanism. Rorty’s humanism holds that “we should turn from nonhuman to human reality in our social practices.” It is not a stretch to understand Rorty’s entire philosophico-political project, including both its epistemic and ethical commitments, as an effort to realize a humanistic culture. Višňovský argues for extending Rortyan humanism into our current post- and trans-humanist era, while at the same time recognizing its limitations around the role of non-linguistic experience and its cordonning of self-perfection in the private sphere and of liberal democracy in the public.

In perhaps the most comprehensive account to date of what Brandom has called “the ‘vocabulary’ vocabulary,” Mauro Santelli’s “Redescribing Final Vocabularies: A Rortian Picture of Identity and Selfhood” highlights the relative lack of attention this signature concept received by Rorty himself, as well as the absence of agreement among commentators about how to interpret the notion of final vocabularies. Santelli gathers together the insights Rorty offers for a “pragmatic naturalist conception” of moral identity, but also raises critical questions regarding Rorty’s privileging of final vocabularies in his understanding of self and identity – why are words more central than beliefs and desires, which Rorty elsewhere made central? He helpfully disaggregates the implicit Wittgensteinian, Sellarsian, and Davidsonian commitments entailed by Rorty’s understanding of vocabularies, their relation to social practices, and their normative import. Introducing conceptions from George Herbert Mead and from sociolinguistics, Santelli generates additional clarity regarding this widely-known yet elusive category of Rorty’s. Specifically, understanding final vocabularies as subsets of our “sociolects and idiolects” enables us to grasp Rorty’s contribution: “just as Rorty
can be considered as linguistifying a pragmatist theory of identity in which the social is primitive like Mead’s social psychology, he can also be considered as moralizing sociolinguistic considerations about the relationship between speech and identity.” Words, Santelli holds, offer more flexible and pluralistic ways of marking our relation to communities and are a better measure of what we share, than beliefs. He then illuminates how Rorty’s way of thinking about vocabularies and narratives of moral identity provides resources for understanding the entanglement of speech and devalued social status, in form of the way implicit biases rely on words, that is endemic to epistemic injustice.

The issue’s final two essays probe the nature and limits of Rorty’s underappreciated contributions to the topics of education and pedagogy. Stefano Oliverio’s “Dead-ending Philosophy? On Rorty’s Literary Culture, Democratic Ethos and Political Education” takes up one of the core assumptions of Rorty’s project – namely, that fostering a democratic ethos entails not only shifting from a predominantly philosophical to a literary culture but making edification through literature the primary means of democratic education. Oliverio insightfully compares and contrasts the educational approaches of Rorty and Dewey, but also expands the conversation using Cornelius Castoriadis as a bridge to a philosophical side of the democratic culture and ethos that Rorty may have unnecessarily rejected. The essay then develops a conception of a democratic philosophical culture oriented toward the education of citizens by drawing on the Philosophy for Children (P4C) paradigm, via Matthew Lipman and Ann Sharp, which fosters an “individualizing-critical” mode much earlier in cognitive development than Rorty’s proposal for postponing “individualization” and critical thinking until post-secondary education, limiting the pre-secondary education to “socialization.” On Oliverio’s view, P4C practices a form of “Socratic pragmatism” closer to Dewey than Rorty and the latter’s embrace of E.D. Hirsch’s program of “cultural literacy.” P4C offers resources to augment Rorty’s narrowing of political education to the cultivation of the literary imagination and to help avoid a politicized conception of socialization which elevates the inculcation of values over their critical questioning. At the same time, Oliverio discerns how Rorty may be used to develop more fully the moral use of literary texts by rectifying P4C’s neglect of “creative and caring thinking” and bias toward the analytical-logical.

In “Notes from the Playground: The Educational Process Between Contingency and Luck,” Maura Striano provides an interesting and updated examination of the potentialities of Rorty’s reflections on education, focusing mainly on his widely discussed distinction between socialization and individualization. Striano moves from an episode of Rorty’s adolescence – one that according to Striano, Richard Bernstein would have called a “concrete social form[s] of cruelty” (1992: 287) – that probably affected Rorty’s reflection: “when he was an adolescent, bullies regularly used to beat him up in the playground of his high school, an action that he was unable to avoid.” In this narration Striano illuminates Rorty’s invitation to “acknowledge the capacity that each individual has to create and re-create one’s self, diverting one’s path away from expected roles and performances.” She takes it as a crucial point to investigate education as a form of “edification” that always implies a process of (re)modulation of the relationship between the individual and the society: “a process taking us ‘out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings’ (Rorty 1979: 360).” Considering the new generation of scholars’ line of interpretation, which aims to smooth over the contrast between the two educational phases identified by Rorty,
Striano wonders what it currently means to adopt and extend Rorty’s theoretical proposal in the educational field, questioning, particularly, how to interpret his insistence on the importance of “luck”, which is an element constantly present in the educational process.

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NOTES

1. Recently published books on Rorty include: Calcaterra (2019); Chin (2018); Curtis (2015); McClean (2016); Schulenberg (2015); and Skowroński (2015).
2. See Malachowski (2020) and Auxier, Kramer & Skowroński (2020). Books by Rondel and by Marchetti are forthcoming.

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Important scholars of classic pragmatism deny any relationship between Rorty and the roots of pragmatism. Rorty is particularly at odds with the Peircean architecture of thought, at least at a first glance. Peirce was talking about the pragmatist way to get at truth through scientific research conducted in the long run. He was defending a strong sense of the value of communities and social experience, a very profound and original approach to mathematics, phenomenology, semiotics, metaphysics. Rorty seems simply the opposite. He used the name of pragmatism for very different attitudes towards truth, research, science and, obviously, reality. Even worse, he seemed to highlight a sort of individualism and the abandonment of Philosophy (with capitalized P). Finally, his parasitic view of philosophy as cultural criticism does not respect the passion for solving philosophical problems which was at the heart of pragmatism understood in a Peircean way. On moral ground, then, he advocates ideas that seem to prevent human beings from having a good foundation to say that Hitler or Stalin were wrong. While this is a caricatured portrait of Rorty, he nevertheless often voluntarily played the role of the radical adversary of any tradition in philosophy, including classic pragmatism, and any usual description or definition of the classic terms of philosophy.

In the series of interviews with contemporary philosophers associated with the pragmatist tradition entitled Let me Tell you a Story: Heroes and Events of Pragmatism, published in this review, we collected some interesting opinions about Rorty’s role within the pragmatist family. Despite the many philosophical controversies raised by the “outrageous Rorty,” in Bernstein’s description of the provocative side of his colleague and friend (Maddalena, Frega & Bernstein 2014: 7), many of authors interviewed in the series acknowledge Rorty’s contribution to the pragmatist debate. Bernstein rejects the idea of a fixed canon of American philosophy precisely because it would leave out important figures like Rorty (ibid.: 4). While criticizing Rorty’s propensity to interpret classical texts by Dewey and James in an excessively free manner, Putnam cannot fail to recognize that he managed to get people – even Putnam himself – to read pragmatism (Bella, Boncompagni & Putnam 2015: 7). Moreover, Larry
Hickman insists on the key role Rorty’s 1979 presidential address to the *American Philosophical Association* played in changing the feeling that pragmatism was being marginalized by the prevalence of analytic philosophy (Bella, Santarelli & Hickman 2015: 7). Already after the publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, many pragmatist scholars and philosophers sympathetic to pragmatism criticized Rorty’s misusing of Dewey (cf. Bernstein & Voparil 2010: 2). However, Susan Haack’s criticism of Rorty’s “vulgar” pragmatism is perhaps the harshest (Haack 1995). As is well known, Haack also recently maintained that Rorty confusedly misinterpreted many pragmatist issues, first of all that of foundationalism, and that he has reconnected himself to this philosophical tradition for purely intellectual marketing reasons (Yong & Haack 2010: 15). Certainly, Haack is technically right, if you look at the outcome of Rorty’s statements. Her arguments are keen and compelling. They seem to close the debate definitively.

However, this is not the only possible way of reading Rorty. Rosa Maria Calcaterra (2019), for example, reads Rorty as a complete representative of the pragmatist spirit and she sees a profound continuity between Rorty and classic pragmatists, including many sides of Peirce’s account of knowledge. This difference in evaluation is due to focusing more on Rorty’s philosophical needs – namely, on the general direction undercurrent of his thought – than on the propositions he maintains: “for it is the belief men betray and not that which they parade that has to be studied” (EP2: 349). Assuming a sympathetic attitude toward Rorty’s view, Calcaterra suggests that Rorty’s move from experience to language heralds a “new pragmatic anthropology” that emphasizes the link between normativity and linguistic practices (cf. Calcaterra 2019: 111ff). While as for Peirce’s philosophy, deliberately overlooked by Rorty, she detects interesting “family resemblances” between Rorty’s contingentism and Peirce’s “dialectic of chance and regularity.” More specifically Calcaterra wonders whether Rorty’s contingentism cannot be read as a postmodern translation of classical pragmatist metaphysics and, in any case, she finds that “Peirce’s tychism might provide an interesting theoretical integration of the issues at stake in the ethical claim accompanying Rorty’s critique of the absolutistic implication of modern metaphysics” (Calcaterra 2019: 123). This interesting suggestion, a profound study of Peirce’s mature philosophy, and an awareness of the history of the effects of pragmatism suggest that a re-examination of the problem is worthwhile, even if the outcome of this research were to differ from both Haack’s and Calcaterra’s findings.

In this paper, I will focus on the results of this further deepening of Rorty’s philosophy, which I hope can account for the fact that he can give some help also to those who do not agree with some of the aims or the means he suggests. In particular, I will focus on the project he wanted to foster as he stated it in the provocative introductions to his books from *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* onwards. From this project, I extrapolate three interesting items that compel to accept the hard truth that Rorty was a legitimate member of the pragmatist family and that he shared with classic pragmatists much more than scholars usually think and, possibly, something different from what he thought to share with them. The three topics that I will follow here are: 1) anti-Kantism; 2) a peculiar kind of holism; 3) the attitude toward culture and politics.
1. Rorty’s Anti-Kantism

The first aspect I want to underline is that Rorty understood better than anyone else that the fight against Kant’s philosophy is crucial to pragmatism considered as a whole. As Calcaterra shows in her book, Rorty knew Peirce and classic pragmatism even if his reading was always peculiar (Calcaterra 2019: 2ff). Through this reading, misleading as it could have been, he got a profound sense of pragmatism. Rorty understood that pragmatism had to be anti-Kantian or not to be at all. Notwithstanding Peirce’s youthful love for the German master, Peirce himself grew anti-Kantian as much as his work was going on. He completely abandoned Kant in the late phase of his thought (Maddalena 2019). Rorty could not have read it because it was not available at the time he was studying but Peirce harshly criticized Kant’s distinction of noumenon and phenomenon, labeling it as nominalism, attacked the idea of the transcendental deduction of the Self, proposed a radical alternative to the separation of fields of inquiry (theoretical, moral, aesthetical) that emerged from Kant’s critical project (Maddalena 2015: 10-29). We can obviously discuss about the accuracy of such a reading of Kant’s work, but this was the one that Peirce gave. Classic pragmatists followed more or less the same path of critiques and Rorty took his anti-Kantian conviction from James and Dewey, not having access in his youth to Peirce’s late manuscripts.

How did Rorty translate the classic pragmatists’ concerns about Kant? It is the famous incipit of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*:

To know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind; so to understand the possibility and nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations. Philosophy’s central concern is to be a general theory of representation, a theory which will divide culture up into the areas which represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all (despite their pretense of doing so). (PMN: 3)

This Kantian model arrived at a dead end in the second part of twentieth century, showing a kind of philosophy that cannot address problems felt by the people and that is uselessly involved in problems that have no escape and no fruits to bear. Rorty ascribes the fault of this kind of picture of philosophy to the notorious trio Descartes-Locke-Kant and labels it as “Foundationalism” (PMN: 3). However, Kant is the symbolic summary of them all and the reference for everything else that followed in philosophy, including analytic philosophy that Rorty acutely sees as “one more variant of Kantian philosophy” (PMN: 8). Rorty’s assault to this tradition is in the name of anti-foundationalism. However, he mistakes this tradition for almost the entire tradition of philosophy and, as Haack suggests, he confuses different types of foundationalism. I think we should be a little more precise than him and that there are other ways out from this situation of contemporary philosophy, but the relevance of the denounce and the idea of picking up anti-Kantism as a basic characteristic of pragmatism is as crucial as genial.

What does it mean to be more precise than Rorty on this point? As for the claim of anti-foundationalism, as I argued in my book *The Philosophy of Gesture* (2015), the real problem with the Kantian picture of philosophy, a good representative of the modern tradition of philosophy, is that foundation according to Kant has to be necessary and a priori, whether this a priori happens in the mind, in the physical, or in the metaphysical world. The image of necessity that modern epistemology presented is always tied to reality and inquiries in which there are parts and wholes, whether we
can build up wholes by adding parts or we can single out parts by analyzing wholes. No
wonder that Kant gave us this maneuver of composition and decomposition as a
description of necessary analytic reasoning and tried problematically to find out a way
to depict synthetic a priori judgements according to the same characteristics. Susan
Haack correctly says that Rorty would have won his anti-Kantian battle, if only he had
demonstrated the impossibility of synthetic a priori judgments (Haack 1995: 131-2). The
account of synthetic a priori judgments in terms of analyticity is at the core of Robert
Hanna’s (2001) attempt to defend Kant’s position. However, Hanna’s work shows that at
the end Rorty was right to reduce Kant’s view of reasoning, including a priori synthetic
judgments, to analysis. This move implies also that the Kantian form of knowledge ends
up in the famous conception of representation as mirror. In fact, Hanna argues that
synthetic a priori judgments are grounded in aesthetic intuition, which, in turn, relies
on a conception of unique space and time. In this way, the certainty of synthetic a
priori judgments depends on segmenting the whole of space and time into parts. The
part-whole scheme that presides over analytic judgments is then at the heart of any
judgment discerned by Kant. The representation that Rorty attacks is the one that gives
us back reality as parts or wholes, ready to be analyzed. Somehow, he acknowledges
that the issue is about a priori necessity and not about any foundation and any
representation. He even refers explicitly to this preconceptual way to look at necessity:
In the visions of the epistemologist, this incoherent notion takes the form of seeing
the attainment of truth as a matter of necessity, either the “logical” necessity of the
transcendentalist or the “physical” necessity of the evolutionary “naturalizing”
epistemologist. (PMN: 376)

Rorty is right in saying that pragmatism refuses this image, but, surprisingly for him,
Peirce here would be the right philosopher in order to tackle this issue, even though he
speaks about signs and representation all the time. Peirce does not think of
representation as a mirror. According to him, representation is an action, a
transformation of reality, which is part of reality itself. His metaphysical realism
amounts to this view of continuity between any modality of experience that he
inquired in every field of research. James, who paradoxically defined himself a
nominalist but who averted Kant’s philosophy with all his strengths, approved the
same version of knowledge as continuity (cf. James 1907; Maddalena 2015; Bella 2019).
The second Wittgenstein to whom Rorty often refers is not far away from Peirce’s path,
as Colapietro showed in his article “Allowing Our Practices to Speak for Themselves”
(2011). If Rorty had the care and the time to unravel the pragmatist concept of
continuity, he would have seen that it casts a light on a kind of foundation that, as in
mathematics, it happens while inquiry and life are going on. I call it an a posteriori
foundation and I did not develop it except for what has to deal with epistemology. I
think it is an idea that respects Rorty’s refusal of foundationalism and his claims that
the refusal of a priori, namely, of Kantian foundationalism, does not mean to become
irrational and that knowledge has a lot to do with history. A deep point of
disagreement with Rorty remains, since I see Rorty’s historicism too stiff and
preconceptual; paradoxically, historicism becomes an a priori in itself forbidding to
accept different kinds of epistemology and metaphysics. I would recommend Rorty not
to become ideological, namely, fixed in preconceived ideas, on this issue for the same
reasons he opposes Kant, but certainly the history and development of continuity are
important also for an a posteriori foundationalism, above all for understanding what
resists to time and what does not.
As for the tradition of philosophy, Rorty accuses modernity as a whole while he accuses Kantism but he often expands his allegations against this kind of foundationalism to the entire history of philosophy. I would be more cautious. Our modern lenses may mislead us. Peirce himself explained that, as far as reasoning is concerned, the idea of reasoning as a chain of parts is only a modern invention. He preferred the medieval version of reasoning that he described as a cable whose robustness depends upon unity among many different threads: “Its reasoning should not form a chain which is not stronger than its weakest link, but a cable whose fibres may be ever so slender, provided they are sufficiently numerous and intimately connected” (EP1: 29). Also on a metaphysical level, Scotus’ metaphysics and some of the Greek or Latin accounts could be read in different ways and, as Haack confirms in her same work, there are several forms of foundationalism (Haack 1995). Therefore, I would probably prefer to say that the path of modernity has taken this a priori, foundationalist-mentalist direction that Rorty described and can be reversed, if we want to.

2. Hang Together

The second aspect of Rorty’s philosophy that I want to underline here is the “synthetic drive” of pragmatism. With this expression I mean the tendency of the entire classic movement to go beyond the analytic frame that encompasses the epistemology of modern philosophy from Kant on. As we have mentioned, Kant’s description of synthesis is built upon analyticity. In the past few centuries, analysis has become almost a synonymous of knowledge. Sometimes also classic pragmatists, especially Peirce, indulged in this attitude to think that knowledge is about “very simple, clearly and distinctly knowable things” (PMN: 357) and that the task of philosophy is to arrive at them or to describe them or to do something with a composition of them. However, in their most significant writings all classic pragmatists were aware that knowledge and language were “tools” (CP: xix) for transforming reality, while the tool itself is continuous to that reality and changes with it.

Synthesis is an act that modifies reality and, therefore, is part of a transition among modalities of reality. My way of summing up the legacy of classic pragmatists on this point is to say that synthesis is a “recognition of identity through changes” and its tool is called “gesture,” an action with a beginning and an end that carries on a meaning (Maddalena 2015: 68ff). We know by doing but doing has a mathematical and semiotic structure. As Peirce said, the reasoning that brings to the synthetic result A=B is more original than the A=A, flat, analytic identity, which is only a derivative case. Reasoning synthetically through changes happens by understanding change as a mathematical continuum (Zalamea 2012; Vargas 2015) and by some actions that happen within this continuum of changes. Real synthetic reasoning happens through actions that have a precise structure. I drew this structure from Peirce, who built up an iconic logic called Existential Graphs on this ground. Peirce was proud of the Graphs because they were a “proof” of pragmatism, namely they showed that meaning coincides with the development of all the effects of an idea (“all conceivable effects,” Peirce used to say) (Zalamea-Nubiola 2011). I extended Peirce’s insights with the logic of existential graphs to any action that could bring a meaning using the same phenomenological and semiotic structures. I call “complete gestures” those habits of action that carry on a meaning, namely, that synthetize our experience that happens in continuous change.
making us understand something new. Complete gestures have a phenomenological and semiotic structure in which all categories (firstness, secondness, and thirdness) and kinds of signs (icons, indices, and symbols) are involved in a dense way. Public and private rites, scientific experiments, performing arts can be good examples of complete gestures.

12 Rorty could not go that far and he did not want to, aware that a new definition of synthesis will open up a new epistemology, while he wants to abandon any epistemology. However, let us stop and think for a moment to what he says.

The Deweyan notion of language as tool rather than picture is right as far as it goes. But we must be careful not to phrase this analogy so as to suggest that one can separate the tool, Language, from its users and inquire as to its “adequacy” to achieve our purposes. The latter suggestion presupposes that there is some way of breaking out of language in order to compare it with something else. But there is no way to think about either the world or our purposes except by using our language.

13 He recalls this Deweyan attitude to describe language as a tool as far as we do not separate the “tool, Language, from its users and inquire as to its ‘adequacy’ to achieve our purposes” (CP: xix). Then, he reminds us that “there is no pragmatic difference, no difference that makes a difference, between ‘it works because it is true’ and ‘it is true because it works’” (CP: xxix) and that he wants to avoid the philosophical tendency “of isolating the essence of Truth,” a trick that did not produce any fruit. In Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature he already recalled that the problem with the Platonic frame of philosophy is that epistemic criteria should be eternal and, at the same time, he could not find them but in our “current practice” (PMN: 374). Finally, in the introduction to Consequences of Pragmatism, Rorty describes philosophy as that kind of conversation that hopes to look at anything in a way that makes it “hang together with everything else” (CP: xxxix). If one adds these statements to the long attack to any form of intuitionism that Rorty carries out in the very same introduction a classic pragmatist drive for synthetic knowledge emerges. Here synthesis is not the reverse of analysis. It is the way in which we make things hang together. Rather, it is the habit of action, the practice of knowledge in which we are immersed and with which we are endowed. Even more significantly, this practice wants to unite working and truth, “the nature of truth and the test of truth” (CP: xxix). From Peirce’s existential graphs to Dewey’s logic and Mead’s conversation by gestures, pragmatists have pointed out that knowledge is a kind of action that mixes up different levels of phenomena and signs or, seen in another light, that truth “happens to an idea” (James 1907: 97), namely, we find that things are usefully hanging together and we participate socially to the way of arranging them. Knowledge has to get out of the mentalism and rationalism, and it has to work. This is the a posteriori foundation that we can have. Remaining in a jargon more familiar to Rorty, here you can catch a glimpse of Quine’s holism. In this holism, that Rorty wants to be no epistemology – but he really means the Kantian-epistemology – one may find the legacy of that synthetic drive that sometimes remained unconscious and undetected even to classic pragmatists themselves.

14 Unfortunately, at least in my view, also on epistemology Rorty sticks to a preconceptual refusal. In this case he sticks to a linguistic level of experience and to his naturalism/historicism for which culture can have “no goals outside itself” (PMN: 362), even though the story of this refusal of the non-linguistic experience might be more complicated or nuanced than that, as Rosa Maria Calcaterra explains in a very
sophisticated and challenging chapter of her book (Calcaterra 2019: 22ff). In general, the result of this refusal to trespass the threshold of language seems to forbid Rorty to give a different chance to epistemology of any form. To me, this is an unfortunate outcome of a very promising attack to rationalism. It looks like a preconceptual way to block the road of inquiry: why should we forbid that everything might happen to hang together? Why should we forbid to look for a different epistemology or a different metaphysics?

3. Culture and Politics

Very pragmatically, and very contrary to the usual image of the philosophy of language deriving from analytic philosophy, Rorty wants to discuss culture and politics at length. The social import of philosophy was present in all classic pragmatists, even though Peirce practiced it much less than anybody else. In a life of research, the founder of pragmatism devoted possibly only one article to social topics (Dmesis) and no one to politics. However, we should admit that he worked on pedagogy and he tried to write something on ethics and aesthetics in the last phase of his thought (Barrena 2014; Guardiano 2014; Mayorga 2014).

Rorty's philosophy of culture has one pillar that, again, he shares with all classic pragmatists. The pillar is the attack against separation among fields of inquiry. This central element finds a specific application in blurring the distinction between poetry and philosophy, and possibly any other field of culture, in a sort of edifying philosophy, which has in itself a political tone.

The central idea is again similar to all pragmatists. Classic pragmatists characterized the separation of fields of inquiry as coming from Kant’s distinction of the three critiques. Rorty seems to run on the same path. One can always argue that Kant wanted the three Critiques to be read together (Baggio 2019) but the history of effects is that professionalized philosophy, understood as a sort of updating of Kant’s project, divides sectors of inquiry as if they were different fields of inquiry. In Italy, only to make an example, not happy enough with Kantian distinctions, we have six academic disciplines within the field of philosophy (theoretical philosophy, moral philosophy, philosophy of science, aesthetics, philosophy of language, history of philosophy). The crucial step in Rorty’s strategy for unifying disciplines is to consider science as a kind of conversation exactly as any other discipline. The point is to find a conversation that changes our self-description, and there is no difference between science and any other field at this level.

To say that we have changed ourselves by internalizing new self-description (using terms like “bourgeois intellectual” or “self-destructive” or “self-deceiving”) is true enough. But this is no more startling than the fact that men changed the data of botany by hybridization, which was in turn made possible by botanical theory, or that they changed their own lives by inventing bombs and vaccines. Meditation on the possibility of such changes, like reading science-fiction does help us to overcome the self-confidence of “philosophical realism.” (PMN: 386)

This unification between science and any other inquiry brings Rorty to a philosophy that continues the conversation “in terms of the books one reads and discusses, rather than in terms of the problems one wishes to solve” (PMN: 394). Rorty’s theoretical move becomes even more precise when he talks of blurring the border between poetry, understood as the edifying, creative side of human conversation and philosophy,
understood as a scientific enterprise of description or exact representation of the world. We saw that the idea of unifying representation and action is at the heart of the synthetic drive of classic pragmatism. We also mentioned how the same drive emerges from time to time in Rorty’s project. The outcome of the synthetic drive is that the goal of philosophy is transformative of reality, and therefore it is also political. As in the previous general case, Rorty takes possibly the opposite way in respect to classic pragmatists. They wanted poetry, arts, politics, and any meaningful action become a kind of inquiry, namely, a kind of philosophy, even though they did not understand philosophy in a “scientistic” way, with that kind of limited realism that Russell or positivists were defending at the same time. For classic pragmatists, everything, including science-fiction and art, is a problem to solve in a scientific way. Any field is connected to any other because any human enterprise is an inquiry, not a conversation.  

Peirce, as usual, systematized this intertwining among disciplines in a strict way by describing a stair of disciplines in which the highest gives principles to any lower and receives contents by any lower (EP2: 258-62). Peirce wanted metaphysics to rely for principles upon logic, logic upon ethics, ethics upon aesthetics, aesthetics upon phenomenology and phenomenology upon mathematics. The other way around worked for contents. However, if you go to the bottom of this image, the idea is really that all experiences hang together and that inquiry is our way to move within experience and to transform it. Unlike classical pragmatists, Rorty wants any philosophy, science, art, and politics to become transformative as poetry is. He thinks that any form of Philosophy (capitalized) be somehow scientistic. However, again, he runs the same path of conceiving philosophy as a transformative activity that makes things work together or hang together. This working is the only prove and condition of what we call “truth.” Consequently, he understands that philosophy must be open to a political commitment. Once again, the difference between classical pragmatists’ “inquiry into experience” and Rorty’s “conversation” is remarkable, but I am arguing that it is worth noticing how Rorty does not see differences between disciplines and fields, a typical pragmatist move that treats aesthetic, ethical, social, and political issues as belonging to philosophy intrinsically.

**Conclusion**

Summing up, Rorty was not a preposterous exploiter of the pragmatist mark. He really belongs to the tradition of pragmatism, sharing with it many important characteristics. Here we focused on anti-Kantism, synthetic drive of knowledge, anti-separatism of sciences and disciplines. In one word, we can say that he underlined the anti-rationalist side of pragmatism. Then, he gave his solution to the impasse of rationalism and his solution is quite at odd with classic pragmatism, often leaning towards the post-modernism that flourished in Europe at his time. In my opinion this different outcome is due to some preconceptual claim about historicism, naturalism, linguistic borders of experience. He could not imagine a different form of representation, synthetic reasoning, metaphysics. Since he could not, he declared it impossible. This impossibility leads him to the aspects of his philosophy that I noticed at first and that seemed anti-pragmatist: the refusal of any kind of foundation, the rejection of any epistemology, the separation between private and public (maybe the worse aspect for a classic pragmatist). But, as I said, this surface has a very pragmatist root that has to be faced. Even those who, like me, think that a philosophical project different from the
one of modernity is possible should pay attention to Rorty’s powerful attack to rationalism that indicates the failure of some strategies they cannot repeat after Rorty.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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NOTES

1. According to Ramberg, Rorty’s engagement with Davidson’s systematic philosophy can be read as potentiation of Rorty’s anti-metaphysical pragmatist project to “let philosophy be cultural politics” (Ramberg 2008: 446).

2. My contention that Rorty’s synthetic drive follows the opposite direction from the classical pragmatists (going not from poetry to inquiry but vice-versa) is not a way to say that Rorty does not share a lot with them especially on the transformative role of philosophy – particularly with Dewey. Instead, it is a way to underline their affinity as “anti-scientists” while also taking into account the incidence of hermeneutics in Rorty’s philosophy. The transformative pragmatist stance is evident also in Rorty’s preface to Philosophy as Cultural Politics (2007): “In Dewey’s work, historicism appears as a corollary of the pragmatist maxim that what makes no difference to practice should make no difference to philosophy. ‘Philosophy,’ Dewey wrote, ‘is not in any sense whatever a form of knowledge.’ It is, instead, ‘a social hope reduced to a working program of
action, a prophecy of the future.’ From Dewey’s point of view, the history of philosophy is best seen as a series of efforts to modify people’s sense of who they are, what matters to them, what is most important” (PCP: viii). Indeed, I think Rorty underrates the role of inquiry in his reading of Dewey. If he did not do so, he would see that the transformative stance and the role of knowledge are not opposed to one another. In any case, though, the importance of philosophy for transforming the world is a permanent characteristic of pragmatists.

ABSTRACTS

The paper will focus on Rorty’s project as it emerges in the compelling introductions to his books from *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* onwards. Even disagreeing with his conclusions, some interesting items suggest that Rorty was a legitimate member of the pragmatist family and that he shared with classic pragmatists much more than a reader can see at first glance. First, Rorty understood better than anyone else that the fight against Kant’s rationalism is crucial to pragmatism considered as a whole. He paralleled Kantism with the history of explaining knowledge as a mirroring representation and he wanted to get rid of it. Second, Rorty shared with classic pragmatists what I call the “synthetic drive” of philosophy, namely, the view of philosophy as the habit of action of looking at anything in a way that makes it “hang together with everything else.” Third, the outcome of the synthetic drive is conceiving philosophy as a transformative activity. In all these cases, Rorty took roads at odds with classic pragmatism but he did not betray the general aim and spirit of the American movement of thought.

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Does Rorty have a Blindspot about Truth?

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Richard Rorty has often been criticized as having a blindspot about the normative role of truth. To give three prominent examples: John McDowell criticizes Rorty for missing the normativity embedded in the disquotational use of truth; Hilary Putnam accuses Rorty of a sophisticated relativism, which fails to take seriously the objective normativity of truth, the way in which truth transcends communal standards. And Huw Price argues that on Rorty’s view of truth one is unable to make sense of the idea that a speaker, warranted by her own lights, could improve her commitments by consulting the commitments and justificatory practices of the wider community. Of these Price’s criticism is perhaps the strongest and the one I would like to critically examine in this paper.

Variants of Price’s criticism have also been voiced by other well-known philosophers (e.g. Habermas) and it is initially quite compelling. If we do not recognize a truth that transcends our practices and the agreements that are forged within them, then what could motivate us to improve our commitments if they meet the only operative standard in the vicinity, namely, being accepted by one’s own standards, say, of coherence?

My aim in the present paper is twofold: in the first place, I want to respond on Rorty’s behalf to Price’s conception of where Rorty’s blindspot about truth lies. I shall argue that Price’s criticism is off-target missing the perfectionist character of the justificatory norms that are criterial for truth. Secondly, I want to argue that despite sidestepping Price’s criticism, Rorty does indeed have a blindspot which concerns the way in which truth figures in internal reflection upon a system of beliefs, e.g., 1st-person reflection upon one’s own system of belief. For the most part Rorty exclusively focuses upon truth and justification as norms of belief maintenance in a critical communal setting; and even when he accepts that there are other contexts in which the question of truth is at issue he tends to model them on justification to one’s peers.
Rorty on the Normativity of Justification

4 In articulating his own pragmatist account of truth as a “convenient friction” that makes disagreements matter, Huw Price argues that Rorty – whose anti-representationalist outlook inspired his own – has a blindspot about the normativity of truth. In particular, Price accuses Rorty of failing to acknowledge that truth is a third norm apart from the norms of sincerity and personal justification. As a consequence, Price claims, Rorty is unable to make sense of the idea that an individual speaker, warranted by her own lights, could improve her commitments by consulting the commitments and justificatory practices of the community. Or, rather, to bring the argument directly to bear on Rorty: Rorty is unable to make sense of the idea that communal justification, which is warranted by its own lights, could improve its commitments by consulting the commitments of a broader better informed or more critically astute community.

5 It is worth observing that Price’s objection cannot be that Rorty refuses to admit that truth plays some normative role or other. Rorty follows Davidson in holding that the concept of truth is part of a package-deal of concepts including belief and meaning that is required to make sense of the idea of rational agents rationally responsive to both their natural-causal and social-linguistic environments. Truth is a norm at least in the sense that it is a standard in terms of which we assess beliefs. That is the insight in the thought that belief “aims at” the truth. Criticizing a belief by saying “That’s not true” or praising a belief by saying “That’s true” have prima facie normative implications: the first puts some pressure on the believer to give up the belief or at least to defend it with appropriate reasons; the latter gives some (additional) reason to stand by the belief in the face of criticism. Rorty calls these respectively dis-endorsing and endorsing uses of the term “true.”

6 Price’s criticism, then, cannot be that truth for Rorty plays a purely disquotational role without any normative import – a criticism he has levelled at Paul Horwich. Rather what Price objects to is Rorty’s view that truth is not a distinct norm whose function is independent of that of justification. Rorty takes it that the normative role of truth can be exhaustively spelled out in terms of norms of communal justification, actual and possible. Justification is, on Rorty’s view, our best criterion for what counts as true but he admits that the latter is not reducible to the former. As Rorty puts it, “Granted that ‘true’ is an absolute term [in so far as truth is not relative to purposes, times or places], its conditions of application will always be relative [in so far as justification is relative to purposes, times and places].” So Rorty understands the endorsement or disendorsement of a belief as true, or not, as a way of expressing whether the belief in question is accepted as appropriately justified in one’s community. Rorty’s attitude to the normativity of truth is summed up in the following remarks:

The only difference between truth and justification which makes [...] a difference is, as far as I can see, the difference between old audiences and new audiences [...] I think that, once one has explicated the distinction between justification and truth by that between present and future justifiability, there is little more to be said.

7 Apart from disquotational and endorsing uses of the term “true” Rorty recognizes a cautionary use in such expressions as “Your belief is fully justified but it may not be true.” Of the three uses of the word “true” the cautionary use is the only indispensable one. But, as one might expect, Rorty refuses to see this as granting any independent
normative status to the concept of truth. He interprets cautionary uses of “true” in terms of a distinction between what is justified according to current communal norms and what is justified according to an idealized community: one that is better-informed, more demandingly critical or richly imaginative than ours. Idealization here is to be understood as idealization from the perspective of our current lights; it is idealization without a transcendent ideal or limit concept. Rorty’s incrementalist progressive approach to justification only requires that we can always imagine the possibility of an improvement in our standards of belief-formation and assessment. But this is precisely what Price argues Rorty is not entitled to assume without the addition of a distinctive norm of truth.

A Rortian Response to Price

As we have seen, Price argues that Rorty’s norm of communal warranted assertibility suffers the same fate as the norm he calls personal warranted assertibility, namely, that without a distinct norm of truth neither norm can make sense of improvements in one’s epistemic standing whether in terms of the actual community or future extensions and improvements of it. But this alleged incoherence is based on treating the norm of communal warranted assertibility as a static norm rather than the revisable update-able norm that Rorty intends. Price treats satisfaction of both norms of warranted assertibility as equivalent to getting full marks on an exam – a model which, of course, leaves no room for improvement. But a better analogy would be determining the number of moons of Jupiter with Galileo’s telescope – a case that allows that a bigger better telescope might be capable of finding more moons; and so providing a better answer to the question.

Price’s misreading here is closely related to a familiar misinterpretation of Rorty as having a majoritarian conception of justification according to which one is justified in a belief if it would be accepted by a majority of one’s communal peers. This majoritarian reading would indeed make allowance for one to meet the norm of justification in a given community – by being part of its majority opinion – without caring in the least about a different consensus within another better informed community. In that case Price’s criticism that there would be no normative pressure to improve would go through. It is in virtue of more or less the same argument that Price motivates his introduction of a distinct norm of truth to make disagreements matter.

To get Rorty straight here we need to draw a distinction between a static (say, majoritarian) and a progressive perfectionist conception of communal norms. Perfectionist norms of justification are implicit in our practices of inquiry: that is, norms of justification that appeal to our best information, our best investigative techniques and our best arguments. Such norms are not, for Rorty, a matter of counting heads within a fixed well-defined group but, rather, doing the best we can along the dimensions of information, investigation and argument wherever, whenever and however we can. What we count as best, of course, changes as we acquire more and better information, more and better investigative techniques and more and better arguments.

It is important to note, in addition, and in spite of some of Rorty’s rhetoric, that the relevant notion of community is not to be understood in general as a more or less stable cultural or political entity but as a plastic epistemic one defined for each specific
subject matter in terms of those whose information, and techniques of investigation and arguments are most relevant for the case at hand. For example, if it is a question about the sub-structure of the atom then researchers who work in physics departments and laboratories around the world contribute to determining what we count as best justified on the matter. If it is a question about the artistic value of a painting then those with experience and good judgment about paintings (those with, as we say, “good taste” in this visual art) are part of the relevant community of peers.

Another way to make the same point is to see that Rorty’s deference to communal norms of justification is a version of Dewey’s theory of inquiry – itself a liberalization of Peirce’s theory. It is well-known that Peirce treats beliefs as part of a default-and-challenge structure of truth-commitments. On this model one is default entitled to a belief that is part of one’s evolving worldview unless and until there is some good reason to doubt it. Peirce appeals to what he calls (somewhat misleadingly) “the scientific method of inquiry” as the best means to settle opinion on some disputed matter. On Dewey’s elaboration of this approach “the scientific method” is understood as a form of democratic experimentalism, a set of quasi-moral quasi-political principles of virtuous inquiry combined with a fallibilist experimental attitude that is just as applicable to art criticism and moral or political dilemmas as to problems in chemistry, economics and paleontology. The scientific method in this sense is not exclusively a method of the successful empirical sciences, just one that the natural sciences happen to best exemplify. On this view, beliefs are to be understood as justified in terms of perfectionist epistemic norms implicit in our best practices of inquiry where the implicit reference to a “we” is understood in terms of expertise or good taste or some other normatively-laden grouping based on relevant training, experience and good judgment.

A person who meets the norms of communal warranted assertibility within a particular community is, contrary to Price’s criticism, put under immediate normative pressure to adjust or change his or her views in light of better information and argument and more critically robust methods of inquiry. Consequently, Price’s criticism of Rorty misses its target since it is aimed at a static view of communal justification of which majoritarianism about justification is one familiar example.

Nonetheless, although Rorty can avoid Price’s criticism, I now want to argue that there remains a residual problem for his conception of the normative role of truth – even if we grant with him that truth is not a separate stand-alone norm wholly distinct from matters of justification.

**Rorty’s Blindspot**

On Rorty’s view while truth cannot be reduced to justification, justification is our best criterion for truth. Or, more fully, justification within the relevant epistemic community is our best criterion for truth. That is to say, it is on the basis of appropriate justification that we count something as true. And while truth is a normative notion in so far as it is a standard according to which beliefs are assessed it is not a distinctive norm since we must often appeal to our norms of justification to determine what it true. It is for this reason that Rorty denies that truth is an independently identifiable goal of inquiry at which we might aim. If we can only determine truth by way of what is best justified and what is best justified is, as Rorty puts it, “an ever-retreating goal” –
in so far as it is likely, based on a plausible induction from the past, that we will in the future discover more and better information, arguments, and criticism – then there is no fixed something called “truth” for inquiry to locate and aim at.

16 But even if we accept this general picture of truth there still remains a question about whether the normative function of truth is exhausted by appeal to the norms of communal justification. We can approach this matter by considering the following passage in which Rorty is discussing the term “true”:

I see no significance in the fact that we use the same word to designate what is preserved by valid inference as we use to caution people that beliefs justified to us may not be justified to other, better, audiences.¹⁶

17 Here Rorty distinguishes two different jobs that truth does for us: 1) to single out what is preserved in valid inference (by which I take him to mean valid argument); and 2) to caution people that no matter how well justified they are it is possible that this justification may not hold for a better informed more critically sophisticated audience. In the outward perspective of inquiry truth is a norm regulating the formation of new beliefs, the answering of new questions, the resolution of new doubts. In these sorts of cases Rorty argues that both the endorsing and cautionary uses of truth can be plausibly interpreted in terms of norms of justification to one’s peers: in the first case one expresses solidarity with the norms of justification of one’s interlocutor(s); and in the second case one imagines a contrast between conforming to the norms of one’s actual community and those of a better one, at least from the epistemic perspective.

18 When Rorty considers the question of truth’s normativity he tends to focus his attention almost exclusively on the perspective of inquiry where the question concerns justifying one’s beliefs to one’s peers in the setting of a communal activity. What this shows is that although Rorty is careful not to reduce the concept of truth to that of justification or verification (as he is often accused of doing¹⁷) he does have a tendency to reduce the normativity of truth to the normativity of justification to one’s peers.¹⁸ Whatever normativity truth has is, on Rorty’s view, borrowed from that of justification and idealizations of such. That there is a blind-spot here is evident, I take it, from Rorty’s inability to see the connection between the truth-preservingness of valid implication – what we might think of as the systematicity of truth – and the question whether our ostensible beliefs are sufficiently justified to form part of our system of truth-commitments.¹⁹ That is, both valid implication and justification play important roles in the maintenance and revision of a world-view understood as an evolving system of truth-commitments rationally responsive to each other and to the empirical world.

19 The normativity of truth is not, as Rorty often seems to suppose, reducible to the normativity of justification. To see this consider that in order to have a system of beliefs at all our truth-commitments must be bound by a rational norm of consistency.²⁰ Of course, we must not think of this as merely a linguistic norm concerning speech acts for it is equally applicable to unexpressed beliefs or judgments. We may put the norm as follows:

Norm of Consistency: If one judges that not-P and also judges that P – or there is a plausible inference from one’s current beliefs to the conclusion that P – then one must adjust one’s commitments to remove the inconsistency.

21 Complying with the norm of consistency is something that we require of any rational system of beliefs or truth-commitments – this is part of what makes it rational. And,
significantly, when reflecting upon our beliefs we do not suppose that we can treat this norm as a matter of justification to one’s peers. One must comply with this norm quite independently of any question of justification for specific commitments. For example, it applies to beliefs that one did not form on the basis of deliberation as well as to beliefs one continues to hold despite having forgotten the basis or justification upon which one came to believe them. And where conflicting beliefs are held it tells us that we cannot continue to hold both beliefs prior to any comparison of the relative strength of their respective justifications, supposing that we are aware of such.

22 The norm of consistency is a principle of belief revision related to reasoned change in view in contrast to the law of non-contradiction (i.e. it is not the case that P and that not-P) which is a matter of formal logic. The norm of consistency concerns rational inference, what it is reasonable or not to believe in light of what one already believes, rather than simply logical implication, what logically follows from what – which puts constraints on the structure of our truth-commitments without prescribing what to believe.21 Following the norm of consistency is part of what is required to achieve the rational integration of one’s truth-commitments.22 In so far as one has a world-view that is inferentially articulated (constrained though not determined by the laws of logic) and rationally responsive to the empirical world (including the social world) then, as Gil Harman puts it, “one always has a reason to avoid inconsistency.”23

23 The norm of consistency, which is better understood in terms of avoiding inconsistency if and when it arises rather than of striving for consistency, applies at the social level too.24 For example, consider Price’s norm of truth:

24 Norm of Truth: if Not-P then it is incorrect to assert that P; if Not-P there are prima facie grounds for censure of an assertion that P.

25 This can be understood as a social version of the norm of consistency, one which presupposes a notion of social reason and a normative demand to achieve a unified world-view amongst fellow speakers (or, at a minimum, fellow speakers within the same field or specialization) within a society – at least about matters where we do not tolerate “no-fault disagreements.”25 Such a norm may be thought to function as a regulative ideal of human communicative practices. Again, it seems right to say, as Price does, that the normative force of the norm of truth, as he calls it, does not depend on any specific considerations of justification for given commitments. But that is not to say that Rorty is wrong to deny that truth is an additional norm of the sort that Price imagines, one wholly distinct from justification.

26 What it shows is that Rorty routinely mischaracterizes the normativity of truth. The problem can be traced to Rorty’s inability to see why truth should be involved in both logical implication and justification to one’s peers (especially when we caution others that what is justified to them might not be justified to other better informed audiences).26 What Rorty is seeing, I suggest, is only one half of the Janus-faced relation between truth and reason. By focusing exclusively on the public reason-giving dimension of the relation Rorty misses its personal or reflective dimension. Public justification that provides reasons to support a commitment (perhaps as a response to a question or doubt) is the external face of reason in its maintenance of a relatively stable world-view in a context of disputes, disagreements and arguments. But there is also the internal face of reason in 1st-personal or social reflection on the unity of one’s (or our) world-view which shows up as a demand for consistency (that is, a demand to eliminate inconsistency) in one’s (or our) thinking quite independently of matters of
justification to one's peers or even justification to oneself in self-reflection. To come to appreciate that two truth-commitments are inconsistent, either because they are logically inconsistent (in so far as they cannot both be true together) or because there is a plausible argument to that conclusion, is to see that one or the other must be given up. It is a further question whether one has any better justification for one than for the other.

27 Notwithstanding this blindspot, Rorty’s does have a genuine insight, namely, that truth is not “an additional norm” that we might have done without.27 This is the mistake Price arguably makes. Over-generalizing Wittgenstein’s comparison of the functions of words with “tools in a toolbox” Price conceives of our ordinary concept of truth as a tool that makes disagreements matter – a tool designed for a specific function that we can imagine having done without.28 To highlight this instrumental approach, Price devises a thought-experiment according to which there is a so-called Mo’an tribe whose members enjoy speech and reason and conform to the norms of subjective assertibility (sincerity) and personal warranted assertibility (justification by one’s own lights) which he elucidates thus:

Subjective Assertibility: A speaker is incorrect to assert that P if she does not believe that P; to assert that P in these circumstances provides prima facie grounds for censure, or disapprobation.

Personal Warranted Assertibility: A speaker is incorrect to assert that P if she does not have adequate (personal) grounds for believing that P; to assert that P in these circumstances provides prima facie grounds for censure.

28 What Mo’ans lack is the concept of truth. By picturing Mo’an practices before and after the introduction of the concept of truth Price aims to isolate and identify the function of truth and the difference it makes to our practices. In a more sophisticated version of the thought-experiment, Mo’ans are granted a truth predicate, but lack “the norm of truth.” Their “truth” predicate operates as a mere device of disquotation without any normative force. As Price imagines it, Mo’ans in this scenario have a practice of expressing merely opinionated assertions (from whence their name is derived) which do not critically engage with one another – much like personal preferences for food (e.g. dark chocolate) or drink (e.g. guinness).

29 An immediate problem with Price’s thought experiment is that it is obviously incoherent – a point Price himself now concedes.29 All the key terms in which Price describes the Moans prior to having the concept of truth – such as opinion, disagreement, assertion – simply presuppose the concept of truth. For example, to be of the opinion that p is to take p to be true. To disagree with someone about their assertion that p is to take p to be false. And the same point applies to the more sophisticated version of the thought-experiment too: all the terms in which the Mo’ans are described presuppose a normative concept of truth rather than a merely disquotational one. So a disagreement that did not put some prima facie pressure upon one to defend one’s belief or to criticize one’s interlocutor’s contrary belief would not be a disagreement at all but, at best, a mere difference. Consequently, the threat of vicious circularity that Price acknowledges, vitiates his thought experiment and its explanatory point.30 The description of the Mo’ans before they have the normative concept of truth is one that simply presupposes what it is being used to explain i.e. the normative concept of truth.

30 That the Mo’an thought-experiment is more or less obviously incoherent shows that truth cannot be treated instrumentally as a stand-alone norm fulfilling a distinctive
function which might be sensibly substracted from and then added to linguistic practice in the way Price supposes. As Rorty, following Davidson, saw, truth is part of a package-deal of fundamental concepts including reason, meaning and belief no one of which can be explained without invoking the others. Truth is implicated in the very ascription of beliefs and meanings to speakers – rational agents with communicative intentions – given the principle of charity in interpretation that implies a general presumption of rationality when interpreting another speaker.

Consequently, an important moral of the Price-Rorty exchange for a neo-pragmatist approach to truth is that it is a mistake to treat truth as doing “a distinctive job” in our thought and talk that we might imagine having done without. One cannot instrumentalize truth as if it were an isolable tool performing a function in terms that do not presuppose it. Despite Rorty’s blindspot about the normativity of truth, his awareness of the deep and inextricable embeddedness of truth in our linguistic and interpretative practices – which undermines Price’s Mo’an thought-experiment – is an important insight that survives criticism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

3. In response to McDowell (2000), Rorty can agree that a disquotational use of the term “true” may also be an endorsing use – without glossing that in terms of answerability to the world. Whether it is necessarily so, as McDowell argues, is something for further debate. And in response to Putnam, Rorty distinguishes ethnocentrism – the view that our thought and talk is inevitably embedded in a cultural and social context – from relativism about truth. It is only the former view that he endorses. See Rorty (1993).
9. Somewhat surprisingly, Rorty’s account of justification is analogous to Peirce’s incrementalist convergence account of truth which Rorty roundly criticizes. In both accounts there is a tension between present commitment and possible future revision. In Rorty this is the tension between the endorsing use of “true” underwritten by current standards of justification and the cautionary use of “true” underwritten by possibly better standards in the future. For Peirce, truth is what stands up to present scrutiny (hence we can endorse what now looks satisfactory to believe by
our current lights) but it must also stand up to future scrutiny (hence we might be mistaken in what we now take to be true although we hope that we are not).

10. This is how Putnam, e.g., reads Rorty on the ground that, for Rorty, justification is a sociological matter. See Putnam (2000: 84).

11. Rorty appeals to "curiosity," and "concrete fears of regression" in order to explain what motivates one to engage in further inquiry even if one has satisfied communal standards of justification. Rorty (2000: 17, 61).

12. Rorty speaks of "justifying our belief to the audience we think relevant (perhaps our own intellectual conscience, or our fellow-citizens, or the relevant experts)" (ibid.: 56). In referring to an "epistemic community" I am aware that pragmatists politicize epistemology in so far as the theory of inquiry concerns a community of inquirers ideally operating according to relations of trust, openness, sincerity, respect, and toleration.

13. Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief."

14. I have discussed this notion of scientific method as a method that is not exclusive to the sciences and defended its philosophical importance against Rorty's criticisms in "A Kant-Inspired Conception of Pragmatism as Democratic Experimentalism" (2015).

15. Rorty (1995: 298). Rorty's point here expands into an argument against Misak's Peircian account of true belief as "a belief that could not be improved upon, a belief that would forever meet the challenges of reasons, argument and evidence" (Misak 2000: 49). Another more succinct formulation: "A true belief is a permanently settled or indefeasible belief" (Misak 2006: 7). To identify true belief with indefeasible belief in this way is to make truth hostage to fortune and put it out of reach of our practices – an unintended unpragmatic consequence. Since in any given case one cannot know whether a putatively true belief will meet all the challenges of reasons, argument and evidence in the future then we cannot claim it to be true now. We simply have no way of knowing whether a belief is indefeasible or not. Rorty's alternative, to say that justification is the criterion of truth, without identifying truth with anything, allows one to take hold of truths in the present; and it allows for the fallible updating of truths as one’s justifications change for the better as a result of better reasons, argument and evidence.


17. For example, even Misak, who is more careful than most in this regard, claims that “[Rorty] asserts that ‘truth’ and ‘objectivity’ are merely labels for what our peers will let us get away with saying.” Although the passage that Misak is paraphrasing is Rorty at his most rhetorical, she leaves out the crucial qualification “ceteris paribus” in the original text i.e. Rorty (1979: 176). Misak (2013: 30).

18. Occasionally, Rorty demonstrates an awareness that there is more to the normativity of truth than that. Consider this passage: “The need to justify our beliefs and desires to ourselves and to our fellow-agents subjects us to norms, and obedience to these norms produces a behavioural pattern which we must detect in others before confidently attributing any beliefs to them. But there seems to be no occasion to look for obedience to an additional norm, the commandment to seek the truth. For […] obedience to that commandment will produce no behaviour not produced by the need to offer justification.” (1995: 287).

What I want to draw attention to is Rorty’s awareness that we justify beliefs and desires “to ourselves.” But the insight is immediately obscured since Rorty treats the 1st-person case of reflection on the model of justification within a community of peers: that is, one's own "intellectual conscience" is considered to be an audience that one must convince. But there are important differences between the 1st-person deliberative case of making up one's mind and providing justification to others: 1) others can simply not listen in a way that has no analogue in one's own reflections; 2) in the case of a genuine audience one is not in a position to make up their minds for them no matter how overwhelming the justifications might seem to us; and 3) in the 1st-person case it can be responsible to maintain a belief that one already holds even if one
does not know what would justify it. If one already believes then justification to oneself is irrelevant.


20. We could also speak of this as a “logical” norm if we understand this term in the broad sense that Wittgenstein uses it when he speaks of his philosophical investigations as concerning “the logic of language,” e.g. (2009: § 93).

21. For a detailed discussion of the importance of the distinction between inference and implication see Gil Harman’s Change in View (1986). Note, too, that in the quoted passage on p. 8 Rorty uses the term “inference” for what I am calling “implication”.

22. This is what Kant, from a “pure” a priori perspective (that a pragmatist would want to bring down to earth), calls the “transcendental unity of apperception” (2000: B139).


24. Kant, e.g., recognizes social and personal dimensions of the norm of consistency. Two of the three maxims of “the common human understanding” (sensus communis) are: “always to think in accord with [or consistently with] oneself”; and “to think in the position of everyone else” (2000 5: 294).

25. This is Price’s expression (e.g. 2011: 47). It might be better to speak of “no-blame disagreements” since one might not blame another for thinking what one takes to be false in, say, aesthetic, moral or political matters given their different sensibility, upbringing, self-image (etc.). But one might still find fault in the sense that one thinks they are missing something. Cavell calls such cases matters of “rational disagreement” which registers the fact that there can be, in a sense, equally legitimate but conflicting rational responses to an artwork or a moral or political conundrum. Cavell (1979: 254).


28. Wittgenstein remarks: “Think of the tools in a toolbox: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screwdriver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws. – The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects. (And in both cases there are similarities.)” (2009: § 11).

29. Price (2010). Price is unfazed by the admission since he appeals to the incoherence as itself a demonstration that truth plays the distinctive normative role of “making disagreements matter” that the Mo’an thought experiment was originally intended to isolate. But all he is entitled to conclude from the incoherence of the case of the Mo’ans is that the concept of truth (including its normative dimension) is not independent of the concepts (hence the normativity) of justification, belief, assertion, reason, and meaning.

30. Price admits that “circularity threatens” in various places in his account of the Mo’ans although it also seems clear that he originally believed that it could be avoided (2011: 176, fn 17).

31. Price’s instrumentalist assumption that truth performs a distinctive stand-alone function is clear from his attempt “to imagine a linguistic practice which had those norms [of sincerity and personal justification] but not truth. By seeing what such a practice lacks we see what truth adds” (2011: 168). As originally conceived Price was of the view that if we subtracted the norm of truth we would still be left with intelligible linguistic practices, albeit “radically different” (ibid.: 166). He remarks: “Without truth the wheels of argument do not engage; disagreements slide past one another” (ibid.: 179). But all we are entitled to say here is that without truth there would be no such thing as argument or disagreement.

32. (Ibid.: 174).
ABSTRACTS

Criticisms of Rorty’s view of truth are so frequent and from such sagacious sources that it is reasonable to suspect that there must be some truth in them. But what? In this paper I consider perhaps the strongest form of such criticism, Huw Price’s claim that without a distinct norm of truth Rorty is unable to make sense of how someone, justified by her own lights (say, local communal standards), could improve her commitments by reference to another better informed community. My aim in the present paper is twofold: In the first place, I shall argue that Price’s criticism is off-target missing the perfectionist character of the justificatory norms that are criterial for truth on Rorty’s account. Secondly, I argue that Rorty’s actual blindspot concerns the way in which truth figures in internal reflection upon a system of beliefs, e.g., 1st-person reflection upon one’s own beliefs. But this blindspot should not blind us to the lasting insight in Rorty’s resistance to Price’s attempt to instrumentalize truth as if it were an isolable tool of our linguistic practices.

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The Interlacing of Science and Ethics
Rorty’s Critique of Epistemology for a Pragmatist Hermeneutics
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1. Introduction
Richard Rorty has long been perceived and interpreted as a provocative and groundbreaking philosopher. It is no coincidence that much of the literature on him still focuses on an unresolved conception of the two commitments – materialist and hermeneutic – that characterize his philosophical perspective. However, upon closer examination, an approach that he calls “eirenic” emerges in his writings. This eirenism should not be confused with a form of sophisticated relativism (Putnam 1992); rather, it is a consequence of the profound anti-foundational conviction and anti-authoritarian sentiment that feeds his thought, as well as his reading of the relation of science and ethics. My hypothesis is that this strategy of holding together unresolved aspects of philosophical perspectives is emblematic of his pragmatist hermeneutics, which applies especially to Rorty’s conception of science and morality, and their interlaced relation. In this article, I focus on Rorty’s recovery of pragmatism and “pragmatist hermeneutics” by considering his understanding of science and ethics as deeply interlaced. Rorty’s perspective on this issue is deeply inspired by Dewey’s and James’s conception of a holistic-syncretic pragmatism in addition to a methodological-scientific one. By focusing on Rorty’s conception of science and ethics and its philosophical implications, it is possible to recapitulate his cultural project of an organic (anti-dichotomic) re-modulation of the objectivity-solidarity relationship. By reassessing the notion that human beings are existentially committed to any vocabulary they adopt, Rorty’s project takes into account not only the main cultural trends of logical empiricism and continental philosophy, but also the existential needs they conveyed – that is, the search for objectivity and the meaning of life, respectively. The Rortyan proposal of an anti-ideological, historicist or post-positivist reformulation of the conception of scientific rationality as not opposed to ethics seems to be in line
with Jamesian efforts to confront scientific dogmatism by questioning the key notion of truth. In this way, by following Kuhn’s historicism, Rorty, like James, arrives at a sort of **pragmatist hermeneutics**: within a naturalistic hermeneutical framework, Rorty contests on an ontological level the need for necessary connections or disconnections between moral and scientific discourse. In this sense, the conception of ethics as having to do with what is personal, historical and “irrational” contrasts with the notion of scientific rationality elaborated in modernity as something that, unlike morality, is able to escape human finitude and contingency.

2. **Scientific or Holistic-Syncretic Pragmatism?**

2 In his introduction to Sellars’ text, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Rorty focuses his attention on the theme of rationality and the prejudice established in modernity about scientific rationality as amoral and impersonal. If Quine should be credited with challenging the rationalist version of foundationalism – *i.e.*, his criticism of the analytic/synthetic distinction – it is, instead, to Sellars that we owe the dissolution of the empiricist version of foundationalism, with his criticism of the “distinction between what is ‘given to the mind’ and what is ‘added by the mind’” (Rorty 1997: 5). Rorty quotes in full Sellars’ famous passage (§ 38) in which he clarifies what rational empirical (and scientific) knowledge means: “empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise” (Sellars 1997: 5-6). From this maxim, Rorty concludes that the notion of rationality and specifically of scientific rationality does not rest on the implementation of codified methods, but consists, instead, in the “give-and-take participation in a cooperative social project” (Rorty 1997: 6). These passages are pivotal to understanding Rorty’s recovery of pragmatism and his attempt to draw “consequences from a pragmatist theory about truth” (CP: xiii). Rorty praises the classical pragmatists for their desire to change the philosophical vocabulary still used within this genre. The burden of finding a path between moving away from philosophy and remaining locked within its vocabulary, and thus having to accept preconceived meanings, is resolved by an effort to pragmatically reinterpret philosophy and its ambiguous key terms like truth, goodness, and rationality. Pragmatism represents a third way between Platonism and positivism because it questions their common assumptions: in particular, the very notion of truth as (adequate) correspondence to reality. To dismiss this notion of truth is also to abandon its implicit alternative conceptions of reality – namely that natural science may or may not be the only truth to be had.

3 Rorty reads the pragmatists’ conception of philosophy in the light of Sellars’s broad definition of philosophy as a way of seeing how things hang together. Pointing at “being anti-Philosophical” (CP: xvii) as a new way of doing philosophy pragmatists are more radical than empiricists for their instrumental understanding of knowledge and true knowledge as something that helps to cope with reality. Pragmatism cuts across traditional distinctions, demonstrating a natural (and sound) oscillation between science and idealism. These two tendencies are adopted in different contexts and for both generalist and specialized audiences – that is, the general public and professional philosophers. Peirce, James and Dewey all assumed the “experimental” model (ORT: 63) in an attempt to emancipate American culture from its religious conditioning of
moral and political reflection. Their scientific attitude is not, however, entirely reducible to hard forms of positivism because of their complementary holistic view. Jamesian anti-atomism, Peirce's semiotic approach, and Dewey's instrumentalism are explicit expressions of the anti-reductionist stance supporting pragmatist naturalism.

Looking at the contemporary situation, Rorty interprets the disappearance of pragmatism in U.S. universities, starting around the mid-twentieth century, as the result of a losing polarization between Carnapian empiricism and a growing fascination with continental philosophy, regarded as more profound than its naïve American rival. Despite critiques by authors such as Bernstein, who see Rorty (like Dewey) as suffering from a certain lack of concreteness in addressing social and political issues (Bernstein 2003: 135), Rorty considers Dewey's anti-ideological liberalism as “the most valuable tradition of American intellectual life” (ORT: 64) and praises intellectuals like Sidney Hook for their efforts in keeping such a tradition alive. Given Hook's and Rorty's common goal, however, Rorty suggests a different strategy from Hook’s “identification of liberalism with ‘being scientific’” (ORT: 64). Rorty does not agree with emphasizing the scientific side of pragmatism while disregarding its equally relevant holistic side, which consists in the recognition of the “continuity between science, art, politics, and religion” (ORT: 64). His confrontation with Hook’s thesis is particularly interesting in that it deepens his understanding of the scientific method. By focusing on an analysis of what science and the scientific method mean, and trying to promote a sort of coexistence between analytic and continental thought within a perspective informed primarily by American pragmatism, Rorty shows that many anachronisms and misunderstandings about pragmatism can be overcome. More specifically, making room again for the “holistic and syncretic side” of pragmatism, in particular, that of Jamesian and Deweyan origin, allows contemporary pragmatically-oriented authors both to regain credibility in the eyes of post-positivist philosophers of science – like Kuhn and Quine – and to minimize unnecessary or rather ideological opposition to the continental tradition. To put it briefly, Rorty adopts a non-ideological attitude that is thoroughly “experimental and fallibilist” (ORT: 66) to encourage new pragmatists to actively participate in contemporary philosophical conversations.

Neatly distinguishing the logic of the scientific method from the choice of the theoretical frame of reference, Hook’s understanding of pragmatism turns out to be strongly positivistic and thus only partially connected with Dewey’s notion of the scientific method and his instrumental conception of the ever-changing relationship between means, evaluations and meta-reflections of value judgements. The holistic aspect so disregarded by Hook is instead the ripest fruit of scientific practice, in which classical pragmatists were almost all trained. Such practice proves it difficult to identify and contrast facts and objective data with human “takings” (ORT: 65), i.e. the value frames within which scientists read and interpret data. Rorty reads Hook’s thesis, according to which “there is only one reliable method of reaching the truth about the nature of things anywhere and at any time,” as a definition of “scientism,” while sharing his conception of “naturalism” as “a philosophy [that] not only accepts this method but also the broad generalizations which are established by the use of it” (ORT: 65). In this regard, Rorty privileges as the most stimulating proposal of pragmatism its effort to break away from foundational logic by challenging the notion that truth corresponds to the most accurate description of the nature of things. Pragmatists assume a behaviourist, evolutionist and historicist stance whereby “true beliefs” are in Jamesian terms “successful rules for action” (ORT: 65). Conversely, Hook’s insistence
on the universal validity of the scientific method is therefore the result of a stance that is only partially pragmatist. In addition, as the opposition between truth-as-correspondence and truth-as-non-correspondence is pragmatically rejected, there is another temptation to escape. The temptation is to re-propose the same non-pragmatist opposition in the context of rationality by appealing to what distinguishes a rational perspective from an irrational one, a distinction that can be drawn on the basis of a contingent preconception that the naturalistic-materialist understanding is rational while the anti-naturalistic-religious one is irrational. Hook's appealing to the logic of the scientific method to maintain the gap between science and theology turns out to be very far from what I claim to be Rorty's Jamesian view, according to which rationality is not the exclusive prerogative of naturalistic philosophies.

6 In order to corroborate the Jamesian notion of legitimate alternative “webs of beliefs” (ORT: 66), Rorty recovers Quine's conception of the continuous reorganization of our systems of knowledge. Quine's and James's idea is that the same “evidence,” the same “data” or “fact,” can be included in very different networks of beliefs, reconfiguring the internal balance of our field of experience as appropriate. According to Rorty, however, this conception, which would be tantamount to renouncing the idea of truth as correspondence, leads neither to considering facts from a holistic perspective in which they do not constitute an undisputed and neutral background against which it is possible to establish a priori methodological criteria for rationally comparing divergent positions, nor to falling into relativism: “[i]f one drops the idea that there is a common ground called ‘the evidence,’ one is still far from saying that one person’s web is as good as another” (ORT: 67).

7 One fact neither proves nor disproves a theory. In this sense, it is not impossible to choose rationally between “alternative, equally coherent, webs of belief” (ORT: 66). Relativism for Rorty, as for James, is an option that belongs to the same absolutist view, as its exact opposite. More interesting, instead, is the uncertain social process by which consensus can emerge over complex issues during discussions in which alternative perspectives collide. The consensus is not obtained by employing prepackaged solutions that cannot be further corrected, but it does emerge gradually – says Rorty – through a “reweaving” of the systems of knowledge at stake. The outcome of bringing the old beliefs into agreement with the new ones, a process for which the empirical instrument of reweaving one's “web of beliefs” does not imply the need to “formulate epistemic principles” (ORT: 68), is far from being fully predictable. In other words, fallibilism does not necessarily go hand in hand with the possession of universal methodological conceptions and principles.

8 In this regard, Rorty recovers Dewey’s experimentalism in the moral sphere and brings it closer to Kuhn's perspective on science. Like Kuhn, who reads the history of science as a history of scientific revolutions, i.e., of slow and decisive changes in immeasurable paradigms, Rorty understands vocabularies as alternative frameworks to be chosen according to purposes considered to be convenient for a human society in a given historical period. According to this idea, if we consider epistemic principles as a kind of moral principle, we can see how both moral and scientific problems historically imply the need for continuous re-description based on the results of the applying these same principles to the specific features of the “problematic situation” we are facing – that is, to the concrete novelty we happen to find in nature. Rorty fully recovers the dynamics of Dewey's organic circuit, a logical device in which the concrete
achievement of goals or the implementation of new means contributes to telling us what we are looking for, what we desire. In morality as in science, the necessary application to concrete situations and the intervention of temporality, required by every organic and social process, play an indispensable role: it is not a matter of comparing static conceptual paradigms, already given once and for all, but of following the development of moral and scientific progress and reconstructing adequate descriptions of the specific “problematic situation.” For Rorty descriptions will contribute to “changes, thus changing the ‘observation language’ used to describe the ‘evidence’” (ORT: 68).

3. Reshaping the Debate on Method in the Social Sciences

This interweaving of facts and values shows how methodological matters are thus connected with the traditional conception of truth as correspondence and therefore, ultimately, with the ontological claim recovered in the modern world. Rorty hypothesizes that modern scientific discoveries did not have as their objective any “epistemological moral” (CP: 191) since they did not intend to establish the “nature of science or rationality” and, above all, that such discoveries were not the result of adopting the scientific method. As anticipated, in modern philosophy, and in its attempt to answer the foundational question of why science is so successful, Rorty sees the emergence of a tradition of thought based on the Galilean metaphor drawn between the discovery of the isomorphism in terms of scientific reductionism and the natural world: the well-known idea that the book of nature is written in mathematical characters. Galileo’s claim to have found not just one language among the many through which nature can be interpreted but the original language of nature – and therefore to have breached the secret constitution of nature itself – was the foundational link between nature and language that characterized and was elaborated by modern philosophy. This link became the premise on which to develop a series of rationalist, empirical, and transcendental theories that explained the success of the isomorphic hypothesis: the idea of a key vocabulary that opens the lock of the universe.

This idea reflects the classical idea of truth as correspondence to, or perfect agreement with, reality, which Jamesian and Deweyan pragmatism, in particular, has tried to undermine, questioning the pragmatist meaning of “correspondence”12 and insisting on the contextual dimension and inherent value of any conception of truth. The distinction between science and non-science has long remained mired in the opposition between idealists and positivists or, to adopt James’s slightly different conceptualization, between the “tender-minded” and “tough-minded.” In Rorty’s view, convinced of the legitimacy of the correspondence between scientific language and reality, the latter have tried to correct the extreme outcomes of transcendental idealism – namely, the construction of alternative linguistic worlds – by referring to the use of the notion of method, and the related notions of objectivity and rigour. In classic pragmatist style, the figures of Dewey and Kuhn stand out in Rorty’s history of the philosophy of science and social science for having suggested a third conception of science, different from those derived from the common foundationalist ontology that holds firm on the point of univocal thought-language-reality isomorphism, even if seen
from the alternative perspectives of positivism and idealism. According to Rorty, confidence in the scientific method goes hand in hand with the idea that essences of nature, reason, and mind exist. If one begins with essences, it is possible to ascertain some method to lead us to the real knowledge of things beyond their appearance. Modernity conceived a notion of science that cultivated such an idea of truth as univocal correspondence to reality. This idea was indifferent to the time and place in which, and interests and purposes for which, correspondence is recognized; in short, it disregarded the operational and value framework concerning truth.

The legitimate question about the moral value of the success of the scientific method in the history of science should, therefore, in Rorty’s view, be met with a somewhat disillusioning answer. The Galilean method, although undoubtedly a good idea, held no profound secret: it did no more than to ultimately function well, indeed better than other methods. Nevertheless, there is nothing special or even specific in the empirical method: it is precisely the same empirical method currently applied in many other human activities. Included among its other procedures are “check[ing] off examples against criteria; [...] fudg[ing] the counter-examples enough to avoid the need for new models; [...] try[ing] out various guesses, formulated within the current jargon, in the hope of coming up with something which will cover the unfudgeable cases” (CP: 193). In this sense, according to Letson, Rorty substantially agrees with “Quine’s quip that science organizes common sense” (Letson 1995: 44). For Rorty the secret was in Galileo’s vocabulary: his terminology “lucked out” by proving to be more convenient than Aristotle’s in that historical context and mentality. The history of the philosophy of science in fact derives from the metaphysical moral lesson that philosophers drew from scientific success. As Hernández recently stated, “what Rorty calls Galilean axiological neutrality becomes a metaphysical process which screens subjective aspects of our descriptions, even if it is unclear in the history of science which general but not trivial procedures compose such a method” (Hernández 2017: 2). In short, instead of inferring the importance of the mathematical jargon in which one frames scientific hypotheses, modern philosophers focused on the capacity of the new vocabulary to describe nature in its proper terms, to describe its essence.

Given that some historians of modern philosophy questioned Rorty’s “simplistic interpretation” of modern thinkers, many (with some important exceptions, see Taylor 1995) accept the relevance of his “history of modern philosophy [...] in its focus on the centrality of the epistemology of representations and the role such epistemology has played in defining a distinct and privileged place for philosophy as a cognitive authority” (see Gutting 2003: 43). That is why it is interesting to deepen our understanding of the reasons or rather the misleading interpretations that, according to Rorty, would account for the outcome that philosophy became a cognitive authority. There are two significant misunderstandings that still inform the role that common sense plays in scientific research today: first, the idea that the scientificty of a hypothesis is proportionate to its “moral insignificance” and, second, that a hypothesis represents reality inasmuch as it can be generalized – that is, it does not present references to subjective notions (see infra CP: 193-4). These are the two modern criteria that have contributed to validating the myth of the neutrality of science and its method in the search for “an absolute conception of reality,” as Rorty quotes from Williams. This Cartesian confidence in a sort of human power to grasp the self-representation of nature becomes the battleground between philosophers like Williams, who believe that this representation is “one of our intuitions about the nature of knowledge,” and Rorty,
for whom it is instead “one of our intuitions about what counts as being philosophical” (CP: 194). In his view, it is not only an epistemological but a moral intuition, as is made evident by the Cartesian ambition of obtaining neutral and universally valid generalizations. The post-Cartesian interpretation of the scientific method has, therefore, deeply marked its destiny in modernity, determining its success. In the light of a rationalistic comprehension of nature, this interpretation contributed to establishing the supposed neutral status of science, making the scientific method a means of not only ordering thought (as it was for Bacon), but selecting purely natural elements. This is the reason why, according to Rorty, modern philosophy did nothing but continue, in this sense, to cultivate the Platonic dream of being able to discover and recognize “Nature’s Own Vocabulary” (CP: 194) – a dream Rorty rejects in keeping with his espousal of the pragmatist tradition, which, as Peirce’s anti-Cartesian essays already demonstrate, clearly denies humans the possibility of having an immediate intuition, intellectual or sensible, of reality.

Thus, the effect of the penetration of Cartesian philosophy into science led to epistemically confusing “parts of one’s mind which do and don’t correspond to reality [...] with the distinction between rational and irrational ways of doing science” (CP: 194). Rorty, however, considers two ways of understanding this correspondence between cognitive abilities and scientific method: an anti-foundational way and a foundational one. On the one hand, in the wake of Kuhn and Dewey, Rorty considers the notions of method and rationality as names that indicate a well-balanced attitude in research activity between not giving up the intensity of one’s sensations and the need for intersubjective discussion. On the other hand, following what Rorty criticizes as “epistemologically-centered philosophy” (CP: 195), the same two notions pretend to be neutral descriptions of an essential correspondence between the human mind and the language of nature. In this sense, the idea of the scientific method is inevitably linked to an “absolute conception”, namely an objective and purely descriptive conception, of reality.

As underlined by several scholars, Rorty is mainly opposed to “scientific realism,” which for Rouse may be explained as the philosophical claim that “science aims, and often succeeds, at developing theories that are true in the specific philosophical sense of a correspondence between the content of linguistic expressions and the ‘way the world is’ independent of human concepts or practices” (Rouse 2003: 82). Moreover, according to Rouse, this realist view of science goes hand in hand with a certain conception of morality: “[l]ike moralists seeking natural, rational, or divine authority for their recommendations [...]science, as realists conceive it, aims for and supposedly attains something greater (and more reliable) than do other, all-too-human activities” (Rouse 2003: 82). According to this view, by rejecting both the notion of the scientific method and that of an “objective” moral theory as inutile and impossible, respectively, Rorty proves to be favourable to a hermeneutic understanding of the sciences (including the social sciences) and morality. Moreover, his taking part in the debate between “value-neutral” scientific models and “hermeneutical” models in the social sciences aims at shedding light on a deeper level of confusion that, in his opinion, affects the protagonists of the debate themselves. Their problem is that both factions, scientific realists and hermeneutists, focus on a methodological issue, while Rorty recognizes that, since they cannot dissolve the Deweyan means-ends circuit, this debate inevitably affects the goals of social research, not only the methods adopted. In order to resolve the situation, Rorty proposes to frame the discussion in terms of
Dilthey’s famous distinction as a quarrel between “the competing goals of ‘explanation’ and ‘understanding’” (CP: 196). Above all, he wishes to modulate the issue by addressing the difference between the types of “jargon” that characterize the two descriptive styles. Rorty emphasizes how both styles, identified as Galilean and teleological, or generalizing and evaluative, imply an already-made choice to commit to a specific human interest or purpose: hence scientific realists chose to neglect while hermeneutists chose to valorize the evaluative dimension of the adopted vocabulary.

Rorty displays an “eirenic” attitude here, which we will see in a moment when briefly mentioning his view of morality, in which he confronts Freud’s materialistic and hermeneutic reading. Indeed, for Rorty, from a perspective that we prefer to call pluralist and genuinely organic in the Deweyan sense, this difference in vocabularies, which also occurs in the social sciences, is not one that should be solved but instead accepted. In the social sciences, the close connection between means and ends is evident, as is the actual interaction between scientific and moral “goals,” namely the ability to predict broad phenomena and the question of how to choose a specific and correct attitude to adopt.

“Explanation” is merely the sort of understanding one looks for when one wants to predict and control. It does not contrast with something else called “understanding” as the abstract contrasts with the concrete, or the artificial with the natural, or the “repressive” with the “liberating.” To say that something is better “understood” in one vocabulary than another is always an ellipsis for the claim that a description in the preferred vocabulary is more useful for a certain purpose. (CP: 197)

The vocabulary that Rorty calls “behaviourist” is useful in predicting general phenomena, while “evaluative” vocabulary is more useful in deliberating how to act. However, the mistake made by supporters of both vocabularies is the same: they both believe that, according to the modern scientific background, there should be one unique and coherent way of dealing with reality. According to Rorty, this conviction means holding onto the idea that there is only one language capable of representing the essence of reality and not accepting the pragmatist revision of the meaning of truth, which, in Deweyan terms, considers vocabularies as useful tools to cooperate with reality. From this point of view, there is no “essential connection or disconnection” between moral and scientific considerations in the sense that it is neither necessary nor necessarily more rational to answer questions that serve different purposes, either the prediction and control of nature or moral behaviour, with one and the same vocabulary.

In this sense, the notion of truth put forth by James and Dewey proves to be central because, as already mentioned, it is on the basis of the pragmatists’ radical questioning of the criterion of adequately representing (copying) reality that Rorty develops his argument and in which he anchors his construction of a philosophical alternative to the foundational or epistemological notion of Philosophy. In addition, Rorty holds firm to the pragmatist perspective for two reasons. First, it is a way to avoid the risk that he envisages in a thoroughly hermeneutical critique of the conception of the scientific method. The Diltheyan risk is precisely that of falling into an opposite, hermeneutical yet always foundational conception that derives a different method for the social sciences from an essential difference between human beings and nature: “this protest goes too far when [...] announcing that the ontological difference dictates a methodological difference” (CP: 199). Second, the social science debate is an
opportunity for Rorty to highlight the relevance of the holistic path outlined by James and Dewey’s pragmatism.16 Along the road traced by epistemological behaviourists and classical pragmatists – and appropriated by Rorty for the “utility of its inspirational upshot” (Malachowski 2013: 211) – it is possible to also prevent hermeneutics from potentially drifting towards nihilistic outcomes.17 Using the vocabulary of American “pluralism,” this pragmatist path reveals, according to Rorty, a purpose almost entirely similar to that of continental authors such as Foucault and Nietzsche: it issues at warning against dogmatism. However, Rorty’s perspective is melioristic and in this respect more in line with the American tradition. Renouncing the transcendental, and the idea that human nature does not necessarily imply a renunciation of the idea of human solidarity, Rorty argues that “bourgeois liberalism seems to me the best example of this solidarity we have yet achieved, and Deweyan pragmatism the best articulation of it” (CP: 207). In this sense, his preference for Deweyan vocabulary, as well as for Dewey’s idea of “culture,” over Foucauldian vocabulary (and his conception of “power”), is reasonable: “Although Foucault and Dewey are trying to do the same thing, Dewey seems to me to have done it better, simply because his vocabulary allows room for unjustifiable hope, and an ungroundable but vital sense of human solidarity” (CP: 208).18 Besides trying to ensure the common goal of demystifying the dogmatism of culture and dominant strategies of power, pragmatist vocabulary also manages to keep the ungrounded ideas of hope and solidarity alive.

4. Science and Morality: from Epistemology to Pragmatist Hermeneutics

Rorty’s strategy of holding together unresolved aspects of philosophical perspectives is emblematic of his movement from epistemology to hermeneutics. This movement especially concerns Rorty’s interlaced conception of science and morality, in which science and morality mark a path of mutual and mutually influential (mis)understandings. From this perspective, the significance of particulars, historicity and contingency is pivotal to Rorty’s construction of his pragmatist hermeneutics. It is no coincidence that his moral reflection focuses predominantly on the “moral significance” of personal details or idiosyncrasies as opposed to their supposed “moral insignificance,” as preached by epistemological science. Before addressing Rorty’s pragmatist endorsement of hermeneutics, and finally concluding on pluralism and meliorism as peculiar aspects that characterize his naturalized version of hermeneutics, we only want here to make a point about this strategy in the moral field. Rorty’s interpretation of Freud, which he considers an indispensable source of inspiration for his moral reflection, is another illustration of what we have called Rorty’s eirenic strategy – the one he used to read pragmatism alternatively to Hook’s positivistic reading. To accept the tension between positivism and hermeneutics in Freud’s psychoanalysis enables Rorty to maintain on the moral level his own naturalistic, anti-essentialist view while at the same time espousing a postmodern conception of the self that is ever open to reinterpretation and re-description (self-creation).19 My claim is that both in considering science and morality, Rorty’s eirenic approach turns out to be the result of his overcoming epistemology intended as the need for a coherent and ultimately univocal worldview. To believe in the importance of hanging together different perspectives is, for Rorty, the only way to fully appreciate
their radicality and to understand what makes them so challenging (cf. Rorty 1980: 185).

19 Rorty concludes his intellectual biography with a famous passage in which he writes that he hopes for an era in which the question about absolutes no longer makes sense, except insofar as it reveals the human inability “to live with one's own finitude [...] to escape the historicity and contingency of [one's] existence” (Rorty 2010: 23). In this short text, Rorty also considers his roughly sketched work on hermeneutics in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979) to be still immature. At that time, he contrasted “edifying philosophy” with “systematic philosophy,” and only later – after having elaborated post-Hegelian European philosophy – was he able to join together “postpositivistic analytic philosophy, American pragmatism, and Heidegger's 'history of Being’” (Rorty 2010: 13). However, Rorty remains convinced even later of (at least) the connection between science and ethics, and the related importance of the history of ideas in understanding the associated philosophical issues. Moreover, he still appears persuaded of the inescapable correlation amongst professionalized philosophy, the application of the scientific method, and the attempt to solve ahistorical difficulties. To put it briefly, already in that text, the roots of many of his later proposals on the need for a therapeutic “deprofessionalization of philosophy” and to adopt Sellar’s lesson on the importance of the history of philosophy for philosophy (Rorty 2010: 15) are outlined.

20 Explaining the meaning of the title of his book, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, Rorty begins with the idea that images and metaphors constitute our philosophical convictions. The traditional conception of knowledge as “accuracy of representation” and the related idea of the possibility of obtaining more accurate and precise representations using “pure, nonempirical methods” (PMN: 12) derive from the modern image of the mind as a mirror of nature. From the therapeutic perspective adopted by Rorty, with which he proposes to deconstruct some obvious philosophical assumptions about the notions of mind, knowledge and philosophy – showing how these assumptions have been historically and not absolutely constituted – the distinction between analytic and continental philosophy also turns out to be one of style rather than method or principle. By adopting Kuhn’s well-known distinction between normal and revolutionary science, Rorty proposes to apply the same perspective to analytic philosophy, as Hans Kögler writes, with the further aim of freeing the notion of abnormal discourse from all “idealized clothing” (Calcaterra & Köger 2020: 15; see also Gutting 2003: 47ff). Rorty considers analytic philosophy as a contemporary variant of Cartesian and Kantian philosophy in that it shares the same “self-image” as “still committed to the construction of a permanent, neutral framework for inquiry, and thus for all of culture” (PMN: 8). Unlike “historicism” philosophers (such as Wittgenstein, Dewey and Heidegger, who along with Kuhn, Sellar’s and Quine are the “heroes” of this book), Rorty argues that one of the central aspects that unites analytic philosophy and the Cartesian-Kantian philosophical tradition is precisely the common “atmut to escape from history,” which for Rorty means “an attempt to find nonhistorical conditions of any possible historical development” (PMN: 9).

21 In the third section, Rorty opens his discussion of hermeneutics by pointing out that by hermeneutics he means neither a method, nor a discipline, nor an alternative research program to epistemology. Hermeneutics is, instead:
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. The notion that there is a permanent neutral framework whose “structure” philosophy can display is the notion that the objects to be confronted by the mind, or the rules which constrain inquiry, are common to all discourse, or at least to every discourse on a given topic. Thus epistemology proceeds on the assumption that all contributions to a given discourse are commensurable. Hermeneutics is largely a struggle against this assumption. (PMN: 314-5)

22 Hermeneutics is taken as a battle flag against all attempts at commensuration since every attempt at codification or comparison ultimately implies the need for a univocal framework, one that may make it difficult to conceive of philosophy as “a voice in the conversation of mankind” (PMN: 264). Embracing the pluralism of vocabularies, Rorty’s critique addresses a monolithic framework of philosophy as well as the notion of truth as correspondence to facts or, as Brandom writes, “the notion of epistemically privileged representations” (Brandom 2000: 159). In this regard, their exchange of ideas is quite interesting. On the basis of Davidson’s distinction between causes and reasons, Rorty introduces what Brandom renames “vocabulary vocabulary” or the vocabulary of “normative discursive practices,” not with the intention of proposing an alternative to the vocabulary of causes, but rather in order “to replace the metavocabulary of representations” (Brandom 2000: 168), or what Brandom defines as “representationalist totalitarianism” (Brandom 2000: 170). Rorty acknowledges that he considers as authoritarian those thinkers who conceive of perceptual experience as the model for the hard sciences and who, consequently, distinguish conversations about hard facts (e.g. photons) as superior to those about less hard facts (e.g. aesthetics). For Rorty these are the “bad guys” or those he regards as “authoritarians.”

These guys do not agree with Brandom and myself that increased freedom and richness of the Conversation is the aim of inquiry, but instead think that there is the further aim of getting Reality right (as opposed to getting, for instance, snow, photons, baseball, Cezanne and the best use of the term “fact” right). (Rorty 2000: 187)

23 Considering the ultimate aim of research to be the increase in the richness and freedom of conversation instead of the need to get at reality in the right way is perhaps the key to understanding Rorty’s anti-authoritarianism, and it is but another way of restating the priority of freedom over truth. In this sense, Rorty echoes what he already wrote in 1979, arguing against “Philosophy as a discipline capable of giving us a ‘right method of seeking truth’.” There he explained that such a conception of philosophy undeniably implied the request for a “permanent neutral framework of all possible inquiry,” to which the Cartesian conception of “mind as Mirror of Nature” (PMN: 211-2) responded. Moreover, in his discussion with Brandom, Rorty confirms his instrumental conception of vocabularies by accepting the former’s naturalist and hermeneutic reading according to which, for Rorty, not only are vocabularies “evolutionary coping strategies” but, in an anti-reductionist and fully Deweyan sense, they “can do more than just help us get what we already want. They also make it possible to frame and formulate new ends” (Brandom 2000: 169). Rorty talks about the plasticity that affects Dewey’s above-mentioned means-ends continuum, that is, the plasticity of meanings that over time revises our vocabulary, which as a consequence enables us to articulate our goals and desires in new ways. Here lies a radical overcoming of the reductionist naturalistic perspective through a sort of pragmatist hermeneutics.
5. Some Conclusions

In this brief excursus of some selected texts by Rorty, we have focused on the relationship between his conceptions of science and ethics by highlighting his understanding of the scientific method and the methodological distinction made between science and morality as a consequence of the post-Cartesian metaphysical interpretation of scientific success according to Rorty’s history of epistemology. What clearly emerges is the conceptual network of foundationalism-epistemology-representationalism against which Rorty takes a firm stand for being a contemporary form of authoritarianism or deprivation of intellectual freedom. In this respect, Rorty’s response to McDowell’s criticism is very instructive. In fact, Rorty insists that his strong anti-authoritarianism does not lead him to confuse the regulative ideal of wanting to do things right with the human inability to handle contingency. On the contrary, in his view, this inability is the result of the Platonic fear of “plurality and contingency.” Above all, he reaffirms his naturalistic approach as a way to move past this philosophical and cultural impasse: “I think that the way out of both Cartesian and Platonism is to view human nomoi human languages and practices – as natural as the beaver’s teeth, and equally in touch (causal touch, rather than any sort of ‘answerability’ touch) with the world” (Rorty 2000b: 123).

As Brandom rightly suggests, Rorty – like James, we should add – criticizes “the ontological privilege and unique authority of science” (Brandom 2000: xiii), considering science, in Deweyan and Quinean terms, “as one more human activity, rather than as the place at which human beings encounter a ‘hard,’ nonhuman reality” (CIS: 4). The object of his polemic is, therefore, not science, but scientism: “the philosophical credentials of taking the practical success of science as reason to understand its vocabulary as putting us in closer touch with reality than others” (Brandom 2000: xiv). Just as for classical pragmatists, and particularly for James, for Rorty, the target of criticism was the uncritical acceptance of the new positivist idola tribus, namely science and its results, in an absolute and absolutely decontextualized and apparently disinterested way. Among James’s and Rorty’s motivations for this battle, a common one can be detected in the profound moral concern that inspires these two “philosophers of agency and commitment” (Voparil 2016: 2), and great experts in epistemology. Their reflections on epistemology and their moral concerns are somehow deeply intertwined. As clearly put by Furlog, Rorty’s reformulation of epistemology or normal discourse “lies well within the hermeneutic circle,” for it “describes a language so well-entrenched in human practice that it can be used ‘as if’ it were grounded in certainty, whereas, in fact, it is only more familiar to us than other discourses” (Furlog 1988: 493). Rorty’s recourse to hermeneutics expresses his hope to show how concretely fallible and contingent both old and new forms of dogmatism or authoritarianism are with their imposition of unnecessary limits on the advancement of inquiry, understood as the advancement of the conversation of humanity. In this regard, concrete deliberation – that is, deliberation constrained by the contingency of natural and social reality – constitutes one of the central aspects of the “patterns” of scientific and moral inquiry promoted by classical pragmatists and profoundly endorsed by Rorty: “[f]or the pragmatists, the pattern of all inquiry – scientific as well
as moral – is deliberation concerning the relative attractions of various concrete alternatives” (CP: 164).

26 As mentioned earlier, Rorty’s recovery of pragmatism is also due to its capacity to provide a framework for heretofore ungrounded hope and solidarity. Solidarity becomes his alternative to an epistemological conception of science in search of permanent results and objectivity. In his reshaping of scientific vocabulary, Rorty’s move from objectivity to solidarity implies, according to Calcaterra’s reading, a reliance on the intersubjective category of suffering. On a moral level, this category is based on the fact that it is precisely through acquaintance with others, by listening to their narratives, that it is possible for us to become sympathetic to the suffering of others – James also expresses this idea in his well-known text, cited by Rorty, on a certain blindness in human beings (CIS: 38). According to Calcaterra, solidarity is therefore, on an epistemological level, the criterion of intersubjectivity on which the communitarian statute of scientific research relies (cf. Calcaterra 2019: 69ff).

27 In conclusion, what I claim is that Rorty’s hermeneutic turn in science and ethics takes the path of a more and more deliberate reshaping of hermeneutics along the lines of the pragmatist tradition. As clearly stated by Bouveresse, however, Rorty was not in search of any “ecumenical consensus” between continental and analytic philosophy and their methods (Bouveresse 2013: 8; CP: 225-6).26 Both his dismissal of “methodology””27 and his eirenic strategy are part of Rorty’s rejection of epistemology in favour of hermeneutics and his proposal for the renovation of scientific and moral reflection. From this perspective, his twofold adoption of hermeneutics (in science and ethics) appears as two photograms of Rorty’s robust antiauthoritarian stance28 or what Voparil brilliantly called “antiauthoritarian fallibilism,” considering it as “an instantiation of the pluralist temperament that James most valued” (Voparil 2016: 2). Voparil has recently written on the commonalities between James and Rorty focusing on their similar ethical views.29 These hinge on a “melioristic ethics of belief that foregrounds a distinctly pragmatic interrelation of choice, commitment, and responsibility” (Voparil 2016: 2).

28 If it is quite clear that Rorty’s relation to classical pragmatism is characterized by important continuities and interesting new developments, it is even more evident, that, in talking about hermeneutics (particularly in PMN), “Rorty selectively appropriates Gadamer’s thought for his own neo-pragmatist aims and concerns” (Bouma-Prediger 1989: 313).30 It is precisely along the lines of an appropriative reshaping of hermeneutics that I have suggested talking about Rorty’s pragmatist hermeneutics. As other scholars have shown, Rorty understands philosophy as an ongoing conversation that is expected to be useful for and committed to existential issues. It is to this extent that he appropriates and reframes, sometimes in an unorthodox way, what previous philosophers have achieved, considering their views in the light of the history of the human society we happen to be part of. His preference for hermeneutics thus takes the form of pragmatist naturalism as it is integrally shaped, or nourished, by melioristic and pluralistic perspectives. These two main perspectives are particularly appreciable in his understanding of the interlacing of science and ethics. As I have shown, pluralism is a valid alternative to any scientific and moral dogmatism, while meliorism is what saves continental hermeneutics from what Rorty sees as its congenital lack of hope, lack of utopianism. This reshaping of pragmatist – read “experimental [and] fallibilist” – naturalism may warrant further exploration to prove both Rorty’s strong cultural
connection to the American philosophical tradition and his commitment to making such a pluralistic voice relevant again to contemporary conversations.

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NOTES

1. In a footnote, Rorty defines “eirenic” as his attitude of rejecting any definitive philosophical resolution between a materialistic and a hermeneutical reading of Freud (EHO: 151).

2. For an accurate reading of classical pragmatism in the light of experimentalism see Trevor Pearce (2020); on the influence of experimentalism on Dewey’s theory of democratic institutions see Frega (2019; in particular, chapter 7 “A Democratic Experimentalist Theory of Institutions”: 269-318).

3. As president of the APA’s Eastern Division in 1979, Rorty played a relevant role during the pluralist revolt against the domination of analytical philosophers. See Gross (2008: 216ff).

4. Hook defines invariants as the scientific reasons for which one does or does not attribute validity to hypotheses and variants as the historical and contingent factors, such as the presence of other clues and evidence, that strengthen the scientific reasons for “believing an hypothesis” (ORT: 65).


6. “Attributions of reality or truth are, on the view I share with James, compliments we pay to entities or beliefs that have won their spurs, paid their way, proved themselves useful, and therefore been incorporated into accepted social practices. When these practices are being contested, it is of no use to say that reality or truth is on the side of one of the contestants. For such claims will always be mere table-thumping, not serious contributions to cultural politics.
Another way to put James’ point is to say that truth and reality exist for the sake of social practices, rather than vice versa” (PCP: 6-7). On Rorty’s priority of politics on science see Kremer (2009).

7. It is worth clarifying that Rorty is well aware of the relationship between methodology and ontology, and it is from this perspective that we can explain his opposition to let’s say a priori methods, namely those methods that already presuppose a fixed conception of reality. On the contrary, because of his endorsement of Dewey’s conception, Rorty is not against the notion of methodology as it is established in the progress of research and modified according to new discoveries.

8. With respect to the issue of the plurality of alternative theories and logics Rorty claims are pragmatic, one author he could have taken into greater consideration is Clarence I. Lewis. However, it is clear that Lewis’s research into developing a rule to choose between alternative theoretical paradigms is quite far from Rorty’s theory. The latter probably would not have talked about rules and in any case would have relied on a pragmatic choice between paradigms: we choose what works best in a certain context and for certain purposes.

9. On the problematic situation in and the importance of the organic circuit for Dewey’s theory of evaluation, see Santarelli: “what we attribute value to is the possible object of an overall reassessment in a situation of crisis, conflict or disharmony. Through a critical evaluation, our provisional aims – for example, our wishes and interests – are considered as a means to an ulterior end. Dewey’s theory of evaluation relies on an original and sophisticated conception of the means-ends relationship, based on the logical device of the organic circuit” (Santarelli 2019: 76; our translation). See also Calcaterra & Frega (2015).

10. Letson criticizes Rorty’s understanding of social science by suggesting that another conception of method can be provided instead of his view of it as “the possession of the key to nature’s secrets.” If by method one means “simply something like approach, then Rorty, and indeed any pragmatist, need feel no compunctions about referring to method” (Letson 1995: 44).

11. See James (1907; 1909).


13. As Rouse comments, Rorty claimed that the meaning of “realism” also depends on which “antirealist” doctrine is considered by realists: “[a]ntirealism’ is not a single doctrine, but an umbrella term for a family of views that define the aspirations of science in terms of specific human capacities or interests. The significance of such views depends upon which capacities or interests are given prominence for a philosophy of science and how the goals of science are supposed to be fixed by those capacities or interests” (ORT: 49).


15. “Dewey thought that if he could break down this notion, if scientific inquiry could be seen as adapting and coping rather than copying, the continuity between science, morals, and art would become apparent” (CP: 86).

16. “On my view, James and Dewey were not only waiting at the end of the dialectical road which analytic philosophy travelled, but are waiting at the end of the road which, for example, Foucault and Deleuze are currently travelling” (CP: xviii).

17. In an interview from 1982, recently republished by Voparil and Bernstein, Rorty further clarifies this aspect: “What I find disturbing about the fashionable French is that they aren't utopian. They hold out no hope. I think that their position is an over-reaction” (Rorty 2010b: 496).

18. Like Foucault, Dewey renounces the idea that there is one vocabulary intrinsic to Nature, as well as the idea of a transcendental subject, yet this does not prevent him from appropriating terms that have belonged, with other meanings, to these traditions of thought. By redefining these terms, such as the “will to truth,” in a “creative” and non-possessive way, the pragmatist
can use them in her vocabulary, thus giving due place to a whole plurality of emotions, desires, and expectations that are characteristic of the richness and diversity of human phenomenology. Like the behaviourist and hermeneutic ones, the pragmatist vocabulary is simply another vocabulary. Nevertheless, as a “pluralist” vocabulary, it allows one to realize and adhere to the ideal needs of concrete life—hope and solidarity—which makes it preferable in Rorty’s eyes.

19. From this perspective, the moral obligation to seek self-knowledge turns out to be an aesthetic exploration of ourselves in pursuit of self-enrichment, rather than a foundationalist search for our propulsive “true center” (EHO: 148). For an analysis of Rorty’s and Ricoeur’s understanding of the Freudian unconscious, see Bella & Santarelli (2019).

20. In the previously mentioned interview from 1982, Rorty reaffirms his admiration for James and Dewey and talks about his effort to free pragmatism from the misunderstandings caused by professionalized philosophy: “it’s a question of putting pragmatism into better shape after thirty years of super professionalism” (Rorty 2010b: 495).

21. On Rorty’s naturalism and its relation to Kantianism, Brandom maintains that the “Trojan horse” in Rorty’s naturalism is his adoption (via Sellars) of Kant’s distinction between causation and justification: “[i]n his reliance on this fundamental distinction, Rorty is a Kantian, even as he deploys this tool to criticize the epistemological tradition Kant represents” (Brandom 2000: xv).

22. “Figures like Nietzsche, William James, Freud, Proust, and Wittgenstein illustrate what I have called ‘freedom as the recognition of contingency.’ […] such recognition is the chief virtue of the members of a liberal society, and that the culture of such a society should aim at curing us of our ‘deep metaphysical need’” (CIS: 46). Along this line, Ramberg reads Rorty’s fight against metaphysics as an expression of his radically pragmatist anti-authoritarianism. See Ramberg (2008).

23. On the continuity between science and philosophy, Rorty writes: “[m]y discussion of Quine has pressed his words with tiresome literalness. Quine probably does not care about the fate of the word ‘epistemology.’ What he does care about, perhaps, is his Deweyan position that science and philosophy are continuous—not to be viewed as having different methods or subjects. […] Dewey and Wittgenstein have in common their view that a natural quest for understanding has been run together, by modern philosophers, with an unnatural quest for certainty” (PMN: 228).

24. “For positivism preserved a god in its notion of Science (and its notion of ‘scientific philosophy’), the notion of a portion of culture where we touched something not ourselves, where we found Truth naked, relative to no description” (CP: xliii).

25. As Malachowski recently reminds us concerning Rorty’s reading of James, “one of the main bones of contention is Rorty’s attempt to lift his pragmatism out of the empiricist tradition and turn it into a strong form of anti-epistemology” (Malachowski 2013: 208).

26. Gross wonders how Rorty could reconcile, especially in the early seventies, his “analytic style with his sense of the importance of intellectual history and pluralism?” His answer is that Rorty, at that time, conceived himself as a “‘therapeutic positivist’ – as someone who recognized, as many of his analytic colleagues did not, that philosophical problems are bequeathed to us by culture and that, although linguistic analysis may be essential for helping us see through some of these problems, it does so not as a method that unlocks timeless truths but simply as a technique for disposing of cultural paradoxes” (Gross 2008: 197-8).

27. This applies mainly to the scientific method, which is not specific in its application and merely an “expression of the urge for ‘the secure path of a science’” (CP: 226).

28. Rorty points out the convergence on anti-authoritarianism between James, Brandom, and himself as follows: “The question at issue between James and his opponents boiled down to this: is there an authority beyond that of society which society should acknowledge – an authority such as God, or Truth, or Reality? Brandom’s account of assertions as assumptions of social responsibilities leaves no room for such an authority, and so he sides with James” (PCP: 8).
29. Voparil underlines that despite the “commonalities between his [Rorty’s] own views and James’s antirepresentationalism, pluralism, and tolerance,” in Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism Rorty “doesn’t recognize James’s own antiauthoritarianism; instead, Rorty praises Dewey for his greater attentiveness to this issue” (Voparil 2016: 8).

30. On the differences between Rorty and Gadamer see also Rockmore (1997).

ABSTRACTS

Richard Rorty has long been perceived and interpreted as a provocative and groundbreaking philosopher. However, an approach that he calls ‘eirenic’ emerges in his writings. This eirenism should not be confused with a form of sophisticated relativism, but rather it should be understood as a consequence of the profound anti-foundational conviction and anti-authoritarian sentiment that feeds his thought, as well as his reading of the relations of science and ethics. In this article, I focus on Rorty’s recovery of pragmatism and “pragmatist hermeneutics” by considering his understanding of science and ethics as deeply interlaced. Rorty’s perspective on this issue is inspired by Dewey’s and James’s conception of a holistic-syncretic pragmatism. His project takes into account not only the main cultural trends of logical empiricism and continental philosophy, but also the existential needs they conveyed – that is, the search for objectivity and the meaning of life, respectively. The Rortyan proposal of an anti-ideological, historicist or post-positivist reformulation of the conception of scientific rationality as not opposed to ethics aligns with Jamesian efforts to confront scientific dogmatism by questioning the key notion of truth. Within a naturalistic hermeneutical framework, Rorty contests the ontological need for necessary connections or disconnections between moral and scientific discourse. In this sense, the conception of ethics as having to do with what is personal, historical and “irrational” contrasts with the notion of scientific rationality elaborated in modernity as something that, unlike morality, is able to escape human finitude and contingency. Appreciating the Jamesian (and Deweyan) element in Rorty’s pragmatist hermeneutics may contribute to renovating the current lines of debate around Rorty and pragmatism, especially by reevaluating Rorty’s strong cultural connection to the American philosophical tradition and his commitment to making this pluralistic voice relevant again to contemporary conversations.

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Pessimistic Fallibilism and Cognitive Vulnerability
Richard Rorty as an Example
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AUTHOR’S NOTE
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1. Some Ideas from Rorty’s Thinking: Ethnocentrism, Rationality and Solidarity

1. Let us start by recalling some ideas that stand out in Rorty’s thinking.

2. 1. Rorty’s harsh criticism of the inherited philosophical tradition does not leave a gap of extreme scepticism but a resignification of all cognitive activity (starting with science and ending with philosophy), which can be understood as voices in the conversation of humankind.

3. 2. As far as philosophy is concerned, Rorty considers it necessary to abandon the traditional attempt to offer a definitive vocabulary, capable of providing normatively unappealable descriptions of knowledge, truth, good, justice, etc.

4. 3. With regard to this, he confers to philosophy the task of inventing vocabularies. This is what he himself does when making his proposal, which, to differentiate himself from any realism or relativism, he calls ethnocentrism. Its core is a contingentism that could
be summed up in the theory that only descriptions of procedures that a specific society – ours – follows in one area of inquiry or another regarding rationality and its norms (such as truth or justification) can be given (Rorty 1991: 23 et sq.).

4. Rorty himself confesses that he prefers to consider his proposal as more of a narrative of maturation than a theory of rationality (Rorty 2000a: 24). The reason for this lies in his idea that any known theory of rationality incurs, in one way or another, in metaphysical realism and a conception of the norms of rationality that fall (manifestly or surreptitiously) into the categories of necessity and, ultimately, of absolute foundation.

However, a quick look at the history of philosophy shows reflections on human rationality that are neither necessarist nor fundamentalist. Failure to grasp the difference of moderate scepticism (for example of Hume) or the various fallibilisms that populate twentieth century philosophy (from Popper to Putnam) can only be explained by what Richard Bernstein calls Cartesian Anxiety. It is a philosophical condition consisting of addressing issues in exclusive dualistic terms. Something that, as Bernstein rightly points out, Rorty helped to combat, despite incurring in it, to his regret, in some cases (Bernstein 1983: 60 et sq.; Bernstein 1986: 46-57). Therefore, when Rorty makes statements like the previous one, he actually does so with the idea that contingentism is either professed as he understands it in his ethnocentric proposal or it falls into necessitarianism.

5. That same condition explains why Rorty affirms that his pragmatism does not have a relativistic epistemology, because it has none (Rorty 1991: 24). However, reading his work is sufficient to see that he does elaborate and staunchly defends a conception of rationality and an epistemology that contains notions of truth and justification belonging to the coherentist and fallibilist type. In fact, he elaborates his proposal through a continuous debate with other thinkers, many of who present philosophies that also belong to that third option which is fallibilism. However, this path has been trodden by many, so, once on it, it is worth noting, even briefly, the differences between the several types of fallibilism. In this regard, as I will argue below, the fallibilism sustained by Rorty is pessimistic.

6. The previous statement that his pragmatism has no epistemology is followed by the claim that it has an ethical basis, that which appreciates the value of human inquiry in cooperation, which appreciates what each individual offers the community through their inquiries. Hence the primacy of the value of solidarity over that of objectivity. From this perspective governed by solidarity, he understands that inquiring consists of continuous reweaving of a belief network (Rorty 1991: 26). Furthermore, all inquiry is interpretation and all thought is recontextualization of beliefs.¹

This vision of the inquiry is anti-representationalist (with respect to the realism of the truth), and not sceptical/nihilistic, because he believes in the possibility of a choice between better and worse options. However, we cannot resort to something alien to each ethnos to do this. Rorty believes that this conception of the norms of rationality has the advantage of not claiming “metaphysical activism” (Rorty 1998: 41). In other words, it frees human beings from the task of inventing false gods: a final arbiter who, from the point of view of the Eye of God, establishes the Truth in an absolute and necessary way.

7. The fact is that the primacy of solidarity leads to what he describes as Sartre’s consistent atheism. (Rorty 1998: 54, 62). This striking and interesting label refers,
among other things, to the idea that human rational activities and their norms are tinged with contingency, as it could be otherwise since there are no unconditioned conditions of any human activity. This is a position for which justification is always limited to an audience, is not necessary, can change and what was true for one audience, will cease to be true for another. In short, rational activities are fallible. That is how Rorty assumes the impossibility of adopting God’s eye view or the like until the end.

2. Fallibilism, Negative Logic and Cognitive Vulnerability

Rorty’s theory on the impossibility of adopting a divine point of view is common to all fallibilist models of rationality, which always operate according to what we could call a negative logic. With this expression I mean that, for fallibilist epistemologies, the recurring corroborations of past errors together with the meta-induction of the possibility of future error constitute the centre of the conceptual network that explains the dynamics of rationality (theory and practice). That is why fallibilist philosophies leave no error or doubt outside the scope of rational activities (knowledge and action), as if they were something alien or contrary to them. On the contrary, both elements are within that scope and play a key role. In this way, fallibilist philosophies show images of what we could call soft rationality. I do not intend to convey any disapproval with this description; its function is descriptive, because I want to highlight the differences of that image of rationality in comparison with the models of hard rationality, those that hold absolute and necessary notions of truth and justification.

The fact is that for fallibilist perspectives, rational activity of any kind is carried out and advances not so much through the positive search for truth or for an absolute foundation free of doubts, but rather through moderate and limited doubt about what is considered verisimilar at the time (or true in a non-absolute sense) and by trying to detect errors. However, this negative logic does not necessarily imply an epistemic pessimism regarding the human capacity to know aspects of reality, that is, to succeed in some way.

To explain the possibility of cognitive success, fallibilist philosophies take sides regarding which notion of truth to maintain and that always creates problems, even today. Some classic fallibilist philosophies opt for a combination of instrumentalism and a notion of truth. This is the case with Peirce and the idea of truth as convergence highly criticised by Rorty, that is, as hope that, at the hypothetical end of the research, the community of researchers would come to an agreement. Another variant of that combination is in Popper’s epistemological Darwinism, for which the truth is a regulatory ideal that we instinctively pursue. More recently, the changes that Putnam introduced to his realism – from internal (Putnam 1981) to natural or direct (Putnam 1999: 3-20) – are a good reflection of the huge philosophical difficulty of trying to take charge of all conceptual and evaluative mediations of our cognitive processes without simultaneously ending up in some antirealistic internism or in some metaphysical realism that always seems threatened by the risk of being dogmatic. In the lengthy debate that Rorty and Putnam had throughout their professional lives, the former strongly criticised the realistic proposals of the latter repeatedly accusing him of metaphysical relapses. I will come back to this problem later.
All the above shows that each fallibilist perspective takes charge of the limits of rational activities and derives consequences on the possibilities of error and cognitive success that may accompany those of error. On the other hand, fallibilism has also shown the importance of the reliability of our rational interactions with the surrounding reality and with others. In short and in general, fallibilisms have opened the way to a more extensive reflection on the scope of what we might call our cognitive vulnerability.

It is understood that I do not see cognitive vulnerability as something that has a negative connotation. That connotation appears in the context of clinical psychology and indicates that the expression refers to psychological disorders, such as anxiety or depression, which are caused by the use of certain schemes or patterns of inadequacy, failure or loss. It assimilates cognitive vulnerability to cognitive distortions that generate negative thoughts about oneself, the world and the future.

Unlike that pathological vision, I see cognitive vulnerability, in fallibilist epistemologies, as a way to bear in mind the limitations of our cognitive abilities and the conditions to exercise them. To which it should be added that all this does not imply in itself either the impossibility of cognitive success, or having a certain confidence in our belief systems. This is the case even though the attempts to clarify this possibility generate enormous difficulties in philosophy (as I have already shown). The latter, by the way, is another manifestation of cognitive vulnerability.

On the other hand, cognitive vulnerability is a manifestation of general human vulnerability, as our belief systems are intertwined with life forms, in the Wittgensteinian sense of the term. Therefore, cognitive vulnerability would in some way reactivate in the epistemological realm the old and prudent sceptical precept of “looking carefully” in order to avoid dogmatic illusions; but it also deactivates the most extreme scepticism as destiny. Along with this, cognitive vulnerability offers us a certain image of ourselves as humans, because what would we be like if we were invulnerable in the cognitive sense and in general? In the cognitive sense, we would be infallible like a divinity (at least intensively); in general, we would be almighty, for example, like the characters that appear in the comics published by Marvel. In short, we would be non-human.

Therefore, I understand cognitive vulnerability as a broader category than fallibilism. It includes some type of fallibilism, but also other factors that condition knowledge processes and that have been formulated by different thinkers, although not categorised as manifestations of cognitive vulnerability.

For example, the individual psychological elements that work even in the processes of choice between scientific theories. Thomas S. Kuhn noted their huge relevance and wondered why the incidence of these subjective factors in scientific research was considered by its critics an index of human weakness instead of the nature of scientific knowledge. For him they constituted “an index only of the inevitable imperfection of human nature” (Kuhn 1977: 326). We would say that they are an index of human vulnerability in general and, therefore, are also constitutive elements of human beings when they investigate. Furthermore, although Kuhn uses an adjective with a negative connotation (“imperfection”), he does not consider that this draws dramatic consequences in the cognitive level: neither total loss of objectivity, scepticism, nor irrationality. It actually points to a redefinition of all epistemic notions involved.
Thus, the subjective elements referred to by Kuhn are other factors that are added to the set of conditions and limitations of human cognitive processes; these are other elements that give us a better understanding of the cognitively vulnerable productive dynamics of scientific change.

There are other economic and political elements, which have been repeatedly revealed by political philosophy, especially that elaborated by the Frankfurt-based Critical Theory. In this case, authors remark that it is important to note how the economic/political interests affect the processes and results of the research. Specifically, they focus on the interests of the ruling class of capitalist societies. From an epistemological point of view, these interests are partial and are hidden in knowledge processes under the impossible presumption of a subject of universal knowledge, capable of separating itself from such interests. In this way, the results of the research, although presented as universal truths, would actually be as partial as the socio-economic system they would serve and legitimise.

This schematic characterisation is enough to show that, in this case, cognitive vulnerability is not linked to epistemic fallibilism, but to an economic and political order that is presented by the authors as undesirable because of the unfair, inegalitarian effects it produces. In this case, the general background vulnerability that we can rebuild does not point to the factum of human psychological faculties (as in the case of Kuhn), but to the factum of human sociability and interdependence, as well as to power relations (understood as domination) that go through all social institutions, including research institutions.

Finally, an analysis like that of Miranda Fricker on “epistemic injustice” reveals other elements that can be considered characteristic of cognitive vulnerability. Following the trail of feminist epistemology, Fricker analyses, on the one hand, what she calls testimonial injustice, caused by the variable credibility and reliability attributed to some subjects of knowledge and not others. On the other hand, she exposes hermeneutic injustice which she understands as that which “occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (Fricker 2007: 1). In this case, the general background vulnerability that we can reconstruct is the same as in the case of Critical Theory, that is, it has to do with the factum of human sociability and interdependence and with the relations of domination that also affect knowledge processes. However, unlike the Frankfurt perspective, Fricker’s analysis focuses on the social power that is exercised, either structurally, or by some agents over others, depending on the prejudices that urge the conceptions of social identities in force in each case (for example, the social identity of gender, race, social class, etc.).

As has already been said, another difference between the two perspectives is that Critical Theory focuses on explaining the way in which economic (capitalist) interests are hidden in the processes of generating scientific knowledge and therefore favour the perpetuation of these partial interests and the unjust social and political order that accompanies them. This would be socio-political harm, but it also shows epistemic harm that involves operating with falsely neutral (unlinked from values and interests) and ahistorical notions of objectivity and truth. Fricker’s perspective, however, deals primarily with the question of how identity-based harm interferes with the fixation and recognition of the subject of knowledge. From there, the author points out ethical/political harm that, as in the previous case, is related to the survival of an unjust social
and political order due to the inequality that it entails. However, Fricker wants to highlight the importance of specifically epistemic harm, such as the waste of possible knowledge that entails dispensing with groups whose credibility is devalued (Fricker 2007: 17), or those who are prevented from participating in practices through which social meanings are generated (Fricker 2007: 6).

25 Epistemic harm would be a crystallisation of what we are calling cognitive vulnerability.

26 On the other hand, both the Frankfurt and Fricker perspectives highlight a close relationship between knowledge and domination and/or, if I may express it on the broadest conceptual level that I am proposing here, between cognitive vulnerability and a more general vulnerability that goes through social relations.

27 If we look at this relationship, cognitive vulnerability seems to have degrees according to human groups, since the social and political damage that certain groups already suffer increase their risk of suffering cognitive dysfunctions. That is, the unequal distribution of general vulnerability in social life feeds cognitive vulnerability and vice versa. In this respect, it is not surprising that the two currents of thought develop ethical political reflections of an egalitarian and democratic type, which have an impact to epistemological reflections. This connection between the epistemological and the ethical-political fields takes on a different aspect according to the authors. In any case, along these lines, it is worth remembering that also the pragmatist tradition of thought and, in particular, Rorty’s philosophy, contain ethical/political reflections that have an impact to epistemological ones. One of the greatest difficulties in all cases lies in how the passage of vulnerability is recognised as a possibility of specific breakdown, or what specific role epistemic and ethical/political elements play, and how they affect each other. I will return to this topic later in Rorty’s work.12

28 Therefore, although neither the Kuhn nor the Frankfurtian analysis, nor that carried out by Fricker, address the problem of cognitive vulnerability, they do however illustrate it. They also allow us to recognise continuity between cognitive and general vulnerability.

29 Focusing on the case of cognitive vulnerability, it should be added that, when it goes from being a possibility to a reality, it certainly leads to harm, but this does not necessarily cancel out positive possibilities (as a radical sceptic might argue), given that the cognitive dysfunctions are, in principle, as contingent as other human cognitive outcomes. Cognitive dysfunctions can be of different types,13 as can the possibilities of solving them, or the effects they generate. A theory that can be considered imprecise, not very fruitful or even erroneous, for example, does not rule out the possibility of elaborating more precise, more fruitful and more cognitive successful theories. Or, that a certain human group (such as women) has been considered cognitively inferior for centuries, but the possibility of seriously disrupting that opinion has not been ruled out. That is, the actual implementation of cognitive vulnerability is not a reason for epistemological pessimism nor for distrust of human rationality, but a chance for a better understanding of its dynamics.
3. The Rorty Case

After making the previous conceptual clarifications, we can return to Rorty’s thinking to show that it is a case of pessimistic fallibilism and cognitive vulnerability.

Fallibilist philosophies usually reflect on fallibilism from an epistemological point of view (about problems of objectivity, justification and truth) and then extend it to all rational activity. Rorty, however, highlights the fallibilism from an ethical point of view (regarding the priority of solidarity over objectivity) and then extends it to all rational activities.

When Rorty speaks of fallibilism he does not mention the idea of error as much as the ideas of objection, a change of vocabulary, or the emergence of some more ingenious hypothesis. Nevertheless, it always relates it to the responsibility of the possible appearance of a new audience before which some of the justified beliefs now lose justification (Rorty 2000a: 4). On the other hand, Rorty oscillates between considering fallibilism either as a human characteristic of our general contingency, and a historical-cultural factor. Thus, in its most epistemological reflections, fallibility is a concrete example of the contingency that affects justification and truth. However, when his reflections focus on issues that go from epistemology to political philosophy (such as the relevance or not of truth to democratic politics), then fallibilism is a cultural factor: “Such fallibilism is not, in fact, a feature of all human beings. It is much more prevalent among inhabitants of wealthy, secure, tolerant, inclusivist societies than elsewhere. Those are the people who are brought up to bethink themselves that they might be mistaken: that there are people out there who might disagree with them, and whose disagreements need to be taken into account” (Rorty 2000a: 4). Perhaps to undo any confusion that might arise from this, it would suffice to differentiate between the existential characteristic (natural for a Darwinian vocabulary like Rorty’s) and the recognition of it.

Based on this, I will now go on to explain that what distinguishes Rorty’s thinking is that the cognitive vulnerability that we can link to his fallibilist position does not focus so much on the permanent possibility of error and the consequent impossibility of achieving unconditional truths, as on the ethical objective of avoiding any relapse into authoritarianism.

However, the path he follows produces an excess of cognitive vulnerability in Rorty’s philosophy, which is evident when he addresses the question of how to determine the best out of several theoretical options (or general, cultural belief systems) in conflict. It is in relation to this issue when it becomes clear that his fallibilism is pessimistic, to the point of sometimes appearing irrational, relativistic, antirealistic, or all of them together. Rorty tried to stop this situation (with doubtful success) based on subjecting a particular notion of truth and justification to the ethical background of his thinking.

Rorty’s fallibilism surely implies a complex notion of truth and its relationship with justification. In his constant reflections on the subject he sometimes reduces truth to justification, and critically argues that maintaining that the truth leads to justification is the same as believing that, in some way, we can go from the conditioned to the unconditioned. In full conformity with the aforementioned negative logic of fallibilism, Rorty argues that what we can aspire to is a justification before wider audiences, which “leads to less and less danger of rebuttal” (Rorty 2000a: 12).
Along with this, on other occasions he considers it useful to distinguish between truth and justification. Moreover, he does so with the precise intention of highlighting fallibilism, in the sense that distinction makes it possible to accentuate the idea that objections may arise to what at a certain moment is considered true, or to explain the failures we find at a certain moment. However, he considers that, although the distinction is useful, that does not make it essential, since under no circumstances would it allow us to decide what to believe (Rorty 1998: 19).

Besides this, Rorty also exposes several uses (which are also notions) of truth:

1. disquotational use;
2. use as consensus, as human dialogue;
3. use as a compliment;
4. the commendatory use, the truth as a recommendation;
5. cautionary use.

The latter is the one I want to highlight here since it gives a comprehensive view of fallibility. This use of truth makes it equivalent to justification before a specific and limited audience. To that extent, it acts as a warning of the contingency of its validity, as another auditorium might not endorse it.

One of the risks that follows on immediately after this idea is that of a combination of relativism and anti-realism. In this regard, Rorty constantly repeated that his proposal is outside the classic and sterile dualisms such as the one this objection contains. To make it even clearer, he decided to describe his position as ethnocentric. Such denomination, among other aspects, referred to the fact that all truth and justification are established by the members of a specific audience through their linguistic interactions. To understand this better, it is important to add to this that Rorty explained this social interactivity through Davidson’s triangulation theory, or rather, a certain interpretation of it.

Far from the risks of dualistic approaches, Rorty finds in the triangle proposed by Davidson the vaccine against all metaphysical dogmatism and scepticism. The triangle is composed of three vertices (speaker, interpreter and world) that cannot be conceived atomically. It is also through this interaction, which includes the “world” vertex, that the reference to linguistic expressions can be accounted for outside representationalism. This reference is not the result of a mere causal relationship (although it does include it), but arises from maximising coherence and truth in interactions with others (Rorty 1991: 134 et sq.). Along with this, the interaction is guided by what Davidson, inspired by Quine, called the principle of interpretive charity, which assumes that others are rational in what they do and say.

Rorty partially accepted this proposal. He accepted it because he adopted the Davidsonian notion of reference when he incorporated into his thinking the idea that Davidson expressed in “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme.” In fact, he quoted this affirmation by Davidson verbatim: “In giving up the dualism of scheme and world, we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false” (Rorty 1979: 310). Thus, the theoretical goals of Rortyan linguistic pragmatism have always been clear: there was no room for linguistic idealism.

But that acceptance was partial, since he showed his disagreement with the Davidsonian defence of a certain notion of truth as correspondence (Rorty 1991: 138).
Against this, he always underlined the aforementioned cautionary use of the truth (what may be justified for one audience may not be for another), thereby accentuating the fallibility of justification and truth and, to this extent, of what we are calling cognitive vulnerability.

What Rorty did not seem to see is that the semantic dimension of the issue is not incompatible with cautionary use. In our interactions, from the most ordinary to the most sophisticated, the use of truth as correspondence is continually present. What we are talking about in each case is, thus, understandable. Furthermore, this is perfectly compatible with maintaining a certain epistemological precaution regarding its justification. In other words, caution affects justification, not the use of truth as correspondence that is supported by reference. To consider, as Rorty does, that any use of truth as correspondence is representational and foundationalist in the classical way is to fall into one of those dualistic approaches that he criticized so much; or rather, engaging in the aforementioned Cartesian anxiety: or the use of truth as correspondence understood in the classical way, or no use of truth as correspondence at all.

It must also be added that, together with this recognition of the presence of the “world” vertex in the reference setting and its limited scope in terms of the notion of truth, a marked inoperativeness of said vertex is found in Rorty when he repeatedly argues against any idea of evidence, that is, against any idea of experience with justification functions. This problem is particularly palpable when addressing the problem of choosing the best of several options in conflict.

Rorty understands the notion of evidence exclusively as a “given” objective scope and with foundationalist epistemic functions. He rejects the role of experience as “felt or had” in cognitive justification (Rorty 1979: 184). He considers this an invention, an appeal to gods, a metaphysical comfort, a recourse to magical mediators. Even in his criticisms of essentialism that involves any representationalism in his opinion, he sustains the need to forget about that “doubtful interface” that is perceptual experience (Rorty 1991: 91). The alternative of proposing an anti-foundationalist notion of evidence is the same for Rorty as when “the question, ‘Is there any evidence for p?’ gets replaced by the question, ‘Is there any way of getting a consensus on what would count in favour of p?’” (Rorty 1999: 155).

Certainly, Rorty accepts that who, like himself, adopts the anti-essentialist position is not an idealist, but a coherenst, since he admits that he “is no more free from pressure from outside” and “there are objects which are causally independent of human beliefs and desires” (Rorty 1991: 101). However, in the processes of justification, he believes that the anti-essentialist coherenst like himself is only obliged to try to fit some new belief into his own already-existing network of beliefs. So, if you are a coherenst anti-essentialist, “then we shall say that all inquiry is interpretation, that all thought consists in recontextualisation, that we have never done anything else and never will” (Rorty 1991: 102). This is explicitly added to by total dissociation between the reference – which can be explained through causal, unintentional and non-representational links – and the verificationist justification that resorts to evidence. Otherwise, one falls into the old metaphysical desire for correspondence between words and reality itself.

The critical dialogue between Rorty and Bjørn Ramberg is illustrative on this issue. The latter, accepting like Rorty the basic ideas of Davidson’s triangulation theory, pointed
out the need to admit the differential truth/error pair not only on the semantic level, but also as an indispensable element of the intersubjective linguistic practices of justification. He also pointed out that these practices require the use of descriptive vocabularies that show “something as a kind of thing. But this is just to say that any linguistic utterance, as opposed to a mere noise, will have appropriateness-conditions” (Ramberg 2000: 363). The importance of this lies in the fact that it enables the reciprocal, normative evaluation of alternative descriptions: “Vocabularies can be evaluated, in so far as different vocabularies may serve different purposes and interests. But human purpose and interest provide both the framework for individuations of vocabularies, and the ultimate terms of any evaluation” (Ramberg 2000: 365).

Rorty’s response is positive and clearly affirms that “none of the three corners of his process of triangulation can be what they are in independence of the other two.” However, this affirmation is preceded by another one that once again identifies correspondence with representation in the fundamentalist sense: “If you think that that glib and ethnocentric answer is not good enough, that is because you are still in the grip of the scheme-content distinction. You think you can escape the inescapable, cut off one corner of Davidson’s triangle, and just ask about a relation called ‘correspondence’ or ‘representation’ between your beliefs and the world” (Rorty 2000c: 374).

The key to a better understanding of this answer lies in that same volume, but in the response to Brandom. That is where he makes clear that the problem is not so much the truth/error pair, or the connection between description, correspondence and evaluation, as the dogmatic, authoritarian drift that arises from it: “My fear is that countenancing these dangerous idioms will be taken as a concession by the bad guys: the people who still use perceptual experience as a model for ‘hard facts’ and who think that photon-talk is somehow harder than talk about comparative aesthetic worth. These bad guys are the people I think of as ‘authoritarians.’ These guys do not agree with Brandom and myself that increased freedom and richness of the Conversation is the aim of inquiry, but instead think that there is the further aim of getting Reality right (as opposed to getting, for instance, snow, photons, baseball, Cezanne and the best use of the term ‘fact’ right)” (Rorty 2000b: 187).

To sum up, Rorty believes that the only alternative to his own position is the one that handles an idea of evidence, of facts of the matter, or of experiential inputs, which would necessarily imply a representationalist, antipluralist, essentialist, fundamentalist and, in short, authoritarian dogmatic perspective.

With regard to this issue, the first thing that can be said is that Rorty is once again the prey of Cartesian anxiety, since he reasons in terms of extreme dualism: either one opts for his coherentist anti-essentialism that assimilates justification to recontextualization, or a notion of evidence and perceptual experience is used that is necessarily essentialist and assimilates justification to the idea of absolute metaphysical foundation, whose reflection in life is authoritarianism.

Once again we can see that his goal is clear: to avoid the authoritarianism that springs from foundationalist representationalism. We can see also that he is creating a theoretical scenario in the service of that goal: a conversational, open, dynamic picture of rationality. But that philosophical scenario is missing a concept that captures everyday usage – “homely and shopworn” (Rorty 1979: 307) – of experience or
evidence. There is no reason to suppose, as Rorty does, that the philosophical use of those terms in relation to justification necessarily entails an authoritarian notion of experience or evidence. Even from a pragmatist point of view “for example, it could be argued that a pragmatism oriented to the ‘linguistic turn’ can only profit from a reconstruction of the notion of experience; instead of rejecting it, ‘linguistic pragmatism’ should include the different shades of this notion that Peirce, James and Dewey developed in their philosophies, but avoiding as well to suggest it – as they sometimes seemed to do – as a foundationalist criterion” (Calcaterra 2019: 38).

Additionally, if we think about controversial situations, the result of this Rortyan conceptual lacuna would be that to forge what is best would be reduced to a conversational process which would be about persuading the opponent, that is, convincing him through arguments and reasons governed by solidarity, but without decisive empirical charge.

Therefore, epistemic processes of justification for choosing one of several options would become pure linguistic exchange between speakers and interpreters of one or several ethnos, without a relevant role for the (Davidsonian) angle of the world.

In this way, Rorty takes cognitive vulnerability to the extreme, since his fallibilism becomes greatly pessimistic because it lacks of any notion of experience to use as evidence to determine what is best to believe (always contingently) in relation to the apex of the world. However, as indicated above, he always argued that his ethnocentrism is not a relativism in which anything goes; it is possible to emerge from disputes and establish the best among several options. How? Through a combination of solidarity and imagination: imagining which option would be the best from the point of view of “a better version of ourselves.”

The “ourselves” refers to Westerners, liberals and moderates. As for the specific meaning of the adjective “better” (which is the one that contains the burden of solidarity), Rorty includes it several times in his work and at the base of its meaning is the pounding of an idea that William James presented in his work entitled The Will to Believe (James 1912: 210), more specifically, the idea that it is necessary to be open to listen to “the cries of the wounded” to increase our knowledge and sense of justice. This reflection is integrated by Rorty in his characterisation of the figure of the ironist. He therefore states that “she thinks that what unites her with the rest of the species is not a common language but just susceptibility to pain and in particular to that special sort of pain which the brutes do not share with the humans – humiliation” (Rorty 1989: 92 et sq.).

Such human resemblance in pain and humiliation, combined with his notion of contingency of the self, of every human community and, ultimately, of all that is human, can easily be reformulated as our similarity with regard to vulnerability understood as an existential condition. In Rorty’s work there is no careful analysis of the concept of vulnerability, however, in his way of presenting the notions of humiliation and solidarity we can see both a double sense of vulnerability in general and its relationship with what we are now calling cognitive vulnerability. Indeed, it is possible to reconstruct a notion of existential vulnerability with a negative sense, for example, when he mentions human fear of pain and death, or the fear of not surviving in some way after death that (in his opinion) exists in supporters of objectivity versus solidarity (Rorty 1991: 31). However, his work also shows a glimpse of a positive sense of vulnerability as a deep root of human contingency. The transformation of this
negative charge of vulnerability into a positive one requires the acceptance of contingency, since it implies (in Rorty’s eyes) a dynamic opening to others, their expressions and their belief systems (this is the field of cognitive vulnerability). In fact, it is an opening that is always driven by the ethical ideal of solidarity.

Furthermore, in this same conceptual framework, Rorty relies on linking the private and public sphere of human lives through their respective ethical requirements. He therefore links, on the one hand, the value of self-creation of the individual in its uniqueness and, on the other, the value of social solidarity, which he considers inherent to any democratic political project that deserves that name, and to any activity that wishes to contribute to that project (starting with science and philosophy). Even so, Rorty bases the norms of all rational interaction on a democratic social ethics developed on the existential background of vulnerability.

In short, to alleviate the pessimistic consequences of an extreme development of cognitive vulnerability, which stem from his rejection of any notion of evidence, Rorty resorts to an optimistic idea of an improved future “us,” whose meaning depends ultimately on understanding vulnerability as an existential condition common to humans.

In this regard, I will first merely point out that Rorty does not clarify how his notion of an “improved us” avoids being another case of metaphysical comfort, or rather, why his utopia is less metaphysical than, for example, the idea of truth as convergence. Certainly his utopian “better versions of ourselves” does not rely on any necessary a priori need, and is a hope that goes from the present to the future, but that does not prevent its character of counterfactual utopia, of invention.

Secondly, this part of Rortyan thought once again clearly shows the antidogmatic and antiauthoritarian goals that guide the author. It is also apparent that in the structure of his theory the hopeful optimism associated with the concept pair vulnerability-solidarity has the task of balancing the excessive pessimism entailed by his notion of fallibilism without evidence. But it is not successful, as we can see in the effects derived from the theory.

No doubt those effects were not sought or hoped for by Rorty himself, since throughout his voluminous work he repeated in a thousand different ways that he did not intend to alter the ordinary way of using “knowing,” “objective,” “fact,” and “reason,” but only the comments that inherited philosophy made about that mode of speech (Rorty 1998: 44). That is, he distinguished between the ordinary use of those terms and the abusive use made by the philosophical traditions that enthroned privileged descriptions. As we have stated in this text, the reason (the goal) that moved him was to avoid at all costs the authoritarianism that inherited tradition entails.

However, the Cartesian anxiety present in his philosophy leads to unsought consequences that do alter the ordinary way of speaking. Or to say it more clearly, his philosophical project becomes disconnected from ordinary speech. Despite his laudable goals, the structure of Rortyan thought has a conceptual lacuna that makes it impossible to reflect philosophically on an epistemic activity (the activity of adducing or requesting evidence) that is a normal part of conversational exchanges such as controversies. On the other hand, the Rortyan proposal has as an unexpected consequence, which is the aggravating factor of blocking the path to deal with such serious phenomena as the spread of post-truth, of “alternative facts.”
In controversial situations (from the simplest to the most complex), we constantly use descriptive languages and truth as correspondence, and distinguish between appearance and reality. Furthermore, in argumentative exchanges we forge empirical evidence to support our reasons. We sometimes do all this by adding some metaphysical counterfactual, and on other occasions we don’t. If only for this reason, philosophy cannot ignore the (semantic) question of reference and its link with truth as correspondence and the (epistemic) question of evidence, as if any possible notion of them were immediately false idols. In the ordinary way of speaking, both are closely related and, therefore, must be rethought taking into account human cognitive vulnerability. The semantic dimension of what we say acquires (or does not acquire) epistemic evidential value in argumentative exchanges themselves, which are undoubtedly interlinked with interpretation. But, an argumentative exchange without a semantic dimension is mere fiction and, in the worst case, lies and manipulation (as when talking about alternative facts). To this extent, it is ineffective in combating authoritarianism.

The concept pair vulnerability/solidarity is fundamental to all conversational activity, since (as we have said) it entails dynamic openness towards others, to what they say and to their systems of belief. As such, the concept pair affects our judgements and reasoning by the ethical implications that it entails. However, ethical and political reasons do not replace and do not deactivate the value of epistemic reasons although they do combine and reinforce each other. That is, ethical and political reasons do not change reality, although they change our concepts, our way of seeing it and establishing what counts as evidence. For example, an understanding of gender-based violence includes ethically despicable acts (such as that a husband murders his wife when she wants a divorce) that at other times have been considered ethically acceptable (by virtue of a code of honour). Here we have a single event (someone takes the life of another) seen as despicable in one case and honourable in another. Whether it is in the end evidence of murder or evidence of honour restored is something that can be explained by, for example, that branch of philosophy that is the argumentation theory. In effect, whether we are disposed to see it in one way or another in a controversial situation passes through a conversational exchange in which we use every kind of argument, that is, ethical and emotional arguments too. But the ethical force of an argument cannot replace its empirical force.

Whether following this theoretical-argumentative path (with Wittgensteinian background), whether through linguistic pragmatism (mentioned above), we can see that there is room in philosophy for the development of a concept of evidence outside of the category of necessity. We can see that evidence can be understood from within philosophy as something hammered out in language through conversational exchanges in which solidarity is also central.

The ethical interest that guides Rorty’s pragmatism is embodied with the brilliance that characterized him in a well-known statement that became his motto: “If we take care of freedom, truth can take care of itself” (Rorty 1989: 176). However, there are several vocabularies about freedom, and we have (contingent) evidence that those that trivialise the truth involve authoritarianism. That is why it is necessary to take care of both at the same time; they nicely complement each other.
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NOTES

1. Rorty derives important epistemological ideas from this, one being that distinction between knowledge is not essential. The distinction between sociology and physics, for example, is sociological, not methodological. They simply constitute different vocabularies (Rorty 1991: 102-3). So, all knowledge becomes understood as voices in conversation of humankind guided by solidarity (and not by objectivity).

2. Error and doubt may arise both from faculties, judgments and all the technical support equipment involved in rational activities.

3. I use the expression “soft rationality” to refer to an image of rationality that is dynamic in epistemological terms, since it conceives knowledge and action as qualitatively plastic, open and flexible social activities. It produces plural and contingent results, since they are always empirically underdetermined. However, at the same time, it is an image that contains limits for that plurality, since it is minimally although not a priori normative. I developed this idea in Perona (2016).

4. Javier Vilanova justifiably defends the need for epistemology to go from discussing infallibility to discussing successability: “We must stop traumatising ourselves due to the difficulty, complexity and scarcity of knowledge and start examining the factors that lead us, even in spite of so many impediments, to reach that desired situation that we believe; we have reasonable justifications and, above all (even if it is some sort of luck), what we believe corresponds to the facts” (Vilanova 2015: 166).

5. Popper ended up contradicting this. On the one hand, he always maintained the idea that truth is an unattainable regulatory ideal, in the sense that we cannot know that any of our theories (or part of them) are true, even if they are; only their contingent corroboration or verisimilarity can be found. However, the contradiction came from his attempts to establish the degree of verisimilarity of a theory, which transformed his notion of verisimilarity into a sort of percentual approach to the truth.


7. For a more current realistic proposal see the work of Tim Williamson, for example.
8. This concept was introduced by Óscar González Castán to explain situations that go beyond mere fallibilism: “However, children’s discovery of their absolute cognitive vulnerability is not the same thing as the discovery of their fallibilism. Rather it is the discovery that, previous to any use of limited and fallible cognitive faculties and previous to any scientific hypothesis or to any sophisticated idea, their lives have been permeated by beliefs and behaviours of an absolute certainty but, nevertheless, of an absolutely empty certainty. [...] These second order epistemic beliefs might give us a permanent sense of vulnerability and distrust. They give us a sense of deepness and despair because we can no longer have an absolutely confident cognitive relationship with any of our beliefs, with the world, and, in fact, with ourselves. Sceptical philosophy has biographical roots” (González Castán 2013: 29-30). See below for further information on this concept: Vilanova (2019) and Gamero (2019).

9. Cf. Beck et al. (1979). However, there are other psychological currents that, aside from pathological cases that require psychiatric treatment, offer a less negative image of cognitive vulnerability. Specifically, in therapies that use negotiation it is considered that there is nothing pathological in itself or anything curative in itself, but rather an imbalance that causes problems. Therapy consists of detecting the problem and negotiating the reestablishment of equilibrium with patients. I would like to thank José Mª Ariso for this clarification.

10. On this issue, it is worth mentioning a huge bibliography that goes from the opening text of Max Horkheimer Traditionelle und kritische Theorie to the emblematic book by Jürgen Habermas Erkenntnis und Interesse.

11. On this same page the author illustrates her notions with these examples: “An example of the first might be that the police do not believe you because you are black; an example of the second might be that you suffer sexual harassment in a culture that still lacks that critical concept.”

12. I am not going to analyse here the way in which this relationship is specified in Fricker’s work or in the work of Frankfurters like Habermas, because it goes well beyond the boundaries of this work.

13. In relation to the general notion of vulnerability, it would be interesting to explore whether harm can be discussed on its own, or that the fact that what constitutes harm depends on each social context. However, this goes well beyond the boundaries of this text.

14. Rorty does not make an analysis of this question, but he does choose the theoretical framework that he considers most useful to talk about human contingency at all levels, that is, Darwinism. But it is important to insist that Darwinism for Rorty is a vocabulary. To that extent it is not a kind of first philosophy we can use to discover the essence of human nature; but it is rather a way of speaking that portrays an image of human beings. The approach is deeply anti-essentialist, but does not exclude the possibility of talking about existential conditions, since the difference between the latter and essences is valid.

15. This is the case, for example, when he states the following: “In non-philosophical contexts, the point of contrasting truth and justification is simply to remind oneself that there may be objections (arising from newly discovered data, or more ingenious explanatory hypotheses, or a shift in the vocabulary used for describing the objects under discussion) which have not yet occurred to anyone” (Rorty 2000a: 4).

16. Rorty exposes these uses repeatedly throughout all his works, but perhaps the best places to get an overview are “Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth” (Rorty 1991: 126-50) and “Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry? Donald Davidson versus Crispin Wright?” (Rorty 1998: 19-42).

17. A use that is not always supported by the representation understood from the visual metaphor of the mirror. It is often an instrumental representation like that of a blind person with his cane.

18. Cf., for example, the criticism of the notions that Hilary Putnam handles of “experiential inputs” or, subsequently, “a matter of fact” (Rorty 1998: 43-62). There Rorty did not capture the relevance of the fact that in Reason, Truth and History Putnam made it clear that he did not
understand inputs beyond conceptual-linguistic structures: “[...] it does deny that there are any inputs which are not themselves to some extent shaped by our concepts, by the vocabulary we use to report and describe them, or any inputs which admit of only one description, independent of all conceptual choices” (Putnam 1981: 54).

19. Rorty believes that the aforementioned Darwinian vocabulary is especially useful for explaining the type of causal (non-representational) relationships that human animals have with the surrounding world. Cf. Rorty (1998: 47 et sq.).

20. According to Rorty, this possibility does not imply that emergence is always satisfactory from the point of view of the moral parameters of the tolerant, liberal, etc., us. An example of this is in the long debate he had with Putnam and, in particular, in his Darwinist response to the question that Putnam asks him about what he would call upon to present as a normatively unacceptable a hypothetical triumph of the Nazi form of life. In his opinion, in those circumstances “I cannot, indeed, appeal to such a ‘fact of the matter,’ any more than a species of animal that is in danger of losing its ecological niche to another species, and thus faces extinction, can find a ‘fact of the matter’ to settle the question of which species has the right to the niche in question” (Rorty 1998: 51). This response is consistent with his idea (already mentioned before) of fallibilism as a historical-cultural factor that not all human groups include; the belief system of the world image of the Nazi does not contemplate the possibility of the fallibility of its own beliefs. This certainly prevents the exchange of reasons and arguments to resolve the confrontation between life forms and their corresponding belief system.

21. For example, in Rorty (1998: 51 et sq.).

22. His work contains some uses of the concept, for example, in “Religion as Conversation-stopper,” he says that we have vulnerable bodies (Rorty 1999: 169).

23. See Calcaterra (2019) to capture the centrality in Rorty’s thinking of his complex notion of contingency.

24. In all these arguments, the key idea is that we cannot resort to any authority besides ourselves and other human beings. This is what Richard Bernstein refers to when he talks about Rorty’s “Deep Humanism” (Bernstein 2010: 211).

I am not going to discuss here the question of why Rorty, who is always so critical of inherited tradition, sees it necessary to reintroduce some version of humanism and universalism. I will only mention that the reasons are political and ethical (strengthen cosmopolitanism and democratic politics as ways to reduce pain and humiliation) and that, for him, universality would be something that can be created gradually, but not something previously existing. Cf. Rorty (2000a: 17).

25. I understand “to see as” in the sense used by the later Wittgenstein. Note that it implies a pluralism of human perspectives and never a “God’s eye” view perspective.

26. Cf. Walton (1992). This book is particularly interesting in relation to the question that we are addressing, because among other things it categorizes evidence by different notions (hard evidence, soft evidence, source-based evidence, etc.).

ABSTRACTS

In this text, the relationship between fallibilism and cognitive vulnerability is examined using Richard Rorty’s thinking as an example. First, some of Rorty’s central ideas are collected and commented on, especially the substitution of objectivity for solidarity, since it affects relevant
issues of epistemology and of reflection on rationality. Next, the notions of fallibilism and cognitive vulnerability are examined, which will be connected to an existential dimension of vulnerability. Examples of all those things are also given from Rorty’s thinking and it is highlighted that the author operates with both a negative and a positive sense of existential vulnerability. It is then stated that Rorty’s proposal implies pessimistic fallibilism and an excess of cognitive vulnerability. First, it is argued that the cause of this lies in the fact that his approach is imprisoned in what Richard Bernstein called Cartesian anxiety and secondly, this generates unwanted consequences for the Rortyan goals themselves to raise his ethnocentric proposal as a non-relativistic alternative to realism and authoritarianism. In this respect, it is maintained that the priority that Rorty attributes to solidarity is accompanied by the rejection of any notion of evidence. This produces a conceptual lacuna in the structure of his thought that makes it impossible to reflect philosophically on an epistemic activity (the activity of adducing or requesting evidence) that is a normal part of day-to-day conversational exchanges as important as controversies to determine the best option in each case. In response, we will argue that one can better work towards the achievement of Rortyan goals if we bear in mind that reasons based on solidarity do not replace and do not deactivate the value of epistemic reasons, although they do combine and reinforce each other.

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Two Forms of Realism
Making Sense of Rorty’s Controversy with Brandom and Ramberg over Objectivity

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AUTHOR’S NOTE

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1 Brandom’s volume *Rorty and His Critics* (2000) is famous due to, as Jeffrey Stout puts it, “the most startling passage in *Rorty and His Critics* and one as surprising as any in the entirety of Rorty’s published writings” (Stout 2007: 16). In this passage, Rorty agrees with Ramberg that the use of “getting things right,” which Ramberg promotes based on Davidson, is fully compatible with his own approach, and declares the intention to use it in the future (Rorty 2000c). In the same volume, incomprehensibly for many, Rorty remains adamant about his refusal of Brandom’s request to use his notion of “made true by facts” (Rorty 2000a). Philosophers sympathetic to the New Pragmatists’ approach read the passages as an admission of Rorty’s eventual failure to avoid truth and realism. Like Stout, they “do not see how to square” (Stout 2002: 52) Rorty’s agreement with Ramberg while he continues to resist Brandom. As Stout puts it, “Ramberg and Brandom appear to be explicating the same pre-philosophical ideal of ‘getting things right’ in the somewhat different philosophical idioms of Davidson and Sellars, neither of which strikes me as inherently tainted by metaphysics” (2002: 52). Others, like William Curtis, hold that “Stout and others read far too much in Rorty’s ‘Response to Ramberg’ […] [T]here is ample evidence in Rorty’s earlier writings […] that suggests that he always held this ‘reformed’ position urged by Ramberg” (2015: 73).

2 In what follows, I will, for the first time, contrast both positions because I think there is a substantive difference between Rorty pre- and post-“Response to Ramberg” and there is a substantive difference between Ramberg’s and Brandom’s request. When Curtis
claims that Rorty “always held” the “position urged by Ramberg” (2015: 73), he is addressing the critics of Rorty who falsely regard him to be a linguistic idealist and social constructivist. Indeed, Rorty never negated causal constraint, nor did he deny that the world is mostly independent from our thoughts. Yet, the point of Ramberg’s piece (2000) is not to convince Rorty of “the brute resistance of the world,” as Westbrook put it (2010: 14), but to convince him of the inescapability of the normative and, hence, of the distinctiveness of the intentional vocabulary. After his conversation with Ramberg, Rorty holds that there are non-causal word-world relations where he formerly held that there are only causal relations. As Curtis rightly points out, he never held that there are no relations.

Before the debate, Rorty held versions of his Quine- and Davidson-inspired meaning holism, which translated his Sellars-inspired epistemological behaviorism into semantics. In epistemology, Rorty took from Sellars that “assertions are justified by society rather than by the character of the inner representations they express” and that “epistemic authority” is explained “by reference to what society lets us say” (Rorty 1979: 174). In semantics, Rorty, interpreting Davidson, thought that “The point of constructing a ‘theory of truth of English’ is not to […] explain the relationship between words and the world, but simply to lay out perspicuously the relation between parts of social practice (the use of certain sentences) and other parts (use of other sentences)” (Rorty 1979: 261-2). Though the world causally constrains what we can say, it has no normative role in our linguistic practices. In his answer to Ramberg, Rorty, re-interpreting Davidson, conceded normative lines – “certain word-world relations which are neither causal nor representational” – running between world and speakers (Rorty 2000c: 374). This revision is as substantive as it can be, a revision that Rorty – this has to be said very clearly – did not follow up on after the debate. But this does not diminish the importance of the concession and the difference it makes for how we can appropriate and build on Rorty today.

Now, I turn to the difference between Brandom and Ramberg and to why, in my opinion, Rorty agreed to use Ramberg’s notion of “getting things right” but not Brandom’s notion of “made true by facts.”

1. Apparent Congruities

Besides being a contribution to the discussion of Davidson, Ramberg showed Rorty that his antiauthoritarian stance can be advocated more powerfully when constructed in the way Ramberg proposes. Ramberg makes two points: Firstly, he shows Rorty that there is a non-dangerous way of making use of a difference that Rorty formerly rejected – namely, the difference between the intentional and physical vocabulary, or the specialness of the “vocabulary of agency,” as Ramberg calls it. Secondly, there is a non-dangerous way of using the notion “getting things right” and Rorty would do well to use it. The reason why Rorty accepts both parts is that the key to the first part – the difference between intentional and physical vocabularies – lies not in the irreducibility of the intentional to the physical and not in some sort of gap between body and mind, but in the inescapability of norms. Rorty writes: “agency […] only appears if a normative vocabulary is already being used” (2000c: 372), which is a variation on Ramberg’s: “descriptions emerge as descriptions of any sort at all only against a taken
for granted background of purposive – and hence normatively describable – behavior on the part of the communicators involved“ (Ramberg 2000: 362).

6 The second part, the introducing of what seems a form of realism, is congruent with Rorty’s program, he says, because it links the theory of truth intrinsically to the theory of action: “Getting things right” means making them better suited to our purposes. Therefore, Rorty, from there on, should use or at least should not have objections against the notion “getting things right”: “There are certain word-world relations which are neither causal nor representational – for instance the relation ‘true of’ which holds between ‘snow is white’ and snow, and the relation ‘refers to’ which holds between ‘snow’ and snow” (Rorty 2000c: 374).

7 Rorty arrives at these proclamations because, following Ramberg’s considerations, he revises his understanding of Davidson’s concept of triangulation: “It was a mistake to locate the norms at one corner of the triangle – where my peers are – rather than seeing them as […] hovering over the whole process of triangulation. […] It is not that my peers have more to do with my obligation to say that snow is white than the snow does, or than I do” (Rorty 2000c: 376). Similarly, Rorty writes in his response to Davidson in the same volume that:

The point of this doctrine [triangulation] is that you cannot get along with just holistic inferential relations between beliefs and statements (as coherence theorists tried to do) nor with atomic relations of being-caused-by (as realists fixated on perception still try to do). You have to play back and forth between causation and inference in a way which does not permit any of the corners of a triangle to be independent of any of the others. (Rorty 2000b: 78)

8 Is this not exactly what Brandom tried to do with his notion “made true by facts”? Brandom explicitly tried to show how “facts” enter the inferential game. The world cannot justify a claim, since justification is an inferential affair, but the world can make claims correct in the sense of true: “The representational model, after all, does not purport to tell us about justification (at least, not directly); its claim is that the use of our empirical vocabularies stands in normative semantic relations to the world, in that how things are determines the correctness of our claims in the sense of their truth” (Brandom 2000: 161). He continues, “I think one can understand facts as true claims, acknowledge that claiming is not intelligible apart from vocabularies, and still insist that there were true claims, and hence facts, before there were vocabularies” (Brandom 2000: 162). Brandom, in a second step, shows also how “facts” in his account enter the justificatory process:

In fact, the same strategy applied above to domesticate epistemic correctness as truth can be extended to domesticate epistemic correctness as justification or warrant. We can see the facts as standing in normative relations of justification to our claiming as well as in causal relations of triggering them. Indeed, we can see them as standing in the normative relations precisely because and insofar as they stand in the causal relations. (Brandom 2000: 165)

9 Given the last citation of Rorty above – on how you have to “play back and forth between causation and inference” – Brandom’s account seems indeed very similar, if not interchangeable with how Rorty depicts Davidson’s triangulation after reading Ramberg. Against this background, it is perfectly reasonable to ask why Rorty agrees with Ramberg but not with Brandom.

10 I do think the playing “back and forth” indicates a kind of problem since in order to “play back and forth” you need two realms between which to perform the maneuver.
My claim is that in the way Ramberg proposes Davidson’s “triangulation,” there are not two strictly distinct realms and, therefore, also no gaps to bridge by “playing back and forth.” This, I will show, is the reason why Rorty embraces Ramberg’s version but not Brandom’s, which implies two distinct realms.

2. Differences

Brandom’s two realms appear as he differentiates between the act of claiming and what is claimed, or, more importantly, of what is claimable: “I want to say that facts are true claims in the sense of what is claimed (indeed, of what is claimable), rather than in the sense of true claimings” (Brandom 2000: 162). “With this distinction on board,” he continues, “there is nothing wrong with saying that facts make claims true – for they make claimings true. This sense of ‘makes’ should not be puzzling: it is inferential” (Brandom 2000: 162). This means, as Brandom explains in Making It Explicit, they have no explanatory but only expressive use. True claims are “providing an expressive equivalent” of a “fact” (Brandom 1994: 328). For Brandom, “‘It is true that snow is white’ is a semantic expression of a nonsemantic fact” (1994: 329). He makes overt use of the representational scheme which operates with two distinct realms, yet the representational power aspirations are domesticated because they are plausible only with reference to a vocabulary using these notions. One might say that authority remains solely at the angle of one’s peers, to use Rorty’s Davidsonian picture.

Yet, Brandom strengthens the non-vocabulary part by granting that: “There were no true claimings before there were vocabularies, because there were no claimings at all. But it does not follow that there were no true claimables” (2000: 162). He explains why: “For facts are true claims in the sense of what is claimed, not in the sense of claimings. If we had never existed, there would not have been any true claimings, but there would have been facts (truths) going unexpressed, and in our situation, in which there are claimings, we can say a fair bit about what they would have been” (Brandom 2000: 163).

Brandom’s strategy is that whereas only social practices install authority, we do confer it in our representational language practice to the angle with the world insofar as the representational model, as cited above, purports “that the use of our empirical vocabularies stands in normative semantic relations to the world, in that how things are determines the correctness of our claims in the sense of their truth” (Brandom 2000: 161). Since we ourselves transferred authority, for Brandom no harm is done. But Rorty is not convinced: Why am I so intent on resisting Brandom’s attempt to reconcile the fact that facts are intelligible only relative to vocabularies with un-Davidsonian notions like “making-true” and “correspondence”? Because I think that nobody would have had a use for this cluster of notions unless they had a conception of beliefs cutting reality at joints which are not relative to vocabularies – which are Nature’s Own, owing nothing to the human needs and interests which led us to dream up photon-talk and baseball-talk. Without this cutting-at-the-joints imagery, nobody would ever have suggested that true beliefs were accurate representations of reality. (Rorty 2000a: 185)

Brandom thinks his approach is immune to this critique because “there is in this picture no contact between naked, unconceptualized reality and someone’s application of concepts” (Brandom 2000: 165). I think Brandom is right that in his picture there is no direct contact, but there is naked, unconceptualized reality!
Martin Kusch makes a similar critique of Brandom's account. Kusch points out that for Brandom, “concepts are always perspectival in so far as their contents are different for different individuals (different individuals have different inferential articulations for the same concepts)” (Kusch 2002: 255). But then Brandom goes on to suggest that “objects are ‘non-perspectival in a strong sense’” (Brandom 1994: 594, qtd. in Kusch 2002: 255). This is where objectivity comes in; what is shared by all perspectives is that there is a difference between what is objectively correct in the way of concept application and what is merely taken to be so, and objectivity lies in the perspectival form of our practice of attributing and endorsing beliefs and commitments. But Kusch says: “Contrary to what Brandom alleges, he has not shown that objects are ‘non-perspectival in a strong sense.’ What he has shown is that the attributer of a de re belief-attitude does not treat the object as perspectival” (Kusch 2002: 258). “But this only shows,” Kusch points out, “that de re attributer neglect the perspectival character of their beliefs about the object; it does not show that the beliefs and the objects are not perspectival. Of course they are perspectival” (2002: 258).

Kusch insists on perspectivity because this strengthens his own version of relativism. The point for me here is not to decide whether objects are non-perspectival in a strong sense but to underline that Brandom takes them to be, as can be seen from his appeal to the already cited ancestral scenarios where there are truths “going unexpressed” (Brandom 2000: 163), and that the correctness of claims is determined by “how things are” (Brandom 2000: 161).

There are two points in particular in this account that are troubling from the point of view that I am attributing to Rorty-in-accordance-with-Ramberg. The first is exactly the part that Brandom thinks is his salvation and to which Rorty, apart from his answer to Ramberg, also could have subscribed: namely, the no-direct-contact-but-only-causal-pressure part. I return to this below. The second point, one that troubled Rorty also before Ramberg’s paper, is that there is a place for naked reality in Brandom’s picture. “Unconceptualized reality” in Brandom’s sense is not just a move in our current representational language game. It bears deeper, metaphysical implications; It is not just a notion in that it has ontological aspirations.

This can be seen from Brandom’s concept of the “claimable.” Brandom’s system would be complete and work beautifully without the “claimable.” The “claimable” adds nothing if not the flavor of the strong, unconceptualized, unchangeable part of reality – reality without us. This is something that Brandom’s system could not offer otherwise because Brandom starts from actual “claimings” and, as the system is inferential, authority lies only with the interlocutors and not at the angle of the world. This is so even if, as mentioned above, when we use the representational vocabulary, we transfer authority to the angle of the world. At this point, the transfer is simply a move inside the representational language game. Brandom, at this juncture, is right: “making true” works inferentially (Brandom 2000: 162). The problems arrive with the “claimable.” If the “claimable” were only a derivative, reified, abstract version of actual claimings, then there would be no problem; the “claimable” would be a (rather useless) accessory, but surely not a concept that licenses talk about truths “going unexpressed” (Brandom 2000: 163) in ancestral time and facts beyond vocabularies. However, this is exactly the license Brandom wants. The function of the “claimable” is precisely to delimit the space for potential claims, and this space is enclosed by non-linguistic being (the ontos on).
Brandom’s hidden ontological and metaphysical background assumptions can also be seen in his appeal to common sense and realist intuitions in the following example:

That old semanticist and modal logician Abraham Lincoln was asked “If we agreed to call the tail a ‘leg,’ how many legs would horses have?” His answer was: “Four, because you can’t change how many legs horses have by changing the way we use words.” This is surely the right response. One cannot change the nonlinguistic facts, in the unloaded sense, by changing linguistic ones. In the counterfactual situation envisaged, the words “Horses have five legs,” would be true, but only because it would not say that horses have five legs, and so would not conflict with the fact that horses would still have four legs. (Brandom 2000: 163)

The question this raises is how far Brandom’s “nonlinguistic facts” are “unloaded.” They are unloaded in the sense that the material outer-world does not offer norms for how to talk about it; this is why Rorty, beyond his response to Ramberg, thinks that Brandom’s “heart is certainly in the right place” (Rorty 1998: 135). Yet, Brandom’s nonlinguistic facts are not unloaded when it comes to the stability and independence of unconceptualized reality, to objects being “non-perspectival in a strong sense.”

Objectivity in Brandom is in the structure, in the perspectival form itself, not in content. That said, the “is-seems”-difference, which is built into our representational discursive practice, hangs on the idea that there is a way the world is, in a stable way, though we will never get a non-perspectival look at it. This “the way the world is beyond our descriptions” seems, at first sight, to be merely structuring the form of our discursive practice and not open to the charge of essentialism. Yet it is bound up with ontological commitments since what ultimately makes claims true is their reliability to the facts – where facts are not notions in a language game – though we do not have measures for checking the actual fit.

A further point is that not only the representational frame presumes that there is a way the world is, but Brandom himself does too. As Brandom writes: “We ought to have little sympathy with an author who, upon being accused of commitment to some objectionable thesis-idealism, let us say, or realism, or pragmatism, depending on one’s sympathies – responds with outrage ‘But I explicitly say on page 193 that I am not an idealist (realist, etc.)!’ For that hardly settles that he is not also committed to it by other things in the book” (Brandom 1997: 197). In Making It Explicit as in Brandom’s contemporary papers, there are points (see above) where he is committed to two realms that need to be bridged, between which to “play back and forth.” This includes not only the causal vs. the normative realm but also language vs. the world. As a result, his approach is open to the accusation that it is a very elaborate and sophisticated version of the old scheme-content distinction because, in the end, though causation and inference have to be played back and forth a number of times, what makes “facts” facts is that they supersede vocabularies even if they are understandable only with reference to vocabularies. Therefore, in Brandom’s approach, vocabularies are still played off against the world beyond vocabularies.

For Brandom it is important that there are facts prior to and beyond language. Ramberg’s Davidson has no use for facts or the world without us. Ramberg offers Rorty the possibility to skip tedious questions of ontology once and for all because his version of objectivity, though having an “is-seems” distinction, operates neither with the semantic register of “how the world is” nor with ontological commitments to how the world is (in itself beyond us) because vocabularies and world are not played off against one another.
Davidson, according to Ramberg, is not making a point about how antecedently and independently of us existing facts enter, figure in, or determine the inferential game, like Brandom does. But he is making a point about how communication is possible – how communication is a way of acting – and how rationality is brought into being via communication. In Ramberg's version there is no difference between claimables and actual claimings like there is in Brandom. No difference exists between what can be potentially claimed and what is actually being claimed because there are not two distinct realms that have to be put in connection. In Davidson “the contrast between truth and error – true belief and false belief […] can emerge only in the context of interpretation, which alone forces us to the idea of an objective, public truth” (Davidson 1984: 170).

At first sight, this seems to be Brandom's point as well. For Brandom the “is-seems” distinction is part of our discursive practice. Yet, for Brandom what finally allows for the distinction are facts beyond vocabularies, whereas what allows for the distinction in Ramberg are successful interactions. In Davidson, and Ramberg, 

"[The objectivity which thought and language demand depends on the mutual and simultaneous responses of two or more creatures to common distal stimuli and to one another's responses. This three-way relation among two speakers and a common world I call "triangulation.""] (Davidson 2001a: xv)"

The key here lies in the words “mutual and simultaneous.” This is subtly but importantly different from how Rorty describes triangulation in his response cited above, as "playing back and forth between causation and inference." "Playing back and forth" is what Brandom does. In Ramberg's Davidson, you never get one angle in isolation in the way that Brandom appears to allow. Brandom first cuts the angles with me and my peers to get naked reality in his ancestral scenarios of unexpressed truths. Then the angle with reality gradually enters the inferential realm via the complex causal-inferential interactions described above. In Ramberg’s Davidson, you always have all three corners together. This is the difference between the Davidson of “radical interpretation” where, “coherence yields correspondence” (Davidson 2001b: 307) – a “correspondence without confrontation” (Davidson 2001b: 137) – which is nearer to Brandom’s picture, and the Davidson of “triangulation” (see Ramberg 2001). On the way Ramberg proposes Davidson's “triangulation” to Rorty, there are no time-slices available in which one single individual finds herself contemplating the world in front of (and divided from) her because the individual's thoughts and language are always already bound up with the world and her peers. The three corners of Davidson’s triangle are, always and in every moment, “mutual and simultaneous”; they are an undividable package because with one angle missing there is no rationality. For Rorty, this is also the reason why Davidson uses “rationality, normativity, intentionality, and agency as if they were roughly co-extensive predicates” (Rorty 2000c: 371).

To put it still another way, for Davidson there aren't even angles, but only an undividable package of relations – relations which you cannot un-do and which bond the intentions and purposes of agents always and in every moment together with their common environment. Also for Ramberg's Davidson, just like for Brandom, there was a world before human beings came to exist. But, in sharp difference to Brandom for whom there are truths “going unexpressed,” it had no meaning and no truth because “meaning” and “truth” require all three angles. Now, with us in the picture, just like in Brandom, we can make claims about ancestral time, but there is no way to curtail us
and our present purposes, which triggers the question about that time in the first place.

28 Truth in Ramberg’s sense of “getting things right” is a success-maker. It marks the successful interaction of all three angles, where language is neither understood as medium of explanation nor a medium of expression. Language is action; it directs and manipulates our (inter)relations. This is what convinced Rorty: the theory of truth is intrinsically connected with the theory of action. According to Rorty, Ramberg lets us see that “an account of truth is automatically an account of agency, and conversely. He helps us see that Davidson, like Dewey, is trying to break down the distinction between the knowing, theorizing, spectatorial mind and the responsible participant in social practices” (Rorty 2000c: 371), which are practices in and interacting with the world.

29 This is where, according to Ramberg, Rorty’s concept of “redescription” comes in. It is not some sort of idealism or social constructivism, but “bringing salience to different causal patterns in the world, patterns with which we engage. And that is just the great ability that our language brings, this ability to reprogram our causal dispositions through salience-alteration” (Ramberg 2000: 363). We can highlight certain features or let them fade into the background. This process of highlighting and rearranging attention alters what reality consists in: “By changing our causal dispositions, redistributing significance across kinds, we affect how we engage with the world, and thus also the world. Indeed, if changing descriptive strategies [...] didn’t have a causal impact on how things are, it would be hard to see how language could have evolved as a useful tool” (Ramberg 2000: 363). Ramberg’s appropriateness conditions do not refer to the object only. The description does not have to fit the object – the description, to “get things right,” has to fit the triangle. This is the important part and the difference with respect to Brandom. The “right” in “getting things right” marks successful interactions, not correct words in the sense of words opposed to a world beyond words, as is ultimately the case in Brandom’s account of “facts,” though, obviously, in Brandom, we have no methods to check the fit.

30 What does that mean for the horse and its legs? In Brandom, the horse will “always” have four legs because it has four legs. The non-perspectival form of the horse, the horse without us, is a “fact,” where “facts” are established by language-games. Yet, what ultimately accounts for objectivity is the difference between our perspectives and the non-perspectivalness of the world beyond us. Our claims are correct if they get reality right (reality without us), although we are in Brandom’s “sanitized version,” as he calls it, never directly in touch with it.

31 Brandom’s version is, in my opinion, both too weak and too strong for Rorty at the time of his concession to Ramberg. Brandom’s version is too weak because there is no direct touch, and authority lies only at the angles with me and the peers. However, we can decide to put authority on the other angle; this is what Brandom recommends we do or what we are already doing in our representational language practice. Until this point it is – Brandom is right – “sanitized,” as long as we agree that we are doing language-games. Yet, and this is where Brandom’s approach is too strong, I agree with Kusch that there is “naked reality” in Brandom – the object is “non-perspectival in a strong sense,” although – this is the weak part again – there is “no bird’s-eye view above the fray of competing claims from which those that deserve to prevail can be identified, nor from which even necessary and sufficient conditions for such deserts can be formulated” (Brandom 1994: 601). These claims seem difficult to hold together.
In Ramberg and Rorty, contact with the world is trivial. We always already are in touch. We cannot not be in touch. But there is no “how things really are.” This does not mean that we can make just any claim. We have to “get things right” and this entails that I, my fellows, and the horse are a package in the process of description and re-description. Authority is distributed. This is in Rorty’s already cited passage: “It was a mistake to locate the norms at one corner of the triangle – where my peers are – rather than seeing them as [...] hovering over the whole process of triangulation [...] It is not that my peers have more to do with my obligation to say that snow is white than the snow does, or than I do” (Rorty 2000c: 376). This entails what Rorty himself calls a “partial reconciliation of pragmatism and realism” (2000c: 374). Also in Ramberg, there is no “birds-eye view” from which to decide between competing claims, but you can provide success rates. These success rates are not based on the accuracy of the object-description fit – objectivity is not guaranteed by the difference between our practice of concept application and “how things are.” Claims are not “made true by facts,” but they are based on the triangle. Claims do not have to “get things right” beyond vocabularies since if we “get things right” we cope successfully with our peers and the world. In this scenario, “copying” is not ensuring successful coping. The weakness of “copying” lies exactly in trying to get us out of the picture – in cutting an angle which instead is needed.

In both Brandom and Ramberg, there is no possibility to decide once and for all between competing claims. In Brandom, this is due to the fact that we cannot rise above our practice; hence we will never get a non-perspectival glimpse of the (only theoretically potentially available) non-perspectival object. In Ramberg this is due to the fact that our practices can change, and that with them, truth also will change, since, as noted, “getting things right” means taking account of the triangle and this means thinking together our (changing) needs and purposes and our common world. Further, the urge to decide between competing claims in addition to their rendering our actions successful is a hangover from representationalism, which in Ramberg’s version really can be left behind. In Ramberg there just is no split between ontology and semantics or epistemology; or put differently, Ramberg’s approach is “post-ontological” insofar as it skips questions regarding reality without us.

To apply this again to Brandom’s example with the horse’s legs, for Rorty at the time of his response to Ramberg, calling the “tail” a “leg” will not get the horse a fifth leg! We have to “get things right” in order to have success with our actions, and today calling the “tail” a “leg” does not render our interactions with the horse and our peers more successful. We cannot freely decide what “gets things right.” But we can change the way in which we engage with the world through salience alteration. Therefore, there actually are possible ways in which horses do not have four legs; this is when their legs are no longer a salient feature because our practices have changed in a way that let the horse’s legs fade into the background. In such a context, saying “the horse has four legs” will let us fall out of success because the horse will not have four legs. This is not just a change in linguistics, like, in Brandom’s example, the “counterfactual situation envisaged, [where] the words ‘Horses have five legs,’ would be true, but only because it would not say that horses have five legs, and so would not conflict with the fact that horses would still have four legs” (Brandom 2000: 163). It is a change in our interaction with matter, which we are and with which we also engage linguistically.
Brandom has to worry about how many legs there really are because he is not only employing or describing but held captive by the representational picture. Once referential semantics are gone, ontology in the essentialist sense drops out as a corollary. This is what Ramberg showed Rorty. To be clear, the vocabulary-ontology divide does not structure Ramberg’s approach. Ontology just is not at stake or in sight. The things we “get right” do not supersede vocabularies because words are not opposed to objects when it comes to what allows for the distinction between truth and error. For Ramberg, Davidson’s “is-seems” distinction is post-ontological because the notion “leg” is (just) a way to cope – it helps and directs our interactions, where we, our peers and the world are one undividable package. The question what “leg” really means or refers to or what there is beyond our vocabularies has fallen off the agenda.

3. Two Forms of Realist Intuitions

Let me now return to Stout’s problems with squaring Rorty’s dismissal of Brandom while he embraces Ramberg. For Stout, as I cited at the beginning, “Ramberg and Brandom appear to be explicating the same pre-philosophical ideal of ‘getting things right’ in the somewhat different philosophical idioms of Davidson and Sellars, neither of which strikes me as inherently tainted by metaphysics” (Stout 2002: 52). I hope to have shown that the “pre-philosophical ideal of ‘getting things right’” Ramberg and Brandom each aspire to is quite different.

For Brandom and Stout this pre-philosophical ideal points to representational realism – in an “unloaded form”, as Brandom would say – yet he would have had to show how the non-perspectivalness of the world beyond vocabularies does not occupy a crucial role in the overall structure of his concept of objectivity. The world without us still figures as the ultimate touchstone, though as a touchstone we will never touch and a touchstone that we do not directly compare our words with – this we do in our inferential practices. Yet, these practices are functioning according to the overall form that there is a difference between what we say and how the world really is. Brandom’s is-seems-distinction hinges on there being a world beyond us; material reality is as it is. To the potential question, “are objects non-perspectival in a strong sense or does the total form of our inferential practices assume them to be?” Brandom’s answer most probably would be “yes to both.”

Brandom’s version accommodates representational realist intuitions better, and his program is exactly this: to take the ecumenical instead of the revolutionary stance. For Brandom, no harm is done as long as we are aware that representationalism is an inferential affair. After Making It Explicit was published, Rorty wrote some recommendations to Brandom on how to face the likely upcoming accusations of relativism by advising him to be “more arrogant […] and to situate his philosophy of language within an immodest metaphilosophical framework according to which philosophical reflection can reject […] intuitions” (Rorty 1997: 177). One reason is that, according to Rorty, inferentialism, even in Brandom’s causally constrained form, will never be enough to convince people with strong realist intuitions, so he might as well go with revolution. Another reason is that “rhetoric matters,” as Rorty puts it his essay on Brandom in Truth and Progress (Rorty 1998, 132). This is the Rambergian point: descriptions alter our dispositions, and by doing so they interact with the world – this
is what the “language as tool” metaphor means. Brandom’s version does not actively alter our dispositions, nor does it want to.

39 The pre-philosophical intuition Ramberg starts from is that we are able to interact successfully with our environment. This is a form of realism that does not sharply divide words and the world. Ramberg’s answer to the old pragmatist question, “Do we need copying to cope?” is a clear “no.”

40 Ramberg provides more powerful tools for two of Rorty’s interconnected aims: his antiauthoritarianism and his openness to change. In Ramberg’s version, Rorty is right; there is still “no authority called Reality before whom we need bow down” (Rorty 2000c: 376) because Ramberg “does not offer criticisms of or warrant for descriptive strategies by appealing to the way the world is” (Ramberg 2000: 368). We can still toss out our “old intuitions” and are not slaves to essences or orders of being while simultaneously capturing what in representational language would be the pressure and resistance of the outer-world, yet without representationalism and its alleged dualisms. Put another way, in Ramberg’s version, there is no playing “back and forth.”

41 Pushing this line of thought further would also go in directions that, at first sight, do not seem compatible with Rorty’s interests. Rorty’s Humanism is touched; in Ramberg’s picture, we do not rely only on ourselves but on the world as well, though in ways that do not confer the world authority over us, nor us over the world. The question is whether Humanism today is still serving the goal that Rorty wanted it to serve: is Humanism still the most suitable tool for our purposes? Does it still guarantee Rorty’s antiauthoritarianism and change? In Ramberg’s version, the concept of “authority” is freed from foundational imagery and offers therewith new ways of conceptualizing “authority” in which “authority” is not necessarily connected to “hierarchy” and “domination.” Ramberg’s version could even offer ways to toss out the concept of “authority” altogether, and this would alter our dispositions a fair bit. Yet, these last thoughts are very tentative and need much more elaboration.

42 My intention here was only to insist on the difference between Brandom’s and Ramberg’s requests. The difference between their respective approaches seems minimal but, as I hope to have shown, this small difference has a large impact on how we understand our conceptual agency and our ways to engage with the world. Brandom’s ultimately dualist version confines agency to the inferential realm which stands across from a world that is as it is in itself. Rorty, in his answer to the debate, does not criticize Brandom for making the causal-normative distinction – a distinction which, on my reading, he abandons in his answer to Ramberg – functioned to argue for eliminativism, whereas in Brandom, ultimately, the distinction functions to petrify the world.

43 Ramberg’s version offers a whole new set of possibilities to understand reality and our linguistic interactions because it does not play the world off against vocabularies. In this account, the world, though equally material and independent from our thoughts, is not a bloc that stands in front of us but is the environment in which we are enmeshed and from which we cannot be divided. Depending on which features of this world we highlight – which become “salient” and which fade in the background – reality
changes. This has a material impact on our lives and is where the ethical and political potency of this approach lies, which is precisely the reason why Rorty agreed to it.

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NOTES

1. See also e.g. Gascoigne (2008: 213-21). For an account that points to the possibility of Rorty having a point in resisting Brandom, see Levine (2008, 2010, 2020). Levine’s approach differs from mine insofar as he moves his support of Rorty’s argumentation in order to strengthen New Pragmatism. Levine is pointing with Rorty to weak spots in New Pragmatism that, according to Levine, should be corrected (2008: 189). My interest in this article is to spell out in detail the difference between Brandom’s and Ramberg’s respective approaches in the debate. These details, I believe, point to a possibility of ameliorating the concept of “realism.” However, that is beyond the scope of this article.

2. See e.g. Rorty (1982: xxvi).

3. As I will argue below, having this question and wanting to answer it, is part of the problem. The question itself needs to be eliminated.

4. “Old” because what is played off against each other are language vs. empirical content.

5. “Mutual and simultaneous” is congruent with Rorty’s description if one strongly emphasizes the second part: “You have to play back and forth between causation and inference in a way which does not permit any of the corners of a triangle to be independent of any of the others” (Rorty 2000b, 78; emphasis added), though, I would insist, that “playing back and forth” is a metaphor that creates confusion because it does presuppose two realms.
6. “Interaction,” here, does not mean “playing back and forth.” More aptly one should say “action” instead of “inter-action,” where “action” always includes the mutual and simultaneous dependence of all three angles in every moment and without the possibility to make cuts.

7. The first person who heard, read, and insisted I pursue this project was Richard Bernstein. So, it is due to him that the project took its start. But it is due to Bjørn Ramberg, with his immense knowledge, wisdom, and mentoring skills, that I advanced it to completion; this article is unthinkable without his support. Earlier drafts of the paper received sophisticated and perspicuous comments from Chris Voparil, Neil Gascoigne, and Michael Bacon. My thanks also go to two anonymous reviewers for their valuable remarks. I presented earlier versions of the paper during a masterclass with Bernstein in Munich; at the 3rd European Pragmatism Conference in Helsinki; and at the workshop “Truth versus the Rhetoric of Truth: Authority, Realism, and Power” in Oslo. I am most grateful to the audiences and commentators of these events.

ABSTRACTS

There is a famous puzzle in Rorty scholarship: Did or did Rorty not subscribe to a form of realism and truth when he made concessions regarding objectivity to Bjørn Ramberg in 2000? Relatedly, why did Rorty agree with Ramberg but nevertheless insist upon disagreeing with Brandom, though large parts of the research community hold their two respective requests for shifts in Rorty’s stance to be congruous? The present article takes up the discussion and tries, for the first time, to make sense of Rorty’s insistence that there is a difference between Brandom’s notion of “made true by facts” and Ramberg’s notion of “getting things right” by showing that Ramberg’s appropriateness-conditions are fully compatible with Rorty’s revised interpretation of Davidson’s concept of “triangulation,” whereas Brandom’s inferential “made-true-by-facts”-language game is not. The reason why Rorty agrees with Ramberg but not with Brandom, I argue, is that Brandom’s contemporary concept of objectivity, as developed in his contribution to the debate and in his Making It Explicit, works with a scheme-content distinction, whereas Ramberg’s Davidson-based version does not. As many of his critics suppose, Rorty’s concession to Ramberg entails a substantive revision of Rorty’s position, not just a clarification. However, this new position is not in conflict with Rorty’s most important commitment, namely his anti-authoritarianism. The revised account still does not bind him to the forms of realism and truth that his critics favor. The article explains to which forms of realism and truth Rorty’s concessions to Ramberg commit him instead.

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Rorty’s Humanism
Making it Explicit

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AUTHOR’S NOTE

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“As a good bourgeois liberal [... I] cannot figure out what is supposed to be wrong with ‘humanism’ [...]” (Rorty 1997: 36)

1. Introduction

The pragmatist conception to which Richard Rorty subscribed holds that philosophy has to serve a mission: to be relevant to cultural practice and to provide “descriptions of the human situation” (see Rorty 2010a: 13, 14, 17). Rorty’s metaphilosophical journey took him from his sophomore question – “what, if anything, philosophy is good for?” – to his attempts to find a “more constructive way of doing philosophy” and to obtain “an overview of the culture” by playing imaginative philosophical language games in order “to serve some human purposes better than others” (ibid.). This is philosophy’s humanistic mission and almost no philosopher – including anti-humanists such as Heidegger or Foucault – would deny that they are motivated to provide humanity with images or stories about “who we are, where do we come from, and where we are going.” But Rorty’s humanism is not just about understanding philosophy’s mission. He was a malcontent who wished to “change the subject” almost from the outset (see Tartaglia 2020). This may, of course, be evident to those who are able to “get him right.” After his Kehre (see Gascoigne 2008: 78-106) the substantial parts of his œuvre advanced ideas that justify labelling his pragmatism as humanistic (see Schulenberg
2015). However, we have to be more explicit about the nature of this humanism. That is what I attempt to do in this paper.  

The doctrine of humanism – however defined – seems to sit comfortably in pragmatism, in both the classical and some contemporary versions. Rorty, in many ways, follows his pragmatist-humanist predecessors, even though the roots of his humanism are more diverse, as I explain below. In my exposition, I focus on Rorty’s secular humanism, which I believe lies at the center of his thought, leaving aside for the moment any connotations of religious humanism. My main objective is to show that humanism is integral to his philosophy and to explain what it consists in. First, I provide, in sections 2 and 3, an account of key humanist sources, both pragmatist and non-pragmatist. Section 4 examines (the few) recent interpretations of Rorty the humanist. In section 5, I focus on the distinction between the human and non-human as the central feature of his humanism. Section 6 outlines Rorty’s project to humanize humanity. In the concluding section, I summarize the key features of his humanism.

But first, I have to sketch the introductory working concept of humanism I use to explore Rorty. It is both descriptive and normative, and inspired to some extent by Rorty himself. Humanism is a philosophical outlook that provides: 1) a certain description of “who we, humans, are” and “what makes us human” (descriptive part); and 2) an understanding of the “value of human being for human being” (normative part). In a social and ethical context, humanism is a conception of human relations in the sense of “how humans see humans” or “what a human means to a human.” To my understanding, being a humanist does not mean playing God (in the “cult of man” sense which Sartre rightfully rejected), nor does it mean being uncritical of human vices. It nevertheless means holding the view that there is no higher value for a human than (another) human. This general humanistic framework is helpful when rereading and rethinking Rorty’s overall contribution, I think, and especially his ethics. I will refer to selected features of his humanistic ethics in due course below. But we should be clear that it would be very odd to think of any kind of pragmatist ethics, including Rorty’s, outside the humanistic framework.

2. Pragmatist Context

Rorty’s version of humanism encompasses aspects of classical and neoclassical pragmatist doctrines enriched by post-linguistic and Romantic strands. Let us look first at the former.

Charles Sanders Peirce famously had no explicit use for humanism and criticized both William James and F. C. S. Schiller for making it a key feature of – or even a label for – pragmatism (see Pihlström 2004a; Pietarinen 2011). But for James, humanism was a type of philosophical thinking (equivalent to pluralism) with fully-fledged epistemological, ontological and even theistic connotations, not merely normative ethical ones:

The humanism, for instance, which I see and try so hard to defend, is the completest truth attained from my point of view up to date. But, owing to the fact that all experience is a process, no point of view can ever be the last one. Every one is insufficient and off its balance, and responsible to later points of view than itself. You, occupying some of these later points in your own person, and believing in the reality of others, will not agree that my point of view sees truth positive, truth
James’s “humanistic principle” that “you can’t weed out the human contribution” (ibid.: 598), for the “trail of the human serpent is thus over everything” (ibid.: 515), was fully embraced by Schiller. He saw humanism “as expressive of what is the most distinctive novelty in the Pragmatic Movement” (Schiller 1912: X) and defined it as follows:

Humanism is really in itself the simplest of philosophic standpoints: it is merely the perception that the philosophic problem concerns human beings striving to comprehend a world of human experience by the resources of human minds [...]

Humanism has no quarrel with the assumptions of common-sense realism; it does not deny what is popular described as the external world. It has far too much respect for the pragmatic value of conceptions which de facto work far better than those of the metaphysics which despise them. (Schiller 1907: 12-3)

Both the Jamesian and Deweyan types of humanism include the principle of meliorism, that is the idea that human beings have the potential to become better creatures than they were in the past (see Koopman 2009: 19).

Later Dewey’s pragmatist humanism/humanist pragmatism was developed in the works of his most important student, Sidney Hook (1902-1989), and in turn by his students and other Deweyan followers, above all the neoclassical pragmatist Paul Kurtz (1925-2012). They proposed the doctrine of secular (atheistic) humanism and began moving away from metaphysics and epistemology and closer to ethics and politics. Hook outlined what he called an “existential humanism,” derived from Feuerbach as an ethical ideal to be contrasted with religious humanism (Hook 1961). Kurtz subsequently summarized Hook’s thinking as follows:

Humanism, as he defines it, is an ethical philosophy. It encompasses everyone who believes in the separation of church and state, the secularization of values, and the view that morality can be based upon experience and reflection. (Kurtz 1983: XI)

For Kurtz, humanism had become the leading topic both intellectually and socially. His aim was to promote “neo-humanism” as superseding all other humanisms, for he considered them insufficiently inclusive and ineffective. He wrote and published “A Neo-Humanist Statement” (2010), consisting of 16 principles based on ideas and values that “express renewed confidence in the ability of human beings to solve the problems we encounter and to conquer uncharted frontiers.” In his numerous philosophical writings, he aligned humanism with eupraxophy, his practical philosophy of a good life (Kurtz 1989a). He regarded humanism as a very rich and complex concept, “virtually synonymous with what it means to be human” (Kurtz 1989b: 9), comprising “the virtue of courage, an emphasis on human power, a willingness to create and seize new possibilities, and the capacity to exercise freedom of choice” (ibid.: 32) etc. At some point he adopted the following “minimal core definition”:
First, humanism expresses a set of values and virtues emphasizing human freedom and autonomy. This ethical theory contrasts with divine-command ethics. Second, humanism, particularly secular humanism, rejects supernaturalism. Humanism should not be simply equated with atheism; however, it proposes a reflective form of agnostic or skeptical atheism. Third, secular humanism is committed to a key epistemological principle: a method of inquiry that emphasizes reason and scientific objectivity. Fourth, it has a non-reductive naturalistic ontology drawn from the sciences. Last, humanist philosophers should not only be concerned with theoretical issues, but with the role of humanism in practical life as an alternative to theistic religion. (Kurtz 1998: 5)

Summing up, these pragmatists understood humanism as the following set of doctrines: 1) a type of philosophical thinking based on self-reflection on human existence and its possibilities (James, Schiller); 2) a naturalistic philosophy of human being as the basis for pursuing human good (Dewey); 3) a secular ethical philosophy (Hook); and 4) a non-reductive naturalistic ontology and secular ethics serving practical human purposes in accordance with the scientific image of the world (Kurtz). As we shall see below, Rorty’s focus on the human over nonhuman incorporates the gist of these features.

3. Linguistic and Literary Turns cum Romanticism

Rorty’s humanism bears all the features of his new pragmatism, which was aptly labelled “prophetic” (West 1989; Hall 1994). It is far from being a merely linear continuation of the work of his classical predecessors (see Malachowski 2010). It would not have become what it is were it not for at least two of its non-pragmatist components: the linguistic turn and Romanticism in the broad sense of the word (both are often referred to as the “postmodern turn”). While the linguistic turn was a substantially new component of pragmatism, Romanticism was not. The linguistic turn – “the talk about the world by means of talking about a suitable language” (see Rorty 1992: 8) – has led to the notion of the centrality of linguistic practices in philosophical thinking about human life. Rorty (1995: 35) conceded: “I linguisticize as many pre-linguistic-turn philosophers as I can, in order to read them as prophets of the utopia in which all metaphysical problems have been dissolved, and religion and science have yielded their place to poetry.” Humans are Darwinian linguistic beings and this evolutionary development has had far reaching consequences for philosophical anthropology and philosophy of culture.

Despite his “pragmatist turn,” Rorty never abandoned the issue of language. We are entirely justified in calling him a “linguistic neopragmatist” (see e.g. Calcaterra 2019). He has remained a “linguistic philosopher,” espousing “the view that philosophical problems are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about language we presently use” (Rorty 1992: 3). Understanding the language (vocabularies) people use – put simply “why we talk the way we do” – was a question that would concern him throughout his career. But it cannot be identified with his rejection of analytic philosophy. Becoming a pragmatist, Rorty constantly thematized the issue of language. Moreover, the “linguistic stance” became the paradigm through and within which he interpreted all other issues. Nevertheless, he did not consider language an epistemic mirror of nature, nor did he think we should look for metaphysics and ahistorical meanings in it. Rather he saw it as a practical and social creative instrument for constructing and re-constructing our
human world either directly through narratives and metaphors, or indirectly through
the coordination of our social practices. Language is a medium for the human
transformation of the world via social practices.\textsuperscript{14}

I consider this linguisticization to be both the stronger and the weaker side of Rorty.
Stronger because it has liberated philosophy of language from the abstract analytic
confines of representationalism and foundationalism (with their questions about the
relations between language and mind, and language and world) so we can better
understand the sociocultural contexts and practices (and questions regarding the
relations between languages), \textit{i.e.} in studies of the way languages are actually used and
applied. It is his weaker side because Rorty notoriously refused to consider experience
(and the relations of language to it).

His stronger side is relevant to his humanism.\textsuperscript{15} Making things look different – either
good or bad – by re-describing (re-interpreting) them in language and by inventing
new vocabularies was one of his main philosophical intentions (if not the primary one).
As early as in \textit{Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature} he claimed: “redescribing ourselves is
the most important thing we can do” (Rorty 1979: 358-9). He continued: “We are the
poetic species, the one which can change itself by changing its behavior – and
especially its linguistic behavior, the words it uses” (Rorty 1982c: 346).

This understanding of language brought Rorty closer to his “literary turn” – the
literary conception of philosophy and literary humanistic culture. It also served to
resurrect the problematics of rhetoric and communication (see Langdorf & Smith 1995)
and, most of all, philosophical support for poetry. The Nietzschean “strong poets” are
those who have the potential to change us and our cultures. Prioritizing conversation
over confrontation, edification over cognition, inspiration over sophistication, and
imagination over truth – such were the humanistic goals that ought to be tackled
through cultural politics. For Rorty, poetic, romantic and utopian are synonyms: “I
think of the course of human history as a long, swelling, increasingly polyphonic poem
– a poem that leads to nothing save to itself. When the species is extinct, ‘a human
nature total message’ will not be a set of propositions, but a set of vocabularies – the
more, and the more various, the better” (Rorty 1995: 33).

The creative power of language has many uses – therapeutic (like in Wittgenstein and
James), self-constitutive (like in Freud and Proust) or community-constitutive (like in
Dewey and Habermas) – and diverse purposes – private (aesthetic) and public (ethical-
political). Rorty demonstrated this by analyzing works of literary art (Nabokov, Orwell,
Proust). His intentions remained humanistic throughout, when advocating the
elimination of unnecessary cruelty and human suffering, the extension of solidarity
and social hope, and the expansion of empathy and loyalty, or love and fraternity.
Implementing the Deweyan ethical ideal of “creating common good” (see Dewey
1932/1985) was the whole point of imaginative conversations about these issues and of
reading (or writing) great works of literature. Nonetheless, Rorty’s stress on the
“ubiquity of language” is far from the postmodernist ideas of Derrida and Foucault,
who founded their anti-humanism, drawing on Heidegger, on the death of the subject
and the idea that it is not the subject who uses language, but \textit{vice versa}, it is language
which uses the subject (see Rorty 1989: 113; Rorty 1991b: 39-48).

\textit{Romanticism} – “the thesis that what is most important for human life is not what
propositions we believe but what vocabulary we use” (Rorty 1982a: 142) – may be taken
(as indeed it has been) as a sort of dividing line between the “two pragmatisms”
(Mounce 1997): scientistic pragmatism and romantic pragmatism. Romantic pragmatism draws on Hume, Herder, Hegel, Nietzsche, Romantic poets and American transcendentalists.16 The chief instrument for creating human good is the imagination (Rorty quotes Shelley in 2007: 108). Its key agent is the “strong poet” (see Nietzsche 2000: 299) who is, according to Rorty (1989: 20, 26), “the vanguard of the species,” “humanity’s hero.” Strong poets are best suited to self-creation which is most important for humans. We are self-interpretive and self-creative beings and there is nothing more we should and could do than to produce better self-descriptions that might lead us to a better human future.

Rorty had a romantic mind which made him a humanist. A romantic mind is not shallow, dumb, primitive or narrow, but is as sublime and noble as the minds of those who dream of divine or cosmic beauties in nonhuman metaphysical spheres. Rorty’s romanticism serves several purposes. It posits: 1) poetry against Platonism; 2) romance against the Enlightenment; 3) imagination against reason; 4) literary narratives against scientism; and 5) edification and utopia against traditional philosophy. It also serves the romantic impulses he favors over transcendence. He thought transcendence should be transformed into philosophical poetry. He wanted to combine Dewey and Nietzsche to support his humanistic project against Heidegger. He considered it “a good project, worth pressing ahead with” (Rorty 2000: 215), but insisted that we “should be more Nietzschean in our willingness to say ‘Thus I will it’ rather than ‘Thus the Intrinsic Nature of Reality obliges me.’ We should be more ‘humanist’ in the sense of that term which Heidegger endeavored to make pejorative” (ibid.: 216). He cannot therefore resist calling his pragmatism/humanism post-Nietzschean, which in this case is a synonym for the Romantic.17 Although Nietzsche has been interpreted as both a humanist (Pavur 1998) and an anti-humanist (Thomas 2013), at least three of his “ends” inspired Rorty: the end of God, of Truth, and of Philosophy as metaphysics (see de Castro 2011). The first, “de-divinization,” is a reference to traditional religion no longer being relevant, and the arrival of “romantic polytheism” (Rorty 1998b). The second, “perspectivism,” concerns the fact that truth is a human creation, and that what we have are just human interpretations and endless redescriptions, not objective or neutral representations (Rorty 1989). And the third, “de-transcendentalization,” means that everything is historical and contingent, and followed by philosophy as “a kind of writing” and the telling of edifying narratives (Rorty 1982a).

Of course, one can argue that self-creation applies primarily (or even exclusively) to the private life of the “ironist,” as many of Rorty’s critics have done (see e.g. Ballaci 2017). But for Rorty, being humanistic means being moral, and being moral means practicing solidarity in public life. Solidarity is one of the touchstones of his humanism. His “liberal utopia” is a community based on the idea that our connections with our fellow humans are of the utmost importance. His key humanistic ideal was to “enlarge human freedom” (Rorty 1982a: 69-70), the Millian prerequisite for self-creation. He revealed his humanistic credo as early as 1979 in his APA address: “In the end, the pragmatists tell us, what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right” (ibid.: 166; italics added). The issue of “what to do with our lives,” both privately and publicly, became the center-piece of his philosophy: “Our Western liberal picture of a global democratic utopia is that of a planet on which all members of the species are concerned about the fates of all other members” (Rorty 1998a: 12; italics added). This is the Deweyan social dimension – caring about social transformation – expressing concern about humanity, its global fate and future.
4. Motivations and Upshots: What’s the Point of Calling Rorty a Humanist?

So what is the point of calling Rorty a humanist? Can we judge whether he is a humanist based on his motivations or the upshots of them, or both? The standard readings of Rorty of which there are many, have not, by and large, been conducted through the lens of humanism. Among the epithets applied to Rorty such as “postmodernist,” “liberal ironist,” “relativist,” “pluralist,” “ethnocentrist,” “elitist,” and “anti-philosopher, that of “humanist” is poorly represented. The humanism in his thought tended to be overlooked, with a few exceptions. One might wonder how Rorty, the anti-Platonist, could ever be a humanist if Platonism has become the humanist paradigm? Furthermore, it would have been deeply paradoxical for Rorty to be called “a humanist” by those who placed him in the postmodernist camp, insisting on its “anti-humanism.” More confusion emerges over one of Rorty’s heroes – Heidegger – who radically opposed any type of humanism for several, mostly metaphysical, reasons. And finally there are his staunch opponents, for whom Rorty was no humanist, but rather an anti-humanist who, with his radical counterintuitive (if not irrationalist) philosophy, came to destroy all the solid pillars of Western humanism. Even fellow pragmatists had difficulty recognizing the continuity between Rorty’s work and Dewey’s naturalistic humanism (although the Jamesian-Schillerian strand would have been quite obvious).

It was none other than Richard Bernstein, Rorty’s closest philosophical comrade and a humanist in his own right (see Bernstein 2017), who was the first to read Rorty as a humanist (see Bernstein 1982). Bernstein thought “the common project of Rorty, Habermas, and Gadamer” was “non-foundational pragmatic humanism” (ibid.: 355-6), despite humanism having become “a dirty word” after the devastating critiques of Heidegger, Althusser, and Foucault. Nonetheless, the humanisms of the first three “may yet serve as a vision that can move us […] and enable us to cope with the darkness of our times and orient our praxis” (ibid.: 356). In his brilliant interpretations of social thought, Bernstein explained that “Enlightenment must not be confused with humanism” (Bernstein 1991: 143). And he thought Rorty “champions James’s humanistic pragmatism” (Bernstein 1983: 204). More recently he came to call it a “deep humanism” but not, alas, until after the demise of Rorty (Bernstein 2010). Bernstein suspected that Rorty would not have accepted any such label due to his aversion to anything “deep,” yet believed “that there has been a deep and persistent humanism that is characteristic of his life and his thinking” (ibid.: 201). Ultimately, though, Bernstein thought otherwise and remains unconvinced, despite not having raised any relevant arguments against this “deep humanism,” apart from claiming that Rorty “doesn’t provide us with the foggiest idea of how to achieve (or even approximate) the goals and hopes that he cherishes” (ibid.: 214).

To understand this backstepping, one has to bear in mind that Bernstein, with his classical Deweyan (and quasi-Marxian) background, has different expectations of philosophy and humanism than his late friend. Both philosophers understand that there is no humanism without social practice; however, the difference is that Rorty thought humanism (and philosophy) was a matter of linguistic practice, or what he called cultural politics, whereas for Bernstein it is also about non-linguistic practice or
experience. For the humanistic goals and hopes common to both (and anybody else) to be achieved would for Rorty mean changing just the vocabularies people use, whereas for Bernstein it would mean changing forms of life, social institutions, mutual human relations, and the like. Bernstein (like all Deweyans) understands that changing vocabularies may in the long run lead to a change in the forms of life, but Rortyans have to understand that the forms of life are not the same as linguistic practices which – no matter how important they are – are merely a part of the former.

Rorty’s pragmatism was declared “humanistic” in the very first monograph on his philosophy, by Konstantin Kolenda (1990), who provided both a sympathetic reconstruction and a thoughtful rebuttal of some of the criticisms of Rorty – quite exceptionally at that time (see also Kolenda 1991). These concern motivations. Kolenda argued that Rorty’s humanism was motivated by his attempts to “establish a closer connection between thought and life” (Kolenda 1990: xiii); to heed “some of the best impulses of our religious and humanistic traditions” (ibid.: 50). Kolenda read Rorty in these philosophical-humanistic contexts because it is the “the connection of knowledge with human growth” (ibid.: 25) – not merely knowledge for the sake of knowledge – and the ideal of “optimal human flourishing” (ibid.: 65) via “edification” that bring philosophy to its humanistic mission. Within such a framework, Kolenda construes Rortyan replies to Kantian questions concerning human knowledge, action, and hope. He is clear on what has not been “gotten right” in Rorty, namely his strategy for what should be done with that part of our culture called philosophy. Having understood and become frustrated at the concerns of traditional professional philosophy since Kant – to strive for objective knowledge and put it on the secure path of science – and having launched a powerful attack on that strategy, Rorty preferred to seek a new way of philosophy rather than abandon it altogether. The ancient, pre-modern mission of philosophy as unique intellectual and cultural practice was to be the *ars vitae* and to serve humanity through its wisdom. This Rortyan transformation of philosophy is humanistic in its roots and orientation, according to Kolenda. Rorty considers its centerpiece to be the pragmatist practical concept of human “coping” with reality, not the analytic theoretical “copying” reality. It is crucial that philosophers deal with the anthropological issues of “what to do with our lives?” as well as the axiological issues of the value of life. Humanist philosophers “would not be those who knew a Secret, who had won through to the Truth, but simply people who were good at being human” (Rorty 1982a: xxxix). Rorty’s metaphilosophy is his reaction to what can be termed the anti-humanism of professional philosophy, consisting in its abandonment of human issues that pragmatists like Dewey considered the kernel of philosophy. Modern philosophy has followed science in its search for laws of reality that can be applied to humanity (or manipulated for the sake of humanity), proclaiming that this is precisely in humanity’s interests. But this is not quite true. The scientism and traditional arrogance of philosophical claims to speak on behalf of humanity have nothing in common with philosophers’ humanism. Philosophers must reflect on who they are as members of a particular, historically concrete community and culture.

In the subsequent decade (1990–2000), discourse on Rorty’s humanism was rare, almost absent, even though Rorty was developing his thinking (see sections 5 and 6 below). Consequently, Kate Soper’s (2001) analysis which asked whether Rorty was a “humanist or anti-humanist?” was timely, important and revealing, especially given his direct reply to it. Here we come to the “upshots.” In Soper’s judgment Rorty has to be considered a humanist and in more than just one way: First, he is an atheist (or a
secular) humanist because he is an anti-foundationalist, an anti-deistic thinker who propagates the “de-deification” (or “de-divinization”) of the world and anti-theological therapy for humanity, arguing that “humanity is not answerable to any transcendent deity” \(\text{(ibid.): 117}\). Second, he is a “Promethean” or “anthropocentric” humanist because he advocates freedom and human powers to re-create history \(\text{(ibid.): 118}\). Third, he is a progressivist humanist because he supports change, innovation, historical optimism, and other features which Soper critically attributes to his American cultural identity and social tradition. Alas, fourth, he is not an “essentialist” humanist since, in his opinion, there is no such thing as human nature nor any intrinsic essence of anything else \(\text{(ibid.): 121}\). And fifth, he is not a “teleological humanist” since he is against all metaphysics including teleology \(\text{(ibid.)}\). In addition, Soper raises further charges against Rorty’s humanism such as elitism, gender-blindness, and inconsistencies relating to some common or universal features, such as resistance to cruelty, humiliation, and the ability to feel pain \(\text{(ibid.): 122-3}\).

What lurks explicitly on the whole in the background of Soper’s discussion – along with her implicit skepticism about whether being a humanist is a good thing and what kind of a humanist we should be – is her attack on Rorty’s purported philosophical anti-realism, which she feels cannot be combined with humanism. But in his response Rorty concedes, graciously softening the differences and refining the detail: “Prometheanism is not a matter of claiming superior causal power. It is a claim about authority rather than about power – namely, the claim that the non-human things that have power over us (vultures, comets, and the like) have no authority over us” \(\text{(Rorty 2001: 131)}\). He concludes:

> I am a humanist in the first two senses, but not in the third. I have no faith in human benevolence, though I have hopes for it. If I had to bet, I would bet that within a few centuries we shall have reverted to post-nuclear holocaust barbarism, and that all the good work done by the Enlightenment and by Romanticism will have to be done again. But I do not think such a reversion is inevitable, any more than I think that continuous progress is inevitable. \(\text{(ibid.): 133}\)

What can be drawn from this unique open exchange? It seems that at this stage Rorty’s humanism was solid, self-confident and centered around the idea of private, existentialist, autonomous self-creation, though it was open to the challenge that its public relations required a rethinking. Nonetheless, if humanism means betterment and had anyone asked Rorty “who is responsible for it?,” he would certainly have replied: “Every one of us for herself.” It is very doubtful that one can rely on anybody else in this, let alone the public. Rorty’s humanism is liberal in stressing individual responsibility for self-creation, but it is not anti-social since solidarity is its counterpart. This is how he comes to claim that humanism without a universal human nature is possible.

“Rorty really was a ‘humanist,’” claims Randall Auxier \(\text{(2010: xix)}\) in his attempts “to make a case for understanding Rorty as a humanist in a quite specific sense.” He places his humanism in the context of ancient (Cicero, Seneca, and Epictetus), renaissance (Pico della Mirandola and Michel de Montaigne) and modern (Emerson and Dewey) humanisms, arguing that what is special about all of them – the “cardinal virtues of rhetoric – eloquence, wisdom, and prudence” – is applicable to Rorty as well. However, Rorty “belongs most comfortably among the prudent humanists” \(\text{(ibid.)}\). Auxier aims not at the festive, but the cautionary role of humanism that is underpinned by the idea that “we are neither quite beasts nor angels, and certainly we are not gods, but we are
not nothing” (ibid.: xx), which Rorty espoused as well. It is a humanism which aims at knowing our value, either actual or potential, and thus retains both dignity and hope as counterbalances to death and falling. It is a wise humanism that aims at knowing our limitations as well as our possibilities, and at learning to accept them and make something good out of them. Auxier thus summarizes Rorty’s conversational/literary (as a substitute for eloquent), edifying/poetic (a substitute for wise) and utopian/imaginative (a substitute for prudent) humanism, that we can never learn anything without first making ourselves vulnerable to the possibility of making errors, to our contingent human mode of existing. Hope is the strength to make ourselves vulnerable, and that is the condition of knowledge, because it is a condition of learning. Our compensation of mustering the strength to hope is that we might, with time and effort, become eloquent, wise, and prudent. (ibid.: xxix)

Rather than put philosophy “on the secure path of science,” Rorty’s intention was to return it to “the service of humanity.” This is a complex notion with many facets. The first is the distinction between the human and nonhuman, and it is this that makes a fundamental difference.

5. In his own Words: Human over Nonhuman

Rorty neither wrote a treatise on humanism, nor did he — in line with his metaphilosophy — provide a “theory” or a “conception” of humanism in his writings. He did not declare that he was taking an explicit “humanistic turn” in addition to his other turns (linguistic, pragmatist, literary). But it also should be clear that “Rorty wants philosophy to reassume a humanistic form” (Malachowski 2011: 89). And not just the form. What is more important is the strategy, on which he wrote: “In short, my strategy [...] is to move everything over from epistemology and metaphysics to cultural politics, from claims to knowledge and appeals to self-evidence to suggestions about what we should try” (Rorty 1993: 57). His commentators explained: “The humanistic embeddedness of philosophical activity that is expressed in this strategy stands at the center of Rorty’s transformative pragmatism (in the strongest sense)” (Egginton & Sandbothe 2004: 79). Rorty himself provided a self-reflective interpretation of how he was proceeding. At various points he explained how he had adopted “the overall humanist position” according to which “there are no acts called “assent” or “commitment” we can perform that will put us in a relation to an object different than that of simply talking about that object in sentences whose truth we have taken into our lives” (Rorty 2004: 137).

Studious readers will not have failed to notice, along with Richard Bernstein (2010: 211), that:

Whether Rorty is dealing with abstract metaphilosophical topics, or the hotly debated philosophical issues concerning truth, objectivity, and the nature of reality, or ethical and political issues concerning human rights, or even with the role of religion in our daily lives, there is a dominant theme that emerges repeatedly. There is nothing that we can rely on but ourselves and our fellow human beings. There is no outside authority to which we can appeal — whether we think of it as God, Truth, or Reality.

And as Rorty put it (2010b: 474):

I am a hedgehog who, despite showering my reader with allusions and dropping lots of names, has really only one idea: the need to get beyond representationalism and
thus into an intellectual world in which human beings are responsible only to each other. (italics added)

In other words:

to get to the point where we no longer worship anything, where we treat nothing as a quasi-divinity, where we treat everything – our language, our conscience, our community – as a product of time and chance. To reach this point would be, in Freud’s words, to “treat chance as worthy of determining our fate.” (italics added)

The foothold for Rorty’s humanism is the core idea of his philosophy – the idea of anti-representationalism. “By an antirepresentationalist account I mean one which does not view knowledge as a matter of getting reality right, but rather as a matter of acquiring habits of action for coping with reality” (Rorty 1991a: 1). Originally this was an anti-epistemological idea; however, it has much broader “humanistic aspirations” (Rorty 2004: 135). It is key to the possibility of being fully human in an epistemic, moral or political sense. Rorty (2004: 132) explained:

I think F. C. S. Schiller was on the right track when he said that,“Pragmatism [...] is in reality only the application of Humanism to the theory of knowledge” [...] I take Schiller’s point to be that the humanist’ claim that human beings have responsibilities only to one another entails giving up both representationalism and realism.

What is wrong with representations, either mental or linguistic, from the Rortyan humanistic point of view? It is not just that there is no such thing as representations, because there are no epistemic representational relations between humans and nonhuman reality (such as “mirroring” or “copying”), but also that those who play this Cartesian linguistic game make humans doubly dependent: once on what they take as surrogates (substitutes) for nonhuman (objective) reality, and second, through these “copies” they call “representations” of reality itself. Believing in representations also involves what Rorty calls the “sado-masochistic” game of constant efforts to verify whether representations correspond adequately to reality. In practice, this amounts to the dictate of the nonhuman over the human. Dictatorship by nonhuman reality is the worst thing that can happen to humans. It is the most inhuman thing, but it need not happen. There are other possible relations between human and nonhuman.

Rorty reveals that the concept of nonhuman reality to which humans think they must subject themselves is either reality that has no human description in human language (Kantian thing-in-itself), or reality that has some privileged description (Platonic ideal reality) presented as if the description were not a human creation but given to us by the reality itself in its own language (science) and which somehow mystically corresponds to the human mind or language. But the “world does not speak. Only we do” (Rorty 1989: 6). Only we can ascribe language to the world of nature; only we say that its language is the language of our human physics or mathematics. Thus we are close to thinking that science is more than human, or even nonhuman. Through such a discourse we lose our sense of humanity, or we may never have had it since this dependence on the nonhuman world is humanly self-imposed, no matter whether the nonhuman authority with power over humans is God or Church, Truth and Science or State and Nation. There are two possible kinds of desire at the bottom of this antihumanism – or rather inhumanism: a Platonic desire to get in touch with something superhuman (“the realm of forms”), and a Kantian desire to understand the law of nature (“the starry heavens and the moral law”). Both versions involve “the impossible attempt to step outside our skins – the traditions, linguistic and other,
within which we do our thinking and self-criticism – and compare ourselves with
something absolute" (Rorty 1982a: ix).

It would be completely wrong to contend that Rorty ignores nonhuman reality or that
he thinks that humans are not in touch with it. We are by no means isolated from it. As
a Deweyan, he knows very well that we constantly interact with our environment, and
that these interactions are causal and exert pressure on us. However, this reality does
not dictate how we should describe it in our language, nor the kind of attitude we
should take towards it (for instance, we can respect it and revolt against it, we can take
it as a subject matter and an instrument, or prevent it from becoming our master nor
our slave, etc.). We, humans, have created language as our instrument for coping with
this reality, and we are free to use both – language as well as reality – according to our
human purposes. Human freedom in particular is the basis for humanism. No freedom,
no humanism. What is more important is that if there is any kind of freedom we
humans achieve with respect to nonhuman reality, we achieve it only thanks to our
cooperation. We, humans, are interdependent on one another and responsible or
answerable to each other. Therefore Rorty writes that the “anti-representationalist
account of belief is, among other things, a protest against the idea that human beings
must humble themselves before something non-human, whether the Will of God or the
Intrinsic Nature of Reality” and that “anti-representationalism” is “a version of anti-
authoritarianism” (Rorty 1999: 7). Rejecting the authority of anything above humanity
that is nonhuman or extra-human is also a part of this anti-authoritarianism. We
humans have only those authorities we have created, and these are the only authorities
we have to either respect or re-create. We are fully self-creative beings mutually
responsible to ourselves. And since there “is no authority outside of convenience of
human purposes that can be appealed to in order to legitimate the use of a vocabulary
[...] we have no duties to anything nonhuman” (Rorty 1998a: 127). Not respecting or
being aware of this would mean not possessing the Romantic Emersonian self-reliance
without which there is no humanism either. Rorty insisted that “we should be more
‘humanist’ in the sense of that term which Heidegger endeavored to make pejorative –
more willing to take power into our own hands” (Rorty 2000: 216). But even Rorty’s
friendly opponents (cf. Stout 2007: 8-9) took this as narcissism and anthropocentrism.
Rorty was urged to retort:

What Stout calls narcissism, I would call self-reliance. As I see it, the whole point of
pragmatism is to insist that we human beings are answerable only to one another.
We are answerable only to those who answer to us – only to conversation partners.
We are not responsible to the atoms or to God, at least not until they start
conversing with us. (Rorty 2003: 6)

Humanism has to be creative in order to free us from all monsters, systems, necessities,
and to embrace contingencies, chances, finitudes, to get relief from the past, to escape
from all inhumanities, from the bad times to hope for good times. And from truth to
creative freedom, because the search for truth as a goal of life and progress is inhuman.
To take our destiny into our own hands is not identical to taking power and ruling the
nonhuman world we did not create.

Rorty’s attack on “epistemologically centered philosophy” was a challenge to the
culture of modernity and Enlightenment with its monomanic ideal of One Big Truth.
Humanism does not consist in subjecting humans to One Big Truth in the delusion that
this Truth does not depend on humanity presuming that humanity’s mission is
discovering it either by luck or as a gift from some guru or through the hard work of an
army of scientists. Humanism does not consist in humans sacrificing another human for the sake of this One Big Truth. Humanism consists in the way humans behave towards humans, in what humans mean to humans, and in what value humans ascribe to humans. Humanists replace the value of humanity for the value of One Big Truth:

“Humanism” can mean a certain Platonic-Cartesian-Kantian account of what it is to be human. But it can also mean, and to the untutored it typically conveys, participation in the hopes of the Enlightenment – and specifically the hope that human beings, once they have set God and the various surrogates for God to one side, may learn to rely on their own romantic imagination, and their own ability to cooperate with each other for the common good. (Rorty 1996: 14)

This is the philosophical use of the concept of humanism: descriptive rather than normative. It served Rorty’s purposes of describing the character of philosophy as a cultural practice with respect to other intellectual practices:

Intellectuals cannot live without pathos. Theists find pathos in the distance between the human and the divine. Realists find it in the abyss separating human thought and language from reality as it is in itself. Pragmatists find it in the gap between contemporary humanity and a utopian human future in which the very idea of responsibility to anything except our fellow-humans has become unintelligible, resulting in the first truly humanistic culture. (ibid.: 133; italics added)

He continued to outline this concept of “humanistic culture,” which he had hinted at when reflecting on “Philosophy in America Today” as a humanistic discipline. Contrasting it with the dominant scientistic and technocratic culture that is even more crudely prevalent, and not just in America, he wrote: “It is a mark of humanistic culture not to try to reduce the new to the old, nor to insist upon a canonical list of problems or methods, nor upon a canonical vocabulary in which problems are to be stated” (Rorty 1982a: 218). Humanistic culture is “a culture that is more deeply and unreservedly humanist than that offered by the arrogant scientism that was the least fortunate legacy of the Enlightenment” (Rorty 2004: 134), and that “will emerge only when we discard the question ‘Do I know the real object, or only one of its appearances?’ and replace it with ‘Am I using the best possible description of the situation in which I find myself, or can I cobble together a better one?’” (ibid.: 135).

This triggers both questions and a crisis: if there is no One Big Truth (even one discovered by Science) common to all humanity that we could all strive for, or if such an ideal is doomed, how are we to live without it? How can we navigate our human lives in the post-Truth era? Rorty’s philosophical humanism does not claim the situation is that hopeless and that there are no truths, principles, values, or criteria for living a human life. He is simply against universal, absolutist and formal ahistorical criteria. Neither does he say that all criteria are equally good. Most of all, he is constantly recreating new and better criteria, and these can hardly be impartial or neutral regarding human goals and intentions. Thus what matters for humanity are goals and intentions that articulate the meanings of human lives.

What Rorty’s humanism advises us is that we should turn from nonhuman to human reality in our social practices. The former, not created by us and as important as our environment, should neither be our ultimate value, nor the highest authority to which we ought to submit. Some may read this as Rorty’s “anti-environmentalism,” but that is not what Rorty is advocating. To my understanding, by making this radical distinction between the human and nonhuman, he urges us to turn to what is and ought to be most important for us humans: our mutual relationships and our shared life in communities. The Rortyan humanistic logic advises us to take care of humanity, and reality will take
care of itself. Or take care of culture, and nature will take care of itself. It does not work the other way around.

The Rortyan humanistic prioritizing of the human over nonhuman has important normative repercussions for ethics. These include the ethics of responsibility (through the value of human being), ethics of care (through empathy and sympathy), ethics of love and friendship (through the concept of fraternity), ethics of justice (through larger loyalty), etc. The common denominator of all this is his idea of enlarging our human circles by recognizing that others are like us (Rorty 1989: xvi), prone to pain and capable of joy, by extending our understanding of “we humans” through imagination and feeling.

6. Rortyan Project to Humanize Humanity

If Rorty’s humanism is integral to his new pragmatist philosophy, the pillars of which he set out in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, the consequences of this humanism are even more culturally ambitious. He has outlined what could be termed the project to humanize humanity, motivated by the “danger” of the “freezing-over of culture” and the “dehumanization of human beings” (Rorty 1979: 377). It began with his concept of edification with its plurality of descriptions and self-descriptions. But it is rooted in the Enlightenment, the linchpin of modern humanity, which, however, cannot be considered without its counterpart, Romanticism. Emancipation, the key watchword of the Enlightenment, is not sufficient. To it we must add self-creation, the key watchword of Romanticism. Rortyan humanistic philosophy contains the hope that we can overcome the impasse of Enlightenment versus Romanticism, and reason versus imagination. Enlightenment without Romanticism is cruel (i.e. dogmatically disciplinary); Romanticism without Enlightenment is self-destructive (i.e. wildly self-creative). Thus each without the other is hopelessly anti-humanistic.

Rorty does not refrain from discussing his project in the Kantian terms of the maturity of humanity. He surmises that:

If we do things the pragmatist way, we will no longer think of ourselves as having responsibilities toward nonhuman entities such as truth and reality. Following the pragmatists, we will be no more inclined to think that we are responsible toward other entities than human beings, […]

continuing:

I have often suggested that we regard pragmatism as an attempt to complete the project common to Renaissance humanists and the Enlightenment. The pragmatists think that it is time to stop believing that we have obligations either to God or to some God’s surrogate. The pragmatism of James, like the existentialism of Sartre, is an attempt to convince us to stop inventing such surrogates. (Rorty & Engel 2007: 40)

The Rortyan project of humanization involves going beyond secularization via de-divinization, de-scientization, and de-philosophization, to go beyond the successors of the Enlightenment era. It all adds up to the poeticization of culture or the establishment of a humanistic culture. The new name for this culture (dropping the prefixes of post- and de-) is a “poeticized culture”; one that is “no longer dominated by the ideal of objective cognition but by that of aesthetic enhancement” (Rorty 1979: 13); one in which religion may flourish without gods, science without representations, and philosophy without confrontations.
Rorty was, of course, fully aware that this was a utopian culture, but utopian as synonymous with inspirational as a kind of imagination in a pragmatist not a Marxist realist sense. Utopias are useful, not because every little detail has to be implemented, but because they supply us with visions, hopes, and better possibilities. Utopias do not allow us to escape time and our human finitude. They lend meaning to our lives as “finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings” derived from “other finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings” (Rorty 1989: 45), and as images of the future that differ from past and present.

Whereas Rorty hoped to go beyond the Enlightenment mainly through new Romanticism which he sees as a correction of the extremes of the former through the humanness of the latter – that is, emancipation not from prejudices, but from the excesses of Enlightenment rationality – today we might think of going beyond both the Enlightenment and Romanticism, either with the help of Rorty, or even going beyond Rorty. In pursuing such a project, we would reach the limits of Rortyanism, but we are not there yet, since there is a lot in his legacy we can and have to learn from. Among the limits that can be identified even now are the possibilities of linguistic practices with respect to non-linguistic experience; the limits of individual self-perfection in the private sphere; and the limits of liberal democracy in the public sphere. All these limits require the creative Rortyan imagination to show us the way beyond the impasses of conversation and action, irony, and solidarity (even cynicism and empathy), and happiness and efficiency (“wild orchids and Trotsky”).

What might prove promising would be to explore how Rorty’s main intentions could be put together: emancipatory and self-creative, Deweyan and Nietzschean, pragmatist and existentialist. It is not enough to free humanity from its self-imposed restrictions and false authorities in order to enlarge and expand human potential (and even to liberate philosophers from ideas that have held them captive since Plato and Descartes to Frege via a Wittgensteinian therapy). It requires the imaginative and creative capabilities for a better life and world – a human life and the human world in which we, humans, are the only authorities responsible to and for ourselves.

Dewey was right: “Humanism is a portmanteau word. A great many incongruous meanings have been packed into it” (Dewey 1930/1984: 283). It is no easy task being a humanist, let alone a Rortyan humanist in the contemporary world in which the posthumanist heirs of postmodernist anti-humanists infer from the claim “we have never been fully human” (see Braidotti 2013) the controversial conclusion that we never will be. For them, being a humanist is not such a straightforward positive epithet. Humanism in all its entirety is presented as obsolete, out of place, and to be abandoned. Even more so for the transhumanists, despite their attempts to portray themselves as super-humanists in the sense that transcending humans via technology is the best thing humans can envisage and do. If Rorty were still alive, he might see this as a direct shot in the heart. His humanistic ideas and values should urgently be extended into the current post- and trans-humanist era.

7. Conclusion

Rorty’s philosophical trans-pragmatist humanism is very rich. It includes many more features than I am able to sketch here. But the following strands should be clear: 1) a holistic approach to humanity as the highest value as against an approach to something
particular; 2) the affirmation that humanity is the highest authority (self-authority) as against all nonhuman phenomena; 3) promotion of self-creation as the greatest imaginative (poetic, artistic) way of a valuable human life as against rationalistic technologies; and 4) solidarity (empathy, sympathy) as the most important social/ethical norm as against cruelty, suffering, and humiliation as the utmost evil humans can perpetrate against humans.

On the one hand, this is a view of humanism as everything that encourages humanity, faith in our powers, human flourishing, and self-reliance rather than mistrust. On the other hand, it is everything that eliminates the evil inflicted on humans by humans. Humanity constantly interacts with its nonhuman environment, which it cannot ignore. But humanity is dependent on how it understands itself and behaves towards itself, on how humans treat each other. We are in charge and we are responsible for our self-creation, no matter how the world is. However, this is not only the most we can do for ourselves, but also the most sublime – to serve nothing else than our humanness. This is not anthropocentrism, nor does it disrespect nonhuman reality or nature. But neither is it worship of something to which we should prostrate ourselves. It is de-divinization of the world, but not the divinization of ourselves. We are not gods and should not play at being gods. Rorty’s key intention was to achieve “a world-historical change in humanity’s self-image” (Rorty 1998a: 132) and “to get rid of the traditional philosophical picture of what it is to be human” (Rorty 1989: 19).

Rorty was a dreamer, a philosophical poet. He imagined the future of humanity as saved from all conflicts and confrontations, full of cooperation not competition. He hoped for a human world in which love would be “pretty much the only law” (Rorty & Vattimo 2005: 40). A world in which there would be no absolutes to worship, in which philosophers would “stop aping science” and human beings would no longer try to escape the historicity and contingency of their existence (Rorty 2010a: 23). It was truly utopian, but by no means irresponsible.

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NOTES

1. For one of the most instructive overviews of Rorty’s intellectual journey in this direction, see Voparil (2010).

2. For instance when establishing “usefulness” as the key criterion of philosophy, he did not spell out that he meant “usefulness for humanity” in one way or another (perhaps he thought it self-evident). Humanism is what is useful for us humans in the sense that it serves our lives and future.

3. For more general studies of humanism, both conceptual and historical, see Copson & Grayling (2015).

4. For a recent discussion of the relevance of pragmatist humanism, see Honnacker (2018).
5. Rorty’s humanism has multiple roots. Besides pragmatism (Jamesian and Deweyan), the roots are Hegelian, existentialist (Sartrean), hermeneutic (Gadamerian), post-structuralist (Derridean), feminist and even anti-Marxist, anti-Heideggerian and anti-Foucaultian. There is not the space to deal with them all here.

6. Rorty, famously, was not one to avoid discussions about religious humanism. See Hardwick & Crosby (1997).

7. This is close to Sartre’s interpretation of humanism “that takes man as an end and as the supreme value” (Sartre 2007: 51).

8. The well-known terms for these relations are *homo homini lupus* (ancient); *homo homini deus* (medieval); and *homo homini hominus* (modern). All deserve elaboration which I cannot provide here.

9. [kurtz.institute/neo-humanist-statement].

10. Although classical pragmatists wrote about language, their philosophy focused on the notion of experience (among other things) and so may be considered as having stopped before the linguistic turn. It was Rorty who opened the gate for pragmatists.


12. This led to the common misinterpretation that he is a “linguistic idealist,” *i.e.* an antirealist who holds that “everything is language and all objects are only linguistic constructs” (see Farrell 1995: 161; Conant 2000: 275).

13. Rorty acknowledged analytic philosophy for the linguistic turn, but rejected its conception of language.

14. Rorty resolutely and rightly objected to the idea that language was the medium of the relation between the human being as subject and the world as object. But when I say that language is a medium, I mean it is a medium for human practices (for an outline of my conception of human practices, see Višňovský 2018).

15. “The claim that Rorty is a ‘humanist’ is based, in part at least, on his faith in our ability to freely choose and invent new vocabularies for describing ourselves” (Guignon 1982: 362).

16. For a confrontation of the key points of both, see the imaginary conversation between Peirce and Rorty compiled by Haack (2006: 688-9).


18. These are *e.g.* Skowroński (2015), who devotes a chapter to Rorty’s neo-pragmatist humanism, and Schuленberg (2015), who aptly elucidates “how pragmatism, humanism, anti-authoritarianism, and post-metaphysics are hanged together.” Readers will be disappointed by the recent work of Hennonaker (2018), who revisits James and Schiller, but leaves Rorty out entirely. The claim that “anyone who has paid close attention to his work can see a committed humanism running through it” (Auxier, Kramer & Skowroński 2020: 1) therefore sounds more like a future interpretation strategy.

19. But Habermas (1985: 12) observed: “As far as Richard Rorty is concerned [...] he does not climb aboard the ‘anti-humanist’ bandwagon, whose trail leads back in Germany to figures as politically unambiguous as Heidegger and Gehlen. Rorty retains from the pragmatist inheritance [...] an intuition which links us together – the conviction that a humane collective life depends on the vulnerable forms of innovation-bearing, reciprocal and unforcedly egalitarian everyday communication.”

20. By contrast, a collection of critical essays published in the same year (Malachowski 1990) identified no explicit humanistic features in Rorty (despite identifying his retreat away from epistemology towards narratives and poetry, his romantic impulses to self-creation via language,
and the like) save the authors of the final essay who wrote “Rorty’s anti-foundationalist pragmatism, in contrast, is supposed to avoid these ‘dehumanizing’ tendencies in traditional philosophy. By reminding us of the contingency of our community and of our own identity as humans, it reaffirms our freedom, and promises a ‘renewed sense of community’ [...] What speaks in favour of adopting the pragmatic standpoint, then, is the hope that we mortal millions living alone may reach out across the estranging sea and achieve true solidarity if only we come to see our community as something we make in the free interplay of diverse voices, not something we find by discovering our human nature” (Guignon & Hiley 1990: 339-40). There is, for instance, no mention of humanism in another early book-length interpretation of Rorty by Hall (1994).

21. Kolenda (1923-1991) was a secular humanist with pragmatist leanings close to Kurtz and literary interests close to Rorty’s. He wrote a chapter on pragmatism and humanism for Hollinger & Depew (1995: 238-55) and published pieces on humanism in Free Inquiry. In one of these he wrote: “Humanists are not subjectivists for whom ‘anything goes,’ as their critics claim. Their commitment to moral fairness is complete and absolute, and not partial and relative” (Kolenda 1981/1982: 16).

22. Rorty’s ethnocentrism is another pillar of his humanism.

23. Rorty is surely also a humanist in the sense of Soper’s “existentialist” or “self-creative” version (ibid.: 116-7), even if she does not explicitly locate him within it.

24. Rorty cannot be called “a humanist” and nor can his philosophy be considered “pragmatist humanism/humanistic pragmatism” based on how often the term occurs in his work. In Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature “humanism” is mentioned 6 times and only in a historical context (see Rorty 1979: 59, 171, 373, 376, 378). In Consequences of Pragmatism (1982a) he was more generous, using the term 17 times, whereas in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (1989) it occurs 7 times, and in Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth (1991) just 8 times.

25. He took this idea not only from Nietzsche and Sartre, but also from Dewey who variously protested against “falling into a paralyzing worship of super-empirical authority” and “loyalty or obedience to a higher power or authority” (Dewey 1920: 102, 161).

26. The current coronavirus pandemic crisis may serve as a topical example of such an inhuman situation dictated by the nonhuman condition.

27. This is the rhetoric of priorities. A Rortyan might take care of the language, and experience will take care of itself (a Deweyan would probably claim the opposite).

28. In particular his anthropocentrism deserves detailed examination.

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**ABSTRACTS**

There have been few attempts thus far to read Rorty through a humanistic lens. This paper is an attempt at making explicit some of the key features of his conception. My main objective is to show that humanism is integral to his philosophy and to explain what it consists in. I focus on Rorty’s secular humanism, which I believe lies at the center of his thought. In sections 2 and 3, I provide an account of key humanist sources, both pragmatist and non-pragmatist. Section 4 examines recent interpretations of Rorty as a humanist. In section 5, I focus on the distinction between the human and nonhuman as the central feature of his humanism. Section 6 outlines Rorty’s project to humanize humanity. In the concluding section, I summarize the key features of his humanism.
Redescribing Final Vocabularies
A Rortian Picture of Identity and Selfhood

Mauro Santelli

AUTHOR’S NOTE
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1. Introduction

Much has been said about Rorty’s ironist, a philosophical character mostly defined by her reflective relationship with her “final vocabulary” – a set of words we employ to justify and narrate ourselves. An ironist is someone who has “radical and continuing doubts” about the final vocabulary she built while being brought up where and how she was; she doesn’t think she can “underwrite or dissolve these doubts” by means of her own final vocabulary; and while in a philosophical mood, she doesn’t believe her final vocabulary is “closer to reality than others.” The figure of the ironist has been intensely discussed, specifically with regard to Rorty’s proposal for a political rehabilitation of the “liberal ironist”: a political actor committed to the tenets of liberal democracies who unflinchingly and courageously stands by those tenets while at the same time considering them contingent and unable to be neutrally defended. What’s more important in this liberalization of the ironist is, for Rorty, restraining her use of her most used discursive weapon: redescription. By redescribing her own culture and commitments, the ironist hopes to achieve self-creation and individuality, but this
same attitude, when focused on someone else’s vocabularies, beliefs and hopes, can embody a destructive anti-social side – namely, what’s perceived as a particularly vicious and distinct form of cruelty: humiliation.\(^1\)

For all the discussion the figure of the liberal ironist has brought, one would think that the concept, as defined in terms of final vocabularies, would be clear and mostly accepted. I find that this is not the case. While the concept of a final vocabulary is mostly undisputed, at least in letting it sink or swim together with the concept of a liberal ironist,\(^2\) it cannot be said to be completely clear. To name several reasons: it is briefly introduced by Rorty and rarely used beyond his controversial Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (CIS); it is no more defined beyond the use of a few examples of what could constitute a final vocabulary; and from contextual implications of the use Rorty makes of it in CIS, it’s not clear why it is framed as a set of words instead of beliefs given that it stands for what characterizes a person’s identity. It’s also unclear exactly what relation these words may have with beliefs. And yet, it has been assumed to be an epistemic notion because ironism itself has been thought to be an epistemic (relativist or skeptical) stance (Lear 2011; Schneewind 2010; Williams 2003). Others are staunchly against this characterization and reduction of Rorty’s ironism to a type of skepticism (Bernstein 2016; Ramberg 2014). While I tend to agree with the latter, ironism per se will not be my focus here.

Both for detractors and faithful believers, final vocabularies can seem to be merely ladders to be thrown off once one has reached their destination: ironism. I would like to argue otherwise, enlarging and working with the idea of final vocabularies to make them clearer by reweaving them alongside more accepted and explained views about personality and self-identity, both in Rorty’s later philosophy and elsewhere. If I’m successful, this will make the concept look like a useful and acute description of our way of speaking about ourselves and about what’s important to us. Furthermore, I claim Rorty’s various reflections on the constitution of moral identity can be seen as powerful alternatives to “deep theories” of human nature (Pinker 2004; Ramberg 2014; Rorty 2004), yet, at the same time, being naturalistic through and through. Rorty, it could be argued, used different ways of talking about selves in different places for a reason: he left things vague because he didn’t see a need to clarify them. I believe there is much to be gained by comparing them and reweaving them while at the same time clarifying them. Rorty’s reasons do not have to be our reasons, and his tools can be repurposed. This is an exercise in redescription. In attempting this, I lay hands on concepts taken from sociolinguistics and the study of linguistic variants, on Rorty’s appropriation of Daniel Dennett’s metaphor that takes the I or the self as a “Center of Narrative Gravity,” and – briefly – from the pragmatist theory of the formation of the self presented by George H. Mead in Mind, Self and Society. I, therefore, leave aside the problems associated with ironism and focus on the earlier step of working out what final vocabularies are supposed to be in general. Alongside the main discussion I attempt to explain why I think this concept matters today.

In order to do so, in the next section (sec. 2) I briefly present the general notion of a vocabulary in Rorty’s philosophy, or what Brandom has called “the ‘vocabulary’ vocabulary” (2000) and some general considerations regarding Rorty’s naturalism and historicism to carry into the discussion of final vocabularies of the following sections. In section 3, I reconstruct the way Rorty presents final vocabularies in CIS and compare it with his later approaches to personal identity and selfhood like the use of the idea of
the self as constituted by narratives. One of the central questions I try to answer here is why does Rorty make final vocabularies play the central role for the constitution of identities that he does? To put it differently, why don't beliefs play that role? Why words? To try to shed some light on this point I compare Rorty’s presentation of final vocabularies in the context of CIS with the way in which sociolinguists treat different linguistic variants or “lects.” Before ending this section, I detail my reconstruction of the concept of “final vocabulary” and the conclusions I extracted from its analysis. Finally, in section 4, I discuss how these Rortian elements can be fruitfully brought into current discussions regarding the nature of stereotypes. I take as an example Miranda Fricker’s theory of epistemic injustice and her statements to the idea of stereotypes – prejudicial stereotypes – at the base of the phenomenon and attempt at sketching a more controversial answer to a different question: the question of whether the “final vocabulary” vocabulary shows any promise as a useful tool in moral discussions outside the scope of liberal ironism. I think it does.

2. The “Vocabulary” Vocabulary and its Merits

Before discussing what final vocabularies are, I’d like to expand on what vocabularies as such are supposed to be in Rorty’s work. Rorty has both naturalist and historicist aspects interwoven in his writings. Robert Brandom epitomized this aspect of Rorty’s work in his “Vocabularies of Pragmatism” (2000). On Brandom’s reading of Rorty, the developing of the notion of “vocabulary” is taken to be a combined successor to the explanatory power of both “language” – in terms of structure of meanings, and “theory” – in terms of structure of beliefs. Both work in tandem as exemplars of the analytic-synthetic dichotomy, and, a fortiori, of the scheme-content dichotomy. One could argue that Rorty here is trying to be a good Davidsonian and Sellarsian and learn from the mistakes of logical empiricism. The successor concept of “vocabulary” allows us to describe both the vocabulary of the historicist and the vocabulary of the naturalist as not only non-overlapping magisteria, but also as complementary and reinforcing of each other. According to Brandom, Rorty’s attack on semantic representationalism that marks his work, at least from Mirror onward, rests on the idea that representations intend to play both causal and justificatory roles. Representations are supposed to be caused by the world and justified by it. The Kantian moral that Rorty would be reminding us of is that justification is a normative concept and causation is not. The world, in the sense of extravocabulary pressures (cf. Tartaglia 2007: 214-6), can only cause beliefs, not justify them. Only beliefs can justify beliefs, because only intravocabulary relations can be considered normative.

To rephrase the preceding, vocabularies, in a first sense, are something attributed to others and oneself in order to explain behavior (cf. Rorty 2000b). Instead of saying that someone acts like she acts because she has this or that language, understands things in a particular way, and has this or that theory about how things work, we just attribute a vocabulary to that person. A vocabulary stands for a loose description of a social practice, with all its conceptual norms. In that social practice, words mean what they mean because people use them in certain institutionalized ways and not in others. Their mutual correction of one another engenders the norms that bind each member to a correct or incorrect usage of the words – what gives them their meaning (cf. Myers & Verheggen 2016). Brandom calls this a “pragmatism about norms” (2000: 16), a position
made available by the rejection of the Myth of the Given identified by Wilfrid Sellars in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. A label for a position Rorty, as a good Sellarsian, exemplified throughout his career. The ways in which we use words are a function of what we believe – of what we are willing to commit ourselves to in a social setting and what we are willing to do. Since, from a Davidsonian standpoint, assertions are actions, and actions are bodily movements explainable as being caused by beliefs and desires, what something means and the beliefs one has are inseparable. One can only use words in sentences with certain illocutionary force. Only in saying something can an element of what one said, a word, have meaning. We attribute meanings and intentions by rationalizing the communicative actions of others and ourselves. In this way, vocabularies attributed to a person explain her actions in the sense of giving causes for those actions and also contain the justifications of the assertions that person makes. Rorty goes further and says that a person does not just have a vocabulary but *is* a vocabulary. And since a vocabulary is a social practice, a shared practice, in order to be a person, someone has to be a certain kind of person before being able to count as an individual. Being socialized, acquiring a vocabulary is just becoming a person. That is, something capable of being committed and being entitled – a someone, in short. Being someone just is being a participant in the game of giving and asking for reasons, a bearer of (inferential) rights and obligations. It is interesting to note that in “Non-Reductive Physicalism” (1990), a text first presented before (1987) the publication of *CIS*, Rorty presents “selves” as consisting of desires and beliefs, not final vocabularies. The fact that these two texts were presented around the same period further presses the question of just what the relationship between describing selves as sets of beliefs and desires and describing them as incarnated (final) vocabularies is.

7 Pushing forward Brandom’s redescription of his work that Rorty himself endorses (2000c; 2010a) and what we can attribute from his endorsement of Davidsonian “metaphysics” (Rorty 1990): from a causal vocabulary, we are explainable, predictable – to the degree attainable by our best natural explanations of the day. Our beliefs are physical states caused by the world (both the world inside our skins and the one outside) under a different description. The description of a historicist vocabulary in which only through being socialized as a member of a society, as an embodied instance of a shared vocabulary, can one count as believing, and not just being disposed in different ways, in the first place. Now, is there some further relationship between these two vocabularies? Brandom suggests that causal vocabularies (the vocabularies of the natural sciences) insofar as they are vocabularies, imply norms. Vocabularies, as “implicitly normative discursive practices” (Brandom 2000: 167), even the causal vocabularies, can be discussed as vocabularies: We can ask such questions as how the vocabulary of Newtonian causes arose, and how it differs from the vocabulary of Aristotelian causes in the questions it prompts us to ask about ourselves and our activities. Rorty himself often pursues such questions, and thereby affirms his practical commitment to historicism. But developing and applying vocabularies is something that we, natural creatures, do. Our doing of it consists in the production of causally conditioned, causally efficacious performances. That is to say that using vocabularies is one among many other things that is describable in the vocabulary of causes. (Brandom 2000: 167)

8 Just as the vocabulary of causes is a vocabulary, the capabilities expressed in deploying or enacting a vocabulary can be described as something that a creature causally linked to its environment can do. Although Brandom does not carry the issue further in this piece, we can find in his earlier and later work a thorough development of this kind of
relationship between genealogies of vocabularies and their causal efficacy. Rorty, in Brandom’s terminology, employs a pragmatism about norms which, in turn, is a “fundamental pragmatism.” A fundamental pragmatism is a metaphilosophical thesis that attributes to practical know how logical and explanatory priority over propositional know that (Brandom 2011). Applied to his pragmatism about norms, this pragmatic position opposes what he calls “regulism” (Brandom 1998: 20). Regulism is an intellectualist conception of norms in which every application of a norm presupposes an antecedently present rule that “determines what is correct by explicitly saying so” (1998: 20). Brandom takes Wittgenstein to have proven how rules, explicitly stateable principles, presuppose implicit and practical norms by showing how an intellectualist conception implies an infinite regress. Since not only actions can be correct or incorrect but also the application of the rule governing those actions can be applied correctly or incorrectly, supposing that every assessment of correctness or incorrectness implies rules to account for the correctness itself implies a vicious infinite regress of rules. This point – crucial to Brandom’s conception of material inferences – is attributed to Rorty in his conception of the meta-vocabulary of vocabularies. Knowing how to follow a rule is prior to knowing that one is following a rule. Making a rule explicit is a game that can only be played if one is already a rule follower – in terms of having the social status and the accompanying capacities of an applier of norms – in a shared social practice. A fundamental pragmatism, like any pragmatism about norms, is, according to Brandom, also a subject naturalism. Or a naturalism that focuses on what we do instead of on what our words refer to. Subject naturalism is opposed to object naturalism – or traditional reductive naturalism. This distinction, made by Huw Price (2011), distinguishes two different ways of understanding the relationship between philosophy and the natural sciences. Rorty (2007a) takes Price’s version of naturalism as his own, and also welcomes Brandom’s reading of the import of the “vocabulary” vocabulary (Rorty 2000c). So, to summarize this section. Rorty hammered out and used a sophisticated tool for the naturalization and historization of philosophy (cf. Ramberg 2004), Brandom’s redescription of it only allows us to flesh it out and make explicit what is somehow implicit in Rorty’s Wittgensteinian, Sellarsian, and Davidsonian commitments. I wish to carry forward the elements above to the discussion of the less explored notion of “final vocabularies” in the following section.

3. Speech Communities, Moral Communities

Rorty presents final vocabularies as follows: “a set of words which they [humans] employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives” (Rorty 1989: 73). We use these words to praise our friends and show contempt for our foes, to describe our projects, doubts and hopes. They are also “the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives.” On one side, it is a vocabulary in that it contains words, both thin and flexible, like “right,” “true,” “good,” “beautiful,”; and thick and more rigid words like “England,” “Christ,” “decency,” “the Revolution,” “progressive,” etcetera; on the other, it is final in that we cannot justify these words other than by shorter or longer circles. Besides this circular recourse we
can only passively give in without hope of redeeming them or defend them by force, to stand our ground. While justifying, we can't go beyond these words with language. Doubt about one's final vocabulary is doubt about one's self. Final vocabularies are markers for identity, we'll elaborate on this.

The relation between “final words” – words belonging to a final vocabulary – and the “platitudes” by which we justify them is a relation of expression. The platitudes, or beliefs “nobody wants to argue about” (Rorty 1989: 47), come forth when a challenge arises to one’s identity. Rorty explains this point while describing common sense:

When common sense is challenged, its adherents respond at first by generalizing and making explicit the rules of the language game they are accustomed to play [...]. (Rorty 1989: 74)

This generalization process is the expression of the implicit relations between words of a final vocabulary, which, in this passage is tellingly named as a “language game.” This implicitness is contained in the know-how needed to play the – commonsensical or otherwise – language game in which our – commonsensical or otherwise – final vocabulary is inserted. These words have meaning in their relation to other words, in a holistic manner, just like every other word from a Davidsonian standpoint. That’s why final vocabularies are sets, they display their finality as groups of words. No single word on its own could play that role, because no single word plays any role in a vacuum. So, when I take the liberty of saying “final word” I only mean a word that belongs to a final vocabulary, that word couldn’t count as final on its own. Rorty goes on to say that, for a metaphysician, philosophical inquiry will tend to be an analysis of these platitudes or generalizations from our practice that contextually define some final words, “thin” words in particular, because they are used in almost every context.

The “platitudes” Rorty is talking about are those beliefs we take for granted and that we don’t see a point in defending; what we defend with them is our final vocabularies, which, in turn, standing as their inferential articulation, constitute beliefs that are central to our self-image:

All beliefs which are central to a person’s self-image are so because their presence or absence serves as a criterion for dividing good people from bad people, the sort of person one wants to be from the sort one does not want to be. (Rorty 1989: 47)

Those beliefs that are central are those that contain mostly thick (final) words, words like “progressive” or “conservative.” Beliefs that instantiate these terms would be something like “being progressive is good,” “being conservative is bad,” such beliefs can be said to sententially (propositionally) express implicit relations between words in our vocabularies. In these cases, the way a thick word is linked with a thin word. In Rorty’s view, these kinds of “platitudes” (beliefs) express “thickening” or “thinning” relations between words, since they contextually define, in our example, “good people” in terms of “something like a liberal,” or condone liberals subsuming them under the – already defined in terms of exemplars – thin term “good.” Central beliefs, then, are those that express the more basic moral commitments of a given final vocabulary, those that revolve around exemplars of good people and bad people – thick words mostly, and conversely, final vocabularies, are populated by words that are used when expressing beliefs implicit in our linguistic moral practices – or moral practices, period. This suggests the way in which talking about selves as constituted by beliefs and desires and talking about selves as being incarnated final vocabularies are not incompatible, but
two ways of talking about the same thing. The question is: Why? What do final vocabularies bring to the table that beliefs and desires don’t?

More has to be said about final vocabularies before we can address this question directly. It is important to note that while final vocabularies can be changed and consciously manipulated to some extent, having one is not optional, being someone and having a final vocabulary is part of the same process. Before one can have doubts about one’s final vocabulary, like the ironist and the metaphysician do – in opposition to the commonsensical human, they must first have one. We are all endowed with a final vocabulary in virtue of our language and acculturation. Our “standard” final vocabulary is a final vocabulary we mostly share with others – with our “tribe,” being who we are is, at least initially, more like being a certain kind of person than being a one of a kind autonomous individual. Rorty exemplifies this point regarding the doubts of the ironist:

The ironist spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game. She worries that the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into the wrong kind of human being. (Rorty 1989: 75)

Nothing can serve as a criticism of a person save another person, or of a culture save an alternative culture – for persons and cultures are, for us [ironists] incarnated vocabularies. (Rorty 1989: 80)

Having a final vocabulary is being the member of a tribe, being a tribe or culture is the use of the same final vocabulary by its members. Take note that I’m saying, “final vocabulary” and not just “vocabulary” while stipulating what kind of incarnated vocabulary a person or a culture is. I’d like to link final vocabularies with moral communities – in contrast with looser human groups, and selves – in contrast with mere biological individuals of the human species.

Rorty uses the term “final vocabulary” both in singular form and in the plural “final vocabularies.” When using it in the plural, he does not always mean different final vocabularies of different persons, but sometimes different final vocabularies of a single person. Specifically, for instance, when we get this description of a liberal metaphysician as someone who wishes a single final vocabulary throughout her self-descriptions, in opposition to the liberal ironist, who privatizes her constantly redescribed private self-descriptions but maintains a liberal public self-description:

The liberal metaphysician, by contrast [to the liberal ironist], wants a final vocabulary […] [that] is not split down the middle by a public-private distinction […]. (Rorty 1989: 92)

A split of the self, so to speak. We’ll deal with this shortly, and I believe it is important, but before, a quick recapitulation: Up to this point we had selves as constituted by beliefs (Rorty 1990), and selves as incarnated vocabularies in CIS. This is brought up in the discussion of the liberal ironist: someone that-unlike the metaphysician or the commonsensical human – could be constituted as more than one final vocabulary. This is where talk of selves as sets of beliefs and desires can become particularly troublesome. It would be hard to make the liberal ironist look anything other than pathological. In what other light could we see someone that has more than one set of beliefs and desires? Of course, we could always talk about someone that doesn’t fall victim to her impulses and restrains herself, but this is not exactly how Rorty wanted to paint the liberal ironist. Restraining herself, in a way, is a part of what a liberal ironist
is, but Rorty proposes a subtle liberation of the liberal ironist, he’s not showing her the mast to which to tie herself. It’s not mere public duty that binds her, but sincere social solidarity. Regardless of whether this last point comes across as clear or not for the time being, the splitting of the self is not a central point in CIS, Rorty expands the idea further in his career. He later makes use of Daniel Dennett’s metaphor for selfhood that takes the self to be a “center of narrative gravity” (Dennett 1992). Meaning a fictional character that is narrated about by that self’s brain. In simple terms: what we say of ourselves constitutes us, and what we say depends on what we do and how we justify it – and to whom. Rorty uses this way of speaking of narratives constituting the self to explain moral dilemmas, treating them not as conflicts between whimsical sentiment and hard reason, but as conflicts between “selves in dispute”:

This non-Kantian view of morality can be rephrased as the claim that one’s moral identity is determined by the group or groups with which one identifies – the group or groups to which one cannot be disloyal and still like oneself. Moral dilemmas are not […] the result of a conflict between reason and sentiment but between alternative selves, […]. Non-Kantians do not think that we have a central, true self by virtue of our membership in the human species […]. They can, instead, agree with Daniel Dennett that a self is a center of narrative gravity. In non-traditional societies, most people have several such narratives at their disposal, and thus several different moral identities. (Rorty 2007b: 45)

18 The structure of the self Rorty describes through Dennett echoes the work of the pragmatist and social psychologist George H. Mead in which one has to be a member of a community in order to become a self (Mead 1966: 162):

The individual possesses a self only in relation to the selves of the other members of his social group; and the structure of his self expresses or reflects the general behavior pattern of this social group to which he belongs, just as does the structure of the self of every other individual belonging to this social group. […] The process out of which the self arises is a social process which implies interaction of individuals in the group, implies the pre-existence of the group. (Mead 1966: 164)

19 For Mead, the self has, as a condition of its possibility, that the person become an object to itself. In a sort of linguistically inspired tone, Mead characterizes the parts of the self (a word that works as the root of all reflexive pronouns) as the “Me” (objective pronoun) and the “I” (subjective pronoun). A “Me” is an objectified self, someone in its functional role of being another to itself; the “I” is the subject proper, the role of the self that instantiates all spontaneity; it is the part of the self that enters in a relation to itself through the “Me.” Only language, the use of “signifying vocal gestures” or symbols, can make this reflexive stance happen. Only through linguistic communication with others can selves happen at all. I only bring Mead to the table to signal that if he appears to get some inspiration from the analysis of the words we use to speak about ourselves (“I,” “Me,” “Self”), Rorty goes all the way in the linguification of this type of theory of identity that isn’t afraid to put society first and personhood last12 – and “full” personhood as only the achievement of a few particularly fortunate, skilled, and tenacious individuals.13

20 All the above notwithstanding, Rorty seems to abandon his talk about selfhood in terms of final vocabularies about the time he begins to talk of narratives around a self instead. This self may bear one or more different narratives within, and that, in turn, is a function of the several groups of people one is loyal to. This is clearly a change in perspective, but I don’t believe it’s a change of heart on the matter. If we look closely, the topic of group membership as shaping our moral identity already appears, quite
centrally, even in CIS. Specifically, when Rorty talks about Sellarsian “we-intentions,” the notion that the primitive explanatory concept for moral obligation is “to be one of us.” For each group we belong to we can say: “we all want...” – as opposite to “I want...,” we can formulate “we-intentions.” This is a moral identity in CIS. Rorty adds to this Sellarsian view the claim that “the force of ‘us’ is, typically, contrastive in the sense that it contrasts with a ‘they’ which is also made up of human beings – the wrong sort of human beings” (Rorty 1989: 190). In sum, we-intentions typically imply and draw their force from the persons we don’t want to be. Moral community between different selves, the joining together of a former “they” into a “we” depends, in CIS, on “similarities and dissimilarities” that “strike us as salient.” And that salience is “a function of a historically contingent final vocabulary” (1989: 192). In Rorty’s newer vocabulary we could say that it’s a function of a narrative derived from a historically contingent group membership (cf. Penelas 2012; Voparil 2014). Talk of final vocabularies or narratives, I believe, is a contextual matter. Final vocabularies are only used to characterize ironism because they are a subtler tool than simpler identities require. Typical moral identities can be described more easily by talk of narratives of a self. But ironism is everything but typical. It is a meta-stable position in which self-description is constantly changed. Final vocabularies, by being looser than narratives (and beliefs) in the sense of not having their more fixed structure, can characterize in a more satisfactory way the constant moral restructuring the ironist inflicts on herself. A single final vocabulary can develop into several different narratives. Just by using the same important words and arranging them differently. So, final vocabularies are more stable than narratives – while still being a product of group membership. Someone who has a final vocabulary, such as someone with a certain narrative, still belongs to some group, but in a looser sense.

If what I’m saying is correct, having a single final vocabulary, which involves beliefs central to a person, can accommodate different narratives while still being a common-sense final vocabulary. That person, while experiencing changes, is not experiencing the profound disruption on her self-image that Rorty’s ironist experiences. While the common-sense man that changes what he tells of himself with his final vocabulary may be in the process of re-shaping his loyalties, he will still be affected by the grasp of those words that connect him with the kind of people that share them. He might not use them in the same way as his peers, but he will know the way in which they use them, their use will be still a part of his divergent use. On the other hand, the ironist wishes to change not only the truth-values or the arranging of some of the words in her final vocabulary, but the truth candidates – the words and all of the semantic-pragmatic relations between them – themselves to make them her own, she does not care about their truth but about their origin. Most of us are narrators and apologists of ourselves, and as such, deal in prose; the ironist, on the other hand, deals in poetry and thrives for novel metaphors to weave into her final vocabulary. That’s why narratives are too broad and rough to speak about ironism, narratives cannot capture the radical changes that Rorty wishes to ascribe to his ironist. Just as beliefs couldn’t fully account for the way in which a liberal ironist could be said to have a liberal public final vocabulary and an ironist private final vocabulary without suggesting inconsistency or pathology.

After claiming, like I did, that final vocabularies and narratives are two interrelatable ways of describing the same phenomenon – both involving beliefs in one way or another, I’ll take the liberty of unifying both Rortian vocabularies and speak of each moral group membership – each group membership that enables “we-intentions” or a
talk of a “us” – as providing us not only with a narrative – or part of a narrative, but with a (lower case) final vocabulary – let’s remember that final vocabularies are loosely identified as the words we use to justify (narrate, ...) ourselves. Different activities or relationships with people can demand different justificatory (narrative, ...) arsenal. In each domain in which we narrate or justify ourselves we will have a narrative and a final vocabulary that accompanies it. In different domains or groups we belong to we will typically have different narratives, but the different final vocabularies can overlap a great deal. Letting us talk, in sufficiently coherent selves, of a whole (upper case) Final Vocabulary. Our everyday moral practice evidences the degree of inconsistencies that can arise between what we say of ourselves in different domains or in different time-slices. This way of talking can accommodate the simple, and subtle, changes (consistent or not) of narrative and the profound and drastic changes of great portions of our Final Vocabulary. Changes in narrative do not imply a significant change in our Final Vocabulary, even if they rearrange it slightly, but substitution of great deals of our Final Vocabulary are bound to have drastic impacts on our narratives and justificatory practices. Such a change would imply a drastic reworking of who we take ourselves to be, what to hope, to fear and with which persons we consider ourselves related to and how.

Before going back to final vocabularies and cashing out some of the promissory notes handed out in the preceding sections, I would like to offer an analogy that can help us see the “final vocabulary” vocabulary as not just a dispensable tool for characterizing liberal ironists as not just crazy intellectuals, but as a nuanced way of speaking about ourselves. This analogy involves a brief excursus through Sociolinguistics.

### 3.1 Words and Group Membership – The Case from Sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is the study of the different ways that any given language varies depending on its contexts of use (cf. Llamas, Mullany & Stockwell 2006; O’Grady, Dobrovolsky & Katamba 1997). A language has different variants – e.g. dialects that are spoken in different geographical locations. Variants are considered such with respect to a given standard language, which is historically-politically sanctioned as such; it’s less changing than its peers with lesser degrees of normalization and social prestige. To every language corresponds a linguistic community that speaks it; to each variant (including the standard variety) corresponds a speech community. Speech communities, besides the already mentioned dialects – that are individuated by geographical location – can be distinguished by a myriad of factors, from socio-economic status, profession, gender, ethnicity and age, to any given interaction imaginable of these and other aspects. As mentioned, dialects represent the geographical variants of a language; other types of lexical, syntactical, morphological and phonological variants fall between the spectrum of sociolects and idiolects. Registers, another element involved in communication studied by sociolinguistics, refer to the contextually and intentionally defined tones and contents of communication. I will only refer to sociolects, idiolects and registers in their lexical sense. I will not address phonological, morphological or, let alone, syntactical variations.

A speaker can participate in several speech communities, and for each speech community that speaker will take part in a different sociolect that, in turn, will shape
her stock of words, ways of pronouncing and writing them, and in some cases ways in which to arrange those words into sentences. No matter how many speech communities two speakers have in common, there will be some differences in their way of speaking. Such extreme variants, corresponding to “speech communities of one,” are called idiolects. Idiolects are the thing which the individual speaker happens to forge out of her interaction with other speakers and in her involvement in different speech communities. In sum, sociolects regarded as lexical variants are words a person uses predominantly in relation to some groups, and (lexical) idiolects are words a person has in virtue of the convergence of all of her group memberships, including the membership in her community with herself, but that no other speaker has.

Before parting with sociolinguistics, we need to say a few words about registers. A “register” is a certain tone and content one employs in each communicative situation to adapt to such situation’s demands and to accomplish whatever one wishes to obtain from it. Registers bring forth the different aspects of our idiolect in particular situations, such as our “technolect” (technical sociolect, or “lect” deriving from our technical competence in a field) in a job interview, or our dialect when visiting our home town, or even the part or layer of our idiolect we may adopt to chastise, congratulate or talk to ourselves (cf. Coupland 2007). To say it in Mead’s words:

Of course, a good deal of the self does not need to get expression. We carry on a whole series of different relationships to different people. We are one thing to one man and another thing to another. There are parts of the self which exist only for the self in relationship with itself. (Mead 1966: 142)

I want to relate Rorty’s way of speaking about final vocabularies with regard to our group memberships and (upper case) Final Vocabulary regarding all our group memberships – including our membership in our community with ourselves – with sociolects and idiolects. I want to make two claims regarding this to underpin what I take to be Rorty’s views: the first is rather uncontroversial: our final vocabularies are a particular subset of words of our sociolects and idiolect, the words we use to justify and narrate ourselves; the second one should look familiar by now: just as sociolects and idiolects are characterized in their relation to speech communities, final vocabularies are characterized in relation to moral communities. Sociolinguists study how our social relationships shape our way of speaking and vice versa, Rorty is interested in how what we do shapes what we tell of ourselves, our prospects and others’ and vice versa. Sociolinguistics characterizes how our linguistic variants shape us as speakers; Rorty wants to characterize how our choice – limited as it might be due to our societal constraints – of words in our narratives shapes us as persons. As we have already seen, such narratives are our selfhood, and, for Rorty, every narrative about or around ourselves is a moral one. It is in this sense that, just as Rorty can be considered as linguistifyng a pragmatist theory of identity in which the social is primitive like Mead’s social psychology, he can also be considered as moralizing sociolinguistic considerations about the relationship between speech and identity. It is this last point I want to stress in the closing section.

3.2 Final Vocabularies Revisited

To finish my redescription of final vocabularies, I would like to discuss what the previous means for the clarification of the importance and meaning of final vocabularies that we began with. For instance, why sets of words and not beliefs? The
choice, as I anticipated, is between webs of beliefs and desires, narratives that commit us to certain beliefs, and words that constitute such narratives. As a good holist, beliefs on their own couldn’t do the job of describing someone’s identity, let alone someone as complex as the liberal ironist. Words, as we have seen in the case of sociolinguistics, are a more basic mark for group membership and identity than beliefs, they link us to greater numbers of people than beliefs do. But Rorty’s choosing of words as the element out of which final vocabularies emerge gives us more than that, they are not only words used simply more than others, they are the words our narratives are constructed around, they embody group membership in a morally engaged sense. These are words we don’t only use by way of our being brought up with them, but with our deliberate (yet not unconstrained), and progressive choosing of them. We not only get them like the lexical part of our sociolects, we also choose them instead of others every time we speak about ourselves. Their nodal function in narratives also permits the interplay of relative inconsistencies between different narratives or different elements in our narratives. Beliefs are too rigid and often would have to be abandoned whilst shedding narratives; words can be carried over with different workings between them, with slightly or otherwise different meanings by their context and use. It is a looser knot than the one we get with beliefs, but words tie our different narratives all the same, and even more of them while at it. Words can mark our membership in groups in similar ways as beliefs can and can also put a stronger emphasis in our relationship with people through them regardless of communion of (central) beliefs.

The distinction between thick and thin words also plays a role in this, since the thicker the words, the stronger the link with the groups that they bind us with. Thin words, by contrast, are the loose knots that could be said to bind our different final vocabularies into a single, give or take, coherent Final Vocabulary or “moral [lexical] idiolect,” they make up our different moral sociolects into a single moral idiolect, capable of engaging more people than before. Thick words pull the strongest, but, Rorty claims, if we are lucky enough to live with enough security and sympathy in our midst, our thick commitments could be tamed by our contingently construed thin unifying vocabulary that would enable us to come into contact and moral communion with increasingly diverse and larger groups of people. The words we use and shape us commit us primarily with groups of people and indirectly with sets of beliefs. These groups are moral standards we live by and there is no way of saying which will win out in each conflict. Either our thin beliefs instantiated in some of our thin narratives, or our most basic beliefs that tell us which groups we are part of, who we “really” are, what (and who) we really care for. If one would like to express the link between final vocabularies and beliefs, one would have to say that they commit us to partnership in groups, some words cannot play the justifying role that final vocabularies play without one’s belief that in some sense one is part of the people who say such things or act in a given way.

Final vocabularies, I would emphasize, have to be taken as sets of words and only as sets of words just because focusing on what beliefs can be abstracted from them is just missing the point of taking the trouble to talk about final vocabularies in the first place. Rorty makes this last point clear. Those words stand or fall, mostly, together. Group membership does not just endow us with a stock of words but with certain meaningful relationships between them. If I were to justify myself as a philosopher (or a spouse, or brother, or Argentinian) I would end up using a limited but interrelated set of words to say things for myself. Beyond them I could say nothing new, and while those
relationships can vary a lot, they cannot be taken independently of each other. If I were
to change my narrative, I would probably have to adjust the way I use certain words,
when I use them, and for what purpose.

31 This is where the analogy with sociolinguistics comes in handy. While addressing moral
issues it is very tempting to dispense with complexities and proclaim simple rules of
behavior. This is analogous with the study of languages as abstract entities from which
grammarians and grammar enthusiasts usually go prescriptive on the actual speech of
actual speakers. It is no surprise that it is sometimes claimed that only competence,
and not linguistic performance is the proper aim of the scientific study of languages.
Performance is too particular to be studied scientifically – we can hear Aristotle saying
in the background. Sociolinguistics’ productive development can be taken as an
argument for a more nuanced understanding of speech. A lot happens closer to the
ground that can be studied and reflected upon. Max Weinreich, a famous sociolinguist,
is credited as saying that “languages are dialects with an army and a navy” as a way of
reminding us of the historically contingent status of our standard languages.
Sociolinguists don’t see the contingency of their subject as an impediment for
understanding. In morality we shouldn’t either. It is just this focus on particularity and
the moral relevance of individuality and contingency in all its richness that talk of final
vocabulary can be seen as sharing with sociolinguistics. If a toolset like the one Rorty
offers us to focus on those words that we use in justificatory and narrative contexts can
be put to use in order to analyze morally loaded talk, then richer interactions between
macro moral theories and micro moral theories could be imagined.

32 It would be extremely difficult (although, I believe, not impossible) to obtain even an
approximate list of words that would constitute an actual final vocabulary, but they are
none the worse for that. Final vocabularies are just a theoretical relational aspect of a
complex narrative about moral identity, found in different corners of Rorty’s work,
that was hammered out to throw some light into a difficult moral phenomenon while
expressing his implicit commitments with his pragmatist and naturalist backgrounds.
Not only can Rorty provide a subtler vocabulary for talking about the complex moral
phenomenon he is preoccupied with but can do so without betraying his commitment
to the idea that we are just clever animals.

33 I find this interesting because Rorty came to find the vocabulary of CIS as cumbersome
and counterproductive for liberal goals. Furthermore, he openly denounced it. One
need only look at his (second) debate with Nancy Fraser (2000; Rorty 2000a), here we
find that Rorty talks like a universalist, he doesn’t argue with Fraser from his own
philosophical positions but rejoins in the vocabulary of the public intellectual apologist
of the Old Left in Achieving Our Country. There is something to be learned from this.
Rorty said clearly that he worried about the almost certain possibility that Democracy
would fail (Rorty 1999b: 89–90). Democracy requires an engaged public, living wages
and a sense of belonging (Rorty 1989: Chapter 9; 2000c; 1998b). One could argue that it
is for this reason that he grew increasingly anxious about the ineffectiveness of the
intellectuals and what they talked about, attempting practicing what he preached and
abandoning sophisticated involvements in political matters.
4. On the Prospects of the “Final Vocabulary”
Vocabulary of Being a Useful Tool Beyond the Scope of Ironism

As a way of concluding this re-evaluation of final vocabularies, I would like to take this chance to speculate on how a redescription of the tools developed by Rorty in CIS, like the one I attempted above, could be used to understand other areas of current research. Miranda Fricker’s *Epistemic Injustice* has brought to the center of epistemological discussions one aspect of the complex interrelations between epistemology and ethics. One element of her proposal involves the inescapability of stereotypes in our testimonial exchanges and assessments of credibility. Taking a middle road between reductionist and non-reductionist approaches to the epistemology of testimony, Fricker proposes a view in which both the rational acceptability of testimony and the phenomenology of our testimonial exchanges is respected. The way in which she does this involves a passive critical capacity for the evaluation of testifiers’ credibility that only becomes active and conscious when something goes awry. This helps Fricker concede an important point to the non-reductionists: their phenomenological point that we don’t seem to notice in most testimonial exchanges making any effort to take testimony as credible or faulty – we don’t seem to carry on any inference or complex process in its evaluation, while at the same time explaining the critical and rational nature of testimony. We critically, yet passively, assess a testifier’s credibility in virtue of perceptual judgements informed by stereotypes of people like her. Our previous testimonial exchanges inform our present ones through the mediation of the classification of persons in stereotypes. In this way, Fricker makes abundantly clear why prejudices are so prevalent and difficult to eradicate: they are stereotypes that become immune to countervailing evidence due to emotionally faulty elements. This explains why her account is a non-ideal theory: epistemic injustice is the default state of testimonial exchanges since most of the time our stereotypes, while irreplaceable, will not be up to the task. Especially when a testimonial exchange involves disparities in power between listener and hearer. This is where testimonial injustices happen the most. We don’t believe (at all, or as much) someone we should (rationally, morally) believe due to culpable prejudices we possess. Fricker goes on to explain the many ways in which epistemic injustices harm speakers (and, secondarily, hearers), both epistemically and ethically.

I believe much can be said about how Rorty can be a powerful ally in the understanding of the harms of epistemic injustice (cf. Penelas 2019), but what I want to do now is to hone in on the ways in which a better understanding of the inescapability of stereotypes (and thus prejudice) could be better understood from a Rortian picture of our moral identity, like the one I presented. An interesting question is what happens if we use the subtlety of final vocabularies to talk not about the “existential adolescent” (Rorty 2010b) who cannot help doubting her final vocabulary, but about the existentially threatened minority that isn’t allowed to settle in a given description of herself. Could the description that Rorty provides about the sufferings of the culturally privileged – and also socially aware – “adolescent ironist” be of help to the culturally marginalized not by their own imaginative making? Susan Dieleman (2017) argues in favor of the usefulness of a pragmatic realism in the vein of Rorty (2000b) – where neither what others say nor *The Way The World Is* could make much on their own – for
critical social epistemologies like the one Miranda Fricker presents. I believe that the subtle ways in which Rorty talks about moral identities can provide examples of just that kind of toolkit that Dieleman claims activists and social justice theorists can find useful in Rorty’s work.

Another preliminary reason that is worth exploring in further work is that the link between implicit biases and words is well established in psychological research (Brownstein 2019). While biases can obviously affect how we perceive people we meet face to face through how they look, what they say, how they say it, and when they say it can play an equally important or even greater role in our prejudiced responses. Furthermore, the impact of what we read from others, without seeing them, also has been studied. For instance, talk of “woman’s literature,” “black literature” (cf. Fought 2006), or “gay literature” is not only applied through self-ascribed labels owing to empowering narratives, but also pervade culture through prejudicial stereotypes about themes, writing styles or registers. In sociolinguistics, as we have briefly seen, one can find an enormous trove of research into the interplays of speech and social status. In a Rortian framework this is no mystery, words are inherently and emotionally attached to persons. How we speak is a function of our upbringing and increasingly of who we want to be like, whom we try to resemble and whom we attempt to distance ourselves from. In the extreme case of the ironist this is perfectly clear, the ironist only wants to resemble herself, she can’t stop redescribing what she takes herself to be in order to purge every possible influence of others from her self-image, from her identity. Ironism could have been described without an appeal to final vocabularies as words, but Rorty wanted to show how even someone who wants to be as different as possible from her peers can still retain a deep emotional attachment to them. A politically relevant attachment. By retaining the public vocabulary of liberalism, Rorty thought, ironists could be free to distance themselves as much as they could from others without promoting cruelty. This is not the place to see whether Rorty succeeded in his description of the liberal ironist and her chances of attaining autonomy without compromising responsibility and solidarity (cf. Bernstein 2016; Ramberg 2014; Rorty 2010b; Schneewind 2010; Williams 2003). Nevertheless, we can use his choice of conceptual tools for this last task in order to repurpose them in other areas where we can find cruelty and identity together, less sophisticated and common forms of cruelty notwithstanding (cf. Llanera 2016: 327-30), but also more pressing (Dieleman 2017).

The study of moral identities through the lenses of final vocabularies and identity narratives can also help stress – and make it more palatable at the same time – the point Fricker makes about the viciousness and dangers of prejudices while underscoring the inescapability of stereotypes. Stereotypes are not only inherently involved in our epistemic and moral perception of others; Rorty provides an additional argument that makes them profoundly interwoven in our very (social) constitution as selves. There is no way to be someone without first being some one. We are not only forced to see others as types of persons before knowing them for who they are as individuals – without probably ever being able to see them only as individuals, we can’t help ourselves but to see us as types of persons. Moral struggles are often described as deliberations about which kind of person we want to be. Taken to social considerations, we often hear about which society we want future generations to inherit. These are more than catch-phrases.
If moral identities are constituted by final vocabularies, the point made by many activists of all sorts of disadvantaged groups and oppressed minorities that watch closely how we speak in order to identify unchecked biases and prejudices – and are often attacked for doing so – could be strengthened. It could be argued that it is not only a matter of political correctness, of mere courtesy and manners as it is often derided as; our choice of words involves the kind of micro-decisions that slowly shape us as better or worse people. They are also the type of choices individuals make that not only affect them and their immediate surroundings morally, they can also escalate into society-wide repercussions. Getting a better grasp of the way our choice of words shapes us and our social relations can also help shape better ways to intervene in public debates. We can understand not only why it is so important to be critical and reflexive in our ways of speaking about ourselves and others, but also why it is so difficult to effect such changes on those we find at fault – or in ourselves when others find us at fault, why so many people are so emotionally and personally involved in how they speak and why they resist so much attempts by well-meaning activists to change their forms of expression.\(^\text{14}\) How could they not be so attached? We are not only asking them to say the same thing in one way or another, we are indirectly asking them to change who they are. To change the words in which they can narrate themselves and leaving some others beyond the pale. While this is exactly what we are asking for and is being asked of us, it is easy to forget. Just as it is extremely easy to forget how hard change like the one we are demanding – or being demanded of us – can be to make, and especially all that can go wrong in the process. After all, the perils Rorty is trying to warn the ironist of are exactly those that await him behind the door of taking from someone her most cherished words and ways of narrating herself without offering anything in return.\(^\text{19}\) What we are demanding is a realignment of her loyalties, a reassessment of her affections, a profound change in habits. This kind of potential for cruelty is not only a problem for the ironist, but the radical reformer interested in producing effective change too. Or, to put it differently, final vocabularies matter not just for ironists but also for liberals not sure or particularly interested in their ironism. In this case, the problem might not be the potential of harming the target of a demand for vocabulary revision, but his resistance to such change owing to the humiliation and potential for resentment entailed. Rorty helps us see this in a more nuanced way without ever relapsing into essentialist, naively realist/representationalist (Dieleman 2017), or conformist positions considering change as just too difficult or impossible to happen.

Rorty was too quick to discard the conceptual tools he developed to talk about his elusive and maybe chimerical liberal ironist. One could argue that he did this to focus on what really matters politically, getting the intellectuals to start engaging again with questions of money and not “just” of recognition – or “love” (Rorty 1999a: 223-8). The rising tide of exclusionary nationalist movements pose a striking picture of Rorty’s prescience, particularly in the US. One of the problems Rorty saw in claims for recognition is talk of cultures as intrinsically worthy of respect (Rorty 1999a: 276). The “final vocabulary” vocabulary makes it very difficult to talk that way. Final vocabularies are important insofar as they express what people find important, but one would be missing the point if one were to go and sacralize final vocabularies, what is sacred, if something is, for Rorty, is the ability to develop and enrich one’s set of words, the opportunity to make them as much one’s own as one has the ingenuity and desire to make them. This goes back directly to the conditions of possibility for that to
happen, and among those conditions are affluence and security (Rorty 2000c). One can campaign for intellectuals to focus more on money and less on love, while still having a nuanced understanding of what it is to be a person in Rorty’s sense. In sum, Rorty’s “final vocabulary” vocabulary lets us understand the particular pain that only humans can suffer of being humiliated, of having one’s identity thrown to the ground, while never forgetting that there’s a lot of material work to do to expand that privilege reserved for a few.

In a world in which politics and identity are so deeply intertwined and with all the promise and dangers this entails, we need all the help we can get to understand both politics and identity as well as we can. I believe Rorty can still do a great deal for our understanding of morality and its complex relations with identity. We should not let his insights in these matters be restrained to the topic of the taming of the ironist.

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NOTES

1. By resignifying others’ vocabularies, the ironist ridicules them, criticizing them without offering anything in return to stand in their place – a particularly gratuitous and egregious act from a pragmatist standpoint. For the ironist cannot provide anything more real to the victim of her redescription than what’s been taken from her, that is something only a metaphysician can do,
for she, the metaphysician, does not only criticize someone else’s beliefs, she shows them the truth, and in doing that she offers an alternative that fills the void of what’s been taken away.

2. Arguably, this is also what Rorty does with his creation (2010b). He talks of the conflation of two sorts of people, the “unruffled pragmatist” – like Dewey – and the “existentialist adolescent” – like Sartre.

3. See (Voparil 2011) for a discussion on the limits of Rorty’s reading of Brandom as aligned with his own project of putting “cultural politics” first and the role of the ontological priority of the social. The Brandomian elements used in this paper to clarify and expand upon Rorty’s concept of “final vocabulary” do not depend on whether one has a Rortian reading of Brandom or a Brandomian reading of Brandom. The focus here will be Rorty’s philosophy and not his disciple’s.

4. In Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics Wittgenstein states this point as follows: “One does not learn to obey a rule by first learning the use of the word ‘agreement.’ Rather, one learns the meaning of ‘agreement’ by learning to follow a rule. If you want to understand what it means ‘to follow a rule,’ you have already to be able to follow a rule” (Wittgenstein 1981: 405 [VII-39]).

5. Rorty also considers Price, Brandom, and himself as on the same general project in terms of anti-representationalism and naturalism (Rorty 2010a), contrary to what Price states (2010). See (Price 2013) for further elements in the Price-Brandom debate regarding the extent of the expressivism needed for a neo-pragmatist position.

6. To say it clearer, when talking about ironists, Rorty describes them as being: “[…] always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves” (Rorty 1989: 74).

7. The three ways of relating ourselves with our final vocabularies are the aforementioned ironism, common sense: taking for granted that our final vocabulary to be sufficient to describe any person’s beliefs, hopes and desires we might encounter; and “metaphysicism”: defending common sense’s final vocabulary by linking it to something real and eternal.

8. One should remember to take Davidson as the background here, but Brandom can be considered to do approximately the same job. Reminding things like “the meaning of a word is the sum of the true sentences it appears in” (Davidson) and “the meaning of a word is the sum of the endorsed material inferences it takes part of” (Brandom) (paraphrasing and summarizing both views) can help.

9. Of course, an ironist’s (or even a metaphysician’s) final vocabulary is not commonsensical, and as such, what may be platitudinous for him may very well not be something nobody would argue but more like “nobody like that person would argue.” Platitudes are those beliefs that are unneeded of argument within a shared final vocabulary or language game.

10. This has normative implications for Rorty. One can find an application of his understanding of the process of individualization as slowly and costly emerging out of socialization in his reflections on the different roles that primary, secondary and university education play in a democratic ethos (Rorty 1999a). Diversity and individuality presuppose some degree of uniformity.

11. Since shortly after the publication of CIS, Rorty’s public-private divide has been profoundly controversial. Nancy Fraser (1990; 1991) famously characterized this distinction as running against feminist breakthroughs that challenge the separation of the personal and the political. Rorty has denied these two distinctions should be lumped together (Rorty & Mendieta 2006), but relativized the usefulness and centrality of his suggestion in CIS on other venues (Rorty 2010b). For a recent (although amiable) critique of Rorty’s distinction see (Llanera 2016), for a defense of its general cogency, and usefulness to feminism see (Dieleman 2010).

12. This linguistification and turning away from a psychological theory has the merits of staying well clear of the siren’s calls coming from the shallow sea plagued with coral reefs that are “deep theories” of human nature (Ramberg 2014). See also the already mentioned Voparil’s take on the
difference between Rorty and Brandom on the role of the “ontological priority of the social” (2011).

13. One can contrast this with his take about how being a woman has yet to be invented through a secluded community, Rorty (1998a) subscribes to this idea from Catharine McKinnon and Marilyn Frye.

14. And, is, of course, a staple of Rorty’s philosophy since its beginnings and central on certain points of Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (cf. Voparil 2014).

15. By “around” I mean not only direct characterizations of ourselves but also things that reflect on what we say of ourselves indirectly, like characterizing our enemies and friends.

16. Like “inferentialism” in which testimony is considered valid only if it’s deemed credible in virtue of an inference, conscious or unconscious. Testimony, as such, is not an autonomous source of knowledge.

17. Ramberg (2004: 23) goes further and claims that an ideal Davidsonian interpreter would also need to assess others through the use of evidentially informed types in the process of radical or ideal interpretation. The appeal to stereotypes, from an interpretivist perspective, would not just be a defect or something we must appeal to due to our cognitive limitations, but an in-built and necessary feature of all awareness.

18. Without even getting into the complexities of linguistic change from a non-ethical perspective.

19. Even when Rorty is willing to humiliate the religious fanatic, the racist and the homophobe in the face of his descendants in class, he is offering something to them in return: an education (2000d). He is also willing to justify fighting against those that are deeply entrenched in their exclusionary ways. But he is always warning us of not making everyone our enemy, fights can be lost when numbers are not on our side and some fights are just too important to lose (cf. Rorty 1999b).

ABSTRACTS

Richard Rorty in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity presents the character of the liberal ironist. An ironist is a person that has pressing and continuing doubts about her “final vocabulary.” A final vocabulary is a set of words that one uses to justify and narrate oneself. An interesting question is why words, and not beliefs, are used by Rorty to characterize someone’s identity. In this paper I take a step back from liberal ironism and focus on the notion of “final vocabulary” and its role on a Rortian picture of moral identity. In order to do this, I explore it alongside concepts from the field of sociolinguistics and from other pragmatist theories of selfhood. I claim that Rorty presents important insights for a pragmatic naturalist conception of our moral identities.

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Dead-ending Philosophy?
On Rorty’s Literary Culture, Democratic Ethos and Political Education

Stefano Oliverio

To Bruno Coppola, in memoriam

1. Engaging with Rorty via Pedagogy?

1 In the *incipit* of a paper of 1944 focusing on the “Challenge to Liberal Thought,” Dewey rehearsed one of the principles to which he had most faithfully clung all his life: there is no better way to assess what is living in a philosophical controversy than to investigate what the educational implications of different philosophical positions are, viz. what educational aims and ideals the latter further and what educational undertakings they promote (LW 15: 261).¹

2 In the present paper, by taking inspiration from this Deweyan tenet, I will explore a relatively simple question: in order to sustain and further the democratic ethos should we shift from a philosophical to a literary culture, as Rorty has repeatedly recommended? To specify the question in keeping with the aforementioned principle: should education pivoting on the reading of novels (and, more generally, of narratives) replace – as the chief axis of democratic education – education for inquiry and, more distinctively, philosophical inquiry?²

3 Some assumptions are involved in the latter formulation that need to be made explicit in order to better outline the argumentative trajectory that will be here unfolded. First, it is patent that the present reflection will tend to “verify” – in a bland and loose acceptance of the word – the significance of Rorty’s position by investigating its educational and pedagogical consequences. Whilst typically Deweyan, it is up for discussion whether this way of proceeding is genuinely Rortyan. Indeed, on the one hand, the latter’s contributions to educational reflection *stricto sensu* understood were fairly meager, sporadic, if not reluctant, in comparison not only with Dewey but also with Sidney Hook, just to mention his philosophical hero and his most direct usherer into pragmatism. Moreover, by analogy with one of his most recognizable stances,³
Rorty (1990) resonantly warned against the dangers of “over-philosophication” when educational matters are addressed.4

On the other hand, though, the question of education peeps out in relevant points of his production and specifically in the constructive parts – as one may even venture to say – when, after showing the reasons for abandoning some vocabularies, or after endeavoring to make them appear unattractive, he delineates his ‘positive’ views: I am thinking, only to mention a couple of instances, of the notion of “edification,” which has a clear educational lineage, to the extent that it is proposed in order to avoid that which is the most educationally loaded concept of modernity, viz. Bildung (PMN: 360 ff); and, moreover, the centrality of his views about “sentimental education” (CIS: passim; TP: 172; 176 ff; 199 ff; Rorty 2000: 17 ff). It can be plausibly argued that the very idea of “cultural politics,” the culmination of Rorty’s life-long project, is a recontextualization of Dewey’s idea of philosophy as a general theory of education (MW 7: 303; MW 9: 338) and of the latter’s purpose to “drop teaching philosophy directly, and teach it via pedagogy” (letter to his wife on November 1st, 1894, quoted in Westbrook 1991: 95).

On account of this ambivalent attitude to education, suspended between the lack of a focused thematization and the recurrence of the topic in his works, the endeavor here pursued to engage with a key theme of Rorty’s thought via pedagogy may be not completely at variance with a deep thrust of his reflection and, indeed, it may grant some specific vantage points from where to view his project as a whole. It is appropriate to specify once again the purpose of the present paper: I am not interested in outlining a Rortyan pedagogy or theory of education,5 but rather I aim at exploring the significance of his invitation to shift from a philosophical to a literary culture from an educational-pedagogical perspective, viz. through investigating what this shift would imply in terms of the educational undertakings and ideals and, thereby, detecting the implications of this move for the flourishing of a democratic ethos. In other words, to adopt a slippery distinction, education is less the content of the argument than the lens through which to look at the issue here investigated.

In the aforementioned formulation of the main question of this paper, there is a second assumption: I have spoken of the substitution of education with novels for education through philosophical inquiry, thus setting up a distinction that, while making sense within a Rortyan framework, may be misaligned with Dewey’s conceptual device. If the first assumption risks overdosing on the Deweyan element (with the “methodological” choice of tackling a philosophical issue via educational theory), here the reverse may be the case with the focus on a distinction – philosophy vs literature – that is certainly not in the spotlight of Dewey’s interests. Indeed, the latter, in his paper from which I have taken my cue, establishes a different opposition when countering Robert Hutchins’s (1936/2009) pedagogical project, pivoting on the Great Books as the pillar of a liberal education adequate for the cultivation of intelligence in a democratic society. He appeals to the need to turn to scientific inquiry as the chief axis of education on account of “the intrinsic kinship of democracy with the methods of directing change that have revolutionized science” (LW 15: 274). In this horizon, in order to further liberal thought, Dewey does not invoke a transition from a philosophical to a literary culture but, primarily, a shift from a dogmatically philosophical to a scientific culture and, relatedly, from a language-obsessed, dialectical (MW 1: 157 ff; LW 11: 50-1) and bookish education (whether philosophical or literary) to an inquiry-driven pedagogy based on occupations.
Against this backdrop, my main question as to whether education pivoting on the reading of novels and, more generally, of narrative texts should replace – as the chief axis of democratic education – education for philosophical inquiry risks being partially un-Deweyan, as the latter seems not to foreground philosophical but scientific inquiry in education. Accordingly, rather than shuttling between only two poles (Dewey and Rorty), the present reflection needs to involve a third voice, that of Matthew Lipman, who together with Ann Margaret Sharp launched in the 1970s the Philosophy for Children (henceforth P4C according to the international acronym) approach, an educational program that, while rooted in the Deweyan tradition, puts at the very center philosophical inquiry.

By harping on a motif of Harold Bloom, the Brazilian philosopher of education Heraldo Aparecido Silva (2010) has nicely intimated that we may construe Rorty and Lipman as two “poets” who undertake an *agon* with their strong predecessor (Dewey) and end up representing two different *clinamen* (in Bloom’s phrase) in relation with the latter’s vocabulary. By appropriating in an idiosyncratic way Silva’s suggestion, I will make Rorty the representative of education for/through literary culture and Lipman the exponent of education for/through philosophical inquiry and by dint of their comparison I will investigate – on the educational terrain – what the shift from philosophy to literature means and what it implies for democratic education.

It is to note that there is one more reason why this comparison and this dialogue of three voices may not be extrinsic: when insisting on the priority of philosophical inquiry for democratic education, Lipman explicitly contrasts the “‘core of common culture’ approach” construed as “the adaptation to the elementary school of the Hutchins-Adler view[s]” (Lipman 1988: 39), that is, the views countered by Dewey in the aforementioned paper. A complex constellation of motifs and biographical trajectories may be limned starting from this simple statement: on the one hand, the Hutchins-Adler approach is something with which Rorty was deeply conversant, as he attended the “Hutchins College” (see PSH: 7-8; Rorty 2010: 5) and, while coming to nurture the same misgivings as Dewey regarding the passion for the absolutes which animated that educational program, he always remained “very grateful for the education” received in that institution. And, although Rorty spells out this gratitude essentially in terms of an acknowledgement of “the best possible preparation for what turned out to be [his] professional career” (Rorty 2010: 5), that approach seems to have left a permanent mark on his (educational) views, if we think that, in his only specifically educational paper (PSH: 114-26), he recommends Hirsch’s (1987; 1996) “cultural literacy” for the primary and secondary school, which is precisely the educational approach that Lipman indicates as an adaptation of the Hutchins-Adler stance to the first levels of education (see below § 3).

While I find unfortunate Rorty’s uncritical endorsement of Hirsch’s cultural literacy (see Oliverio 2018; 2019), Rorty’s appropriation of Hirsch has some good points and Lipman (and, with him, the Deweyan pedagogy) may be a little too dismissive towards the cultural literacy approach – accordingly, Rorty’s attitude may represent a helpful counterbalancing attitude from within the pragmatist camp.

In this horizon, I would like to suggest that, rather than a neat alternative (either literary culture or philosophical inquiry; either Rorty/Hirsch or Lipman and Sharp) in reference to how to sustain the democratic ethos, we have to do with a more “entangled” regime of relationships, in which a “Rortyan” moment is at work in the
very idea of philosophical inquiry as Lipman and Sharp develop it and a “Lipmanian” moment is not alien to Rorty’s stress upon novels. The former qualification (about the “Rortyan” moment in Lipman) can be more easily claimed, the latter will require, instead, a kind of recontextualization and perhaps even the description of a hypothetical Rorty and of “what [he] might have said, and in my view should have said” (TP: 292) but was unable to say with sufficient decision on account of his “‘God that failed syndrome’” towards the philosophical tradition, as Richard Bernstein (2010: 214; see also Bernstein 1991: 251) has enthrallingly named it.10

Against the backdrop sketched in broad strokes thus far, I will address, first, Rorty’s understanding of a need for an end (instead of a “Deweyan” recovery) of philosophy starting from his dialogue with Castoriadis and by reconstructing his appeal to a poeticized culture ($2$); in $§$ 3, I will present Lipman’s case for education for philosophical inquiry in order to cultivate a democratic ethos in primary and secondary schools. I will contrast it with Rorty’s education as socialization and, contextually, I will illustrate their different stances towards Hirsch’s cultural literacy. Finally, in $§$ 4, after problematizing one dimension of Rorty’s understanding of the use of literature for a democratic culture, I will indicate the need to combine the Rortyan and Lipmanian thrusts and I will claim that part of the novel-driven education advocated by (my hypothetical) Rorty maintains a constitutive Socratic-inquiring dimension.

When coming to the educational terrain as the “testing” ground, in a Deweyan spirit, we may thus discover that what Rorty, according to “the either/or’s that structure his thinking,” loves to present in “fateful [...] dichotomies” (Bernstein 1991: 242) is better understood as an original prosecution of Dewey’s project of a recovery of philosophy as the vehicle to deal with the problems of wo/men and, thereby, “enlarge human freedom” (CP: 69; see Voparil 2013).

### 2. The End(s) of Philosophical Inquiry and the Democratic Project

Richard Bernstein has forcefully epitomized the trajectory of Rorty’s engagement with the fate of philosophy as well as the differences between himself and his lifelong friend, despite their common recognition of Dewey as their philosophical hero:

> From the early days of his disillusionment with “Platonism,” he was haunted by the question, What is philosophy good for? [...] I never experienced the type of disillusionment that Rorty experienced. [...] The task, as Dewey had indicated, was to reconstruct philosophy. I did not see Plato as the “Platonist” that Rorty caricatures, but rather as the great defender of the ongoing, unending dialogue that Rorty came to advocate. (Bernstein 2010: 213-4)

Rorty’s invitation to take leave of philosophy was spelled out in different ways over the years, not without some changes of accent (Wain 2001). In this paper, I will tackle this theme through his response to a vigorous vindication of the significance of philosophy penned by Cornelius Castoriadis. The Greek-French philosopher and psychoanalyst insisted on the fact that “[p]hilosophy is a central element of the Greek-Western project of individual and social autonomy; the end of philosophy would mean no more and no less than the end of freedom” (Castoriadis 1989: 3).

Philosophy and democracy share, in Castoriadis’s view, the same self-reflective tension, that is, they are both constantly engaged in inquiring into the very reasons for their
positions and results. Castoriadis takes to task Heidegger’s view of philosophy insofar as, for all the latter’s fervor for Greek thought, he fails to capture the real gist of it. Indeed, Heidegger seems to ignore “systematically the fact that philosophy was born in and through the polis and is a part of the same movement which brought about the first democracies [...]” (Castoriadis 1989: 4). It may be not completely accurate to state that Heidegger ignored the polis; the real problem is rather that, when recognizing that it was the very center of Greek life, he interpreted it in the light of his thought about aletheia by completely uncoupling it from the democratic project: “The πολις is the abode, gathered into itself, of the unconcealedness of beings” (Heidegger 1982: 133). I would suggest that Castoriadis’s main move consists in substituting the vocabulary of dis-closing (overarching the themes of philosophy and democracy) for the Heideggerian vocabulary of un-concealment (encompassing the themes of aletheia and polis):

Democracy is the project of breaking the closure at the collective level. Philosophy, creating self-reflective subjectivity, is the project of breaking the closure at the level of thought. But of course, any breaking of the closure, unless it remains a gaping “?” which does not break anything at all, posits something, reaches some results, and, thereby, risks erecting again a closure [...] Thus, the birth of philosophy is not just coincident, but equi-significant with the birth of democracy. Both are expressions, and central embodiments, of the project of autonomy. (Castoriadis 1989: 11)

A last element of Castoriadis’s argument is worth mentioning in this context: for him the most vital era of Greek philosophy and the adventure of the Athenian democracy terminate almost synchronically, the former with “the death sentence against Socrates” (Castoriadis 1989: 13), the latter with “the defeat of the Athenians in the Peloponnesian war” (Castoriadis 1989: 12). In this understanding, in an admittedly paradoxical way, the greatest of all philosophers, Plato, does not belong to the very flourishing of the democratic-philosophic ethos qua the ethos of autonomy and self-reflective dis-closure. Plato caused a “torsion” to this ethos that would overshadow “the Western emancipatory movement” (Castoriadis 1989: 13) and, in reference to the Bernstein remark from which I have taken my cue in this section, it is possible to say that it is precisely the focus on this torsion, viz. on “Platonism,” – by sideling, instead, the intimate Socratic bond of philosophy and democracy as twin participants in the project of autonomy – that leads Rorty to his tendential ban on philosophy as a resource for democracy.

In commenting upon Castoriadis’s paper, Rorty marshals different but converging strategies, only some of which will be relevant for the present argumentation. First of all, he specifies that the end of philosophy would be calamitous for the very Greek-Western project of individual and social autonomy only to the extent that we construe “philosophy” as “the use of imagination” or even “culture” in the Castoriadisian acceptation of the word:

In this sense, it is of course true that the end of philosophy would mean the end of the conscious refashioning of what Castoriadis calls “imaginary significations.” [...] To cease revising these significations would indeed be the end of freedom. For what Dewey called “the crust of convention” would then become unbreakable. (Rorty 1989b: 24)

Enthralled by the Emersonian dictum that “[t]here is no outside, no enclosing wall, no circumference to us. [...] Men walk as prophecies of the next age” (quoted in PCP: 109), Rorty would redescribe what I have called the movement of dis-closure in terms of the work of imagination, of which philosophy may have been a stage, however one that has
been so contaminated by the debris of a long history that it is better to shift to other cultural forms. In this horizon, while he could be ready to accept Dewey’s intimation of the significance of philosophy as “an intellectualized wish,” the “effort at action” and the “prophecy of the future” (MW 11: 43), he would object that it might be only a belated and possibly trite habit to refer to it as “philosophy” instead of frankly endorsing a literary culture.

Indeed, Rorty insists that there are at least two meanings of philosophy that make its end possible – without undermining the democratic, autonomy-driven project – and even welcome: first, philosophy as the Kantian undertaking to reconcile “the facts of science with our moral intuitions and our social hopes” (Rorty 1989b: 25) and, secondly, philosophy as what Heidegger calls metaphysics (Rorty 1989b: 28-9). In this context and in reference to the main line of argument of the present paper – viz., philosophical and/or literary culture for the cultivation of the democratic ethos? – I will dwell only upon the former. By rehearsing a typical motif of his production, Rorty hopes for a culture that substitutes narrative for theory, thus operating in the wake of what he takes to be the Hegelian “turn from theorizing to story-telling” (Rorty 1989b: 26). Accomplishing this turn, however, and thus deploying genuinely post-philosophical narratives, requires the thorough abandonment of “the idea that human beings have a nature – one which has been repressed by the practices and institutions of the past” (Rorty 1989b: 26).

In Rorty’s view, this further move entails taking “the novel rather than the treatise as the genre in which the European intellects comes to fruition” (Rorty 1989b: 27) and embracing Milan Kundera’s view about the wisdom of the novel (Rorty 1989b: 27; see also EHO: 66-82). In this perspective, Plato can still represent a dialogue partner not because he is “the greatest of philosophers” – albeit appearing paradoxically after the full thriving of the philosophic-democratic ethos had come to fruition – as Castoriadis puts it, but rather because he is the author of an extraordinary narrative pivoting on a fascinating character named Socrates. In Rorty’s late production, this attack on the philosophical undertaking is spelled out in terms of the description of philosophy as a transitional genre. Indeed, Rorty sets out the thesis that:

[...] the intellectuals of the West have, since the Renaissance, progressed through three stages: they have hoped for redemption first from God, then from philosophy and now from literature. [...] From within a literary culture, religion and philosophy appear as literary genres. [...] The difference between the literary intellectuals’ readings of all these books and other readings of them is that the inhabitants of a literary culture treat books as human attempts to meet human needs [...]. (PCP: 91)

The evolution from religion through philosophy to literature and a literary culture is construed as the transition from a culture finding:

redemption [...] in a non-cognitive relation to a non-human person [through] a cognitive relation to propositions [to] non-cognitive relations to other human beings, relations mediated by human artifacts such as books and buildings, paintings and songs. This sort of culture drops a presupposition common to religion and philosophy – that redemption must come from one’s relation to something that is not just one more human creation. (PCP: 93)

This kind of literary culture redescribes Socrates’s motto in Apology by stating that “a life that is not lived close to the present limits of human imagination is not worth living. For the Socratic idea of self-examination and self-knowledge, the literary
intellectual substitutes the idea of enlarging the self by becoming acquainted with still more ways of being human” (PCP: 94).

24 It is in this sense that we should take Rorty’s invitation to accept the Castoriadisian vindication of the self-reflective mission of philosophy as an endeavor towards autonomy only to the extent that we understand “philosophy” as “the use of imagination” and, therefore, the constant movement of breaking the Deweyan “crust of convention.” But does not something crucial in the Castoriadis narrative get lost in this redescription, moreover something that may ally Castoriadis with a Deweyan understanding of philosophy? Rorty seems to be deaf to the possible permanent value of philosophical inquiry – in the “Socratic” sense – and this not only on account of his focus on the narrow meaning of philosophy as the Kantian undertaking but also when the very rise of Greek-Western philosophy is put in the spotlight. Indeed, instead of seeing – with Castoriadis and, arguably, Dewey and Bernstein – this rise as contextual and co-implicated with the rise of the Athenian democracy, he refers to:

Parmenides [who] jump-started the Western philosophical tradition by dreaming up the notion of Reality with a capital R. He took the trees, the stars, the human beings, and the gods and rolled them all together into a well-rounded blob called “Being” or “the One.” He then stood back from this blob and proclaimed it the only thing worth knowing about, but forever unknowable by mortals. (PCP: 105)

25 One could agree on the fact that this Parmenidean thrust could have contributed to hijack philosophy qua the driving force of the project of autonomy towards Platonism – in the derogatory meaning that Rorty gives to this name – and that, accordingly, Romanticism (in an acception which is shared by Rorty and Isaiah Berlin (1990; 1996)) may work as a welcome corrective (PCP: 105 ff; see also Schulenberg 2015, esp. chs. 2, 8 and 11). A pragmatism as romanticism without any passion for profundity (PCP: 80 ff) is a promising alternative, but should we exclude the possibility of a “Socratic” pragmatism?

26 In the following section, I will endeavor to show what this Socratic pragmatism might look like, by moving to the educational terrain and referring to Matthew Lipman and Ann Sharp’s P4C approach, which combines an attentiveness to the better argument without ceding to “the jigsaw-puzzle view of inquiry” (PCP: 83). And, moreover, I will indicate in what sense Lipman and Sharp recommend this kind of philosophical culture for the cultivation of a democratic ethos.

3. Philosophical Inquiry, Cultural Literacy and Education as Socialization

27 The Socratic ideal of self-knowledge, which Rorty wants to replace with the enlarging of the self through literary imagination, emerged as an articulation of some practices typical of Athenian democracy. By elaborating (also) on the Castoriadis essay (cf. Euben 1997: 104-5), to which Rorty responded, Peter Euben has drawn our attention to “the degree to which Athenians institutionalized self-reflection and self-critique” (Euben 1997: 92) and has emphasized that the Socratic self-examination is an extension and radicalization of the “democratic tradition of self-scrutiny” (Euben 1997: 48).

28 It is important to highlight that this train of reflection has a clear educational trajectory and it contributes to making the argument for “the Socratic challenge that ordinary men can rule themselves wisely, and that it is possible and perhaps necessary
to have ‘philosophical’ citizens” (Euben 1997: 93; italics added). In this horizon, Euben establishes a helpful distinction between the political education of a citizenry and a politicized education. I will quote an illustrative passage in some length:

A politicized education regards the “objects” of instruction as passive receptacles of knowledge which molds them according to some blueprint of the good society. Here what can be taught, who can teach it, and where it can be taught is tightly regulated, and education is close to what we mean by training, socialization, or “indoctrination” in the original unapologetic meaning of the term. Of course every culture, including a democratic one, educates its young to embody certain ideals of action and character and much of that education is a matter of habit and imitation, of social, psychological, and cultural processes that constitute us as the kinds of people we become. But a politicized education [...] treats the new as if it already existed [...] A political as distinct from a politicized education would be deeply respectful of those traditions which empowered democratic citizens but skeptical of those which claimed the exclusive privilege of doing so. It would encourage student citizens to challenge those with power while reminding them of the critical traditions within the dominant culture that makes such critique possible and intelligible. (Euben 1997: 50; italics added)

As we will see later in this paper, a ‘mild’ version of the so understood “politicized education” may be represented by Rorty’s views about sentimental education (and, via Hirsch, about civic education in the first levels of schooling) and even – in a more radicalized form – by some ideas of O’Brien in Orwell’s 1984, the alarming closeness to which Bernstein imputes to Rorty as an upshot of his stance on socialization.

The project of the political education of democratic citizenry, instead, is linked – in a Castoriadisian mode – with Socrates’ “philosophical culture.” When developing his argument for a Socratic political education, Euben asks the rhetorical question “why Socrates for us now rather than, say Jefferson or Dewey” (Euben 1997: 53). To put it a bit humorously, Lipman and Sharp’s P4C aspires to having it both ways (Socrates and Dewey) through their educational program. Socrates presides over P4C as the model of doing philosophy as opposed to applying philosophy: “The paradigm of doing philosophy is the towering, solitary figure of Socrates, for whom philosophy was neither an acquisition nor a profession but a way of life. What Socrates models for us is not philosophy known or philosophy applied but philosophy practiced. He challenges us to acknowledge that philosophy as deed, as form of life, is something that any of us can emulate” (Lipman 1988: 12). More specifically, Socrates gives us a model of dialogical inquiry, that is, of how philosophy as doing should be performed; this model is dovetailed, by Lipman and Sharp, with the stance of activist-Deweyan pedagogy that invokes the priority of students’ interests (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan 1980: xv).

At the same time, they explicitly engage also with the democratic-educational side of this project. Indeed, from the very beginning P4C has laid a strong emphasis on moral and civic education through philosophical inquiry. As Lipman and Sharp put it:

Acquainting children with the conduct that society expects of them is only part, although a very important part, of a responsible moral education. It is also necessary that children be equipped to think for themselves, so that they can creatively renew the society in which they live when the situation demands it, as well as for the sake of their own creative growth. (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan 1980: 158)

In this way, differently from Rorty who, in a fairly Hirschian manner (see below in this section), seems to confine children’s education to mere socialization and to postpone until post-secondary (or, in any event, no earlier than in the last classes of secondary) education a more critical and creative engagement with the culture of one's group,
Lipman and Sharp want to involve children in the conversation of society not only in a socializing but also in an “individualizing-critical” mode and they deem philosophical inquiry to be a privileged vehicle to achieve this aim. Their attempt, therefore, is to devise a pedagogical strategy and to invent adequate materials (a curriculum composed of philosophical novels and manuals) to pursue in the classroom the same endeavor that Socrates performed on the Athenian agora, viz. the education of “philosophical citizens.”

They vigorously insist on the fact that “moral education cannot be divorced from philosophical education” (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan 1980: 172). Here I will dwell, in particular, on what Lipman (1988) calls “education for civic values.” Pivotal in the latter endeavor is the stress upon the centrality of the concept of valuation. For Lipman:

[s]tudents engaged in a value inquiry will discuss and study many things, such as the nature and use of criteria, the relationship of means to ends and of ends to further ends, the role of the analogical reasoning in consideration of values, and the influence of context on moral reflection. A most important area of study would be valuation itself – that is, the ways in which people in different walks of life do in fact decide value matters [...]. (Lipman 1988: 65; italics added)

The significance of valuation is wide-ranging but, in particular, it touches upon the question of democratic participation:

[W]ith the acquisition of the mechanisms and methodology of valuation, students will find themselves capable of appraising the institutions of their society in terms of the manner in which these institutions actually implement and make possible the realization of the ideals of the society. Each ideal then becomes a criterion of evaluation rather than a symbol to be invoked rhetorically and subsequently ignored. In this sense good citizens are reflective citizens, vigorously insistent that ideals not merely be professed but that they be operationalized and implemented. [...] [S]chools must prepare students for citizenship by affording them every possible exposure to and participation in the sorts of rational procedures that characterize adult society [...] Rational institutions are our best assurance that individual citizens will be reasonable. (Lipman 1988: 60)

There are three axes in the educational undertaking directed to the formation of habits of valuation: the cultivation of reasoning skills about value issues, the development of character and “the craftsmanship that enables the individual to integrate habits and reasonings, character and reflection in such a way as to lead to sound value judgments as well as to commendable actions” (Lipman 1988: 71). Even if Lipman recognizes that this undertaking should be implemented across the curriculum, education for complex thinking (Lipman 2003) through philosophical inquiry plays an absolutely special role:

When it comes to ethical reasoning, philosophy is an indispensable method, the subdiscipline of logic is an indispensable apparatus, and within logic there are countless tools [...] that one learns very early to make use of. After all, ethical reasoning need not be thought of as a mere toying with bloodless abstractions, for what is called moral conduct is the practice of such reasoning. (Lipman 1988: 76)

I would intimate reading this approach in the light of Euben’s ideas on political education introduced earlier and, therefore, in a “Socratic” key, operationalized through a pragmatist pedagogy hinging on a specific educational setting, the community of philosophical inquiry (Oliverio 2017). Lipman is adamant in opposing this stance to Hirsch’s “cultural literacy,” which, in Lipman’s eyes, insists on the very
fact that “the educated individual is familiar with the essential findings in the major disciplines” (Lipman 1988: 39).

I cannot expatiate here on a detailed examination of Hirsch’s tenets, pivoting on the essential role played by background knowledge (knowledge of contents, of facts) in order to be competent readers and literate people:

Cultural literacy lies above the everyday levels of knowledge that everyone possesses and below the expert level known only to specialists. It is the middle ground of cultural knowledge possessed by the “common reader.” It includes information that we have traditionally expected our children to receive in school, but which they no longer do. (Hirsch 1987: 19)

His approach is clearly understood as a counter-attack against educational proposals furthering the cultivation of skills (whether reading skills or thinking skills etc.) and against the Romantic pedagogies that have taken leave of “the [...] conception of education [...] [which] assumed that a child is a still-to-be-formed creature whose instinctual impulses need less to be encouraged than to be molded to the ways of the society in which it is growing up” (Hirsch 1996: 72). Progressive education (but not necessarily Dewey [cf. LW 13: 1-62]) performs, in a sense, a synthesis of these two tendencies and thus represents the very target of Hirsch’s polemics.

The cultural literacy approach has had since its inception a strong political component, for instance denouncing the shift to multicultural education:

But however laudable it is, it should not be the primary focus of national education. It should not be allowed to supplant or interfere with our schools’ responsibility to ensure our children’s mastery of American literate culture. The acculturative responsibility of the schools is primary and fundamental. To teach the ways of one’s own community has always been and still remains the essence of the education of our children, who enter neither a narrow tribal culture nor a transcendent world culture but a national literate culture. (Hirsch 1987: 18)

This thrust has resulted in an appeal to the Jeffersonian and Lincolnian idea “that the center of children’s upbringing and schooling in the United States should be instruction in a religious devotion to democracy” (Hirsch 2009: 67). This educational stance gets embodied in “the general principle of the core curriculum” according to which “we deal with different nationalities as we deal with different religions: we leave them alone but expect them to accommodate themselves to the public sphere. Schools are the institution that will enable everybody to make that accommodation” (Hirsch 2009: 80). By mobilizing the distinction between the public and the private sphere – in reference also to “my friend and colleague Richard Rorty” (Hirsch 2009: 74) – Hirsch specifies the logic of his view of the civic core:

The concentric circles beyond the systems of communication that we all share, and the core American creed that protects our bodies and our beliefs, our purses and our legs – the circle beyond that core – can be as rich and fulfilling as we are able to make them. Those who press us to create a more substantial American identity need to keep in mind why our core structure was invented in the first place. It was not to build a hearth and a home but to allow us the freedom to build them as we wish, by providing protection from oppression and persecution and bloody wars between rival traditions, tribalisms, and systems of belief. (Hirsch 2009: 83)

The cultural literacy view sounds fairly remote from Dewey’s invocation of a new civic education on account of the new challenges in modern democratic society and from his understanding of school as social center (MW 2: 80 ff). And Hirsch himself finally came to endorse Hofstadter’s (1963: ch. 14) critique of Dewey’s educational theories, after
preferring in his first works to cross swords with the latter’s heirs in progressive education (cf. Hirsch 2009: 227-8, 41n). In contrast, when sponsoring cultural literacy, Rorty joins together his two educational heroes and speaks bluntly of “Hirsch’s Deweyan hopes for a better educated democratic electorate” (PSH: 117; italics added), rather than splitting hairs in pinpointing their differences in a scholarly manner. Indeed, for Rorty “Hirsch is largely right about the high schools” as the initial task of education is “the shaping of an animal into a human being by a process of socialization” and in this respect “Hirsch is dead right in saying that we Americans no longer give our children a secondary education that enables them to function as citizens of a democracy” (PSH: 117–8). In this advocacy of cultural literacy Rorty does not see any transgression of his Deweyan allegiances:

I take myself, in holding these opinions, to be a fairly faithful follower of John Dewey. Dewey’s great contribution to the theory of education was to help us get rid of the idea that education is a matter of either inducing or educing truth. Primary and secondary education will always be a matter of familiarizing the young with what their elders take to be true, whether it is true or not. It is not, and never will be, the function of lower-level education to challenge the prevailing consensus about what is true. (PSH: 118)

Whether or not this alignment of Hirsch with the Deweyan legacy can be performed so smoothly, one thing is certain: the kind of recontextualization of Dewey’s ideas thereby operated by Rorty is clearly different from that of Lipman. Indeed, by inventing the child as a philosophical inquirer – a figure arguably ignored by Dewey (cf. Oliverio 2012; 2020) – Lipman endorses a view of childhood and its epistemic agency that seems alien to Rorty and Hirsch. For all his kindness to babies (PMN: 192; cf. also Saarinen 2013), Rorty tends to lump together babies, animals and brutes in that they are all non-users of language: “To attribute beliefs and desires to non-users of language (such as dogs, infants and thermostats) is, for us pragmatists, to speak metaphorically” (PSH: xxiv; italics added). His adherence to the linguistic turn (Del Castillo 2015) leads him to object to Dewey’s insistence on “cognitive development as continuous with animal and infantile feeling” (TP: 300, 30n; italics added) and to totally abandon that very notion of experience on which the whole educational project of Dewey hinges:

Dewey should have dropped the term “experience,” not redefined it. He should have looked elsewhere for continuation between us and the brutes. He should have agreed with Peirce that a great gulf divides sensation and cognition, decided that cognition was possible only for language users, and then said that the only relevant break in continuity was between non-language users (amoebas, squirrels and babies) and language users. (TP: 297; italics added)

In this stance, it is almost inevitable that the very first steps of any educational undertaking should consist, for Rorty, not in any forms of cultivation of the inquiring attitudes of children but rather in the aforementioned “shaping of an animal into a human being” by virtue of the “gathering of raw material” (Rorty & Ghiraldelli Jr. 2008: 189) and the “piling up” of a lot of information (viz. the Hirschian list of words one needs to know: cf. for instance Hirsch 1987: 152 ff) “into the children’s heads” (PSH: 122) so that they develop those sentential attitudes that alone enable them to be fully fledged members of the community.

One could argue that this is a fairly uncharitable (and even distorted) reading of Rorty and, moreover, one that cannot be deployed to contrast him with Lipman: when inventing the child as a philosophical inquirer, the latter had to refer to language-users, while tendentially (apart from one occasional association of children and
psychotics as non-fully fledged members of community: cf. PSH: 37) the
two aforementioned tenets of Rorty concern babies (viz. infants in the etymological
acceptation of the word) and, for all his openness to children’s philosophical talents, it
is moot whether Lipman would have ever subscribed to a theory like that of “the
philosophical baby” (Gopnik 2009), as his child becomes a philosophical inquirer only
insofar as she is introduced into a cultural tradition.

Despite these caveats and qualifications, I would insinuate that a chasm obtains
between Rorty’s and Lipman’s understandings of childhood and that this is one of the
reasons for their different attitudes towards Hirsch’s cultural literacy and, additionally,
that this has much (if not everything) to do with the fact that Lipman remains
committed to the Deweyan centrality of experience. More specifically, it may be argued
that, via the Deweyan (LW 5: 243-62) notion of “qualitative thought” (something that
Rorty would suggest abandoning), Lipman discovers the ‘childhood layer’ of any
(philosophical) inquiry.

However, due to the main thrust of the argumentation in this paper, we should focus
on another site where the disagreement and perhaps the main bone of contention
between the two authors lies. As aforementioned, by embracing the Socratic-Eubenian
idea of educating “philosophical citizens” and extending this project also to children
and, therefore, to primary and secondary education, Lipman identifies in the
cultivation of the abilities of the valuation of society one of the chief aims of a
democratic education. In a sense, he does not exclude children from forms of “political
education” (as predicated upon a culture of self-scrutiny) understood in the Euben
acceptation of the phrase. In contrast, Rorty is skeptical about the reasonableness of
this project: on the one hand, he agrees that it is an appropriate attitude that of the one
who “worries that the process of socialization which turned her into a human being by
giving her a language may have given her the wrong language, and so turned her into
the wrong kind of human being” (CIS: 75); but, this being a typically ironic stance, it is
highly unlikely that it may be cultivated from the very early levels of education as it is
difficult to “imagine a culture which socialize[s] its youth in such a way as to make
them continually dubious about their own process of socialization” (CIS: 87).

In this perspective, the contrast between a philosophy-oriented and literature-oriented
education is entwined with the opposition between a stance which aspires to cultivate
habits of critique from childhood – while socializing children in their own culture, or
better, as a constitutive part of this socialization process insofar as it pertains to the
introduction into the democratic tradition of self-reflective scrutiny – and one which,
instead, draws a marked fault-line of discontinuity between socialization and
individualization. Lipman could object to Rorty that he displays an ultimately
patronizing attitude towards children on account of his inclination to deem them to be
not fully fledged members of their community and, thus, not real fellow partners in the
cultural conversation (by accordingly considering them as people needing first to
swallow the cultural raw material); as a consequence, he postpones until their post-
secondary education both the recognition of their full right to nurture worries about
their own socialization and the possibility of their assessing the social institutions in
which they have grown-up (whatever is the vehicle of this assessment, whether the
philosophical argument or the invention of new vocabularies).

One can argue that Rorty has never set himself free from Hutchins’s spell; as he found
the Hutchins approach beneficial in his youth, he continues to recommend it also to
contemporary schools. The more the latter will draw upon the Hirschian cultural literacy, the less colleges will be involved in "the remedial work that society currently forces [them] to undertake – the kind of work that Great Books curricula are typically invented in order to carry out" (PSH: 124). Paradoxically Lipman and Rorty are at one in considering Hirsch as the heir of Hutchins, but while the former deems any "core of common culture" approach to be detrimental for a democratic society, the latter sees it as an indispensable resource, provided that it is confined to the initial levels of education and that, at the university level, students are free to pursue trajectories of self-creation, acquiring the cultural tools "to make themselves into people who can stand to their own past as Emerson and Anthony, Debs and Baldwin, stood to their pasts" (PSH: 124).

In a sense, Rorty wants all contemporary youth to receive the ‘same’ kind of education as that which he had the privilege to receive when fifteen – as a precocious college student enrolled on a program of excellence. And we should recognize that Rorty (with Hirsch) makes a good point with his stress on the need for a development of literacy that requires the acquisition of a large amount of background knowledge. If Lipman is right in his qualms about an approach that risks perpetuating a school of the mere acquiring (instead of furthering a school of inquiring, to stick to a notable Dewey [MW 3: 236 ff.] distinction), he may have been too overhasty in discarding it as a sensible pedagogical option. Not only because Rorty could have had it right:

[...] I doubt that it ever occurred to Dewey that a day would come when students could graduate from an American high school not knowing who came first, Plato or Shakespeare [...] Dewey too hastily assumed that nothing would ever stop the schools from piling on the information and that the only problem was to get them to do other things as well. (PSH: 120-1)

But for another reason directly connected with the very project of P4C: Lipman always took pains to distinguish his approach from the typical programs for training isolated thinking skills according to “a ‘skill and drill’ mentality” (Lipman 1988: 25) and he reclaimed the specificity of P4C (Lipman 1988: 40 ff). In particular, he insisted, first, on the significance of the recourse to philosophy as “representative of the heritage of human thought. Philosophy does not cannibalize its past but holds the thought of any philosopher ever available for re-inspection and re-interpretation” (Lipman 1988: 40); and, secondly, on the fact, that P4C is “[a] language-based approach” (Lipman 1988: 41). I suggest reading these features in terms of the presence of a cultural literacy dimension to P4C, which obviously ought not to be inflected in the Hirschian way of a fixed repertoire of words to know but should maintain a Rortyan focus on the need for a mastery of language that invokes, also, a form of acculturation (possibly promoted through narrative texts: see below § 4).

In this perspective, Rorty’s noble aspiration to extend to all young people the kind of school preparation he had had the luck to take advantage of makes sense also in a P4C-oriented educational conception. And, though, if this Rortyan thrust is disconnected from the cultivation of a critical attitude via philosophical inquiry from the early levels of schooling, one cannot resist the suspicion that Rorty’s view risks smacking of elitism: are only those who make it to the college enabled to fully participate in the democratic tradition of self-critique?

The appropriation of the Hirschian thrust (construed in terms of a stark separation of socialization and individualization), combined with the specific inflection which Rorty gives to the understanding of literary culture at the socialization level, may give rise to
further misgivings. I have already hinted at how Rorty enlists Hirsch’s cultural literacy for his idea that socialization aims at shaping an animal (viz. an infant) into a human being. But actually this is only a stepping stone to the real goal of education as socialization, namely the familiarization with inspiring narratives about one’s own country:

Updating Dewey a bit, we can think of him as wanting the children to come to think of themselves as proud and loyal citizens that, slowly and painfully, threw off a foreign yoke, freed its slaves, enfranchised its women, restrained its robber barons and licensed its trade unions, liberalized its religious practices, broadened its religious and moral tolerance, and built colleges in which 50 per cent of its population could enter. […] As Hirsch quite rightly says, that narrative will not be intelligible unless a lot of information gets piled up in the children’s heads. (PSH: 121-2)

Thus understood, education as socialization risks excluding the early cultivation of any attitude of self-scrutiny and self-reflectivity, which Castoriadis and Euben (and Dewey and Lipman for that matter) would consider intrinsic to the democratic tradition (and therefore, arguably, to the educational initiation into that tradition). Also at this educational level Rorty would cede to what Bernstein had nicely called his “historical myth of the given”: “He speaks of ‘our’ practices, ‘our’ tradition, the ‘consensus’ of a particular community as if this were simply a historical given. […] If we are serious or playful about politics and liberal democracy, then it is [the] ongoing argument [about the ends to pursue] that should be the focus of our attention” (Bernstein 1991: 244). Accordingly, the ability of valuation should be at the very forefront of our educational interest, as Lipman would put it, and philosophical inquiry represents a major vehicle in this respect.

Rorty’s distinction of socialization and individualization is the pedagogical counterpart of the “banal point that education […] needs to begin with acculturation and conformity […] abnormal and ‘existential’ discourse is always parasitic upon normal discourse, […] the possibility of hermeneutics is always parasitic upon the possibility (and perhaps upon the actuality) of epistemology […]” (PMN: 365-6). Dovetailing his Kuhnian mindset with the Hirschian view, Rorty makes of the first levels of schooling the terrain where to establish the common ground and the space of agreement against the backdrop of which – later – plans for “abnormal discourse” and “self-creation” may (and, indeed, ought to) be pursued. Once again, does not democracy “as the regime of (political) self-reflexivity” (Castoriadis 1989: 11) require, instead, a kind of acculturation to its specific ethos, to its movement of dis-closure in every level of schooling, differentiated as the modalities in which this endeavor is undertaken may have to be? Are we really doomed to oscillate between the insane project (Rorty may be right on this point) of an education instilling doubts into the youth about the very society that educates them and the resigned acceptance of an initial conformity? Is it not precisely in order to escape from this alternative that philosophy qua the Socratic movement emerged, working its way through the sirens of Homer and those of sophistry, prior to capitulating to Platonism (which does not, however, need to be the destiny of philosophical inquiry)? Should we not aspire to pursue that admittedly precarious balance which Socrates wanted to strike between the faithfulness to one’s one country and the readiness to scrutiny its customs (this work of scrutinizing being, indeed, part of the very work of socialization in a community animated by a democratic tradition)?
4. Interweaving Philosophical Inquiry and Literature in Education

The argumentation presented in the previous section seems to have culminated in a clear answer to the question from which this paper has taken its cue: not only is philosophical inquiry pivotal for a democratic culture but it should be cultivated from the very early levels of schooling. In this perspective, the merit of the Lipmanian misreading of Dewey is that of affording an educational approach that enables us to bring to fruition the Socratic project of educating “philosophical citizens.” The case (philosophy vs literature) seems to be that of philosophical inquiry against the Rortyan poetized culture.

Things are more complicated, though. While reclaiming the significance of philosophical inquiry for democratic education, I do not want to insinuate that literature should have a subordinate role in education. If the Lipmanian cultivation of valuation skills (understood as the contemporary counterpart of the democratic culture of self-scrutiny and accountability) is crucial, we should not forget that in Athens “[f]or a culture of accountability to be something more than a mode of policing there needed to be some generative tension between it and a Dionysian politics of disruption. That was, in part, supplied by comedy and tragedy” (Euben 1997: 108). On the terrain of public-political education philosophy – qua the Socratic radicalization of the democratic movement of self-scrutiny – and “literature” were (and still need to be) allied, competitive as philosophy qua the Platonic undertaking and art may have been since the Greek inception (Edmundson 1995).

But what does this alliance of philosophy and literature look like? In what sense can we regain Rorty’s emphasis on literary culture for the democratic project as the tension toward self-scrutiny? Is Rorty’s understanding of the role of literature in fostering a democratic ethos adequate?

Richard Bernstein (1991) has remarked that invoking moral and political education through novels rests on “little, if any, concrete empirical evidence” (Bernstein 1991: 285). More devastatingly, by referring to Rorty’s innovative reading of Orwell’s 1984 (CIS: 169-88) and in particular of the character of O’Brien, who declares “But we create human nature. Men are infinitely malleable” (Orwell 1949/1989: 282), Bernstein has suggested that “[t]here is no important difference between Rorty and O’Brien concerning the infinite malleability of human beings and the possibility of socialization ‘all the way down.’ O’Brien is the true ‘disciple’ of Rorty who has diabolically mastered the lesson of the contingency of all vocabularies” (Bernstein 1991: 290). By possibly twisting a little Bernstein’s misgivings, we could rephrase them as follows: in The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism, the book co-authored by O’Brien in the fiction of 1984, we read that the endeavor to perpetuate a hierarchical society essentially amounts to “an educational [issue]. It is a problem of continuously moulding the consciousness both of the directing group and of the large executive group that lies immediately below it. The consciousness of the masses needs only to be influenced in a negative way” (Orwell 1949/1989: 216). Replacing an education inspired by the ideal of a self-examined life, animated by a rational discussion drawing upon arguments and the method of inquiry, with a literary education could leave us disarmed in the face of all the O’Briens lurking within the folds of democratic societies. Insisting on exposing,
during primary and secondary education, the youth to narratives that increase the sense of belonging and evoke a pride for the history of their country risks being a form of “politicized education” rather than a kind of genuinely “political education” (to draw upon the aforementioned antithesis described by Euben).

59 These misgivings may be reconnected to reservations about (some aspects of) Rorty’s project aired in some of the best scholarship on his work.17 I am thinking, for instance, of how, at the end of a sustained and detailed engagement with the significance of Rorty’s thought for education, Ramón del Castillo (2014) has nicely highlighted that, when choosing novels depicting cruelty from the inside, Rorty ends up privileging those offering “an ultimately tranquilizing image” (Del Castillo 2014: 99). And he raises a crucial question:

[...] are we sure that, if we settle for Rorty’s illusions and his literary recommendations, would not teaching and society remain merely satisfied with a pale reformism of custom and a melancholic therapy of the I? Albeit its Nietzschean touches, education à la Rorty turns out to be a little flat: is not the hope that animates it only a symptom of a malaise instead of being the key to its cure? (Del Castillo 2014: 100)

By distinguishing “moral inculcation” and “ethical reflection” (the latter largely overlapping with what Lipman would call "ethical inquiry"), Chris Voparil (2006), in his turn, has noted that:

[u]ltimately, Rorty’s commitment to what we have called ethical reflection does not hold up. Despite a certain amount of lip service to ethical phronesis, Rorty appeals to literature and stories for the inculcation of moral norms. These are of course not transcendental moral norms. But his historicized conception of morality as a matter of “we-intentions” still implies a kind of universality inasmuch as it rests on collectively agreed upon and shared terms. To preserve this commonality, Rorty must insulate it from the idiosyncratic attempt to define one’s character. (Voparil 2006: 74)

Thus, Rorty separates those dimensions which Lipman’s understanding of ethical education within (and for) a democratic society keeps integrated with each other (see above § 3). Indeed, through an accurate and sophisticated examination of Rorty’s claims about sentimental education, Voparil emphasizes that at the end of the day:

Rorty must subordinate the ethical aim to the moral norm, rather than the other way around. He enlists the ethical force that literature works upon individuals in principle, but in practice its transformative power can only be allowed to function in the direction of producing better liberal citizens. Hence he must distinguish between works which meet this criterion and those which do not – namely, between books for public and for private purposes. (Voparil 2006: 75)

And, yet,

[a]s attractive as this bifurcated picture may appear, [we should] resist it. Citizens of democracy surely do read different kinds of novels, and these different novels serve different purposes for different people, some critical and questioning, others didactic and moral. Novels, like art in general, can be put to many uses, both radical and reactionary. As long as both types exist, one is tempted to argue, democracies will be capable of generating change from within. However, to the extent that the actions we take in the public realm to collectively alter our world are severed from our efforts to transform ourselves, the power of the demos may end up yielding little more than a defense of the status quo. (Voparil 2006: 80)

In the vocabulary marshaled in this paper, we could rephrase these misgivings in the following way: not only does Rorty’s understanding of the “political-educational”
mission of literature disarticulate the “tripod” of Lipman’s (1988: 70-1) education for civic values – composed of the inquiry into values, the cultivation of the character and the craftsmanship of integrating character and reflection – but it risks serving the purposes of a politicized education rather than those of a genuinely democratic political education.

And, yet, there are important lessons that can be drawn from Rorty’s stance also for those who, like the present author, consider the P4C approach one of the most valuable and advanced for the education of citizens in a democratic society. Accordingly, I will, in conclusion, indicate, first, how significantly a “Rortyan” (literature-oriented) moment is present in P4C and how this should be not only preserved but further enhanced; and, secondly, to what extent a “Socratic” moment is at work in parts of Rorty’s thought about literature and how this should be cultivated also against some of the aforementioned deep tendencies in Rorty’s way of framing the relationship between literature and ethics and politics.

Concerning the first aspect, it is to note that, when enumerating the main reasons “why moral education cannot be divorced from philosophical education” (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan 1980: 172 ff), the P4C creators insist that “a sufficient moral education program would have to develop in the child an awareness of the feelings of the other”; moreover, they indicate that “philosophy for children introduces the novel as the vehicle of moral education” (Lipman, Sharp & Oscanyan 1980: 173, 174). These are two “Rortyan” elements that have been present in the P4C project since its very beginning and this enables us to think of an alliance between Lipman/Sharp and Rorty. On the one hand, by integrating these elements in a broader framework in which philosophical inquiry as a Socratic endeavor is central, Lipman and Sharp can prevent these elements from capitulating to the drift culminating in moral inculcation and the mere manipulation of sentiments (to which Rorty often seems to yield), by strengthening, instead, those “intentions [of Rorty] closer to the broader notion of ethical reflection […]: the idea that we tell stories in order to change – to refashion our identities and remake ourselves by deepening or enriching our existence” (Voparil 2006: 77). In other words, what in Rorty risks being engulfed by a politicized sentimental education could be re-activated and brought to fruition.

On the other hand, it may be debatable whether the P4C approach has granted sufficient attention to the aforementioned elements over the decades. Despite the work of many of the practitioners who have valorized them, one should not conceal the fact that a relevant part of the philosophical-educational debate has objected to the P4C approach in the Lipman-Sharp tradition intimating that it winds up being – its best intentions notwithstanding – only one more program in critical thinking and remaining anchored to an analytical-logical view of philosophy. Without tackling this debate, one can suggest that an encounter with the Rortyan positions could help P4C to shun these most unwelcome outcomes and to revisit and redescribe its educational device in forms that ward off an over-intellectualistic slant that may undermine the very project of an education of democratically wise citizens. Indeed, by deploying Rorty’s distinction between normal and abnormal discourse,¹⁸ Voparil has correctly emphasized that:

[u]nder […] conditions of abnormal discourse, where we lack shared criteria to which to appeal to settle disputes because it is precisely these criteria themselves that are up for grabs, the kind of argument that proceeds inferentially from shared premises within a fixed logical space simply has no purchase. (Voparil 2013: 114)
To rephrase this in the P4C vocabulary: in these situations, we need less critical than creative and caring thinking (Lipman 2003) and the dialogue with Rorty may be crucial to put in sharper focus – also within the educational practice in the classroom – this dimension.

After stressing the “Rortyan” elements in the P4C “Socratic” education, I would like to briefly hint at the “Socratic” element in Rorty’s views themselves. In particular, I want to emphasize the implication of his endorsement of Milan Kundera’s wisdom of the novel (EHO: 75 ff). His reference to the Czech writer is illuminating. Indeed, the latter (Kundera 1986: 15 ff) situates his argument in favor of the novel within the context of a re-lection on (i.e. a different inflection of) Husserl’s conferences on the crisis of European sciences. And he implicitly opposes a modernity electing Cervantes as its hero to the modernity springing from Descartes, whose inaugurating gesture Husserl radicalizes. However, the contrast between Descartes and Cervantes – and their 20th century heirs – does not need to be construed in terms of an updated version of the Platonic fight against poetry. Rather, the novel continues to be, in many respects, at least within a Kunderian horizon, a (self-)reflective and even “philosophical” genre. Kundera is quite explicit in vindicating “the appeal of thought” (Kundera 1986: 32-33) as one of the main resources for the novel to continue its adventure as a vehicle for the experimental exploration of the possibilities of existence. And in a later work, after referring to the Nietzsche demise of any systematic philosophy, he turns not to literature alone but to a closeness between literature and philosophy, of which the novel is a major embodiment (Kundera 2000: 153 ff and 178 ff).

Accordingly, in my admittedly idiosyncratic reading, by aligning himself with Kundera’s advocacy of the novel, (my hypothetical) Rorty is not encouraging us to take leave of a reflective and “philosophical” culture but only to broaden the panoply of its intellectual tools. Philosophy is not simply dismissed but is re-situated within a different constellation, as an important element of life. This is something more than saying that in a literary culture philosophy is experienced as a genre (moreover, a transitional one). Rather it implies that, among the literary genres privileged within education for a democratic society, those that have an “inquiring,” “examining” (we could venture to say, Socratic) dimension maintain a priority. And this stance, I would like to suggest in conclusion, should not be confined to secondary and post-secondary education (where the novels that Kundera has in mind can be read) but it can find hospitality also in the primary school where, instead of “Kunderian” novels, that kind of children’s literature may be marshaled, whose “philosophical whimsy” (in the compelling phrase of Gareth Matthews (1976: 9)) can help trigger and sustain that movement of self-reflectivity and dis-closure which resides at the very kernel of the democratic project and whose cultivation only an alliance of philosophy and literature can implement in our educational settings.
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NOTES

1. Citations of the works of Dewey are to the critical edition published by Southern Illinois University Press. Volume and page numbers follow the initials of the series. Abbreviations for the volumes used are: EW The Early Works (1882-1898); MW The Middle Works (1899-1924); LW The Later Works (1925-1953).
2. Speaking of “replacing” philosophy with literature can be misleading, if understood as a complete abandonment instead of as a substantial redistribution of emphases. Indeed, Rorty continued to recognize a role for philosophy in the common discourse, for instance in terms of a work of “weaving the old and the new together”: one of the reasons why philosophers will “probably always be around is that there will always be something exciting happening [in culture] that needs to be tamed and modified, woven together with the past” (Rorty in Mendieta 2006: 47). He also invited us not to reduce any thinking imaginatively to literature (ibid.: 121). I would like to acknowledge an anonymous reviewer for having drawn my attention to how far the word replacement risks misrepresenting Rorty’s position in the light of statements like those aforementioned.

3. The major example of this stance may be his paper on “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy” (ORT: 175-96).


6. An implicit but unnamed target of Dewey’s paper was also the neo-scholastic philosopher Jacques Maritain.

7. It is appropriate to specify that here I am not interested in exploring and commenting upon the way in which, within the scholarship about Philosophy for Children, the possible contribution of Rorty tenets to the practice and theory of this educational approach has been interpreted.

8. On this stage of his intellectual development cf. also Gross (2008: pos. 605).

9. As Ramón del Castillo (2014: 67-8) has aptly highlighted, many theses present in this paper echo some ideas discussed in a previous text, *Hermeneutics, General Studies, and Teaching* (Rorty 1982b).

10. For different (but converging) descriptions of this Rortyan “bereaved” attitude towards philosophy made by some leading philosophers and scholars cf. Mendieta (2006: 15-7).

11. For a Deweyan narrative comparable with that of Castoriadis cf. MW 6: 17 ff.

12. I have elaborated on this idea in Oliverio (2020).

13. This – post-secondary – level of education is what Rorty calls “individualization."

14. Upon the testimony of Rorty himself (cf. Mendieta 2006: 18 and 55), it may be stated that his enthusiasm concerned principally the vigorous introduction into the history of philosophy that he had received. Indeed, the lack of any historical interest was one of his main indictments against analytical philosophy. However, in an admittedly more speculative way, I am here taking his attachment as directed also toward the very method of basing education on the reading of “great books” (while completely abandoning the reference to a *philosophia perennis* that this phrase had had in Hutchins and Adler). I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting the need to better specify Rorty’s fondness for the education received in Chicago, in reference to the aforementioned testimony.

15. This is clearly the stance underlying Rorty’s reflection in AOC, many pages of which have a distinct educational tone.

16. Literature is a concept which does not belong to Greek culture but I will use it much in the sense in which Edmundson (1995), an important dialogue partner for Rorty, deploys it when interpreting contemporary literary criticism against the backdrop of “an ancient quarrel” dating back to Plato.

17. It is right to acknowledge that, in the following, I am going to extrapolate del Castillo’s and Voparil’s ideas from the broader context of their argumentation, which is richer and more respectful also of the strengths of Rorty’s positions.

18. On some occasions, Rorty has captured the same distinction between philosophy and literature in terms of a vocabulary inspired by literary criticism, through the difference between the beautiful and the sublime (cf. Mendieta 2006: 69).
19. As appropriately pointed out by Voparil (2006: 70), we should not pass over in silence the fact that there is a “lack of fit between Kundera’s ethereal ideas and Rorty’s prosaic liberalism.” In addressing the theme of irony in Kundera and Rorty, Voparil vindicates its political (public) role in a democratic society. While not completely overlapping, I would tend to suggest that this vindication and my insistence on the inescapability of an education for philosophical-Socratic inquiry as a driving force of a healthy democratic discourse point in the same direction.

ABSTRACTS

In this paper, I will explore Rorty’s recommendation to shift from a philosophical to a literary culture by addressing this theme through a philosophical-educational lens and in reference to the question of what kind of education we need in order to foster democratic ethos. In this perspective, I will establish a comparison/contrast between Rorty’s idea of sentimental education and Matthew Lipman’s Philosophy for Children understood as two (alternative?) ways of recontextualizing Dewey’s heritage. After discussing Rorty’s understanding of a need for an end (instead of a “Deweyan” recovery) of philosophy starting from his dialogue with Castoriadis and by reconstructing his appeal to a poetized culture, I will present Lipman’s case for education for philosophical inquiry in order to cultivate a democratic ethos in primary and secondary schools. I will contrast it with Rorty’s education as socialization and, contextually, I will illustrate their different stances towards Hirsch’s cultural literacy and his core curriculum approach to civic education. Finally, after problematizing Rorty’s views on the use of literature for a democratic culture, I will indicate the need to combine the Rortyan and Lipmanian thrusts and will claim that an aspect of the novel-driven education advocated by Rorty maintains a constitutive Socratic-inquiring dimension.

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In his autobiographical writing *Trotsky and the Wild Orchids* (1992 [1999]) Richard Rorty vividly describes an emblematic episode of his adolescence that has a specific value in terms of his educational reflection: when he was an adolescent, bullies regularly used to beat him up in the playground of his high school, an action that he was unable to avoid. This scene, indeed, portrays a recurring theme of his school life, which assigns predefined roles to different actors – the bullies and their designated victim – and it is, therefore, a good example of what Richard Bernstein would identify as one of the many “concrete social forms of cruelty” (Bernstein 1992: 287) that we somehow take for granted. On the other hand, Rorty’s narration of the episode effectively illustrates what Rachel Haliburton acknowledges as the capacity of the liberal ironist to provide an effective re-description of “what humiliates,” drawing this from a personal awareness of the various ways in which human beings can be humiliated (Haliburton 1997: 56). Indeed, as Rorty points out in the introduction to *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989) “for liberal ironists, there is no answer to the question ‘Why not be cruel?’ – no noncircular theoretical backup for the belief that cruelty is horrible. Nor is there an answer to the question ‘How do you decide when to struggle against injustice and when to devote yourself to private projects of self-creation?’” (Rorty 1989: xv). This decision is a matter of contingency, and has to do with what Rorty defines as “luck.” The young Richard decides to “escape” from the humiliating situation he was trapped in by seizing the opportunity to leave ordinary high school in order to attend the Hutchin “college” at the University of Chicago, thereby starting to re-describe his life project according to a new and different perspective. Through his narration of this episode Rorty invites us to acknowledge the capacity that each individual has to create and re-create one’s self, diverting one’s path away from expected roles and performances defined according to a predetermined script, which reflect the contingent requests of the public dimension in which individuals are embedded, and overcoming the dialogues and narratives one may feel trapped in.

From a pedagogical point of view, this is a crucial point, since it reflects the relationship between the individual and society and has to do with what Rorty in
Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1979) describes with the term “edification,” which is a substitute both for education (“a bit too flat”) and Bildung (“a bit too foreign”), indicating a process taking us “out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings” (Rorty 1979: 360). Edification implies a profound re-description of one’s life conditions and represents, indeed, for Rorty, the only possibility of escaping from, but not overcoming, cruelty and humiliation, since there is no way to convince whoever performs cruel acts of the inappropriateness of this behavior, if she/he has been raised with the conviction that such acts are permissible in a determinate social context or if they are, for some reason, rewarding or satisfactory. As a matter of fact, the environments within which individuals and communities grow up and, in particular, the conversations and discourses in which they are embedded, as well as the linguistic habits they are used to, make the difference since they shape the core of one’s being in the world, identified by Rorty in “conscience and aesthetic taste,” which, as he explains in Trotsky and the Wild Orchids, can be considered “equally, products of the cultural environment in which we grew up” (Rorty 1999: 15). Cultural differences are so deep and strong that there is not, and there can never be, any neutral “common ground” to which individuals, who have different forms of conscience and aesthetic taste, can “repair” in order to argue out their differences (Rorty 1999: 15); we need therefore to acknowledge the incommensurability of different life stories and narratives, which are the by-product of different processes of inculturation and socialization but, as Rorty points out in Universality and Truth we should also be aware that “there are not incommensurable languages” since “any language can be learned by one who is able to use any other languages” (Rorty 2000: 18) which means that people can always overcome the communicative barriers determined by the use of different linguistic codes by making new hermeneutic moves. This requires a move away from what in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity he describes as “common sense” language, which refers to the “final vocabulary” individuals “are habituated” to use (Rorty 1989: 74). According to Rorty’s vision, when people refer to common sense linguistic structures there cannot be any possibility of a reflective encounter of any kind based on rational argumentation, on the basis of the possibility of performing what Jürgen Habermas (1990 [1983]) would define as a form of “communicative action.” For this reason, Rorty is extremely critical of Habermas’ reference to a rational frame of reference according to which individuals can dialogue and communicate, beyond cultural constraints. Accordingly, as the American philosopher points out in Philosophy and Social Hope, if there is no shared ethical and esthetic understanding of the world, conflicts and quarrels of any type cannot be overcome through argumentation and reasoning. Under these conditions, therefore, there can be no way to negotiate with the bullies we encounter on the playground of our life in order to understand their reasons, and to make them understand ours.

Within this framework, individuals who have different cultural, economic, political and social backgrounds and insist on affirming their ideas on the basis of a universal idea of truth, referring to established frames of reference, will always “strike one another as begging all the crucial questions, arguing in circles” (Rorty 1999: 15), systematically descending into fallacies, attempting to prove any proposition while simultaneously taking that proposition for granted. In Universality and Truth Rorty makes a distinction between “arguing with people” and “educating people” in order to point out the ineffectiveness of rational argumentation within a specific communicative context (Rorty 2000: 19). In Rorty’s view, the point is not only that argumentation is not
effective but, as Susan Dieleman points out, “argumentation does not break out of the established conventions, and because novelty is required for social progress, the motivation must come from elsewhere” (Dieleman 2010: 893). The solution is, therefore, to elaborate alternative forms of communication and expression, which could have more effective practical outcomes, but this can happen only if people move out from the conventional realm of the discourses they have been used to, and start to re-frame and re-describe their world in new and different terms. Again in Universality and Truth Rorty points out that what cannot be achieved on a rational basis through argumentation could be achieved through an “appeal to sentiment” (Rorty 2000: 19). On this basis he also grounds the possibility of using “non-violent means to change minds” (ibid.: 20) by stepping into a different discursive context, which has deep pedagogical implications.

Nowadays, primary and secondary schools are at the crossroads of different cultural instances and experiences and cannot be seen as the safe place within which individuals can be engaged in reasonable conversations and discourses through which different cultural traditions and different vocabularies can be harmonized within a unitarian democratic educational project. This is particularly significant if we acknowledge, as Rosa Calcaterra points out, how there is “an evident asymmetry between the convincing discourses provided for supporting the principle of cultural pluralism and the concrete dynamics of the socio-ethical reality of our time” (Calcaterra 2015: 5) which, I believe, is a very delicate point in reference to educational contexts. Within our globalized societies schools, are, indeed, the melting pot of conflicting instances and are the ground on which individuals with different experiences, opportunities and stories come to interact and grow together, being continuously faced with the impossible but fascinating task of sharing incommensurable experiences through incommensurable narratives and vocabularies. Moreover, the playgrounds of real schools are the foreground of the encounter, often conflictual, of youngsters whose educational possibilities are conditioned by their cultural and social backgrounds and life histories, which are incomparable and unique but still need to be taken into account in order to be explored and contrasted with other possible expressions and narratives. In this context bullies and their victims can reframe their relationship only if they have the opportunity to develop a deeper and wider vision of individual and collective experience, which would allow them to be engaged in other and different discourses, to re-describe the world in new terms and to share their re-descriptions through multiple narratives. As Tracy Llanera explains, this can occur only on the basis of an involvement in some kind of “redemptive relationship” and of an encounter with alternative lifeworlds (Llanera 2019: 27), which is a crucial educational issue.

According to a Rortyan approach, what should be first of all cultivated within educational contexts is not the capacity to argue, communicate and reflect on a rational basis, but rather the capacity to listen, to describe and re-describe, and to use different and even new forms of language and new words in order to create new narratives and re-write the scripts individuals have been referring to. In this perspective, individuals come to have the possibility of developing peculiar capacities of re-description that are mobilized essentially at a private level but, and this is my point, require to be developed at a public level. As Rorty points out in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity “the vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument” and therefore it cannot be “a medium for argumentative exchange”
(Rorty 1989: xiv) but, rather, it can be a tool for a new understanding of the world that other individuals may be challenged to use. As a matter of fact, this is one of the most controversial points in Rorty’s scholarship due to his insistence on the necessity of separating the private from the public dimensions of human experience. This separation is, indeed, particularly problematic from a pedagogical point of view since it would mean that the educational experience and its outcomes are essentially contingent, private and personal and therefore they cannot be designed and planned in advance, nor can they be considered to be for each and everyone. Moreover, since education is a public endeavor, it makes use of shared experiences and resources and makes use of public spaces within which the process of self-creation becomes visible and tangible.

As a matter of fact, in his *Intellectual Autobiography* Rorty pointed out that there is no “barrier” between the public and private spheres (Rorty 2010: 21) but that private projects are often not relevant to an individual’s public engagement, which occurs on a different basis. Indeed, as Tracy Llanera notes, there is a common feature that connects the two dimensions, which can be described as self-enlargement, since both self-creation and solidarity enlarge the individual and collective experience (Llanera 2016). From a pedagogical point of view this feature could be the basis of an educational project which could refer to private experiences of self-enlargement that could be shared and developed within a public dimension. Along a similar line of reasoning Michael Bacon notes that if in Rorty “self-creation begins as a private matter, it need not end there,” meaning that individuals, through the process of self-creation, which is strictly connected with Rorty’s notion of “irony,” come to offer re-descriptions which have a social impact since they “call into question received wisdom” and draw attention to “unnoticed forms of cruelty” (Bacon 2017: 961, 962). As we can see, the main focus of Rorty’s idea of “irony,” which is the tool that individuals use to re-describe their references and their world, is cruelty and in particular, those forms of cruelty that are accepted as legitimate within a cultural, historical and social context, like the cruelty of bullies who attack a child in the playground, or the cruelty of the German soldiers who shared responsibility for the Holocaust. Accordingly, the main outcome of a process of re-description and self re-creation, at an individual and collective level, is therefore the capacity to detect and overcome cruelty within different kinds of human experience, which can be identified as a relevant educational goal. Within this framework, one interesting point to discuss is, therefore, whether individual capacities of re-description can possibly be used as a reference at a social and public level and what their educational impact could be, taking into account cultural and contextual differences. Let us think, for example, of the educational impact that the reading of Anna Frank’s diary, a very private and individual document that was not meant to become public, has had, and still has, on the consciences of thousands of adolescents since its first publication.

Rorty’s separation between the private and the public is emblematic of what in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989) he acknowledges as the “contingency” of individual and social experience. In order to clarify this point we can refer to the reading of the Rortyan thesis of contingency offered by René V. Arcilla (1993), who highlights how it is mainly based on “the freedom of re-description” which enables us to “celebrate what distinguishes one’s self from others through the exercise of irony” (Arcilla 1993: 202). As Daniel Conway (1991) points out, in Rorty ironic self creation is “exclusively a private affair” which therefore has no or little impact on the social
contexts which people live in nor on society as a whole; through irony individuals can re-describe their life and re-create themselves, but this is a contingent and situated process that cannot be shared with other individuals. Thus, the ironist Rorty can look back at his adolescence and re-describe the scenes he has been involved in. However, the same scenes and the same scripts will be repeated over time if there is never a public and shared re-description of the roles of, and relationships between, classmates, which could be useful also to reframe the relationships between individuals and society. In these terms, confining irony to the private sphere means “restricting its corrosive power to the personal pursuit of autonomy” (Conway 1991: 198) and not letting it act in depth on the narratives and scripts that frame the social experience of individuals and communities. Scott Holland (2004), who explores Rorty’s use of literature to find alternative tools to re-describe human experience, points out how his “fondness for the thrill of self-creation” (Holland 2004: 494) is the key to an understanding of the Rortyan vision of the relationship between individuals and society, which is also particularly significant from a pedagogical point of view. In particular, it is important to point out that at the root of the process of self-creation Rorty introduces a key element that requires an in-depth exploration. We can detect it in the passage of Trotsky and the Wild Orchids where Rorty points out that we are “just luckier, not more insightful, than the bullies with whom we struggle” (Rorty 1999: 15) since “we” – the individuals who have a shared understanding of the world as “liberal ironists” –, unlike the bullies, have had an opportunity to re-determine ourselves.

What Rorty calls “luck” is defined as an undetermined space within which education can make a difference, but always on an individual and private basis. Nicholas Rescher (2001 [1995]) describes “luck” as a “rogue force that prevents human life from being fully domesticated to rational management. Its foothold on the world stage is secure by the power of chance, chaos, and choice. Luck and her cousins, fate and fortune, make it somewhere between difficult and impossible to manage our lives successfully simply through planning and design” (Rescher 2001: 12) due to the fact that “our condition on the world’s stage is the product of fate (what we are), of fortune (the conditions and circumstances in which we are placed), and of luck (what chances happen to us)” (Rescher 2001: 39). This understanding of the notion of luck is consistent with Rosa Calcaterra’s (2019) analysis of Rorty’s “contingentism” understood as “a conceptual net tied to the criteria of indeterminacy, ambiguity, uncertainty and randomness” (Calcaterra 2019: ix). “Luck” is, indeed, an “untranslatable” term. Gérald Sfez (2014) explains that it has been used over time to design “either chance, devoid of all intention, or the necessity of nature, that is to say the essential that with which human ‘freedom of action’ is concerned”; on these bases he moves on to name “the paradox of the relation between chance, necessity, and freedom in a manner that remains mythical without being a mystification” (Sfez 2014: 535). In literature, which is Rorty’s most congenial cultural tool, “mythical” refers essentially to what Thomas Stearns Eliot in Ulysses, Order, and Myth (1923) describes as a “method,” first acknowledged by Yeats, useful for the creation of a narrative order by using a peculiar “way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (Eliot 1923: 483), thereby making reference to the images and myths of the past.

Similarly, Rorty uses the term “luck,” which has a deep and dense cultural history, in accordance with a literary (non-philosophical) method, which helps him to give shape and meaning to the contingency of human experience, creating a narrative thread
which can help individuals connect the past and present and make meaning of the present through the images of the past. This methodological choice deeply informs also Rorty’s understanding of the role and function of education and his view of the educational process. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* Rorty highlights how individual experience can be understood in accordance with two different perspectives: a) a perspective deriving from western philosophical tradition which celebrates the individual capacity to “break out” of the world of time, appearance and idiosyncrasy and to reach a stable frame of reference identifiable in terms of “truth”; and b) a Nietzschean perspective which celebrates the capacity to escape from inherited descriptions of the contingencies of existence and to find new descriptive patterns. These two perspectives highlight how individuals are moved either by what Rorty defines as “a will to truth” or by a “will to self-overcoming” (Rorty 1989: 29). Accordingly, “the drama of an individual human life is not one in which a pre-existent goal is triumphantly reached or tragically not reached” following either a constant external reference or an “unfailing interior source of inspiration.” Rather, it is “a process of Nietzschean self-overcoming” portrayed as a “dramatic narrative” whose paradigm is “the life of the genius” who “has found a way to describe that past which the past never knew, and thereby found a self to be which her precursors never knew was possible” (Rorty 1989: 29).

The genius, in Rorty’s view, is not a particularly gifted individual who has innate qualities but someone who is sustained by a strong “will of self becoming,” which is not a will to escape from, contrast or make fun of the cultural habits and traditions individuals are embedded in, but to re-use and re-invent them in a new and more meaningful way. This means that all individuals have the opportunity to be educated, but also that this depends on the contingent and “lucky” encounter of an individual with someone who, or something which, can sustain their process of growth. Within this framework Rorty refers to a specific sort of luck, the luck “which makes the difference between genius and eccentricity,” describing it as a function of contingency, which is tightly interwoven with the individual capacity to move forward and the opportunities of “self overcoming” that individuals can grasp and use in the unfolding of their life experience.

This notion of “luck” is a key and recurring element in Rorty’s educational discourse and contributes also to define the organization of the educational process, as we can see in *Universality and Truth*. Here, Rorty describes education, with a specific focus on college education, as a contextualist effort to help individuals become “participants” in a shared conversation through a systematic engagement with experiences leading to a process of “self-overcoming” which is facilitated by a specific form of “luck”: the luck to have been involved in an educational experience, and sometimes to have been engaged in an educational relationship, that fosters the development of an ironic attitude. Therefore, he affirms that “students are lucky” to find themselves “under the benevolent Herrschaft [domination]” (Rorty 2000: 22) of a professor or a mentor who offers them the opportunity to “overcome themselves” in order to gain the ability to “re-describe” their experiences in different terms. But what is the role and function of Rorty’s understanding of “luck” if we focus on the relationship between formative processes and educational experiences? Can we use the pattern inscribed within Rorty’s notion of “luck” in order to understand the educational process in its mythical tension between the past and present, the cultural heritage and tradition, focusing on the
possibility that individuals have to invent and re-describe their own traditions and vocabularies?

The cultural environment which individuals come from is always the first element that requires to be taken into account in order to understand the contingency of any educational experience within individual formative processes and to evaluate its impact in a long term perspective. As Jim Garrison points out, in Rorty’s view “Education is the site of cultural reproduction” (Garrison 2001: 48) and this happens through a hermeneutic process emerging from the encounter with the narratives that represent the cultural and social traditions which individuals are exposed to. Nonetheless, we see that, in Rorty’s view, in order to be effectively educational, this process should be motivated not by a “will to truth” but rather by a “will to self-overcoming” – recalling the categories introduced by Rorty in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity. Accordingly, education should therefore lead individuals and communities to be engaged as active participants in a cultural process which is not merely a process of the acquisition and reproduction of cultural references and values, but rather a process of the acquisition of cultural tools that the individuals can use to become active participants in a process of growth and change.

This vision of education is clearly an overcoming of the Platonic tradition that has been the main cultural reference for Western pedagogy and has deeply influenced the development of educational actions and practices. In Hermeneutics, General Studies, and Teaching (1982) Rorty tries to sketch a conception of education starting from Nietzschean rather than Platonic assumptions and describes the educational process as “participation in a community effort, learning to take a hand in what is going on, learning to speak more of the language which his time and place in history has destined him to speak” (Rorty 1982: 8). Therefore, each individual through education is engaged in the different cultural narratives which are providing her or him with references that should not be proposed as absolute truths, but rather as true statements acknowledged in a certain milieu and in a definite cultural and social context. This makes possible the emergence and contrasting of different statements and claims of truth, according to a vision consistent with Rorty’s understanding of philosophy and of its relationship to politics and society.

In The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy (1992 [1984]), Rorty acknowledges the “priority” of democracy to philosophy asserting that the worry for freedom is more relevant than the worry for truth; accordingly, democracy should be understood as both the moral condition and the moral end of any educational project, since it is the grounding condition of the possibility of expressing oneself through different vocabularies and of being exposed to those vocabularies. As Rorty explains in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity “truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths” (Rorty 1989: 21). In this perspective the educational experience is what allows us to understand the infinite creative and re-creative potentialities of the human mind and its relationship with the social and political contexts within which it emerges.

For this reason, as Abellanosa points out, in a Rortyian perspective, even in the phase of socialization education is not “a process of helping us to get in touch with something non-human called Truth or Reality (other-worldly, objective, ultimate, unchanging) rather it is what keeps us in touch with our potentialities” and transforms itself,
through the phase of individuation, into what Abellanosa has described as “the process of inventing something which will improve (Dewey pragmatic) our “tradition” (Gadamer hermeneutics), i.e. “what we have been told” (Abellanosa 2010: 98). Nonetheless, the possibility of inventing and re-describing one’s own traditions and vocabularies is closely connected to the political conditions which allow or limit individuals in their capacity to imagine new conditions and new possibilities, which is not only a matter of ethical but also of esthetic judgment. “Truth” and “freedom,” which are the Rortyan equivalents of heteronomy and autonomy, are the two constitutive elements of the educational process and should therefore be seen as part of an experiential continuum, to speak in Deweyan terms, and not as expressions of opposite narratives, as Rorty points out in *Philosophy and Social Hope*.

Here he tries to overcome the cultural and political dichotomy between the “right” and “left” visions of education, the former based on a Platonic and the latter on a Rousseauian and Marxist view, focusing on the idea that education is “the shaping of an animal into a human being by a process of socialization, followed (with luck) by the self-individualization and self-creation of that human being through his or her own later revolt against that very process” (Rorty 1999: 118). As Maria Virginia Machado Dazzani points out, in Rorty’s view the two main aims of the educational enterprise are both to maintain one’s own experiences and to determine one’s own future (Machado Dazzani 2013) and they should be pursued in this order. However, as Rorty himself explains, in this process “socialization has to come before individuation, and education for freedom cannot begin before some constraints have been imposed” (Rorty 1999: 118), which occurs during the primary and secondary education period aimed at familiarizing the young with what their elders take to be true, whether it is true or not. These constraints are cultural constraints, and are therefore contingent and historically determined by the different times and places which people are living in. This means that education cannot be conceived as existing outside a community, which is the context that holds and shares acknowledged descriptions of the world, keeps memories of previous descriptions and narratives, and constructs and negotiates “truths,” including and legitimating new participants in the process of knowledge construction and transmission. The community is therefore the “public” space within which individual conscience and esthetic taste are formed through the socialization process within which students “take over the moral and political common sense of the society as it is” (Rorty 1999: 116).

Nonetheless, as Holland notes, Rorty is not a communitarian but he is rather “impatient with the excessive trend in the contemporary academy and society that celebrates group identity and identity politics” and considers questions such as “What culture do we come from? and What is our relation to that culture?” philosophically and educationally irrelevant. Since he is more interested in the politics of individuality, he acknowledges as more “edificant” the celebration of “Emersonian type stories,” which “provide accounts of how people walked away from identification with this group or that community” and “use individual models to carve out a personal identity rather than turn to group mores to ask how the individual might find his plot and place in some collective identity” (Holland 2004: 500). Therefore, it makes a substantial difference whether or not an individual grows up in a democratic environment, since this determines how the process of “socialization” occurs, which discourses and values
the individuals are exposed to, and which kind of vocabularies they learn to use in order to express their ideas and feelings.

Indeed, Rorty’s vision of democracy is culturally grounded in the pragmatist, liberal and cultural milieu in which he grew up, as he explains in Philosophy and Social Hope. The United States allows US citizens to open “a prospect on illimitable democratic vistas” since the country is, according to Rorty “despite its past and present atrocities and vices, and despite its continuing eagerness to elect fools and knaves to high office” a “good example of the best kind of society so far invented” (Rorty 1999: 4). Accordingly, individuals who grow up there can have the opportunity to be exposed to discourses and narratives which shape their conscience according to a democratic ethos and their esthetic taste according to a narrative and shared understanding of individual and collective experience.

Nonetheless, this is a matter of a mixture of contingent elements that Rorty acknowledges as “luck.” Contingency is therefore an original condition that leaves us open for different individual opportunities and spaces of socialization and, hopefully, of individuation. If it is true that it is the contingent condition of a human being that determines if one grows up in a moral community that shapes one’s conscience and esthetic taste, it is also true that, according to Rorty, there are differences in the educational value of the socialiazation projects that the different moral communities undertake. Therefore, the acknowledgment of existing cultural differences does not justify the acknowledgment of a “cultural relativism” which would legitimate the educational validity of any kind of experience, discourse and narrative, even the most distorted and anti-democratic. Rorty’s educational proposal is indeed an “ethnocentric” one, since he points out that what he acknowledges as “Our moral view” (democratic, liberal) is:

I firmly believe, much better than any competing view, even though there are a lot of people whom you will never be able to convert to it. It is one thing to say, falsely, that there is nothing to choose between us and the Nazis. It is another thing to say, correctly, that there is no neutral, common ground to which an experienced Nazi philosopher and I can repair in order to argue out our differences. That Nazi and I will always strike one another as begging all the crucial questions, arguing in circles. (Rorty 1999: 15)

The lack of this common ground depends not only on the lack of a shared cultural background, of shared narratives and “heroes,” which as a consequence produces the impossibility of creating a common communicative space and of making equivalent use of the same vocabulary or even of constructing a new vocabulary but, before that, on the lack of a democratic moral foundation of individual and collective living as well on the lack of shared esthetic experiences.

It is at this point useful to note that Rorty’s ethnocentrism cannot be assimilated to what is commonly understood as an uncritical faith in the superiority of one’s home culture’s beliefs, practices and institutions but, as Rorty points out in Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth (1991), it is a product of “the liberal culture of recent times” which is “open to encounters with other actual and possible cultures,” and is willing to “make this openness central to its self-image.” In so doing, it enhances its “ability to increase the freedom and openness of encounters, rather than [...] its possession of truth” (Rorty 1991: 2). In this perspective liberal culture, “constantly adding on more windows, constantly enlarging its sympathies,” proposes itself as “a form of life which
is constantly extending pseudopods and adapting itself to what it encounters. Its sense of its own moral worth is founded on its tolerance of diversity” (Rorty 1991: 204).

As a product of the process of socialization, according to this liberal ethnographic educational narrative, individuals are, as David Hildelbrand says, “acculturated but open” (Hildelbrand 2003). In this perspective, Maximiliano Figueroa Muñoz sees ethnocentrism as “a condition to recognize and take into intercultural dialogue, an invitation to respect cultural difference and the task of managing it in order to turn it into a critical self-ethnocentrism and make it transferable to cultural influences that can generate relations of more solidarity” (Figueroa Muñoz 2016: 73). This perspective is also consistent with David Hansen’s idea of an educational cosmopolitanism that includes a grounding “loyalty to the known” and a perspectival “openness to new” (cf. Hansen 2003). However, it has some specific connotations connected to a vision of the educational process, which may have different outcomes according to the success of its phases, within the framework of a very clear view of the human self as well as of the individual engagement in social life.

According to Rorty, the phase of socialization is followed by a phase of individuation, which can be seen as the second distinct and important element of the process that in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature he had described as “edification,” intended as “the project of finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking” (Rorty 1979: 360); edification is indeed the final step of a lifelong project of the self-formation and re-creation of human beings intended as a contingent, centerless network of beliefs, desires and narratives. René Arcilla (1990), Carol Nicholson (1989) and Gert Biesta (1996) have discussed this idea of education as edification which occurs through conversation, as well as through a deeper and wider participation in multiple discourses and narratives. Within the current educational debate this idea is, indeed, very promising and useful in terms of overcoming current mainstream narratives but in my opinion there are some points that need to be discussed and clarified.

First of all, according to Rorty the phase of individuation, which not all individuals have the “luck” to be engaged in, is experienced during the college years which are aimed at offering “a provocation to self-creation” and therefore at helping students “realize they can reshape themselves” (Rorty 1999: 118), developing an increasingly critical, reflective and “ironic” attitude towards the world. Indeed, as Michael Bacon points out, this attitude is the ground on which to build an ironic process of self-creation which plays also a social role “precisely by expanding logical space” (Bacon 2017: 961); moreover, as Christopher Voparil notes, irony “opens a space of freedom, choice, and responsibility that demands our own willed or self-chosen commitment” (Voparil 2016: 1) engaging individuals in a continuous conversation with the others and offering them “alternative perspectives from which to see things” which are precisely “what break the hold of our current, often unquestioned, lenses in order to bring the previously occluded into view” (Voparil 2016: 15).

In this process they learn to look at the world from a different perspective, and become capable of re-describing it in new and different terms; therefore, the process of re-shaping individual life goes hand in hand with a process of “re-description” of the world and of the narratives which individuals are embedded in. As Paulo Ghilardelli Jr. (1999) points out, in this phase education can be seen as a process which sustains individuals in the elaboration of new ways of experimenting the world and of re-creating it through the use of new languages, new vocabularies, new images and new
metaphors within a complex dynamics of continuity, change and growth. But what happens to those individuals who do not have the opportunity to attend college? When and where does the process of individuation really start? Can it occur outside formal contexts or through other forms of relationship and engagement?

Undoubtedly, Rorty's educational proposal has the merit of defining a general framework within which it is possible to articulate or re-articulate the different dimensions of the educational process; nonetheless, compared to the complexity and reality of contemporary educational contexts within a globalized world, the process described requires to be enlarged and integrated, taking into account also the previous additional experiences that individuals gather within informal contexts and the complex interaction occurring between formal and informal contexts. Moreover, the educational process Rorty refers to represents what occurs, or should occur, within a particular kind of democratic society, according to an ethnocentric perspective. It is organized in such a way that the process of socialization, intended mainly as acculturation, is conceived as a phase, long lasting but preliminary, in the process of individual edification. This process occurs only if certain conditions hold: a) the individual has been exposed to cultural elements that can be potentially re-described since they are not proposed as truths but as sentences; b) individual freedom is preserved and cultivated; and c) the individual has the “luck” to be engaged in a process of edification. But what happens if none of these conditions are satisfied? Or if even one of them is not previously fulfilled? Certain individuals, from birth, in various different cultural and political contexts are embedded in informal or formal experiences of socialization which are not intended as a preliminary step to a subsequent process of individuation, but are conceived as totalizing, truth oriented and therefore lacking any premise for an authentic process of edification. Let us think, for example, of the child soldiers of the Camorra (the Neapolitan mafia), who are raised according to shared scripts and narratives within which negative “heroes” are identified as role models, and who grow up within discourses and vocabularies strongly connotated, which do not offer any space for re-interpretation or re-description. Let us think of the children born and raised within the Daesh Caliphate, who have been indoctrinated and exposed to discourses and narratives aimed at shaping and controlling, rather than edifying, their conscience. What chance do these children have of being engaged in a process of individuation and edification and where and when could this occur?

According to the framework designed by Rorty it seems to be almost impossible, unless they are, on an individual basis, “lucky” enough to escape from the cultural and historical context they live in and the narratives which they have been exposed to. In order to have the opportunity to develop a new vocabulary, they need, indeed, to be exposed to other languages and narratives and to encounter opportunities of “self overcoming” outside and beyond the socialization processes which they are engaged in. Tracy Llanera explains how Rorty’s work can help “make sense of the interlocking features of truth, language, and solidarity that shape the life world” of this kind of individual and highlights the role of “redemptive relationships” which “attempt to capture the non-cognitive dimension of human encounter” (Llanera 2019: 20), thereby pointing out the essential role played by some kinds of relationship that have an educational role since they offer individuals the possibility to look at their own experience from a different perspective. We should bear in mind that the formative process unfolds at different levels and in different domains of human experience,
involving multiple actors, times and spaces. Accordingly, from a pedagogical point of view, we should not look at the process of edification as circumscribed and separated within a defined time and space; it is, instead, necessary to explore the conditions that may allow all individuals, even those who do not seem to have the opportunity to escape from the narratives which they are involved in, to engage in a process of self-disclosure, self-discovery, self-understanding and self-determination, in any dimension and at any moment of the formative process. This requires a focus on the potentially edifying opportunities that may function as potential hidden triggers of a “will of overcoming,” as well as on the multiple and various relationships that constitute the texture of individual experience in order to detect the educational potential embedded within it, and to envisage the possible trajectories of edification that each individual could be engaged in. We should also consider that the outcomes of the process of socialization are crucial in the definition of the possibility of individual edification and, therefore, we cannot separate them from the process of individuation.

On this basis, I agree with Robert Reich who does not see the reason why the process of socialization must be separate and distinct from the process of individuation. “Why could they not, for example, proceed simultaneously and co-exist within a continuous project, just as liberalism and irony co-exist within Rorty’s utopian community? Rorty unfairly and arbitrarily limits the process of individuation to colleges and universities. In doing so, he undermines the effect and drastically limits the scope of the ‘provocation to self-creation’ so crucial to his liberal utopia” (Reich 1996: 346). This is also the opinion of Khosrow Bagheri Noaparast (2014) who points out that Rorty’s “dichotomy” between socialization and edification “makes edification impossible to achieve unless there can be a relation between the two phases of education” (Bagheri Noaparast 2014: 98). If the process of individuation unfolds as a process of re-description and discovery of new possibilities of individual and collective life, this opportunity should be offered to each and every individual from the very beginning of the educational project and within different educational contexts, formal, non-formal and informal, also taking into account the fact that not every project unfolds according to a linear perspective that leads to formal higher education.

Rorty acknowledges the educational value of multiple and different educational experiences and of the exposure to multiple cultural stimuli, and encourages individuals to move around the cultural bazaar offered by our contingent world. However, he does not clearly point out how it might be possible to integrate these experiences into a continuous and comprehensive educational project within which each and every one could have equal opportunities to grow. This requires a re-framing of the individual process of edification, which – in order be effective and generative – should not be understood only as a private experience, but also as a public reference for other individuals.

This is consistent with Rorty’s idea of social development as a process guided by “instructive” stories to share, as he points out in Justice as a Larger Loyalty, rather than rational norms, principles and values mastered by a “universal human capacity” (Rorty 1997: 147). An educational project inscribed within this vision of social growth is described in Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality, where the American philosopher highlights the necessity of taking into account the fact that some people “were not so lucky in the circumstances of their upbringing” since they have been “deprived” of “security and sympathy” which are essential conditions to foster individual and collective projects of edification. Again, Rorty uses the term “luck” to
describe a specific and crucial educational condition, which I believe represents a
challenge for a democratic society, within which everybody has the right to be “lucky.”
This means that in a democratic society there should not be deprived and “lucky”
individuals or, at least, there should always be the opportunity for all to overcome
deprived life conditions. The only way to engage both “deprived” and “lucky”
individuals in a unified educational project is to inscribe them within a broader process
of social development, aimed at acknowledging and reducing the conditions of
depivation, and cultural and social change according to shared instances and hopes,
overcoming the distinction between the private and public dimensions of human
experience. This requires the reference to a peculiar educational narrative that can
effectively make use of what Rorty calls “sentimental education,” whose aim is to
develop in each individual an increasing capacity to see similarities beyond differences,
which can be fostered through a deep engagement in a variety of life stories, that
contribute to the creation of new shared narratives and vocabularies (Rorty 1998: 128).
If the role of education is to determine luckier upbringing conditions for a wider
number of individuals and communities, this may occur only on the basis of the
creation of a shared space of understanding within which the public encounter with
private stories of edification can sustain a reflective acknowledgment of the
contingency of the human experience, and a shared commitment to enhance the “will
of overcoming” both for individuals and for the communities they live in, which is the
basis of any democratic society.

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Starting from an emblematic episode described by Rorty in *Trotsky and the Wild Orchids*, which is an effective narrative example of making public a private experience, the article provides an inquiry into Rorty’s thinking around education, with a particular focus on his notions of contingency and luck. In particular, the article offers an analysis of Rorty’s frequent use of the term “luck,” in accordance with a literary (non-philosophical) method, which informs his

**ABSTRACTS**

Starting from an emblematic episode described by Rorty in *Trotsky and the Wild Orchids*, which is an effective narrative example of making public a private experience, the article provides an inquiry into Rorty’s thinking around education, with a particular focus on his notions of contingency and luck. In particular, the article offers an analysis of Rorty’s frequent use of the term “luck,” in accordance with a literary (non-philosophical) method, which informs his
understanding of the role and function of education and his view of the educational process. The use of a literary method is useful to give shape and meaning to the contingency of human experience, creating a narrative thread to connect the past and present and make meaning of the present through the images of the past. Within this framework, Rorty understands “luck” as a specific and crucial condition that highlights the presence of an undetermined space within which education can make a difference in individual life.

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Symposium on Roberto Frega's
Pragmatism and the Wide View of Democracy
System and Legitimacy in the Wide View of Democracy

Matthew Festenstein

1 Roberto Frega’s Pragmatism and the Wide View of Democracy marks an ambitious attempt to construct a comprehensive and critical vision of democratic theory, a vision that draws together elements from pragmatism, from sociological theory, and from critical theory. Responding to the pervasive sense of crisis that surrounds democracy, Frega persuasively argues, requires broadening our understanding of the concept’s scope. Frega seeks to move beyond two prominent conceptions of democracy in contemporary democratic theory. First, there are those who subscribe to an exclusively institutional concept of democracy (which includes most mainstream political scientists, for example) as consisting in a more or less extensive set of procedures that support popular self-rule. To the extent that this group explicitly thinks of the normative dimension of democracy at all, it does so in terms of the instrumental value of certain procedural features, such as competitive elections, the rule of law, and liberal rights of speech and association (e.g., Przeworski 2019). The other mode of thinking about democracy that Frega repudiates locates it within a philosophical ontology of the political and is more inclined to appreciate the non-instrumental value of democracy, but tends to view democracy as a special form of collective agency restricted to certain practices, actors or moments of exceptional creativity (e.g., Wolin 2016).

2 In their place, Frega develops a theory which is underpinned by a fusion of pragmatism, critical theory, and sociological theory. He aims to show how a “pragmatist social ontology of democracy [...] provides a solid basis for an ambitious attempt at reconstructing the whole domain of political normative theory around the concept of democracy” (63). The breadth of Frega’s scholarship is impressive, as is the energy with which he engages with a wide panorama of social theorising, and I am broadly sympathetic both to the philosophical taproots of this project and to the directions in which Frega takes it. Yet this is a very ambitious project and I am concerned that it doesn’t quite deliver on these ambitions in some important ways. After sketching the contours of his account, I will focus on what seem to me two important questions,
attached to his claims about the social ontological basis of his democratic theory and to his account of the normative requirements of democracy.

3 In much of its expository detail, Frega particularly draws on an interpretation of the pragmatist tradition of thinking about social and political theory, encompassing not only the work of John Dewey but also of a range of interlocutors and near contemporaries, such as Mary Parker Follett, Charles Cooley, and Arthur Bentley. At the core of this account is the famous Deweyan claim that we need “get rid of the habit of thinking of democracy as something institutional and external and to acquire the habit of treating it as a way of personal life” (Dewey 1988 (1939): 228). This “wide view” of democracy as a way of life emphasises the everyday, social and pervasive character of democracy as well as its institutional mechanisms, viewing it as “a norm whose fields of application are not only formal political institutions but all the patterns of social interaction, the organizational forms, and the institutional arrangements that characterize a society from the micro level of primary associations to the macro level of its major social, economic and political institutions” (7). In identifying democracy with a set of everyday practices, Frega goes beyond the relatively familiar idea that democratic institutions or procedures require a certain kind of “ethos” or norms among citizens in order to be sustainable or to flourish. Rather, we should think of democracy as property of a social habits, interactions and organisations in general: the “adjective ‘democratic’ could and should be predicated on patterns of everyday human interaction which comply with its normative requirements” (172).

4 These requirements consist of three generic normative features that Frega ascribes to social interactions, namely, relational parity, inclusive authority, and social involvement. Relational parity holds when someone’s position in a relationship and the specific content of her role in that relationship do not depend on her social status: for example, when the status of citizen doesn’t depend on economic standing, gender or race (80). In a democratic society, there is no socially or politically privileged caste, class, gender, race, or other group, before whom others defer. Inclusive authority requires that people are the authors of the decisions whose consequences they will suffer rather than merely passive recipients of these consequences. This “all affected” principle does not mean that there cannot be hierarchy in any social decision: in the workplace, for instance, Frega allows that “hierarchical patterns of authority can be assessed in terms of their democratic quality, which in turn depends on the degree to which subordinates are involved in decision processes” (82). Social involvement refers to a social unit’s capacity to involve all its members in a plurality of social practices, particularly those having to do with a common good. The value of social involvement goes beyond formal and material inclusion in decision-making authority to encompass a broader (and more diffuse) value of “unrestrained access to social practices and spaces, effective integration in social institutions such as the workplace, the neighbourhood, or the educational system” and “the concrete experience of belonging to the same social world and having a significant position in it” (83).

5 Relationships on these terms have a non-instrumental value for Frega: democracy should be pursued, he argues, not “for the sake of other, higher, ends, but is an end in itself” (69). Frega rejects not only what he calls instrumentalism, the idea that democratic processes are valued for the outcomes (say, peace or non-domination) that they deliver. He also rejects what he calls reductivism the idea that democracy is justified by reference to some other more fundamental value, such as justice or
autonomy. Democracy should have the status of what he calls a paradigm value, one which is not valued for the sake of other values that it achieves and which acts as a kind of organising concept through which social and political life can be understood; “the added value and meaning realized by a democratic society or way of life exceeds its mere capacity to instrumentally promote other values such as justice and non-domination. It resides in realizing a self-contained form of life which is valued for its own sake” (86).

If these principles set the normative requirements for democracy, its social location is not restricted to a specific set of political procedures or moments of rare collective agency but comprises a broad field of practices: an overarching concept that extends “to all domains of social life, referring to the ways in which a large variety of social goods, including education, health and the quality of the environment are distributed within a society” (73-4). Here too, the relevant framework is provided through a threefold classification. Frega’s discussion of his core themes is nuanced, distributed and often proceeds through an exposition of others, so in extracting some key elements of his social ontology in this way I may be over-simplifying or missing important distinctions. In essence, the idea is that the basic ingredients of a pragmatist social ontology are habits, interactions, and associational forms or organisations. Habits are dispositions to respond to the world in particular ways (231). Social interactions consist in normatively patterned sets of mutual expectations among members of a group or communicative community. Social institutions are organisations to promote or sustain specific social purposes (such as the family, firm or school):

As a social concept, democracy denotes a society in which [...] three different levels are fused together: it refers to a mode of social organization in which a specific set of habits is integrated within peculiar forms of social interaction in the structured framework of social institutions which are also organized according to democratic principles. These three dimensions interact constantly, so that the distinctively democratic quality of a social aggregate stems from the positive feedback generated by the mutual and beneficial effects of these interactions. None of these dimensions alone is sufficient for a democratic polity to exist. This complex bundle of individual habits, patterns of social interactions, and associational forms is the prime referent of a pragmatist theory of democracy. (134)

Democracy at the societal level emerges from a particular configuration of underlying democratic practice: “A given configuration of habits, patterns of interaction, and organizational forms defines the basic structure of society. A democratic society is one in which these three dimensions are weaved together in ways that are consistent with the three normative principles” (157).

Building as it does not only on pragmatism and sociology but on a wide range of critical theory literature in social and political theory, this social ontology of democracy is meant to have a critical purchase, to be something we can apply to diagnose problems with, to criticise and to revise existing practices:

Defined in these terms, the concept of democracy has the widest possible application and provides a normative standard that operates in all spheres of social life and can be used to assess the quality of any form of human association, offering guidance in diagnosing social pathologies, identifying positive models of social interaction, and devising prospective processes of social emancipation. (209)

Frega goes on to say that for his conception “democracy defines that form of society in which all basic institutions from the family to the state and all major organisations
from schools to firms are organised according to the three principles” (209-10). So (a) democratic theory can’t be a freestanding and purely political theory of institutions. Instead, it is built up with a psycho-social theory of habits, a sociological theory of interactions, and organizational theory of institutions specify the key ontological elements of this conception. Furthermore (b) democracy is a form of society in which all basic institutions are organised in line with the three principles. And (c) this provides a normative critical standard for the assessment of societies, their practices and institutions.

Seeing democracy as located in a multiplicity of social contexts has the advantage of drawing our attention not only to the importance of underpinning ethos and culture for sustaining democracy (a very familiar idea, as Frega accepts) but to the range of sites on which struggles for democracy can occur. The interwoven character of democracy in Frega’s social ontology suggests a stronger claim. Both micro and macro institutions (a school, a democratic society) are democratic when habits, interactions and institutional forms relate to each other in the right way. We can consider Frega’s argument in the light of recent thinking in democratic theory about so-called deliberative systems, which raises the same kind of issue (e.g., Dryzek 2010; Mansbridge 1999; Parkinson & Mansbridge 2012). For a systems theorist, such as Jane Mansbridge, writing of a deliberative conception of democracy, “the criterion for good deliberation should be not that every interaction in the system exhibit mutual respect, consistency, acknowledgement, openmindedness and moral economy, but that the system reflect those goods” (Mansbridge 1999: 224). If democracy or deliberativeness is a feature that distinctively arises at the system level, then it’s not the case that each part needs to be democratic:

A system here means a set of distinguishable, differentiated, but to some degree interdependent parts, often with distributed functions and a division of labor, connected in such a way as to form a complex whole. It requires both differentiation and integration among the parts. It requires some functional division of labor, so that some parts do work that others cannot do so well. And it requires some relational interdependence, so that a change in one component will bring about change in some others […] Normatively, a systemic approach means that the system should be judged as a whole in addition to the parts being judged independently. We need to ask not only what good deliberation would be both in general and in particular settings, but also what a good deliberative system would entail. (Mansbridge et al. 2012: 4-5)

A systems perspective suggests that democracy at the system level requires an ordered division of labour among the different components, as well as the appropriate feedback loops (as Frega says) between them. Yet it doesn’t of course require that each element of the system have the characteristics of the whole.

The significance of taking the wide view of democracy, from this holistic perspective, is that we don’t restrict ourselves to delineating the supportive functions of habits, and interactions for democratic political procedures or institutions but in addition ask the normative question of the range of social habits, interactions and organisations whether or not they serve democratic functions in the wider societal context (cf. Warren 2017). There is an ambiguity in this position. One way of taking the idea that “democracy defines that form of society in which all basic institutions from the family to the state and all major organisations from schools to firms are organised according to the three principles” is that each institution needs to be organised in this way. The presence or efficacy of an organisation that fails to meet the requirements of relational
parity, inclusive authority, and social involvement necessarily detracts from the democratic quality of the wider society. It is not obvious that this is always right. A pressure group such as Greenpeace, for example, which isn’t inclusive or egalitarian in its decision-making, may contribute to improving the democratic quality of the whole by introducing ethical considerations for democratic consideration and public debate that would have been sidelined otherwise, for example, or by mobilizing a sceptical populace. Insisting on the democratisation of these institutions without other compensating changes elsewhere may diminish that societal-level democratic quality. On this microcosmic reading, democratic society is incompatible with any undemocratic element. Taken literally, this casts democracy as primarily a utopian ideal, not one with much purchase on any actually existing social or political form. Perhaps this is right, and we should think of democracy as primarily a utopian or ideal set of social relationships – as Dewey arguably sometimes did (Festenstein 2017). However, this doesn’t seem to fit with Frega’s overall methodological approach rooted in his philosophical inheritance, his project of providing a grounded and sociological approach to democratic theory: the elements of his social ontology aren’t the lineaments of an ideal democratic blueprint. Rather than finding democracy in a wide range of social interactions or as an end-in-view of political action, it would mean we find it nowhere. If Frega’s position is that it is only in the context of the whole being democratic that any part can be, and vice versa, he paints himself into an even narrower corner than those authors like Wolin whom he criticises for envisaging democracy as a fleeting and sporadic achievement. Democracy in this sense is very much à venir, an unachievable ideal that may regulate our current activity, at least if we (whoever “we” are) can agree on what working toward such an ideal requires of us.

On the alternative reading, democracy emerges from the interweaving of habits, interactions and organisations. To describe a society (or any selected social unit) as democratic is not to say that each organisation within it conforms to the three principles but that the society or unit does as a whole. There is a question then of how we deploy Frega’s diagnostic tools, to interrogate selected institutions or to examine wider systems. If democratic pathologies are pathologies of the whole, then it is an open question whether identifying pathology in a part is more or other than identifying the ways in which it may be undermining a democratic system. So the primary critical question to ask in this case of (say) a firm, university, school, or other social institution, is not whether it is itself run in accordance with the three normative principles but whether it supports the wider society’s being run in this way.

The second issue to explore concerns the normative scope of Frega’s three principles. Frega doesn’t really explore the sense in which democracy is meant to have non-instrumental value for everyone in pluralistic societies, including that it is constitutive of their personal self-fulfillment (127). He seems insensitive to the thought that as an everyday practice for some citizens it doesn’t appear that way at all – indeed, to some of us relational equality may feel profoundly disruptive of the moral order that gives our lives meaning. Social involvement and inclusive authority are demanding and expose us to distinctive risks in our social interactions:

But for this reason perhaps someone will say that the popular state is immensely preferable to Monarchy, because in that state, in which of course everyone manages public business, everyone has been given leave to publicly display his prudence knowledge and eloquence in deliberations about matters of the greatest difficulty and importance; and because the love of praise is innate in human nature, this is
the most attractive of all things to all those who surpass others in such talents or seem themselves to do so; but in Monarchy that road to praise is blocked. What is a disadvantage, if this is not? I will tell you. To see the proposal of a man whom we despise preferred to our own; to see our wisdom ignored before our eyes; to incur certain enmity in an uncertain struggle for empty glory; to hate and be hated because of differences of opinion (which cannot be avoided, whether we win or lose); to reveal our plans and wishes when there is no need to and to get nothing by it; to neglect our private affairs. These, I say, are disadvantages. (Hobbes 1998 [1642]: 122)

Would they be considered as disadvantages in the transformed social setting of wide democracy? And if they wouldn’t, how does this matter for agents entangled in the here and now? These have been troubling questions most clearly and deeply discussed by the critical theory part of Frega’s heritage (e.g., Geuss 1981).

The standard form of response to this kind of question, which is central, for example, to Habermas (1996) is that what is being justified by democratic theory at this point is specifically the legitimacy of democratic decision-making: it may be contentious or repellant for some of our conceptions of the good (and this may in turn create problems for its sustainability) but it isn’t intended to be set of universal principles of social association. Rather, the idea is that, if an organisation makes its decisions informed by certain principles then its meeting these conditions provides legitimacy for the decisions it reaches, which can legitimately be taken to be binding on members, and which are underpinned by the exercise of political power.

On this standard view of democratic legitimacy, we can view Frega’s three principles, of relational equality, social involvement and inclusive authority, as a set of candidate principles for a conception of democratic legitimacy, but it is not obvious that they have purchase on every social organisation, since not every organisation seeks to have the kind of binding force on its members that requires legitimation to back it up. It is not clear if the aspiration of Frega’s wide view is to present a transformed and extended vision of democratic legitimacy or, more generally, of a morally justified form of society. If the former, the view seems restricted to those units that raise the normative question of legitimacy. If the latter, then it seems important to explain why this wide view has purchase in circumstances of extensive moral pluralism.

Anyone committed to understanding the challenges and promise of contemporary democratic theory will benefit hugely from engaging in depth with Frega’s magisterial book. Even if it raises deep questions, this reflects the importance of the territory it covers and the vital contribution it makes to mapping that territory.

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NOTES

1. In Festenstein (2018), I discuss the democratic case for the functional value of self-censorship, which also seems to fit as an instance here: habits that may threaten the flourishing of democracy may also support it.

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A Wide View of Democracy and An Inclusive Conception of The Social
Roberto Frega’s Democracy Theory and Its Dewyan Legacy

Torjus Midtgarden

1. Introduction

Perspectives and resources from John Dewey and other classical pragmatists have been applied in contemporary political philosophy for some time. Yet Roberto Frega’s *Pragmatism and the Wide View of Democracy* (2019) is to date the most comprehensive and ambitious attempt to draw on several such resources and to develop them within a systematic account of democracy. Frega not only applies Dewey’s seminal conception of the public but also ontological perspectives drawn from Dewey and other pragmatists. Frega’s book is a major achievement that deserves to be seriously considered and extensively discussed by everyone who thinks classical pragmatism has something to offer political philosophy. In this paper, however, I will only consider certain aspects of Frega’s project that concern his use and development of resources from Dewey. Firstly, I consider how Frega updates and develops Dewey’s wide conception of democracy. While Dewey famously explores the idea of democracy as a social ideal to be applied across institutional contexts, Frega develops a normative concept of democracy which is sociologically informed by social interactionism, construed broadly as encompassing classical sources, such as Dewey, George Herbert Mead and the Chicago school of sociology, as well as the more recent contributions of Ervin Goffman and Harold Garfinkel. Frega’s approach follows Dewey in providing an account of democracy through considering immanent features of social life. I briefly point out that Frega’s proposed distinction between ontological principles that generate and structurate social reality on the level of “habits,” “patterns of interaction” and “forms of institutional organization” (2019: 90), parallels a similar distinction found in Dewey’s social theory. However, Frega’s further attempt (2019: 131) to base a pragmatist social ontology on Dewey’s notion of association calls for more consideration and discussion. In particular, I show how this notion should be articulated in terms of Dewey’s inclusive
conceptualisation of the social – or the social taken as incorporating or integrating biophysical, technological, and psychological processes. This inclusive conception bears on Dewey’s social and political theory through his considerations of human agency. Through an inclusive conceptualisation of the social, he sees human and social agents as involved in processes of production and consumption in which technologies and biophysical elements condition and inform their opportunities, dependencies and vulnerabilities. Notably, Dewey’s inclusive conceptualisation of the social would conflict with the ways in which sociologists have conceptualised the social as *sui generis*, starting with Émile Durkheim (1982 [1895]). Following Anne Warfield Rawls’ interpretation (1987, 2009), even Goffman and Garfinkel can be seen as committed to ways of conceptualising the social as *sui generis*. In building on Goffman’s and Garfinkel’s accounts, Frega’s social interactionist approach, too, would be committed to a conceptualisation of the social as *sui generis*.

Turning to Frega’s use Dewey’s conception of the public, I further consider ontological underpinnings for this conception. While Frega suggests that Dewey’s conception of the public could be supported by the Human Ecology of the Chicago school of sociology, I point out differences as well as commonalities between Dewey’s social ontology and the Human Ecology as outlined by Robert Park and Ernest Burgess (1921) and later elaborated by Park (1936). Moreover, given that Dewey’s conception of the public is based on a notion of “common affectedness” (Frega 2019: 188), I endeavour to show how the latter notion can be spelled out in terms of vulnerabilities and dependencies highlighted by Dewey’s inclusive conceptualisation of the social.

Although in building on Goffmann and Garfinkel Frega would be committed to a conception of the social as *sui generis*, his use of Dewey’s conception of the public further suggests that Dewey’s inclusive conceptualisation would be relevant or even required. I therefore briefly suggest how Frega’s pragmatist social ontology could be expanded by revisiting and requalifying his triadic distinction of ontological principles of social reality (habits, patterns of interaction, forms of institutional organisation) in the light of Dewey’s inclusive conceptualisation of the social. Finally, I present two further reasons for considering Dewey’s inclusive conceptualisation in spelling out a pragmatist ontology: firstly, it would be consistent with the naturalistic underpinnings of George Herbert Mead’s social theory (1934); and, secondly, it could enhance the relevance of Frega’s ontologically based theory of democracy in addressing current global challenges.

2. Updating Dewey’s Conception of Democracy and Developing Its Sociological Basis

Preparing ground for his project Frega points out that “the distinctive feature of political pragmatism” lies in pragmatists’ “original social-theoretic account of the constitutive features of a democratic society, of democracy as a form of society” (2019: 113). As Frega rightly suggests, this interpretation holds not only for thinkers we may think of as sociologists, such as Robert E. Park and George Herbert Mead, but also for John Dewey, the most influential political philosopher in the pragmatist tradition. In fact, as Frega makes clear, Dewey outlines elements of a social theory as a basis for his conception of democracy, perhaps most famously in *Democracy and Education* (*DE*). He here presents his wide conception of democracy as “more than a form of government”
and as “primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (MW9: 93). To sustain his conception of democracy Dewey presents sociological perspectives stressing the centrality of communication for social reproduction of norms and ideals, as well as for socialisation. "Society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication," Dewey thinks, “but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication” (MW9: 7). More specifically, Dewey analyses how individuals through communication may consent to plans of action, and also benefit from the community’s fund of cultural and intellectual resources. While briefly suggesting the mechanism of perspective taking, which was later theoretically elaborated by George Herbert Mead (1934), Dewey’s sociological perspectives on communication became a focal point for the Chicago school of sociology through Robert E. Park and Ernest Burgess’ *Introduction to the science of sociology* (1921). In fact, by relating Dewey’s brief analysis of communication to Émile Durkeim’s concept of collective representations, Park and Burgess even suggest that Dewey’s analysis may be “taken as a description of the process by which these collective representations come into existence” (1921: 38). Nevertheless, Dewey’s analysis of communication in *DE* remains sketchy at best, and Park and the Chicago school never developed a full-fledged (or consistent) theory of society. It is thus to be welcomed that Frega elaborates on this theoretically rich yet underdeveloped legacy of Park and Dewey. I will briefly focus on some aspects of Frega’s development of this legacy.

In qualifying his approach to social ontology as “social interactionist” (2019: 89), Frega takes Dewey, Park and the early Chicago school as part of the same tradition, and he includes also the more recent contributions of Ervin Goffman and Harold Garfinkel. Through following leads of his theoretical predecessors, Frega wants to reconstruct patterns of social interaction of which the predicate “democratic” may be applied, and which further may serve as building blocks for extending the application of the predicate to “the largest possible domains of social life, from basic face-to-face interactions to formal political institutions” (2019: 78). As a theoretical strategy this approach could be seen as an updated elaboration of Dewey’s efforts in *DE* to develop a wide concept of democracy by extracting “desirable traits of forms of community life which actually exist” (MW9: 88–9). Like Dewey, Frega aims to establish a concept of democracy through considering immanent features of social life. Yet, tuned also toward contemporary political-theoretical distinctions, Frega goes on to reconstruct three major patterns or principles. *Relational parity* concerns interaction as symmetrical and not status-dependent; *inclusive authority* stresses that individuals are to be authors of the decisions whose consequences they will undergo; and *social involvement* refers to a social unit’s capacity to involve its members in practices having in view some common good. Frega qualifies a concept of democracy based on these three principles as a “paradigm normative concept.” Like philosophical projects that put emphasis on other master concepts, like justice or non-domination, he thus explores a concept of democracy that could, via empirical cues and examples, be applicable across various domains of social life, and not only in an institutionalised political sphere. In order to extend his application of the concept of democracy to such various domains, Frega (2019: 90) introduces an ontological division between three different levels or strata: “democratic habits”; “democratic patterns of interaction” (or democratic “collective habits”); and “democratic forms of institutional organization.” To some extent, this division parallels Dewey’s distinction in *Lectures in China* between habits, customs and institutions as “broad categories of human activity” (LC: 85) that are to provide criteria
for normative assessment of how social arrangements contribute to “human welfare and freedom” (L. C: 84). In this perspective, Frega may be seen to significantly update Dewey by drawing on Structuration Theory (Giddens 1984) and by taking the triadic division as principles that generate and structurate social reality so that the various levels are “in constant interaction and influence each other” (2019: 90). Yet, a transition to social ontology is in line with the Deweyan legacy and Frega (2019: 131) in fact appeals to Dewey’s ontological exploration of the notion of association. Nevertheless, this abstract strand of Dewey’s social thought calls for more consideration and discussion, not only in the light of other interpretations that put emphasis on Dewey’s concept of habit, like that of Italo Testa (2016). My concern is rather that Dewey develops his notion of association in ways that would not necessarily accord with ontological presuppositions of the social interactionist tradition in the broad sense at stake.

6 Dewey develops his notion of association in two steps. Firstly, as Frega points out, he defines the notion in an ontologically generalised sense. Association, Dewey thinks, is not a unique trait of humans and human societies: all other animate beings and all inanimate things are associated in the generalised sense in which both humans or “atoms and physical masses” are seen as “being acted upon by and affecting other things” (LW1: 138). Hence, “associated or conjoint behaviour” could be seen as “a universal characteristic of all existences” (LW3: 41). Secondly, however, Dewey goes on to qualify the category of human association in an inclusive sense. He thus aims to conceptualise ways in which social phenomena and processes may be taken to incorporate or integrate physical, technological, biological, as well as psychological processes (or “associations”). Rejecting various forms of reductionism, he endeavours to understand social phenomena in their “complexity” (LW3: 44) and to take “the social, in its human sense” as “the richest, fullest and most delicately subtle of any mode [of association] actually experienced” (LW3: 44). Sociologically, the inclusive conceptualisation supports consideration of how social organisation is conditioned and enabled by biological processes and by physical and technological infrastructures. Yet, Dewey’s inclusive conceptualisation particularly matters for his social and political theory through considerations of human agency. As I return to below, through an inclusive conceptualisation, he sees human and social agents as involved in processes of production and consumption in which technologies and biophysical elements condition and inform their opportunities, dependencies and vulnerabilities.

7 By considering and including biophysical processes and natural and technological infrastructures in his conceptualisation of the social, Dewey challenges conceptualisations of the social as sui generis in sociology. While the classical conceptualisation of the social as sui generis is found in Durkheim’s work (1982 [1895]), there are other and more recent attempts that bear directly on Frega’s project, such as those of Goffman and Garfinkel. Anne Warfield Rawls (1987) has pointed out how Goffman’s outline of a theory of an interaction order is an attempt to conceptualise social order as sui generis. An interaction order in Goffman’s sense involves interactional constraints that are not to be derived from an institutional order, nor from individuals or from aggregated effects or effects of routinization. An interaction order would thus be a distinct social entity sui generis. As Warfield Rawls has suggested more recently (2009), Garfinkel’s concept of a “constitutional order” is a comparable effort to conceptualise social order. Hence, in building on Goffman’s and Garfinkel’s concepts of social order in developing his interactionist account of democracy, Frega would be
committed to a conception of the social as *sui generis*. In so far, his approach would thus be equipped to account for social interaction without having to consider psychological and biophysical processes or technologies.

Nevertheless, Dewey’s inclusive conceptualisation of the social would still be relevant for Frega’s project. For example, in considering democracy as “a form of life” Frega notes that “[t]he notion of forms of life connects human experience with the larger space of nature,” and that “[s]peaking of forms of life means challenging the boundaries that separate culture and nature, with the aim of making more visible the entanglement between these two dimensions” (2019: 57). However, Dewey’s inclusive conceptualisation bears more profoundly on Frega’s use of Dewey’s concept of the public.

### 3. The Public, Dewey’s Inclusive Conceptualisation of The Social and Human Ecology

Frega’s project includes an account of democracy as social order but also “a theory of democracy as collective action” (2019: 65). In developing the latter, he employs Dewey’s conception of the public, as well as other pragmatist approaches, to focus on various aspects of “democratic approaches to social problems” and on “the capacities and the conditions which enable and constrain forms of political activation” (2019: 159). Following Dewey’s and other pragmatists’ accounts, he sees collective activation as taking place when agents need to amend practices and institutions “in the face of changes in the social and natural environment” (2019: 160). As Frega makes clear, Dewey’s concept of the public, which turns on “indirect consequences of transactions,” focuses more specifically on “human affectedness, on the existence of a public as the collective body composed of all those who are affected” (2019: 188). While a public must become aware of its “common-affectedness” in order to come into existence, the constitution of a public is originally sparked by “the need to control the circumstances of social and natural life” (2019: 190). On this account, political institutions have thus arisen “against the background of the ecological sea changes which, by transforming relationships between individuals, human groups, and the environment, required new and more complex forms of organized action” (2019: 190). Frega proposes that the term “ecological” could be understood here in the sense of the Human Ecology of the Chicago school of sociology. Although Frega rightly suggests that both Dewey and the originators of the Human Ecology framework take steps to develop a naturalistic ontology, Dewey’s social ontology and the Human Ecology as outlined by Robert Park and Ernest Burgess (1921), and later elaborated by Park (1936), have crucial differences, as well as commonalities. Let us consider differences before turning to commonalities.

Human Ecology would differ from Dewey’s ontological outlook with regard to the conceptualisation of human agency. Elaborating on Darwin’s notion of “the struggle for existence,” Park and Burgess put emphasis on *competition* as “the elementary, universal, and fundamental form” of interaction (1921: 507). Competition for material resources and territory is construed as an unconscious biotic process between human individuals that determines their distribution in space and that underlies the economic organisation of society. Although competition would be constrained by “custom and consensus” in human societies (Park 1936: 13), Park conceives the individual as belonging to a “biotic substructure,” as well as to a “cultural
superstructure” (1936: 13). However, this idea of biotic processes of competition as the most basic level of human agency differs significantly from Dewey’s understanding of human agency. Dewey’s inclusive conceptualisation of the social does not isolate a biological dimension of human agency or privilege it over social or cultural dimensions, nor does it assume any direct link between biotic and economic processes in terms of “competition.” His inclusive conceptualisation rather focuses on how human vulnerabilities and opportunities are biologically conditioned, as shown by childrens’ immaturity and need of care and education, and by the need for adequate food. In particular, through processes of production and consumption, human opportunities, vulnerabilities and dependencies are conditioned and informed by technological artefacts and services and by access to natural resources. In a normative perspective, Dewey’s emphasis on biologically and technologically conditioned vulnerabilities, as well as opportunities, contrasts sharply with Park’s more direct and positive link between “the freedom of the individual” and competition as a biotic process (1936: 13).

Park’s and Burgess’ Human Ecology further suggests general conditions for political activation and action that both compares to and differs from Dewey’s approach. In construing competition as the most fundamental form of human interaction, the human ecologist takes it to be the first stage in an ordered sequence of different forms of interaction. On this account, competition conditions and enables conflict conceived as a conscious form of interaction and as a distinctively political process. “It is only in periods of crisis,” Park and Burgess hold, “when men are making new and conscious efforts to control the conditions of their common life, that [...] competition is converted into conflict. It is in what has been described as the political process that society consciously deals with its crises [...]” (1921: 510). In fact, Dewey’s approach in The Public and Its Problems (TPIP) tends to converge with Human Ecology on the assumption that political action arises from perceived problematic consequences of social, and in particular, economic activities. In fact, Dewey would agree with Park’s and Burgess’ suggestion that political action emerges from a perceived need to control conditions under which economic activities go on. Yet, again, Dewey’s approach differs from that of Park and Burgess in seeing action consequences as problematic, not due to competing biotic agents and their “freedom,” but rather as due to the vulnerability and affectedness of fullblown human agents. He provides examples of the affected public from the 1920s that succinctly bring out this point: child workers, women workers with no protection of their maternal health, workers with no old age pension or minimal wage, and farmers suffering from heavy mortgages and oscillating prices on farm products and agricultural implements. As Dewey suggests in his lectures on social philosophy, understanding human vulnerabilities and ways of being affected requires consideration of natural and technological conditions for economic activities and for different modes of consumption in particular. Hence, human biological aptitudes and potentials, as well as land, natural resources, and vital technological infrastructures and services (such as electricity), must be included in the social and should further be seen as enabling conditions for human opportunities over which the polity needs sufficient control in order to provide for the affected public.
we look for relevant sources of inspiration, Thorstein Veblen and his account of various modes of consumption should be considered, rather than the Human Ecology outlined by Park and Burgess. Nevertheless, Dewey’s inclusive conceptualisation of the social and the Human Ecology of the Chicago school could be seen to share a general ontological orientation. In his later development of Human Ecology, Park takes pains to include not only population and biotic processes but “technological culture” and “the natural resources of the habitat” as constitutive elements of society, as well as “custom and beliefs” (or “non-material culture”) (1936: 15). This conceptualisation of society thus broadly corresponds to basic elements in Dewey’s inclusive definition of the social. By considering and including biophysical processes, natural resources and technology, both Dewey and Park challenge conceptualisations of the social as sui generis in sociology.

As pointed out above, in building on Goffman’s and Garfinkel’s concepts of social order, Frega would be committed to a conception of the social as sui generis. However, Frega’s use of Dewey’s conception of the public comes with a wider set of ontological commitments. Moreover, in view of Frega’s expressed aim to develop a pragmatist social ontology inspired by Dewey’s notion of association, I therefore revisit his ontological distinction between habits, patterns of interaction and forms of institutional organisation in the light of Dewey’s inclusive conceptualisation of the social.

4. A Pragmatist and Inclusive Social Ontology: Habits, Patterns of Interaction and Institutional Forms

Suggesting his tripartite distinction as “principles that generate and structurate social reality” (2019: 86) Frega wants to take into account of how habits, patterns of interaction and forms of institutional organisation “are in constant interaction and influence each other, contributing together to shape social life” (2019: 90). As for the category of habit, however, it fits uneasily within an account of the social as sui generis. Already in American sociology in the 1920s the concept of habit was seen as “closely associated with psychology” and thus as jeopardising the autonomy of sociology – or it was rather taken belong to “the biological field” (Camic 1986: 1071-2). The tendency in sociology to reject this concept contrasts sharply with central role given to it in Human Nature and Conduct where Dewey aims to integrate biological perspectives, seeing habits as concretely embodied in involving “skill of sensory and motor organs” (MW15: 15) and as “requiring the cooperation of organism and environment” (MW14: 15). He further integrates sociological perspectives, conceiving “habits as social functions” (MW14: 15), as well as psychological perspectives, in stressing how reflective habits involve mental capacities and aptitudes through the work of imagination (MW14: 132-5). Frega subscribes to Dewey’s account of habit as “an acquired predisposition to ways or modes of response” and as concerning “the patterns of interaction between an agent and his/her environment” (2019: 231). He further conceives habits in a Deweyan way as incorporating “perceptive, affective, and reflexive features” (2019: 230), taking their “reflective dimension” to be “operational and embodied” (2019: 230). More generally, he holds that “[t]he pragmatist human agent is an embodied social actor” (2019: 128). The underlying ontological commitments for using the concept of habit, however, can be articulated in terms of Dewey’s inclusive conceptualisation of the
social and would involve rejection of possible reconstructions (and reductions) of the concept in terms of the social *sui generis*.

As for the level of social interaction, we may further note how Dewey draws on biological and psychological perspectives in conceptualising conditions for human communication. While taking "[o]rganic and psycho-physical activities" as a condition for "the presence and operation of meanings" (LW1: 220), he sees *sentience* as "an indispensable means of any noetic function" (LW1: 199). Moreover, Dewey's stress on the role of sentience in human communication bears on his account of democracy and democratic processes. Notably, he thinks that emotional as well as intellectual consensus serves as a criterion for the moral rightness of a claim. More specifically, he takes "[t]he emotion of sympathy" to provide a basis for taking other persons' points of view and thus enabling consideration of "what justice demands in concrete cases" (LW7: 251). Sympathy further enables consideration of how "the welfare of all [is] affected by conduct" im-partial (LW7: 259). Dewey's stress on human sentience would be relevant for Frega's theory of democracy as well, in particular for his critical appropriation of Habermas. Frega finds that Habermas "focuses too much up on the linguistic dimension of discourses," while pragmatists "embody rationality in a thicker concept of experience which never loose sight of the deeper interdependencies of the mind with the body and with the outer world" (2019: 260-1). Again, however, an appreciation of Dewey's relevance could be further articulated and sustained through his inclusive conceptualisation of the social.

Finally, Dewey's inclusive conceptualisation would bear on the level of institutional organisation, as well as on the level of interaction, with regard to the role of technologies. In ways recalling Benedict Anderson's historical thesis of "imagined communities" (1991 [1983]), Dewey in *TPIP* considers how modern technologies and news media have enabled the sense of belonging to communities which extend far beyond face-to-face interactions. In industrialised nations, he observes, "[r]ailways, travel and transportation, commerce, the mails, telegraph and telephone, newspapers, create enough similarity of ideas and sentiments to keep the thing going as a whole, for they create interaction and interdependence" (LW2: 306). In other works he considers how new possibilities for sharing and discussing ideas "in areas of social concern" have been opened by new communication technologies (LC: 170). Moreover, he suggests that these possibilities could be developed on the model of international scientific forums for publishing and scrutinising knowledge claims. He thus projects an ideal public sphere which would be enabled and sustained by "the telephone, the telegraph, the radio, the transoceanic cables" (LC: 170) - and which may be sharply contrasted with prevailing practices in business and diplomacy of keeping information secret. Moreover, he speculates how people could contribute to a public fund of knowledge which "can be shared and increased at the same time" (LC: 178). Like scientific forums, such knowledge fund should not be organised through the imperatives and forces of the market, but would rather amount to a "socialism of knowledge" (LC: 178). Yet, he suggests elsewhere, such knowledge fund could enable political and democratic control of market forces and also sustain modes of production and consumption not subjected to these forces. Dewey's projected ideal could be interestingly compared to Frega's consideration of emerging economic practices of peer-production for creating and sustaining *digital commons*. Enabled by the internet these collaborative practices are, Frega points out, "expanding the scope of non-market and non-state models of
production and consumption” (2019: 350), and they have democratising effects through “reducing impact of hierarchical mechanisms of coordination” and through “high levels of decentralization” (2019: 353). Hence, he thinks that “peer-production and knowledge commons create opportunities for a more democratic form of society right at the heart of its technological core” (2019: 352). Although digital commons would normally fall short of providing democratic control as conceived by Dewey, their ways of producing, storing and sharing knowledge of interest to members are comparable to Dewey’s imagined knowledge fund. Moreover, while Dewey suggests that his knowledge fund could be sustained by transoceanic cables, telephones and radio receivers, digital commons are in fact enabled, structured and sustained by the technological infrastructure of the internet. More generally, by showing how communication technologies create new potentials for initiating and coordinating social action across national borders and for building and organising transnational communities, the example of digital commons suggests the relevance of Dewey’s inclusive conceptualisation of the social. Considering also how digital commons involve modes of production and consumption that have emerged in response to prevailing forces of the market, Dewey’s inclusive conceptualisation again proves relevant in stressing how human opportunities and vulnerabilities arise through modes of production and consumption and thus through technological dependencies. Hence, in emphasising the role of economic activities, Dewey’s inclusive conceptualisation, along with Veblen’s social thought, could provide a critical complementation of the social interactionist ontology developed in the earlier chapters of Frega’s book.

5. Concluding Remarks

Frega’s theory of democracy significantly develops and updates Dewey’s conception of democracy in the context of 20th century sociology and contemporary political philosophy. His theory interestingly links up with ontological considerations in Dewey’s and other pragmatists’ work. Yet, as suggested by his use of Dewey’s conception of the public in particular, a pragmatist social ontology could be further articulated in terms of Dewey’s inclusive conceptualisation of the social. I will end by presenting two further reasons for considering a social ontology along the lines suggested above. Firstly, in distinguishing a pragmatist social ontology from conceptions of the social as *sui generis*, one would find support not only in Dewey’s work but also in that of George Herbert Mead, a pragmatist thinker even more intimately linked to developments in the social interactionist tradition as conceived by Frega. In Mead’s work (1934), as well as in that of Dewey, the concept of habit plays a central role and should be spelled out in terms of biological endowments and biophysical processes, as suggested also by Mead’s concept “the biologic individual.” In sociology, this part of Mead’s legacy has largely been left behind, probably because “most symbolic interactionists overlook the biological dimension in Mead’s thought” (Cohen 2000: 87). Recovering this biological dimension may be taken as imperative in spelling out a pragmatist social ontology, particularly so since part of Mead’s work is of a general philosophical nature and could serve as an important source, together with Dewey’s work.

All exegetical considerations of classical pragmatism or pragmatists aside, however, there is another reason for taking Dewey’s inclusive conceptualisation of the social into
account. On Frega’s interpretation, Dewey’s conception of the public focuses on “human affectedness” (2019: 188) and on an “awareness of a shared affectedness” (2019: 359). In later chapters of his book he applies Dewey’s conception in addressing global challenges and in thus considering “transnational publics brought to life by the awareness of a shared affectedness produced by the global reach of risks related to environment, security, health, social welfare” (2019: 359). Yet, the relevance of Dewey’s concept, and hence of Frega’s account of democracy, could be further enhanced by spelling out the notion of affectedness in terms of vulnerabilities and dependencies captured by Dewey’s inclusive conceptualisation of the social. If specified in terms of biologically conditioned vulnerabilities and technologically conditioned dependencies, a shared affectedness regarding environmental risks and health risks in particular could become an even more central focus in a pragmatist account of democracy. That would in turn support the relevance of a pragmatist account in addressing current global challenges.

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NOTES

1. Dewey develops his inclusive conceptualisation of the social in the text to which Frega refers (“The Inclusive Philosophical Idea” [LW3: 41-54]) but also in his lectures on social and political philosophy during the years 1923-1928 (see footnote 12 below).

2. See MW9: 5-7.


4. “By [language] we are led to share vicariously in past human experience, thus widening and enriching the experience of the present. We are enabled, symbolically and imaginatively, to anticipate situations. In countless ways, language condenses meanings that record social outcomes and presage social outlooks” (MW9: 43).

5. See MW9: 8. While Dewey later expresses his indebtedness to Mead (see LW12: 5), it is notable that Mead (1934: 79) makes reference to Dewey’s most elaborate analysis of communication in chapter 5 of Experience and Nature.

6. See Park & Burgess (1921: 36-8, 182-5).

7. For example, Edward Shils has argued that Park “could not formulate a dynamic theory of behavior which would have unified his own classificatory and descriptive scheme and helped to systematize his rich aphoristic insights into modern social structure” (Shils 1948: 10, cited in Bulmer 1984: 122-3). With regard to the Human Ecology framework outlined by Park and other members of the Chicago school, Richard C. Helmes-Hayes has pointedly summed up that, “while formidably broad and ambitious in its scope and enriched by a sensitive tradition of empirical investigation, [human ecology] is an approach whose theoretical reach exceeded its grasp” (1987: 397).


10. In particular, Dewey rejects behaviouristic and physicalistic reductionism regarding mental or social phenomena (see LW3: 45), or reduction of social and moral phenomena to biological phenomena (LW3: 52).

11. Dewey briefly considers how “physiological factors of sex, of procreation, immaturity and need of care” contribute to the organisation of the family (LW3: 48). He further suggests that social phenomena, or society at large, would be sustained by physical and technological infrastructures and by material artifacts: “land, including all the natural resources (and obstacles) and forms of energy for which the word ‘land’ stands [...] the tools and machines by which physical energies are utilized [...] physical appliances and apparatus, from clothes and houses to railways” (LW3: 47).


14. One should also note, however, the distinct contribution of Park’s student, Roderick Duncan McKenzie (1924). As Dennis McDonald has pointed out (2011), there are differences that need to be taken into account between McKenzie’s contribution, on the one hand, and that of Park and Burgess, on the other. In particular, McKenzie did not subscribe to “the sharp distinction between the ecological and the social that Park and Burgess maintained” (2011: 269). McKenzie rather held that “[s]ociety and the social encompass not only human-to-human relations, but also vital relations of humans to objects of nature and culture” (2011: 269).

15. “Competition is universal in the world of living things. Under ordinary circumstances it goes on unobserved even by the individuals who are most concerned” (Park & Burgess 1921: 510).
16. Dewey thus considers “[c]ertain physiological factors of sex, of procreation, immaturity and need of care” (LW3: 48). In TP1P he further brings out how childrens’ immaturity and the fulfillment of their developmental potentials call for adequate conditions for care and education. “[T]he period in which education is possible to an effective degree is that of childhood; if this time is not taken advantage of the consequences are irreparable. The neglect can rarely be made up later” (LW2: 274). Hence, he stresses, child labour has irreparable and irretrievable consequences both for the child and for society (see LW2: 274 and also Dewey 1928).

17. See MW15: 249.

18. In his lecture notes from the same year (1928) Dewey more dynamically considers how natural, technological and artefactual environments are integrated in human production and consumption, and are constitutive elements of human development or “growth.” Through production and consumption, he points out, there is “[d]emand for permanent possession of means that are means for many wants, not exhausted in consumption – for example [demand for] land, for money, for owning books, pictures [...] This want is met however not only by possession but by command whenever needed, streets/lights, lighthouses, schools [...] tools, instruments, appliances, machinery” (Dewey 1928).

19. See Midtgarden (2019) for an historical account of Dewey’s concept of the public that focuses on his practical political support of regulatory policies in the late 1920s and the early 1930s.


21. Considering “the economic-industrial activities that affect the distribution of power, and of abilities, capacities, enjoyments” (MW15: 247), Dewey particularly notes how vulnerabilities and dependencies emerge through various modes of consumption (see MW15: 248-69, Dewey 1928).

22. See also LW3: 47 and LW11: 246.


24. “To be right, [the claim] must be an acknowledged claim, having not the mere power of the claim-antclaimer behind it, but the emotional and intellectual assent of the community” (LW5: 285). In a more negative and critical perspective, Dewey in DE observes how “[i]ndividuals use one another so as to get desired results, without reference to the emotional and intellectual disposition and consent of those used” (MW9: 8).

25. See also Dewey (2015: 37).


27. See Mead (1934: 347-53).

28. See Mead (1932, 1938).

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Pragmatism, Social Democracy, and the Politics of Democratic Association

Ed Quish

1 Roberto Frega’s *Pragmatism and the Wide View of Democracy* makes a powerful case that we should understand democracy expansively, not simply as a political regime, but as a comprehensive social formation that shapes ordinary interactions at their deepest level. Properly understood, democracy does not just apply to formal institutions that translate popular preferences into political outcomes, but defines an entire way of life based on the ideal of free and equal association. Frega argues that while this democratic way of life began to emerge alongside “the twin political revolutions that took place on the two sides of the Atlantic Sea at the end of the eighteenth century,” its promise remains unfulfilled (2019: 1). Today, in the midst of a legitimation crisis for contemporary liberal democracies, Frega argues that his “wide,” “social,” and “pragmatist” conception of democracy is simultaneously more capacious and trenchant than prevailing liberal theories. He claims that “to renew the democratic project it is not enough either to call for the reinforcement of its liberal protections – notably against populist threats, or to revitalize participatory mechanisms, as many left intellectuals contend. In a more encompassing way, what needs to be done is to plunge deeper into its social roots” (2019: 7). Plunging into democracy’s social roots requires a theory that clarifies the meaning of democratic sociality, explaining how democratic self-organization can re-shape our societies according to the free association of a society of equals.

2 While theories of social democracy have often been structured by debates about the politics and political economy of the welfare state or the dilemmas of the parliamentary road to socialism,1 Frega’s position is noteworthy for its specifically social emphasis on the texture of relationships in ordinary interaction, an analytical focus that is meant to encompass “the political as well as the economic and the moral dimensions of associated living” (2019: 17). Accordingly, Frega defines democracy not as a form of government or as a political-economic regime, but as a form of social
interconnection: as “a social unit capable of promoting individual happiness and self-realization by fostering relations of mutual cooperation among free and equal individuals” (ibid.: 2). Frega’s associational focus does not displace many of the traditional political and economic concerns of social democratic politics – reducing inequality, facilitating political participation, democratizing the workplace, among others – but instead reframes their significance by emphasizing processes that render social interaction more egalitarian, inclusive, and fulfilling. Still, Frega’s associational focus does imply an analytical shift away from the dynamics of political conflict and the challenges of economic transformation, re-orienting democratic theory toward the dynamics of democratic habit-formation and social structuration. Guided by the normative standards of “(a) relational parity, (b) inclusive authority, and (c) social involvement,” Frega’s ambition is to provide a theory of association that can serve as a benchmark to evaluate the democratic character of any social group (ibid.: 8).

While Frega’s normative ambitions are often compelling and his associational emphasis leads to a series of important insights, his conception of social democracy stands to benefit from being widened further, specifically in order to integrate the dynamics of political economy and political conflict into his interactionist social theory. Further expansion along these lines seems promising within Frega’s theoretical parameters, since it can enrich his account of democratic association rather than do what he clearly intends to avoid – namely, place a structuralist or methodological individualist theory of political economy or a theory of foundational antagonism at the basis of his social ontology.

To elaborate on these suggestions, I will explore a series of limitations in Frega’s argument that result from insufficient attention to political economy and political conflict. These limitations manifest in the book’s historical argument, its theory of relational equality, and its reliance on an overly voluntarist understanding of political change. While Frega’s desire to ground his theory of social democracy within a general history of democratic modernity is admirable, his claim that the persistence of aristocratic forms of hierarchy and social seclusion represents social democracy’s major antagonist sidelines the conflict between capitalism and social democracy, allowing too many difficult questions to be avoided. Second, and relatedly, I try to show how the limits of this historical framing have consequences for the book’s normative theory of association, specifically the vision of relational equality that underpins it. And finally, I offer a sympathetic critique of how Frega envisages the relationship between social and political democracy. Here, I attempt to show that progress for social democracy requires combining the voluntary, associational impulse that defines American pragmatism with an acknowledgement that democratization requires collective agents that are organized on a large scale and willing and able to engage in conflict.

Democracy’s Social Revolution

Rather than place a free-standing normative ideal at the core of his account of democracy, Frega develops his theory of democracy by reconstructing a series of normative practices that have underpinned the social evolutions of democratic modernity. Given the centrality of historical reconstruction for the book’s methodology, the nature of Frega’s historical narrative has deep importance for his
overall theory. Frega’s wide view of democracy is rooted in an expansive assessment of the consequences of the age of democratic revolutions. According to Frega, these democratic revolutions created more than new political institutions, but “a complex socio-cultural-ideological-organizational-economic syndrome, something that is well captured by Claude Lefort’s definition of democracy as a ‘form of society’ or, in Marcel Mauss’s terminology, as a ‘total social fact’” (Frega 2019: 7). Following Lefort, Frega claims that the basis of democracy’s social revolution was the transformation of an aristocratic society of orders into a society of equals integrated by their own voluntary association. As Frega puts it, “The idea that free and equal individuals could associate freely was profoundly new, unsettling, and contested. To be achieved it required the invention from scratch of a new form of society, one in which social cooperation would be achieved through voluntary association among free and equals rather than through integration through the traditional mechanisms of rank, privilege, and hierarchy” (2019: 108). The book’s central argument is built around the unfulfilled potential that Frega sees in this ideal, stressing how it remains both theoretically under-clarified and practically unrealized.

While we might interpret the meaning of these transformations differently depending on how we understand the meaning of “voluntary,” “free,” and “equal” – they can indicate an individualistic, liberal vision of society bound by contracts as much as a social democratic vision of cooperation premised on solidarity – Frega paints a compelling picture of what he believes the democratic ideal of free association demands. He claims that it requires, “the removal of all the social, cultural, economic, educational, and political obstacles which hinder the realization of a society of equals in all dimensions of social life, that is, in the family, the workplace, education, the civil sphere, and access to political positions. This form of social equality can be achieved only if formal as well as informal conditions of access to symbolic, cultural, social, and material goods are equally distributed with no considerations of status” (ibid.: 52). In other words, democracy implies that relational equality should structure all forms of social interconnection, allowing maximal opportunities for individuals to access the benefits of the society to which they contribute and to experience self-fulfillment through social cooperation.

Since these aspirations remain substantially unfulfilled, there must be obstacles that have impeded and continue to impede their progressive realization. In Frega’s view, these obstacles are external to the idea of a democratic society that began to emerge in the age of revolutions: they derive from the durability of pre-democratic systems of status and rank that impede free association, obstacles that he describes as “the persistence of the ancien régime” (ibid.: 107). Stressing how quasi-aristocratic arrangements and social ideals continued to structure democratic modernity well into the 20th century can be illuminating, and there is a tradition of democratic critiques of the rise of new “aristocracies” within labor and social democratic circles throughout the 19th century that Frega’s account can draw upon. At the same time, claiming that social democracy’s main adversary is the persistence of the ancien régime does not bring into focus how capitalism has impeded free association, often under the guise of preserving voluntarism, freedom, and equality. At both the practical and theoretical level, these obstacles are not external to the social formations created in the 18th century revolutions, but an immanent part of their forms of politics and social relation.
Both American pragmatism and its contemporary democratic movements reflected the critical potential and the limitations of the opposition between democratic equality and aristocratic privilege that shapes Frega’s historical narrative. In John Dewey’s earliest writings on democracy, he echoed Frega’s claims, lamenting how an “aristocratic ideal” premised on the use of political power for “the assertion of privilege and status and to the detriment of the common good” continued to shape political theory and practice well into the late 19th century (Dewey 1969: 242). Dewey was not alone in adopting this critical frame. Under the banner of republicanism, contemporary American labor organizations like the Knights of Labor polemicized against their slavery to an “industrial aristocracy” as they agitated for a cooperative form of industrial democracy. Yet moving into the twentieth century, both Dewey and organized labor sharpened their critique. Labor began to see its antagonism with capital not as the result of special, quasi-aristocratic privileges, but as an immanent part of capitalist society’s self-reproduction. These realizations emerged from a straightforward learning process. The capitalists who fought to undermine labor’s organizations did not have any formal status-superiority to the workers who they dominated. Instead, their power over labor was rooted in their ownership of capital, protected as a generic property right that any citizen had a formally equal right to enforce. Even as a panoply of arguments circulated about how to ease or resolve that antagonism, a candid acknowledgement of its formative social power was at the root of their social diagnoses. In other words, rather than reflect the America of Tocquevillian myth – where civil society is a neutral terrain of interaction in which an equal citizenry can associate freely – efforts to form unions, cooperatives, and other popular social infrastructure demonstrated how capitalist society is stratified by the unequal effects of equal rights, with profound consequences for how different social groups can organize and which organizations can gain effective power. Generic commitments to property rights protected capital accumulation for the few and enforced wage-dependence for the many, ensuring that even labor’s basic associational rights could only be the outcome of often violent struggles.

By the time of *The Public and its Problems* Dewey also abandoned the idea that the obstacles to democratization revolved around the persistence of status and privilege. Instead, they revolved around how the associational fabric of society was predicated upon a deeply unequal distribution of social and political power that was itself a result of dynamics set in motion during the late 18th century revolutions. These inequalities ensured that the state would be controlled not by an “inclusive and fraternally associated public,” but by the leaders of society’s major economic institutions. As he wrote, “The forms of associated action characteristic of the present economic order are so massive and extensive that they determine the most significant constituents of the public and the residence of power. Inevitably they reach out to grasp the agencies of government; they are controlling factors in legislation and administration” (Dewey, 2012: 100, 99). As Dewey elaborated further, “The same forces which have brought about the forms of democratic government, general suffrage, executives and legislatives chosen by majority vote, have also brought about conditions which halt the social and humane ideals that demand the utilization of government as the genuine instrumentality of an inclusive and fraternally associated public” (ibid.: 100). Only by constituting itself as a collective actor in its own right could the public develop the countervailing power to alter these dynamics and lay claim to the political agencies that governed in its name.
If social democracy’s main adversaries are inequalities rooted fundamentally in pre-democratic forms of status hierarchy, it is hard to see how the distinctive problem of private capital’s integration with the democratic state arises, and it is equally hard to see how democratic critics would grapple with the consequences of social arrangements where inequalities that impede free association – like those that empower capital to disorganize, intimidate, and suppress labor – occur between citizens with no distinction in their formal status. On the other hand, if we take the problems raised by capitalism as central to democratic modernity – and perhaps more salient for social democracy than the persistence of the ancien régime – we confront a series of unavoidable questions that have structured experiences of social democratic politics for generations, but that are a minor theme of Frega’s account. How can workers develop their political capacities within labor unions? How we integrate these organizations (alongside community groups and other institutions in civil society) into political parties that can contest the power that capital exercises over the state?

**Relational Equality**

If social democracy’s main obstacles are forms of status hierarchy that impede equal individuals’ ability to associate freely, our positive vision of democratic association will reflect an effort to negate these specific wrongs. While the normative principles that shape Frega’s account of democratic association – relational parity, inclusive authority, and social involvement – all reflect this specific critical focus, they also open onto more radical possibilities that have the potential to both deepen and sharpen Frega’s account of relational equality. The ideal of democratic association that emerges from this historical diagnosis conveys an image that is compelling but unstable, with critical purchase on contemporary politics that is apparent, but often diffuse. Again, we can appeal to a few aspects of Dewey’s philosophical worldview that appear in Frega’s account, but could do more to structure it. Taking in their full meaning demonstrates why relational equality requires a positive account of agential equality that strives to universalize experiences of intelligent self-direction and creative expression.

In his formal discussion of the normative criteria that shape democratic association, Frega claims that “Relational parity obtains when an individual’s position within a relation and the specific content of that relation do not depend on one’s social status. For example, when the status of a citizen depends upon one’s economic standing, or when authority in a relation depends upon gender or race, the principle of relational parity is violated […] What matters most for relational parity, therefore, is not what one has, but how one is treated” (Frega 2019: 80-1). The next criterion, inclusive authority, demands that “individuals be the authors of the decisions whose consequences they will undergo,” and animates a call for the democratization of hierarchy by fostering participation in decision-making and cultivating legitimacy between leaders and led in a variety of social institutions (ibid.: 82). Finally, social involvement refers to “the effective, material inclusion in the concrete activities of a community” which implies “residential integration, equal opportunities in schools, meaningful and sufficiently creative jobs, and moderate economic inequality” so as to create the “experience of belonging to the same social world and having a significant position within it” (ibid.: 83).
On the one hand, Frega’s three principles all appear to refuse a radical conception of equality that would cast suspicion on all forms of inequality. Instead, they often rest on the hope that those who are unequal can nevertheless meet on a plane of equality. The result is that while egalitarianism is at the core of Frega’s account of democratic association, his argument for egalitarianism always proceeds by making space for inequality. For instance, those with different (and by implication, unequal) “economic standing” should not have their “status” as citizens compromised by that inequality, a claim that seeks to mute the social and political effects of inequality rather than overcome it. Inclusive authority does not simply account for dynamics of leadership in democratic organizations, and instead rests on an explicit defense of hierarchy, understood to be “to a certain extent, unavoidable in social relations” (ibid.: 82). Reflecting the ambition to undo the effects of status, social involvement is frequently discussed in purely negative terms – as a demand for the abolition of obstacles to voluntary association rooted in discrimination and social seclusion – even if it also elaborated in positive terms as cooperative problem-solving among equal participants in inquiry. The former, constrained view predominates in Frega’s technical definition, where social involvement demands that one’s position in society is “significant,” rather than equal. It asks for a society where we all in some sense belong, but does not demand that society belongs equally to all of us.

At the same time, many of Frega’s ambitions appear to push beyond these restrictions, especially when he moves beyond negative formulations of their meaning. When Frega discusses how social involvement implies joint-problem solving within a community of equals – an associational experience akin to the process of scientific inquiry – he is pointing toward a form of social relation where involvement is more than significant, but substantively equal. In Dewey’s Lectures in Social and Political Philosophy, he defined the problem of social democracy in a way that reflects the specific nature of his own radical egalitarianism: “This basic problem of industrial society is to establish conditions that will place all men in their labor on the plane which the small class of scientists and artists now occupy. Then there will be a real consummation of social life in full freedom. There will [be] a true social democracy” (Dewey 2015: 94). Implicit in this hope is more than we find in Mary Parker Follett’s theory of “integrative management,” but the radical aspiration to universalize experiences of agential capacity at all levels of society. As Frega is well aware, Dewey’s egalitarianism is a core component of his social epistemology. Dewey argued that since each person’s perspective on the associational experience is presumed to have equal validity, the only way to arrive at an actionable hypothesis among competing agendas is to engage in a process of inquiry in which all claims are effectively integrated. Here, there is clear resonance with Follett’s arguments. At the same time, Dewey’s aspiration to elevate the epistemic and creative experience of labor go far beyond the hope for a more inclusive managerialism. Instead, they point toward a society where workplaces are organized as experimental laboratories where the division of labor is functional rather than hierarchical, ensuring that all members are given an equal opportunity to creatively resolve problems, shape their joint activity, and benefit fully from the fruits of their labor. Can such an aspiration be realized in a society where workplaces are fundamentally organized as sites for the accumulation of private capital? If it cannot, one can hardly perceive a difference between Dewey’s aspirations and those of the Socialist Party of America’s presidential candidate Eugene Debs, who hoped that with the achievement of a truly democratic society, “The industrial dungeon will become a
temple of science” (Debs 1948: 241). Approaching this ideal not only requires an unambiguous defense of our equal epistemic and creative capacities, but a conception of distributive justice that equitably shares the burdens of social reproduction and clarifies how distributive and relational equality can work in tandem.

The Search for the Public

A cardinal component of pragmatism is that the normative ideals that shape the ends of our action cannot be conceived as independent from the means for their realization. Viewed from a comprehensive perspective, ends and means are not distinct, but parts of a continuous process of agency in which each advance re-shapes the terrain of action and opens new possibilities. Far from a kind of hard realism that counsels rebuking robust ideals for the sake of a narrow focus on the short-term, Deweyan pragmatism only demands that our ideals are rooted in the possibilities revealed by experience. In Human Nature and Conduct, for instance, Dewey cautioned specifically against positing ends that fail to inhere in present possibilities. As he put it, “The “idealist” sets up as the ideal not fullness of meaning of the present but a remote goal. Hence the present is evacuated of meaning. It is reduced to being a mere instrument, an evil necessity due to the distance between us and significant valid satisfaction” (Dewey 1930 [1922]: 274). In his view, democratic progress should express something of the “fullness of meaning” that inheres in experiences of shared agential capacity, and his account of democratic political transformation was based in the hope that these experiences can proliferate as they re-shape the political organizations responsible for steering and managing a complex modern society.

At a fundamental level, Dewey understands enhancing democratic agency as an effort to transform social intelligence: how it is generated, directed, and made effective. In Dewey’s view, intelligence is “a short-hand designation for great and ever-growing methods of observation, experiment and reflective reasoning which have in very short time revolutionized the physical and, to a considerable degree, the physiological conditions of life” (Dewey 2004 [1948]: v). As an inherently social and collective capacity, intelligence is bound up not only in the worldviews of society’s members, but in the formation of their collective habits and agential possibilities. Intelligence and its attendant phenomena – reflexivity, problem-solving, experimental exploration, and personal growth – reflect the structure of effective human learning, and they permeate any society, democratic or otherwise. The ambition of Dewey’s “democratic experimentalism,” therefore, is not to simply use democratic politics for the purposes of experimental exploration, but more radically to transform the very associational fabric of society by making the structure of all experimental learning more democratic. Frega’s exposition of this component of Dewey’s philosophy insightfully notes that the democratic method, “does not consist in treating society as a place for naturalistic experiments or for sophisticated institutional engineering, but rather in identifying the conditions under which the knowledge producing capacities and the learning potential which is already implicit in social life can be enhanced” (Frega 2019: 284).

By the late 1920’s, Dewey came to describe this process as the public’s self-discovery. As Frega explains, in an era when the demos of modern nation states came to be understood more and more through the metaphor of a crowd, Dewey and other pragmatists insisted that self-aware publics could still discover their capacities for
intelligent collective action in new social conditions. In Dewey’s view, the public’s eclipse was not the inevitable result of complexity or technological change, but a result of how the forms of social intelligence upon which public consciousness were built – “our enormous natural resources, our vast machinery of production and distribution, and the wonderful technical skill the country possesses” – had emerged without corresponding political agencies that could subject them to the cooperative control of a self-governing community. While social intelligence has proliferated, it is not only internally disorganized, but it has no higher-level steering agencies to help coordinate its actions, preventing the public from exercising regulatory control over the consequences of its own activity. What Dewey understood as the public’s self-discovery therefore required both a social and political aspect: organizations that inculcated democratic habits needed to proliferate, but they also needed to develop the power to exercise control over the state, which meant wresting control away from the powers that not only utilized it for their narrow self-interest, but whose power contributed to the very disorganization of the public itself. A key question then emerges: what precisely are the agencies that can allow the public to discover its capacities and act upon them intelligently?

In his most thorough discussion of contemporary politics, Frega argues that new, transnational publics can emerge through the agency of “norm entrepreneurs” like environmentally conscious certification agencies, which spread information, re-shape consumer practices, and advance a policy agenda that transcends the boundaries of national public spheres. He praises entrepreneurial authority because, “its legitimacy relies on purely social sources. It does not derive from processes of delegation of state authority but is based only on freely obtained consent” by consumers in the market (Frega 2019: 387). Frega’s emphasis on private volition resonates with some aspects of Dewey’s worldview, but it ultimately fails to account for the depth of the problem of the public’s eclipse, either in Dewey’s time or in ours. By doing so, Frega misses the opportunity to demonstrate the continuities between Dewey’s problems and ours, which should focus our attention on the difficult but urgent task of re-building the political parties that once served as large-scale institutions of democratic participation and collective agency.

Dewey might have written in his early essay on democracy that “The democratic ideal includes liberty, because democracy without initiation from within, without an ideal chosen from within and freely followed from within, is nothing,” (Dewey 1969: 245), but he did not argue that the public could be formed by the purely voluntarist strategies of obtaining individual consent, either in the market or through public deliberation through the national media. The public needed agencies that were willing to intervene meaningfully within society, re-shaping its practices in order to facilitate democratization. In fact, Dewey’s mature political writings criticized the liberal individualist idealization of private volition quite radically, since he recognized that from its standpoint, any structural social change would be viewed as a suspect infringement on the possibilities of private choice. His rejection of this view went so far as to suggest that its widespread adoption undermined social progress itself, given “its denial (more often implicit than express) of the possibility of radical intervention of intelligence in the conduct of human life” (Dewey 1960: 78).

While The Public and its Problems did not account for the specific institutional ecosystem that could support the public’s self-discovery, Dewey’s own political actions in
subsequent years illustrate the kinds of changes that he believed were necessary to advance this goal. In the midst of the Great Depression, Dewey began to advocate the formation of a new political party that would put forward “a new conception of politics, a new conception of government, and of the relation of the government to the people in this country” (Dewey 1987: 276). A new party would refuse the parameters of established party’s rhetoric, influence networks, and habitual forms of political competition. Instead, it would gather together a plurality of popular organizations and direct their focus not simply to internal self-organization, but to external conflict with political opponents. During this time, Dewey studied the history of third-party farmer/labor organizations, taking on their failures as a problem to be resolved in its own right (Dewey 1985: 238). His ambition was not simply to federate democratic organizations, but to organize them for victories over adversaries, both within and outside the formal institutions of liberal democracy. For these tasks, a theory of democratic association needs to integrate the dimension of political conflict, including for moments when an “integrative” solution is not politically appropriate. With no coherent, nationally and internationally recognized bearer of a social democratic way of life, embodied in an organization that maintains an ideological distinction with competing parties, intervenes in society, and maintains a willingness to coerce its adversaries, the public’s search for its agential capacities will proceeds unfocused, divided, and ultimately eclipsed by its well-organized, well-financed, and self-interested opponents.

Democracy’s Future

An important part of Frega’s intervention is that it resists a tendency in critical thought to see the democratic era as already eclipsed. Wolfgang Streeck, for instance, argues that contemporary hopes for a more democratic future “presupposes a degree of political control over our common fate of which we cannot even dream after the destruction of collective agency, and even the hope for it, in the neoliberal-globalist revolution.” (Streeck 2014: 46). Frega’s argument can help us see how these forms of intellectual pessimism rest on mistaken views about democratic collective action. Just like Dewey argued with the advent of “mass society” reclaiming our agential capacities is an omnipresent possibility for social collectives willing to struggle for more shared control over their common fate. In these processes, we should reject the inegalitarian heritage that has dominated Western political thought in all of its guises, using own experiences of what it means to be free and equal with others as a motivation for action, and the germ of a democratic ideal worth fighting for.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. See, for example, Przeworski (1985).

2. On the Knights of Labor see Gourevitch (2012).


4. For an insightful historical account of labor’s efforts to wrestle with these theoretical and practical issues, see Montgomery (1981 [1967]).
Replies to critics, European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophies

Roberto Frega

1 First of all, I warmly thank Matteo Santarelli for having put the symposia together, and Matthew Festenstein, Torjus Midtgarden, and Ed Quish for having accepted his invitation. Once a book is published one has the tendency to let it behind and jump to a new project. Yet this is the time when critical distance finally comes, and one sees better the blind spots and limitations of one’s own project. To that extent, engaging with alerted and critical readers is the best opportunity one has to grasp in a more comprehensive way one’ own undertaking, for the better, and for the worse.

2 I see this book as the first step of a broader intellectual attempt – the renewal of the democratic project itself. As a consequence, the book wasn’t even in press that I was already working at a series of articles where some of the topic that could not find sufficient discussion in the book were addressed. Among them, I wish to mention a piece on the social ontology of democracy,1 two on the renewal of social-democracy,2 and a series of five papers on workplace democracy.3 Compared to the book, these articles are much less dependent on the intellectual resources of a specific philosophical tradition and are more, so to say, intellectually “freestanding.” If I mention this, this is only to make more explicit that this book was just a beginning. More than deploying the entire plot, I was particularly committed to showing the relevance to the project of a philosophical tradition – American Pragmatism – to which study I have devoted the largest part of my academic career so far.

3 In what follows I will briefly take on my critics’ comments in their publication order in this symposia.

4 Festenstein focuses the first row of critical comments on an apparent paradox. He contends that an all-encompassing application of the democratic norm to social life would fail to appreciate the democratic importance of associations which are organized in non-democratic ways. He quotes pressure groups, but also political parties and the
army fall into this group. He sees them as anti-democratic in their internal organization, yet necessary for the functioning of democracy as a system. This is, indeed, a topic I discuss in Chapter 7, where I take on Mark Warren’s theory of democracy and associations and introduce the notion of associational relations.

5 I think Festenstein is right in raising the question of a possible tension between the micro and the macro dimensions of democracy, yet I am persuaded that the tension does not give rise to a paradox, since my claimed priority of democracy as a form of society has the status of a prima facie claim. Social organizations such as pressure groups, churches, and political parties have a specific function within a democratic polity. At the same time, their internal organization matters for democracy (p. 267). On the one hand, there is the question of the specific democratizing function of a given type of association, no matter how it is organized. This is the system or macro level. On the other hand, there is the question of the democratizing meaning of internal patterns of organization. This is the micro level.

6 By replacing the idea of the democratizing function of associations as such with that of the democratizing function of the associational principle, my contention is that associations that have a democratic function at system level ought still to comply, at least prima facie, with the democratic norm as a principle of internal organization. These two imperatives, the functional and the expressive, need to be identified, disentangled, and maximized as much as possible. Maximizing the functional while improving the expressive would boost the democratic quality of our societies to a much higher level. In this sense, I do not see my contention to be utopian, quite the contrary.

7 As a matter of fact, not all pressure groups, nor all parties or churches are organized in the same manner, and the same holds for armies. Even within associations of this type we can distinguish between more democratic and less democratic organizational patterns, and the three principles of (a) relational parity, (b) inclusive authority, and (c) social involvement are there to help us do this discrimination. Armies can hire or exclude women, include or discriminate homosexuals, exercise authority in violent or deliberative ways, and all this matters infinitely for the democratic quality of a society.

8 As Festenstein has written in his comments, a pressure group such as Greenpeace is neither inclusive nor egalitarian yet it has democratic relevance. My point is that its usefulness at system level should not be a justification for tolerating an undemocratic form of internal organization. Greenpeace could continue to fulfill its democratizing function while adopting more inclusive, less inegalitarian, and less hierarchical organizational patterns. If this can be done without imperiling its functional contribution to democracy, then there is a duty to improve its democratic internal organization. If not, then we face a conflict between two democratic imperatives which would have to be settled. I do not think this tension can be removed, because any form of human organization faces at the same time internal and external constraints, it must comply with input- as well as with output-legitimacy requirements. Democracy, in other terms, is successful only if it delivers. Efficiency according to my view is built into the conceptual and sociological fabric of democracy, it is not its antithesis (see ch. 8 on this).

9 The second question Festenstein raises in his commentary is that of the possible incompatibility of my account of democracy with pluralism. That is, with the idea that many people may simply not share my views about inclusion and authority.
Festenstein’s concern stems, I fear, from with my unwillingness to provide a justification of democracy and its legitimacy, so that I may appear to have simply dressed the list of my preferred normative principles, expecting others to share my views.

This is a major point of contention, because I actually do not share political theory’s overconcern with justification and legitimacy. My sense is that political theory’s infatuation for them has done a bad service to the profession and to the larger society, since we have lost familiarity with other major and fundamental academic practices, one of which consists precisely in articulating complex normative meanings, as we do when we reinterpret notions and traditions. In my book, I take it as an uncontroversial starting point that democracy has provided the social and political horizon of Western societies for the last two centuries. I do not see much need, today, to engage in complex theoretical justifications of this point. Yet I think that the meaning of the democratic project which sets our societal horizon remains insufficiently spelled out. We have had, in the past, a thriving debate about the supposed priority of equality over freedom, or of liberal over socialistic democracy but we have, most of the time, forgotten fraternity, the third normative pillar of the democratic project that saw its birth with the French and American revolutions of the late 18th century.

Yet in the last three decades even this kind of debate has mostly been abandoned, and our intellectual energies have been focused on increasingly sophisticated justificatory exercises which are not of much help to understand what does it mean for us European, today, to live in democratic societies. More than another justification of the superiority of democracy over authoritarianism, we need to start thinking again about the manifold meanings of the democratic norm, about its larger societal and economic implications, about how democracy transforms our life opportunities, how it shapes our interactions with our fellow human beings, how it determines our chances and expectations.

Festenstein writes that “It is not clear if the aspiration of Frega’s wide view is to present a transformed and extended vision of democratic legitimacy or, more generally, of a morally justified form of society.” My answer would be that my aspiration is neither of these. If I speak of a democratic project (actually, my original and preferred title, rejected by the publisher), this is precisely because my aspiration is to renew the normative horizon within which we live together, which requires in turn a fresher interpretation of what constitutes this form of life beyond (or below) its protective political shell. That is, the social interactions of which social life consist. The three principles of relational equality, social involvement and inclusive authority simply reformulate the old democratic triad of freedom, equality, and fraternity in a way that I find more helpful to describe how democracy as a norm informs our everyday life. Yet the basic intuition is nothing new. It is, simply, what democracy has been consisting of for more than two centuries, even though, perhaps, only in a still limited part of the world.

Torjus Midtgarden takes a more historically oriented route to my book, challenging some of the intellectual associations on which I rely to broach my social ontological reading of Dewey’s idea of democracy as a way of life.

Midtgarden sees an opposition between two traditions of social ontology, one that goes from Durkheim to Goffman and Garfinkel, committed to a “sui generis” understanding of the social, and one that is more distinctively Deweyan, and which construes the
social as “inclusive,” rather than sui generis. Implicitly, since I rely on both conceptions, Midtgarden points to a contradiction in my approach. How can I rely on authors which, if he is correct, endorse incompatible views of the social?

16 Midtgarden suggests a way out of this impasse through a reconceptualization of my triadic social ontology, so as to blend the sui generis with the inclusive approaches. This suggestion goes against the grain of my own attempt to take stock of the two conceptions by keeping the social and the political disjoined, rather than integrating the political dimension into the social ontology. In other terms, where I see Dewey’s conception of the public as part of his political, rather than social theory, Midtgarden urges me to overcome this distinction and bring Dewey’s notion of public within my social ontology, besides habits, patterns, and forms.

17 Midtgarden is right in saying that I fully subscribe to Garfinkel and Goffman’s view of the social as sui generis, a position I discuss at length in the book. Indeed, I take social interactionism broadly construed to be the most promising account on which a social theory of democracy can be built. I am also aware that on its own social interactionism is inadequate to fully sustain a political view of democracy, since social interactionism lacks a satisfying account of the genesis of institutions, as well as a theory of the distinctive function of politics as a specific system. Yet, as scholars such as Anthony Giddens have shown, it is nevertheless possible to build an institutional perspective on a social interactionist basis, which is exactly what I try to do, by relying on the pragmatist tradition of democratic experimentalism, that I interpret as a theory of social and political institutions, and by developing a theory of public activation based, in part, on Dewey’s notion of public.

18 I am sympathetic with Midtgarden’s reservations about the fruitfulness of associating Dewey with the Human Ecology movement, but I think that the bulk of my argument is not really affected by the divergences he points at, since what really matters here are the proximities on which a common view can be construed, the differences notwithstanding.

19 I disagree, however with his idea that the notion of habit is in tension with those of patterns of interaction and forms of organization. Indeed, if one looks at Dewey’s theory of habits as it is developed in Human Nature and Conduct, their stabilizing function is clearly attested. Even though Dewey does not formulate things in this way, the idea is clearly present that whereas impulses bring disruption and novelty into action, habit is what provides action with regularity, predictability, stability. My point is that habits achieves at individual level what patterns and forms achieve at the aggregate social level. That is, they impose upon the unpredictability of human interactions some form of stability.

20 In my account of the social ontology of democracy I have so far not considered the role of emotions and intelligence, which is admittedly a weakness, and I welcome Midtgarden’s criticism as an invitation to integrate these perspectives in my future publications on this topic, which I will certainly do. This is perhaps one of the least satisfying implications of my way of distinguishing and articulating the social and the political dimension of democracy, since this theoretical move inclines me somehow to overemphasize the stabilizing dimension of sociality, while confining the active and transformative to the political dimension, which is of course a too sketchy account of reality. There is a price to pay in sharply separating the social from the political, and Midtgarden reminds this with clarity. But there are also advantages, the most
important being the possibility to make fully visible the social structuring of democracy, so as to provide a solid sociological description of what Dewey named a “way of life” and Claude Lefort a “form of society.”

In his comments, Ed Quish suggests that my move towards a social account of democracy ought to be radicalized even further by taking into greater account the implications for democracy of economic inequality and organized political conflict. In so doing, he criticizes me for an overemphasis on the formal preconditions for the existence of democracy. This is a very important argument, since it points to a broader and crucial factor of disagreement or misunderstanding between pragmatism and radical/critical traditions in contemporary political theory.

22 There exist two overall general strategies to resist the liberal reduction of democracy to a political regime for the protection of individual rights and liberties. On the one hand, the one usually associated with the name of Karl Marx, which emphasizes the economic underpinnings of any political association, and pointing toward a potential contradiction, or at least tension, between capitalism and democracy. On the other hand, the one which focuses on the social constitution of human identity, and which emphasizes democracy’s revolutionary transformation of patterns of social interaction. In my book I side decidedly with the second strategy, not because I do not consider the first relevant, but because the second is a much less traveled road, and one which needs to be explored in greater depth. So Quish is at the same time right and wrong in criticizing me for neglecting the first strategy.

This answer is of course acceptable only to a point, since it does not say whether the two strategies can be really combined, or whether supporters of one see the other as a mere reflex of the one they consider most important. It is well known, to make only an example, that for some strands of Marxism the idea that democracy can cure the ills of capitalism merely amounts to false consciousness.

24 Quish and I share the idea, closer to the pragmatist tradition, that the two strategies are and indeed ought to be integrated. He is then right to remind that even for Dewey economic inequality beyond a certain threshold represents an internal limitation to the deployment of the democratic project itself, one that is conceptually and causally irreducible to the social factors on which I focus.

25 There are, however, two aspects Quish does not seem to consider. The first is that, contrary to what he seems to think, the plight of formal inequality in social relationships, not to mention that of systematic social exclusion and of an anti-democratic exercise of authority are not a thing of the past, but continue to plague democratic societies even today. One has only to consider that many democracies established universal suffrage only after WWII, that formal racial discrimination was legal in the US till the late ‘60, and that authority in most workplaces, bureaucracies, and educational institutions continue to be exercised in fully non-democratic ways even today. These social factors continue to stand in the way of the democratic project, and their damaging consequences will continue to remain underestimated if our theoretical frameworks are dominated by a focus on either the deficits of formal political institutions, or economic exploitation and inequality.

26 The second aspect concerns the complex history of the relationships between capitalism and democracy, particularly after WWII, when a successful compromise allowed most European states to build generous welfare systems that deeply improved overall economic, social, sanitary, educational, cultural conditions of the largest part of
the population. There can be disagreement about the extent to which this process has been satisfying, and there is for sure a need to consider the more recent but steep increase in inequality nearly everywhere. But I think that the deep materialistic presuppositions of a narrative of the crisis of democracy based on economic inequality misses a central dimension of the democratic project, which is that of the human emancipation made possible by a thorough transformation of patterns of social interaction. Economic inequality is certainly a powerful threat to this project, but the project is larger than that, and cannot stop nor mostly focus on the economic dimension.

27 In relation to this, I am happy Quish brings forth the question of workplace democracy, since after the publication of the book I have devoted a series of papers to showing the implications of my wide view of democracy to reconsider the functioning of the workplace as a basic social institution, since I consider the democratization of workplaces a crucial step in the advancement of the democratic project.

28 Yet, even with reference to workplace democracy, I would not consider economic inequality or exploitation to be the core topic to address. Or, at least, I would contend that the democratization of the workplace requires much more than reducing economic inequality, sharing ownership, or renewing the role of trade unions. Even at the level of the workplace, what the democratic norm requires is a revolution in patterns of social interaction which cannot be confined to reforms in decision-making mechanisms, as supporters of workplace democracy contend most of the time. Saying this is not enough does not mean this is not important, quite the contrary. But it means that our discussion of workplace democracy is significantly impoverished when we understand democratic deficit in the workplace in the terms of a theory of formal political government, or reduce them to a chapter in the critique of capitalism.

29 Quish’s last remark is that I neglected the role of political parties. Whilst I cannot deny this, I think he is mistaken in reducing non-party collective activation on which my discussion focuses to forms of ‘private volition’. Indeed, what I wanted to emphasize in my account was precisely the political relevance of activities usually not categorized as such. Particularly in my criticism of Jürgen Habermas’ theory of the public sphere, my interest was in bringing to the fore the political relevance of social practices through which collective goods can be achieved without any form of formal political activation such as that which is achieved through political parties.

30 My point is not that parties are not relevant anymore, but that major political consequences are produced also in ways which do not pass through forms of public mediation as required by theories of the public sphere.

31 The declining confidence in parties and in the other formal political institutions is under our eyes. Whilst it is true that we ought to do the best we can for renewing these institutions as agents of the public, there is also an alternative route which is inscribed in the pragmatist tradition and which is systematically neglected in contemporary debates. This route passes through the self-activation of the public through practices that cross the boundary between the public and the private, the political and the social, the political and the economic. Because of their hybrid nature, these practices are systematically disregarded by political theory, and often criticized as forms of privatization, or commodification. My point is that Deweyan pragmatism helps us take a fresher and new look to this practices, a look that reveals their democratizing potential.
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NOTES

2. Frega 2020; and Frega. (unpublished manuscript).
4. But see also Frega 2021b, where I update my view of social interactions by distinguishing between “bare social interactions” and patterns of interaction.

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Essays
From Really Being to Being Represented
A Synoptic Overview of Peirce’s Pragmaticist Doctrine of the Truth of Propositions

Jeoffrey Gaspard

Introduction

This paper is addressed to scholars (among which I include myself) unfamiliar with Peirce’s thought as a whole and aims at reaffirming that his entire philosophy shall be conceived as an integrated (yet fragmentary) system, a characteristic which has often been shrugged aside in unsuspecting disciplines (e.g. language, media, or literary studies). For instance, as far as semiotics is concerned, I gradually came to realize, with Short (2007: ix), that “Peirce’s theory of signs [has indeed been] taken up by an interdisciplinary army of ‘semioticians’ whose views and aims are antithetical to Peirce’s own, and meanwhile […] has been shunned by those philosophers who are working in Peirce’s own spirit on the very problems to which his semeiotic was addressed.” This often led many works, among them introductory monographs about signs in general, to focus on specific parts unfortunately severed from the whole, leaving those amputated fragments at best difficult to understand or at worst desperately meaningless.

Within this perspective, I will strive to provide a “synoptic” overview of Peirce’s “pragmaticist” doctrine of the truth of propositions. Two reasons have led to this choice of topic. The first is that Peirce’s perspective on propositions, I believe, is a good way of illustrating the fundamental interrelations between his metaphysical, phenomenological, and semeiological views. The second reason is I think this topic constitutes a good entry point to reflect upon Peirce’s pragmaticist approach as a whole. In order to do so, I will mostly rely on Peirce’s own writings, as I came to believe that no one was as incisive as Peirce himself, provided each of his thoughts are repositioned on the chronological line of his intellectual development. Indeed, as Max Fisch (1986) and others have shown (see, in particular, Murphey 1961; Freadman 2004;
Short 2007; Bergman 2009b; and Bellucci 2018), Peirce’s views did greatly evolve over time, but that envisioned “philosophical edifice” was already there in the making, as a guiding principle governing all his work.

In the first place, I will thus briefly present Peirce’s fundamental “conceptions,” which are central to his philosophical system, irrigating all of its branches. In the second place, I will survey Peirce’s “Kantian step” of transferring those conceptions of logic to metaphysics, yielding three kinds of “real elements” whose respective characters are quite distinct. In the third place, I will describe how those three kinds of realities must necessarily be implied in a pragmaticist approach of true propositions, understood as final beliefs to which inquiries carried sufficiently far are ultimately destined to lead.

1. Toward the Kantian Step

In the famous Guess at the Riddle essay, written in the winter of 1887-1888, Peirce declared that his ambition was “to make a philosophy like that of Aristotle, that is to say, to outline a theory so comprehensive that, for a long time to come, the entire work of human reason, in philosophy of every school and kind, in mathematics, in psychology, in physical science, in history, in sociology, and in whatever other department there may be, shall appear as the filling up of its details” (W6: 168 [1887-88]). More specifically, he insisted that “to erect a philosophical edifice that shall outlast the vicissitudes of time, my care must be, not so much to set each brick with nicest accuracy, as to lay the foundations deep and massive;” and argued in consequence that the first step toward the foundational building of a systematic philosophy was to find “simple concepts applicable to every subject” (W6: 169 [1887-88]).

In the New List of Categories, published twenty years earlier, Peirce had actually presented such a list of conceptions, or categories, understood as “the fundamental ones of at least one universal science, that of logic” (W2: 56 [1868]), and which he formally deduced from a formal analysis of the structure of propositions. However, Peirce repeatedly conceded that his conceptions, which “meet us not once but at every turn” (W6: 182 [1887-88]), were rather “vague ideas.” For instance, in his Architecture of Theories, published in an 1891 issue of the Monist, he admitted that “they are conceptions so very broad and consequently indefinite that they are hard to seize and may be easily overlooked” (W8: 109 [1891]). In the same vein, in his second 1898 Cambridge lecture, he argued that it was “to be remembered that they are excessively general ideas, so very uncommonly general that it is far from easy to get any but a vague apprehension of their meaning” (CP 4.3. [1898]); and in a 1903 letter to William James, he confessed also that “to make them as distinct as it is in their nature to be is, however, no small task. I do not suppose they are so in my own mind; and evidently, it is not in their nature to be sharp as ordinary concepts” (CP 8.264 [1903]).

More precisely, Peirce conceived these fundamental conceptions to be “no more than the ideas of First, Second, and Third, – ideas so broad that they may be looked upon rather as moods or tones of thought, than as definite notions” (W6: 169 [1887-88]). What is more, he emphasized that “if there are any three-fold distinctions that are more than verbal, their real nature will clearly be elucidated by an understanding of the meanings of the numbers one, two, three, provided that there are any such meanings” (ibid.: 170). Now, in the most abstract of form, according to Peirce, third is
the conception of that which is related to two other things, in such wise that it brings
them into relation (because we cannot conceive anything third without necessarily
conceiving something first and something second: third implies first and second);
second is the conception of that which is related to something else, but regardless of any
third thing bringing them into relation (because we may not conceive something
second without necessarily conceiving something first, but we may conceive something
second without necessarily conceiving anything third: second implies first but does not
imply third); and first is the conception of that which is unrelated to nothing else
(because we may conceive something first without necessarily conceiving something
second nor something third: first does not imply second nor third).

Those three irreducible categories being vague and hardly definable, I propose to take
“the Kantian step of transferring the conceptions of logic to metaphysics” (R 439: 1
[1898]) and examine their application to the “real world.” Peirce argued indeed that the
categories of logic “should be the three elementary conceptions of metaphysics”
on the ground that “Nature only appears intelligible so far as it appears rational, that
is, so far as its processes are seen to be like processes of thought” (CP 3.422 [1892]).
Such a metaphysical point of view, I believe, shall help us understand even more clearly
“what are the kinds of objects that are first, second, and third, not as being so counted,
but in their own true characters” (W6: 170 [1887-88]). For three fundamental categories
of characters, or “modes of being,” may indeed be deduced from what was stated above:
firstness, secondness, and thirdness. Firstness is the mode of being of that which is first,
or that which is such as it is, in being unrelated to nothing else; secondness is the mode
of being of that which is second, or that which is such as it is, in being related to something
else but regardless of anything else; and thirdness is the mode of being of that which is
third, or that which is such as it is, in bringing two other things into relation. Let us
now see how the categories enter into real elements.

2. Possible Qualities, Actual Existents, and General
Laws

One of Peirce’s original contributions to philosophy consists in a passionate defense of
his own version of scholastic realism (see, for instance, Boler 1963; Engel-Tiercelin
1992; and Lane 2018), whereby he contended that the real, understood as that which is
such as it is independently of its being so represented, was not to be reduced to mere
existence.

This, however, contradicted a seminal tenet of nominalism, “this stupid and utterly
anti-scientific doctrine” (R 778: 12 [ca. 1909]). According to Peirce indeed, the
nominalists “hold that existence, – the reaction of things against the other things of the
universe, – is the only mode of real being while the Scotists, like Aristotle and Plato,
held that besides the existent realities there are higher kinds of reality; laws that
regulate the universe though they cannot be said to exist, as well as potentialities or
germs of being not yet developed into actual existence” (R 778: 12 [ca. 1909]). As a
matter of fact, an important evolution of Peirce’s thought, spanning almost thirty
years, consisted in this gradual recognition of those three “independent or distinct
elements of the triune Reality” (EP2: 345 [1904]), which any serious philosophical
system shall recognize as its ingredients: possible qualities, actual facts, and general laws.
This, for instance, led him to suggest a division of the most important metaphysical
systems having emerged in the history of philosophy “based upon the consideration of what ones of the three categories each of the different metaphysical systems has fully admitted as real constituents of nature” (EP2: 179 [1903]).

2.1. Possible Qualities are Real

The first category comprises all qualities, which may be conceived as firsts, being such as they are, regardless of anything else. Indeed, “a quality is whatever it is in itself. It has such mode of being as it has independently of any other quality, of existing in any subject, and of being represented” (R 8: 1 [ca. 1904?]). It follows that any given quality, because it is such as it is in itself and would so remain even if it never were never embodied in anything, is in some sense eternal: “a pure quality, in its mode of being as a pure quality, does not cease to be because it is not embodied in anything” (R 7: 12 [ca. 1903?]). Said Peirce, in the 1903 Syllabus of Certain Topics of Logic: “look at anything red. That redness is positively what it is. Contrast may heighten our consciousness of it; but the redness is not relative to anything; it is absolute, or positive. If one imagines or remembers red, his imagination will be either vivid or dim; but that will not, in the least, affect the quality of the redness, which may be brilliant or dull, in either case. The vividness is the degree of our consciousness of it, its reaction on us. The quality in itself has no vividness or dimness” (EP2: 268 [1903]). Accordingly, “it seems undeniable that there really are such possibilities, and that, though they are not existences, they are not nothing” (EP2: 269 [1903]).

From a phenomenological point of view, we are conscious of qualities whenever we happen to feel anything: “Imagine me to make and in a slumberous condition to have a vague, unobjectified, still unsuppressed, sense of redness, or of salt taste, or of an ache, or of grief or joy, or of a prolonged musical note. That would be, as nearly as possible, a purely monadic state of feeling. Now in order to convert that psychological or logical conception into a metaphysical one, we must think of a metaphysical monad as a pure nature, or quality, in itself without parts or features, and without embodiment” (CP 1.303 [1894]). As a matter of fact, artists are particularly attuned to that state of mind which consists in contemplating “what stares one in the face, just as it presents itself” (EP2: 147 [1903]). For instance, “when the ground is covered by snow on which the sun shines brightly except where shadows fall, if you ask any ordinary man what its color appears to be, he will tell you white, pure white, whiter in the sunlight, a little greyish in the shadow. But that is not what is before his eyes that he is describing; it is his theory of what ought to be seen. The artist [however] will tell him that the shadows are not grey but a dull blue and that the snow in the sunshine is of a rich yellow.” In any case, thus, “whenever we are awake, something is present to the mind, and what is present, without reference to any compulsion or reason, is feeling” (EP2: 4 [1894]). Our feelings, therefore, testify to the reality of possible qualities.

2.2. Actual Existents are Real

The second category of real elements comprises all existents, which may be conceived as seconds, being such as they are, related to something else, but regardless of anything else. Using the word “in its strict philosophical sense” (CP. 6.495 [1906]), Peirce thus argued that “the existent is that which reacts against other things” (CP 8.191 [1903]) in pairs, and that “what is meant by Existence consists in each existent reacting [...] with
all the other existents of the same universe” (R 939: 35 [1905]) – a mode of being that a mere quality is incapable of enjoying. For instance, “to say there is a phantom table […] incapable of affecting any senses or of producing any physical effects whatever, is to speak of an imaginary table. A thing without oppositions ipso facto does not exist. […] Not only is this opposition essential to an individual thing or subject, but also to an individual fact. Its truth, or existence, is the sum of its effects” (CP 1.457 [ca. 1896]).

Remember that this mode of being was the only one conceived to be real by the nominalists: for “the heart of the dispute lies in this. The modern philosophers – one and all, unless Schelling be an exception – recognize but one mode of being, the being of an individual thing or fact, the being which consists in the object’s crowding out a place for itself in the universe, so to speak, and reacting by brute force of fact, against all other things” (CP 1.21 [1903]).

13 Hence, the mode of being of an existent thing does not consist in a mere possibility, like that of pure qualities, but in its brute actuality: its being, therefore, “does not consist in any qualities, but in its effects – in its actually acting and being acted on, so long as this action and suffering endures. Those who experience its effects perceive and know it in that action; and just that constitutes its very being. It is not in perceiving its qualities that they know it, but in hefting its insistency then and there, which Duns called its haecceitas”5 (CP 6.318 [ca. 1909]). However, “if all its qualities were to be taken away, and it were to be left quality-less matter, it not only would not exist, but it would not have any positive definite possibility – such as an unembodied quality has. It would be nothing at all” (CP 1.527 [1903]). Existents, therefore, may not be prescinded6 from the qualities which they embody, although those embodied qualities may be prescinded from them.

14 More specifically, an existent is to be conceived as the subject of an actual fact, which may be of two possible kinds: (1) “monadic” facts, which consist in its embodying some possible quality and (2) “dyadic” facts, which consist in its standing in a relation with some other existent. Dyadic facts may themselves be divided into two possible kinds: first, those which consist, for their subject, in its being qualitatively related to another existent by virtue of a quality which they would both happen to possess, and those which consist, for their subject, in its being dynamically related to another existent by virtue of acting on, or of being acted upon by, the other. In that latter case, the reaction necessarily determines a quality which would otherwise not be there in one or both of the related existents: any dynamic relation necessarily produces an effect.

15 From a phenomenological point of view, we are conscious of actual existents whenever we happen to react with anything forcing itself upon ourselves: “this sense of acting and of being acted upon, which is our sense of the reality of [existent] things, – both of outward and of ourselves, – may be called the sense of Reaction. It does not reside in any one Feeling; it comes upon the breaking of one feeling by another feeling” (EP2: 4 [1894]). In other words, a reaction is “that which we experience when our will meets with resistance, or when something obtrudes itself upon sense” (R 439: 6 [1898]). That which brutally reacts against us, therefore, is an insistent other, a non-ego which resists to its being modified, and this very reluctance is what distinguishes existents from mere fancies of the mind which “yield at once to a direct effort of the will”7 (EP2: 65 [1901]). This definition corresponds to what we generally call experience, as being that which brutally forces itself upon us in the course of life. Note also that actual existents conceived as being perceived are called percepts and constitute, as such, the bedrocks of
perceptual facts. The latter, as I mentioned, may either be “monadic” or “dyadic,” for something may immediately, or directly, be perceived as embodying a quality or as reacting against another thing. Our senses of reaction, therefore, testify to the reality of actual existents.

2.3. General Laws are Real

The third category comprises all laws, which may be conceived as thirds, being such as they are in bringing qualities and existents into relation. Peirce remarked indeed that “nobody can doubt that we know laws upon which we can base predictions to which actual events still in the womb of the future will conform to a marked extent, if not perfectly. To deny reality to such laws is to quibble about words” (EP2: 269 [1903]). For instance, it is a given truism that “with overwhelming uniformity, in our past experience, direct and indirect, stones left free to fall have fallen” (EP2: 183 [1903]). In order to make sense of this, however, “two hypotheses only are open to us. Either: first, the uniformity with which those stones have fallen has been due to mere chance and affords no ground whatever, not the slightest, for any expectation that the next stone that shall be let go will fall; or, second, the uniformity with which stones have fallen has been due to some active general principle, in which case it would be a strange coincidence that it should cease to act at the moment my prediction was based upon it” (ibid.). Of course, as the realist he was, Peirce opted for the second hypothesis.

Accordingly, the 1903 Syllabus stated that if “there be a regularity that never will be and never would be broken, that has a mode of being consisting in this destiny or determination of the nature of things that the endless future shall conform to it, that is what we call a law. Whether any such law be discoverable or not, it is certain we have the idea of such a thing, and should there be such a law, it would evidently have a reality, consisting in the fact that predictions based on it would be borne out by actual events” (EP2: 269 [1903]). More specifically, a general law, the instantiation of which applies to actual existents whenever corresponding conditional events are actually fulfilled, is therefore expressible in a general conditional proposition of the form “if..., then...,” and is to be conceived as expressing a consequence, or general relation subsisting between an antecedent general fact as cause and its consequent general fact as effect. The mode of being of laws, therefore, consists in their general power of government, applicable to an infinite collection of occasions even if those occasions never actually get to occur.

From a phenomenological point of view, we are conscious of laws whenever we happen to reason in thoughts, that is, go through an intellectual process “by which a phenomenon is found to be governed by a rule, or has a general knowable way of behaving” (EP2: 5 [1894]). Hence, the law according to which dropped stones would fall, for instance, is not immediately apprehended in consciousness, as feelings or actual existents may be apprehended: a law is indeed necessarily thought, that is, represented. However, the fact that any good law is a represented law, or is dependent upon representation, does not in the least imply that it cannot be real. In a famous passage of his fourth 1903 Harvard Lecture, which I reproduce here in full because of its clarity, Peirce thus argued that “the general proposition that all solid bodies fall in the absence of any upward forces or pressure, this formula, I say, is of the nature of a representation. Our nominalistic friends would be the last to dispute that. They will go
so far as to say that it is a mere representation, – the word mere meaning that to be represented and really to be are two very different things; and that this formula has no being except as being represented. It certainly is of the nature of a representation. That is undeniable, I grant. And it is equally undeniable that that which is of the nature of a representation is not ipso facto real. In that respect there is a great contrast between an object of reaction [i.e. an actual existent] and an object of representation. Whatever reacts IS ipso facto real. But an object of representation is not ipso facto real. If I were to predict that on my letting go of the stone it would fly up in the air, that would be mere fiction; and the proof that it was so would be obtained by simply trying the experiment. That is clear. On the other hand, and by the same token, the fact that I know that this stone will fall to the floor when I let it go [...] is the proof that the formula, or uniformity, as furnishing a safe basis for prediction, is, or if you like it better, corresponds to, a reality” (EP2: 181 [1903]).

19 In other words, provided it is truly represented, a given law, in so far as it would bring about the predictions which it conditionally implies, cannot be conceived as a mere formula, or representation: it may be just as real. It follows that a general law “that consists in the fact that the subject of it would, under certain conditions, behave in a certain way, is Real, provided this be true whether actual persons think so or not; and it must be admitted to be a Real Habit, even if those conditions never actually do get fulfilled” (EP2: 457 [1909]).

20 Note that, as a matter of fact, it is precisely because we know that some determinate effect would ensue, provided conditional events are fulfilled, that we are capable of purposive action. For instance, our knowing that a bullet shot at someone would necessarily kill that person is a necessary prerequisite for our really killing someone on purpose, provided we actually shoot a bullet. Conversely, we also know that no one could be killed in such a manner if no bullet is actually shot, i.e. if the law’s conditional events are not actually fulfilled for it to instantiate itself. Our reasonings, therefore, and the rightful predictions which they allowed us to foresee, testify to the reality of general laws.

2.4. A Triune Reality of Firsts, Seconds, and Thirds

21 Peirce’s categorial scheme thus provided him with a logical apparatus for deducing three fundamental kinds of real elements: possible qualities, actual existents, and general laws. Qualities, as firsts, may be prescinded from existents, which existents (and their facts), as seconds, may be prescinded from laws, as thirds. Laws, on their side, are unprescindible from either two, just as existents are unprescindible from qualities. In the draft of an unpublished paper, On the Logic of Quantity, probably written around 1895, Peirce summarized his metaphysical doctrine in the following terms: “We remark in the world three categories of elements. The first comprises the qualities, such as red, butter, tedious, hard, heart-rending, agreeable, and doubtless manifold varieties which are utterly unknown to us. They are potentialities and general in their nature, but there is no reason why any of them should be as it is. The second category comprises actual occurrences. They are individual and brutally insistent. The third category comprises laws. No fact nor collection of facts can constitute a law which goes beyond any completed facts to determine how facts that may be shall be characterized. In these, the ideal world of qualities and the world of facts overlap” (R 13: 4 [ca. 1895]).
In metaphysics, therefore, firstness, secondness, and thirdness correspond to the modes of being of that which is merely possible (i.e. qualities), that which is actual (i.e. existents), and that which is general (i.e. laws), respectively. This is the reason why Peirce argued that “there must be three categories of things: first, those which are such as they are regardless of anything else, like the living consciousness of a given kind of feeling, say of red; secondly, those which are such as they are by virtue of their relation to other things, regardless of any third things, which is the case with the existence of all bodies, whose reality consists in their acting on each other, in pairs; thirdly, those which are such as they are by virtue of bringing two others into relation, as signs of all sorts are [e.g. thoughts of laws] such only so far as they bring their significations to bear upon the objects to which they are applied” (EP2: 427 [1907]). As it is now clear, those three categories of “things” are the three categories of real elements constitutive of a “triune Reality,” in so far as “the being of the quality lies wholly in itself, the being of the [existent] thing lies in opposition to other [existent] things, the being of the reason [i.e. laws, in so far as they are represented] lies in its bringing qualities and things together” (CP 1.515 [ca. 1896]).

Now, we have seen that each kind of real elements are phenomenologically apprehended through three different states of mind: our feelings are feelings of qualities, our reactions are reactions of existents, and our reasoning in thoughts are thoughts of laws. However, the fact that these elements are necessarily relative to mind does not imply that they may not be real, that is, be such as they are, independently of what any particular mind or minds may think (or represent) them to be. This highlights an important feature of Peirce’s objective idealism: namely, if “all our knowledge is, and forever must be, relative to human experience and to the nature of the human mind” (CP 6.95 [1903]), it remains that “all experience and all knowledge is knowledge of that which is, independently of being represented.”

Remind indeed that Peirce’s defense of a triune reality lies in this fact “which all ordinary people will see plainly enough; that the essence of the realist’s opinion is that it is one thing to be and another thing to be represented” (CP 8.129 [1902]). This, as we have seen, explains why Peirce was for instance “confident that the bull and I feel much alike at the sight of a red rag” (EP2: 192 [1903]); that if “a man [walks] down Wall Street debating within himself the existence of an external world [and] jostles up against somebody who angrily draws off and knocks him down, the sceptic is unlikely to carry his skepticism so far as to doubt whether anything beside the ego was concerned” (CP 1.431 [ca. 1896]); and that if “we admit that the law has a real being, [...] then the future necessary consequent of a present state of things is as real and true as that present state of things itself” (CP 6.368 [1902]).

Hence, whether it be an unrepresented and unembodied possible quality, an unrepresented and reacting actual existent, or a necessarily represented law according to which a future state of things may be predicted, all three kinds of elements may be deemed as real.

### 3. Representing the Real World

Now, as planned, let us see how the three kinds of elements must be recognized at once in true propositions, taking one of Peirce’s canonical examples as an illustration: the hardness of a diamond.
3.1. “This Diamond is Hard”

If one wishes to represent that a particular diamond really is hard, for instance, one has indeed to recognize the reality of all three kinds of elements. In the first place, one has to admit the reality of hardness, as a possible quality being such as it is whether it be embodied or not and represented or not. Hardness is a first and its mode of being is a mere positive qualitative possibility (distinguishable from, say, softness). In the second place, one has to admit the reality of the (supposedly hard) diamond, an insistent existent thing brutally acting upon other things and upon my senses in such wise that it is actually capable of determining the very representation that is to be made of it, whether that representation, at this stage, be true or not. This (supposedly hard) diamond is a second and its mode of being is a reactive actuality. Finally, in the third place, one has to admit the reality of the law according to which something hard would behave if it really were hard. A law is a third and its mode of being is that of a general necessity.

Now, that which is purposed to represent an object as it really is, that is, as being such as it is, independently of its being represented, is a general propositional sign. It happens indeed that such a general sign, once instantiated in context, may be interpreted as representing (a) the existent object to which the proposition is actually related (e.g. a diamond), (b) the possible character which is supposedly possessed by its object (e.g. hardness), and (c) the actual relation which is said to really subsist between the object and the professed character. As it turns out, the object is indicated by a proposition’s subject-part, the possible character is signified by its predicate-part, and the actual relation between the two is expressed by the very “co-localization” of the two parts (Stjernfelt, 2014, 2015). A general proposition, once instantiated in context, is thus purposed to signify a fact about an object: for instance, the actual fact that hardness is embodied by this singular diamond, to which the proposition is itself related, and to which it applies.

More technically, propositions are meant to be asserted in context. A proposition does indeed profess to be virtually true, but a same proposition can actually be used in both fictive and veridictive discourse. Therefore, there has got to be “something more” differentiating the two kinds of usage. Peirce identified it as an act of assertion: “an act of assertion supposes that, a proposition being formulated, a person performs an act which renders him liable to the penalties of the social law (or, at any rate, those of the moral law) in case it should not be true, unless he has a definite and sufficient excuse” (EP2: 278 [1903]). Only such a conventional act may distinguish between a proposition which renders its enunciator “responsible for its truth” (CP 5.543 [ca. 1902]) and one that does not. However, in so far as “that which any true proposition asserts is real, in the sense of being as it is regardless of what you or I may think [i.e. represent] about it” (EP2: 343 [1905]), it remains to be seen how we can be so sure that a general proposition really conforms to the singular fact which it is purposed to represent? In other words, in so far as “truth is the correspondence of a representation with its object” (EP2: 379 [1906]), how can we be so sure that a general proposition, once instantiated and asserted in context, is true of its object?
3.2. The Truthfulness of Propositions

The answer, said Peirce, lies in the “application of the sole principle of logic which was recommended by Jesus; ‘Ye may know them by their fruits’” (CP 5.402n2 [1878]). It lies in the future. Here is Peirce’s argument, which I develop following up on the previous example. The peculiar instantiated proposition, by means of which an enunciator asserts that a given diamond is hard, may only be conceived to truly conform to the (supposedly real) fact that it embodies hardness if and only if that diamond would act like the hard thing it is represented to be: for instance, if the diamond really is hard, then it would resist an attempt to leave a mark, if scratched: “Take any general term whatever. I say of a stone that it is hard. That means that so long as the stone remains hard, every essay to scratch it by the moderate pressure of a knife will surely fail. To call the stone hard is to predict that no matter how often you try the experiment, it will fail every time. That innumerable series of conditional predictions is involved in the meaning of this lowly adjective” (EP2: 254 [1903]). Accordingly, the truth of a proposition necessarily hinges upon the future actualization of the conditional predictions implied by its predicate, as they may be stated by means of an argument. This amounts to saying that the truth of a proposition hinges upon the real government of the possible laws by means of which its object is presumably determined and affected. Corollarily, the falsity of a proposition hinges upon the possible discrepancies between expected results (as theoretically predicted by a law) and the ones ultimately taking place in actual fact, by means of experimentation. Errors and doubt may thus be forced upon us, whether we like it or not.

This overall argumentation, of course, expresses Peirce’s pragmaticist doctrine, as it was clearly defined in 1907: “that the total meaning of the predication of an intellectual concept consists in affirming that, under all conceivable circumstances of a given kind, the subject of the predication would (or would not) behave in a certain way, – that is, that it either would, or would not, be true that under given experiential circumstances [...] certain facts would exist, – that proposition I take to be the kernel of pragmatism. More simply stated, the whole meaning of an intellectual predicate is that certain kinds of events would happen [...] under certain kinds of existential circumstances” (EP2: 401 [1907]). In short, Peirce’s position thus forces us to recognize that the only way to admit that general propositions may ever be conceived to be true of particular objects – which we certainly do all the time – is to recognize that those objects may possibly be governed by real laws. All in all, therefore, truthfulness requires a recognition of all three real elements: real qualities, real existents, and real laws.

3.3. The Role of Inquiry

Naturally, in the course of life, we do not test the truthfulness of asserted propositions by means of controlled experiments (although we might always do it in principle): we rely instead on the good faith of their enunciators and act instead upon beliefs, understood following Scottish philosopher Alexander Bain’s definition as “that upon which a man is prepared to act” (EP2: 399 [1907]): “to assert a predicate of certain subjects [...] means, – intends, – only to create a belief that the real things denoted by those subjects possess the real character or relation signified by the predicate” (EP2: 427 [1907]).
However, the testing of the truthfulness of propositions, by means of experimentation, does happen to be the norm of scientific inquiries. According to Peirce, the scientific method (next to that of tenacity, authority, and a priori) is indeed the most successful one for settling opinion, or “fixing belief,” which is an incessant hope animating the scientific community. More precisely, a scientist’s business is to test the reality of hypothesized laws, or general principles, whose possible government could explain a peculiar kind of phenomena. Hence, the possibility of real governing laws becomes an indispensable postulate of scientific inquiry as well, just as a faith in the intelligibility of the world is an ethical imperative for scientists. Once possible laws are guessed, they may be subsequently tested by means of experiments and, if confirmed, constitute the basis for predictions. If they are not confirmed, however, new batteries of hypotheses will have to be submitted, and opinions will have to be revised.

It follows that, in general, a scientific truth constitutes a belief to which a sufficiently carried inquiry is ultimately predestined to lead, and that the real becomes precisely that which a final belief shall ultimately represent. And because scientists necessarily err in their particular inquiries, the real is indeed that which “has such characters as it has independently of what any particular mind or minds may think those characters may be” (EP2: 532 [1903]; our emphasis): one thought, or even more, may be wrong, but countless thoughts that are carried sufficiently far are logically destined to be right. Peirce thus argued that “the different sciences deal with different kinds of truth; mathematical truth is one thing, ethical truth is another, the actually existing state of the universe is a third; but all these different conceptions have in common something very marked and clear. We all hope that the different scientific inquiries in which we are severally engaged are going ultimately to lead to some definitely established conclusion, which conclusion we endeavor to anticipate in some measure. Agreement with that ultimate proposition that we look forward to, – agreement with that, what it turns out to be, is the scientific truth” (EP2: 87 [1901]).

Conclusion

Somewhere else, having conducted a lexicometric analysis of Peirce’s Collected Papers, I showed that the two most cited (substantive) terms in those writings were precisely truth and proposition (Gaspard 2019). In light of the present essay, this result is not surprising: Peirce’s philosophical interests, an outgrowth of his own background as a research scientist, do seem focused on the “logicality” of things. Peirce was thus among the first systematic thinkers to have connected traditional questions of metaphysics (see, for instance, his focus on a list of post-kantian categories, his re-reading of scholastic realism, his nuanced take on idealism, etc.) with an emerging “philosophy of science,” focusing on the logic of scientific inquiry, and an equally pioneering “philosophy of logic,” concentrating on relatives and the classification of arguments (see, for instance, Hookway (1985) for an overview of Peirce’s architectonics). Furthermore, his constant appraisal of the nature of reasoning and of representations in particular, construed as ingredients of thought, has been central to this effort. His pragmatism, of which I strived to offer a “synoptic” (hence necessarily partial) overview in this article, is then purported to connect these views into one unified system.
Peirce’s reflections, among other things, evolved into an impressive but fragmented doctrine of signs, that needs to be read in light of this unified and systematic approach. At the turn of the century, Peirce actually reached the point where he equated Logic with Semiotic, understood as “the quasi-necessary, or formal, doctrine of signs” in general (CP 2.227 [ca. 1897]). More specifically, he added that “by describing the doctrine as ‘quasi-necessary,’ or formal, I mean that we observe the characters of such signs as we know, and from such an observation, [...] we are led to statements [...] as to what must be the characters of all signs used by a ‘scientific’ intelligence, that is to say, by an intelligence capable of learning by experience” (ibid.). As he came to conceive it, “Logic, considered as Semeiotic” (SS 80 [1908]) was to comprise three branches: pure grammar, logic proper, and pure rhetoric. The task of pure grammar is to ascertain “what must be true of the [signs] used by every scientific intelligence in order that they may embody any meaning” (CP 2.229 [ca. 1897]). The task of logic proper (or critical logic) is to ascertain “what is quasi-necessarily true of the [signs] of any scientific intelligence in order that they may hold good of any object, that is, may be true” (ibid.). Finally, the task of pure rhetoric is to ascertain “the laws by which in every scientific intelligence one sign gives birth to another, and especially one thought brings forth another” (ibid.).

Peirce’s famous trichotomies of signs thus aims at defining the possible kinds of ways by means of which such a “scientific intelligence” may get to know or represent the real. For instance, as we have seen, terms (subjects and predicates), propositions, and arguments are the three kinds of symbols, or generals signs, fit to signify, or be interpreted as signifying, possible characters (as predicates), possible objects (as subjects – with the help of indexical signs), possible facts about objects (as propositions connecting subjects and predicates), and possible rational connections between facts about objects (as arguments connecting premises leading to conclusions). In light of this overview, Peirce’s contention that “the value of a symbol is that it serves to make thought and conduct rational and enables us to predict the future” (CP 4.448 [ca. 1903]) takes on its full meaning. Following an old trend in Peircean studies, I thus hope this paper succeeded in showing that no parts of his philosophy shall be studied in themselves, amputated from the systematic whole to which they belong.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. As a matter of fact, in an 1892 paper on the critic of arguments published by The Open Court, Peirce granted that his logical enquiries stood in line with those of Kant and Hegel, in sharing a similar affinity for triads: “Kant taught that our fundamental conceptions are merely the ineluctable ideas of a system of logical forms; nor is any occult transcendentalism requisite to show that this is so, and must be so. […] That there are three elementary forms of categories is the conclusion of Kant, to which Hegel subscribes; and Kant seeks to establish this from the analysis of formal logic. Unfortunately, his study of that subject was so excessively superficial that his argument is destitute of the slightest value. Nevertheless, his conclusion is correct; for the three elements permeate not only the truths of logic, but even to a great extent the very errors of the profounder logicians” (CP 3.422 [1892]). In his second 1898 Cambridge lecture, he stated in the same vein: “Why should there be three principles of reasoning, and what have they to do with one another? This question, which was connected with other parts of my schedule of philosophical inquiry that need not be detailed, now came to the front. Even without Kant’s categories, the recurrence of triads in logic was quite marked, and must be the croppings out of some fundamental conceptions. I now undertook to ascertain what the conceptions were. This search resulted in what I call my categories” (CP 4.3 [1898]).

2. Peirce’s conception of the real would broadly remain unchanged throughout his writings. For instance, in his early review of Fraser’s The Works of George Berkeley, from 1871, he had already argued that “objects [of representations] are divided into figments, dreams, etc., on the one hand, and realities on the other. The former are those which exist only inasmuch as you or I or some man imagines them; the latter are those which have an existence independent of your mind or mine or that of any number of persons” (W2: 467 [1871]). A few years later, in the well-known How to Make Our Ideas Clear, published in 1878, he suggested that “we may define the real as that whose characters are independent of what anybody may think them to be” (W3: 271 [1878]). In the same vein, in his later years, he came to declare that “we must mean by the real that which has such characters as it has independently of what any particular mind or minds may think those characters may be” (EP2: 532 [1903]), and that “to say that a thing is Real is merely to say that such predicates as are true of it, or some of them, are true regardless of whatever any actual person or persons might think concerning that truth” (EP2: 456 [1909]). In other words, the real is that which “is unaffected by what we may think of it” (W2: 467 [1871]). Really being is thus ontologically different from being represented (see, for instance, EP2: 303 [1904] on that matter).

3. Peirce actually took no prisoners as far as nominalism was concerned. For instance, in one draft of his 1907 rejected letter on pragmatism to the editors of The Nation and The Atlantic Monthly, he lamented that “the nominalistic color which an apparent accident made ascendant even to this day throughout European philosophy is merely that perversion of pragmatism which consists in denying any other mode of real being than existence” (R 320:18 [ca. 1907]). This led him to conclude that “all modern philosophy of every sect has been nominalistic” (CP 1.19 [1903]).

4. Thus, because a quality is not “dependent, in its being, upon the fact that some material thing possesses it” (CP 1.422 [ca. 1896]), “the error of [the nominalists] lies in holding that the potential, or possible, is nothing but what the actual makes it to be” (ibid.). Similarly, another error would consist in rightfully recognizing that “all colors are relative to the sense of sight” but failing to notice that “there is a difference between a color and a sensation of color. For a color is
a quality of a thing which remains the same whether it be exposed to one kind of illumination or to another, and whether it be seen by a normal or by a color-blind. Such is the established signification of the word ‘color’” (CP 6.327 [1909]). As a matter of fact, two things could not be thought of as alike were it not for some real quality which would happen to be possessed by the two things compared.

5. In an unidentified fragment, Peirce thus reminded that the word actual “is due to Aristotle’s use of ἐνέργεια, action, to mean existence, as opposed to a mere germinal state” (CP 1.325 [n.d.]).

6. According to Peirce, a “prescission,” being one of the three grades of mental separation with discrimination and dissociation, “consists in supposing a state of things in which one element is present without the other, the one being logically possible without the other” (EP2: 270 [1903]). In other words, that which is “prescinded” is that which cannot be dissociated from something else but which may still be supposed, or conceived, to be separate from that something else. In other words, that which is prescinded is that which may be focused on, to the neglect of something else (cf. W2: 50 [1867]).

7. Taking an inkstand as an example, Peirce described its existence in the following terms: “If I turn away my eyes, other witnesses will tell me that it still remains. If we all leave the room and dismiss the matter from our thoughts, still a photographic camera would show the inkstand still there, with the same roundness, polish and transparency, and with the same opaque liquid within. Thus, or otherwise, I confirm myself in the opinion that its characters are what they are, and persist at every opportunity in revealing themselves, regardless of what you, or I, or any man, or generation of men, may think that they are. That conclusion to which I find myself driven, struggle against it as I may, I briefly express by saying that the inkstand is a real [existent] thing” (EP2: 62 [1901]). In a draft review of Karl Pearson’s Grammar of Science, Peirce suggested along the way that “there is a blind force about the inkstand by which it crowds its way into our universe in spite of all we can do” (CP 8.153 [ca. 1900]).

8. Regarding predictions, Peirce argued in one of his 1903 Lowell Lectures that “five minutes of our waking life will hardly pass without our making some kind of prediction; and in the majority of cases these predictions are fulfilled in the event. […] To say that a prediction has a decided tendency to be fulfilled, is to say that the future events are in a measure really governed by a law. […] If the prediction has a tendency to be fulfilled, it must be that future events have a tendency to conform to a general rule” (CP 1.26 [1903]). In defining uniformity for the Baldwin’s Dictionary, Peirce explained the problem in these other terms: “If I have tried the experiment with a million stones and have found that every one of them fell when allowed to drop, it may be very natural for me to believe that almost any stone will act in the same way. But if it can be proved that there is no real connection between the behaviour of different stones, then there is nothing for it but to say that it was a chance coincidence that those million stones all behaved in the same way; for if there was any reason for it, and they really dropped, there was a real reason, that is, a real general [law]. Now if it is mere chance that they all dropped, that affords no more reason for supposing that the next will drop than my throwing three double sixes successively with a pair of dice is a reason for thinking that the next throw will be double sixes” (CP 6.99 [1902]). Accordingly, the possibility of conditional prediction is what differentiates the coincidental regularity of a chance succession from the regularity of a real, governing law.

9. It is indeed equivalent to say that “all stones fall” and to say that “if x is a stone and x is dropped, then x would fall.”

10. Here again, then, a choice between nominalism and realism had to be done in so far as a “law [may be] distinguished from brute fact, either, as the nominalists say, by being a product of the human mind [i.e. a representation], or, as the realists say, by being a real intellectual ingredient of the universe” (EP2: 425 [1907]). Of course, the second alternative was the one decidedly chosen by Peirce: “My argument to show that law is reality and not figment – is nature independently of any connivance of ours – is that predictions are verified” (CP 8.153 [ca. 1900]). Over time, there
remained for him to conclude that “after physical science has discovered so many general principles in Nature, nominalism becomes a disgraceful habit of thought” (CP 6.175 [1906]).

11. When absolute idealists would conclude that metaphysical conceptions, because they “repose upon their being involved in the forms of logic, are only valid for experience and since all our knowledge is relative to human mind, [...] are not valid for things as they objectively are” (CP 6.95 [1903]). As a matter of fact, however, “even lies invariably contain this much truth, that they represent themselves to be referring to something whose mode of being is independent of its being represented.” On this important balance in Peirce’s thought between realism and idealism, see the recently published book by Lane (2018).

12. That an act of assertion renders its enunciator “liable to the penalties of the social law” is rendered explicit in the taking of an oath: “If a man desires to assert anything very solemnly, he takes such steps as will enable him to go before a magistrate or notary and take a binding oath to it. Taking an oath is not mainly an event of the nature of a setting forth, Vorstellung, or representing. It is not mere saying, but is doing. The law, I believe, calls it an ‘act.’ At any rate, it would be followed by very real effects, in case the substance of what is asserted should be proved untrue. This ingredient, the assuming of responsibility, which is so prominent in solemn assertion, must be present in every genuine assertion. For clearly, every assertion involves an effort to make the intended interpreter believe what is asserted, to which end a reason for believing it must be furnished” (CP 5.546 [ca. 1908]).

13. As it is here evidenced, Peirce was thus a major precursor of modern pragmatics, a historical fact now widely recognized (see, for instance, Réthoré 1993; Bergman 2009a & 2009b; Boyd & Heney 2017; and Bellucci 2018). Regarding fiction in particular, Peirce posited that “the real world cannot be distinguished from a fictitious world by any description. It has often been disputed whether Hamlet was mad or not. This exemplifies the necessity of indicating that the real world is meant, if it be meant. [...] It is true that no language (so far as I know) has any particular form of speech to show that the real world is spoken of. But that is not necessary, since tones and looks are sufficient to show when the speaker is in earnest. These tones and looks act dynamically upon the listener, and cause him to attend to realities” (CP 2.337 [ca. 1895]).

14. Here, Peirce misuses language, for it is not the proposition in itself which asserts something but the proposition as it is used in an act of assertion.

15. Note that propositions are the only kind of (general) signs which may possibly be true or false of their object, while their predicates and subjects, by themselves, may be neither. Indeed, predicates, if they do signify possible characters, do not indicate the actual existents to which they may belong, and subjects, if they do indicate existents, do not explicitly signify their character. Accordingly, no subject or predicate can ever be used to assert anything by themselves, while a proposition can.

16. Peirce actually coined the term pragmaticism to differentiate his own kind of pragmatism from other kinds which he did not entirely condone. Nevertheless, Peirce still used the term pragmatism in numerous places.

17. Note that the truth of propositions may also hinge upon socially established laws. For instance, someone may be truly represented as “king” in so far as “certain conditional rules shall govern the conduct” of the “king” and its subjects accordingly. But if the king’s subjects (e.g. civil society, the military, etc.) fail short of implementing those conditional rules, the king then becomes instantly stripped of his clothes. This explains why social realities may collapse at once: real social laws are indeed less crystallized than real natural laws, the former losing their governing power more easily than the latter.

18. Note that a symbolic predicate may represent any kind of character, not only qualities. Peirce distinguishes indeed between monadic (e.g. “is blue”), dyadic (e.g. “kills”), and polyadic characters (e.g. “gives to”). That characters may concern more than one subject does not contradict the logic of what is stated above. However, Peirce insisted that polyadic characters could not be conceived
as belonging to a subject independently of its being represented as belonging to that subject by means of a general predicate. For instance, John does not give a gift to Paul independently of John being represented as doing so. This is because “giving” is not immediately observable like “killing” is. Indeed, an act of giving consists in the instantiation of a necessarily represented law (i.e. the socially instituted “law of giving”), and whose real government may only be verified if conditional predictions based on it are actually borne out by future events. Said Peirce: “If A gives B to C, he, A, acts upon B, and acts upon C; and B acts upon C. Perhaps, for example, he lays down B, whereupon C takes B up, and is benefited by A. But these three acts might take place without that essentially intellectual operation of transferring the legal right of possession, which axiomatically cannot be brought about by any pure dyadic relationships whatsoever” (CP 6.323 [1909]). It follows that “the mere transfer of an object which A sets down and C takes up does not constitute giving. There must be a transfer of ownership and ownership is a matter of Law” (EP2: 171 [1903]) – it implies that “certain conditional rules shall govern the conduct of A and of C” (CP 1.475 [1896]). On the other hand, that an actual existent embodies a quality or that two existents react against each other do not have to be represented as such in order to be phenomenologically apprehended: those monadic and dyadic characters are immediately given in perception (i.e. through feelings and senses of reaction, respectively) and, as such, are constitutive of their respective kind of dyadic (perceptual) fact. This brings a division of facts distinguishing between monadic, dyadic, and polyadic facts, the latter being necessarily “intellectual” or “mental,” that is, dependent on thought and representation.


ABSTRACTS

This essay attempts an overview of Peirce’s pragmaticist doctrine of the truth of propositions. Relying on his writings, I try to characterize his conception of the real and discuss the ways in which his peculiar scholastic metaphysics, opposing that of nominalists, is a central tenet of the pragmaticist view of truth which he strived to develop. Peirce conceived indeed real possibilities and real necessities to be just as real as actualities, those realities corresponding in nature to qualities (“firsts”), laws (“thirds”), and existents (“seconds”), respectively. More specifically, I detail the peculiar mode of being of each kind of real elements and show that all three categories must be recognized at once in true propositions. This led Peirce to conclude that if propositions are general signs indeed and, as such, along with terms and arguments, are necessarily dependent on mind, it does not in the least preclude those propositions to be about, nor true of, a real world – a position which actually constitutes a necessary prerequisite for any meaningful conception of scientific inquiry. I believe that a focus on such interrelations between Peirce’s categorial account of the real and Peirce’s pragmaticist conception of truth constitutes an ideal testament to the systematic nature of his thought, which is an aspect often deflated in unspecialized literatures.
Multilingual
Michela Bella et Angélique Thébert (dir.)

Symposium on Pierre Steiner's

*Désaturer l’esprit. Usages du pragmatisme*

Michela Bella et Angélique Thébert

1 Ce premier symposium en langue française inaugure une nouvelle série de symposiums qui viendront enrichir la section multilingue de l’*European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*. Cette série vise à contribuer à la discussion des publications récentes qui traitent du pragmatisme ou proposent des confrontations avec ce courant de pensée. Elle s’insère dans la section multilingue, dont l’ambition est de permettre aux nombreuses voix internationales qui composent la scène pragmatiste contemporaine de s’exprimer librement, en valorisant la particularité de chaque style et en permettant aux auteurs de mieux articuler leur pensée dans leur langue maternelle. Chaque symposium sera composé d’une brève introduction par les éditeurs, de trois notes critiques sur le texte en question et d’une réponse de l’auteur.

2 Le livre de Pierre Steiner, *Désaturer l’esprit. Usages du pragmatisme*, publié en 2019 par la maison d’édition Questions Théoriques, offre une excellente occasion d’inaugurer cette série de symposiums multilingues. Le livre de Pierre Steiner se développe à partir d’une distinction clé, qui apparaît dès le sous-titre: la distinction entre les *usages* et les *utilisations* du pragmatisme. L’ambition de Steiner n’est pas tant de repenser un pragmatisme “déjà pensé,” en en restant à une logique *historienne*, mais plus radicalement d’adopter un “*historicisme renouvelant nos possibilités de pensée*” (Steiner 2019: 9). Dans une perspective jamesienne, qui considère le pragmatisme plus comme une attitude que comme une méthode établie *a priori*, que l’on pourrait appliquer dans de nouveaux contextes, Steiner embrasse une conception transformatrice du pragmatisme, qui peut “s’accompagner de l’invention de nouvelles fins et de nouveaux horizons” (9). L’auteur propose notamment de mettre cette attitude philosophique au service d’un sujet central de la philosophie contemporaine (et de nombreuses autres disciplines connexes): l’esprit. “[Cette] attitude [pragmatiste] s’exercera ici sur *ce que le*
pragmatisme nous permet de faire à propos de l'esprit, et plus précisément à propos de nos manières de parler et d'agir à partir du concept d’”esprit” (10). Cette démarche inspire le titre de l'ouvrage: désaturer l'esprit. Cette entreprise de désaturation comprend deux mouvements pragmatistes: 1) la désubstantialisation de l'esprit et la mise en évidence des relations de transaction et de médiation qui interviennent entre l'esprit et son environnement naturel et social (via des signes, normes et instruments); 2) la réflexion sur la manière dont le concept d'esprit est utilisé dans nos pratiques de recherche et nos pratiques “de reconnaissance de sa présence chez nos congénères” (10).

Considérant les utilisations récentes du pragmatisme faites en philosophie de l’esprit et dans les sciences cognitives, Steiner estime que la plupart d’entre elles ne sont que des tentatives pour appliquer des outils pragmatistes à un horizon de pensée déjà donné et prédéfini, celui de la critique du cognitivisme classique. Steiner poursuit quant à lui un chemin différent. Son ambition n’est pas d’utiliser mais de faire usage du pragmatisme: il s’agit de relever le défi qui consiste à adopter une attitude authentiquement pragmatiste, en déployant ses conséquences au-delà de ce qui a déjà été fait ou dit et, dans cette perspective à la fois théorique et pratique, de démystifier les nombreuses conceptions qui constituent les prémisses de nos débats. Cela implique de “reconsidérer [l’idée même] de cognition, le principe d’une réalisabilité matérielle de l’esprit, ou le privilège d’un usage référentialiste des concepts mentaux et cognitifs” (11). En d’autres termes, le projet de Steiner n’est pas tant de proposer une version 2.0 de l’esprit que de réfléchir à ce que font nos usages du concept d’esprit. Le résultat de son enquête ne conduit pas à un évidement de l’esprit, comme si l’attention accordée aux emplois du concept d’esprit était le fin mot de l’histoire. Comme il le précise (15), l’esprit n’est pas qu’un mot! L’ambition qui anime son analyse n’est pas d’évincer l’esprit mais d’en faire une réassignation, de le remettre à sa place. En l’occurrence, l’esprit ne se réalise pas “dans des faits qui ne dépendent pas de ce que nous faisons” (14; nous soulignons).


Dans La proposition expressiviste de Steiner et l’énactivisme. Divergences et convergences, Marta Caravà porte son attention sur le troisième chapitre de l’ouvrage, dans lequel Steiner oppose des arguments critiques à la version énactiviste des sciences cognitives. La question qui guide son analyse est celle posée par ce dernier: “Que peuvent étudier les sciences cognitives?” (Steiner 2019: 176).

Steiner identifie cinq points de convergence entre la philosophie de la psychologie de Wittgenstein et un programme de recherche d’inspiration énactiviste. Selon Caravà, ils “expriment le projet général de l’énactivisme,” qu’il faut comprendre comme “une conception externaliste, incarnée, dynamique et active de l’esprit et de la cognition.” Steiner montre toutefois que l’expressivisme (à la Wittgenstein) radicalise la portée critique des sciences cognitives. Comme le montre Caravà, la critique de l’énactivisme menée par Steiner porte à la fois sur “l’usage dénotatif des concepts psychologiques” et sur la conception de la cognition comme “processus générique,” déjà centrale dans les approches cognitives classiques. Concernant le premier point, dans sa réponse à Caravà, Steiner s’attache à dissoudre une possible confusion entre les “concepts
psychologiques scientifiques” (les concepts de cette discipline scientifique qu’est la psychologie) et les “concepts psychologiques ordinaires” (les concepts “que nous mobilisons quotidiennement dans nos explications ou interprétations du comportement d’autrui”). Il précise que sa critique de l’usage référentialiste des concepts psychologiques se rapporte surtout à ces derniers, qui peuvent d’ailleurs “constituer un obstacle à la pratique de la psychologie scientifique.”

Plus fondamentalement, Caravà pose la question de savoir si l’abandon du “modèle du processus pour la compréhension de la cognition” doit conduire à un abandon de la philosophie de l’esprit. Elle interroge l’idée de Steiner selon laquelle il faut passer du “concept énactiviste de processus” (aux relents ontologiques trop marqués) au “concept wittgensteinien d’expression.” Elle reconnaît que, ce faisant, Steiner offre aux sciences cognitives une voie de recherche prometteuse. Mais elle se demande en quoi, d’un point de vue opérationnel et pragmatiste, une telle “étude du comportement expressif” peut bien consister. Concrètement, que faut-il étudier? Plus radicalement, reste-t-il quelque chose à étudier? Steiner répond à cette question en indiquant tout d’abord qu’il est plutôt suspicieux à l’égard de l’idée selon laquelle une thèse philosophique (comme l’énactivisme) devrait être évaluée à la lumière de ses conséquences empiriques. Selon lui, une discussion sérieuse de l’énactivisme doit s’effectuer avant tout sur le plan philosophique. C’est à ce niveau que le pragmatisme peut apporter une contribution importante. Steiner précise également que sa conception expressiviste “invite les théories cognitives putativement ‘radicales’ à s’émanciper d’une métaphysique naturaliste naïve, qui suppose par exemple que ‘cognition’ correspond à un ensemble spécifique de processus naturels, qui posséderaient une essence ou un trait commun (‘la marque du cognitif’) indépendamment de nos conventions et pratiques descriptives.” Bien au contraire, selon lui, la reconnaissance de la cognition est inextricablement liée à “un système” qui “précède et excède l’étude de sa réalisation matérielle, qu’elle soit neurocentrée, énactée, ou étendue.” Voilà la spécificité d’une approche expressiviste du mental: elle évacue la question du lieu de résidence de l’esprit. Et en cessant de chercher où se réalise (s’incarne) le mental, elle opère en quelque sorte une sublimation du mental.

En conclusion, Steiner revient sur les conséquences de sa thèse relative au fonctionnement “musculaire” du cerveau (défendue à la fin du deuxième chapitre). Il souligne le point sur lequel son approche se distingue des études existantes: l’expressivisme cherche à comprendre comment les réponses du cerveau à l’environnement constituent un “répertoire comportemental historiquement, culturellement et anthropologiquement situé, à partir duquel les concepts psychologiques ordinaires sont appris et utilisés” (nous soulignons). Dès lors, en portant son attention sur ces performances comportementales (et non sur le cerveau lui-même), l’expressivisme va “plus loin que la reconnaissance d’une distribution ou extension factuelle de l’esprit et de la cognition sur un ensemble de dispositifs, de capacités et d’événements (dont le cerveau comme muscle).” Le cerveau n’est donc pas le nouvel hébergeur de l’esprit.

Dans Désaturer l’esprit, mais sans le dénaturer! Quelques remarques sur l’ouvrage de Pierre Steiner, Jean-Marie Chevalier montre que la méthodologie utilisée par Steiner pour “repenser à fond l’ontologie du mental” est “grossissimo modo” wittgensteinienne, en tant qu’elle se base sur un “examen des circonstances d’usage du concept de pensée” (Steiner 2019: 130). Il souligne que l’objectif de l’analyse de Steiner est à la fois de suivre
les auteurs sélectionnés dans un processus de démystification de certaines “confusions catégorielles héritées,” et de faire progresser les sciences cognitives contemporaines en déployant les conséquences – l’usage – d’une réflexion pragmatiste. La première remarque de Chevalier questionne l’unité de l’ouvrage. On peut en effet s’interroger sur la manière dont sont reliées les différentes études consacrées aux auteurs pris pour guides (s’agit-il d’un parcours progressif?). Surtout, on peut se demander quelle est in fine la conception de l’esprit retenue par Steiner.

Dans le chapitre consacré à Brandom (dont la présentation est, selon Chevalier, “discrètement [durkheimienne]”), Steiner radicalise “l’explication inférentielle des épisodes mentaux.” Cela conduit Chevalier à émettre un doute quant à la possible confusion commise par Steiner entre “un externalisme sémantique” et un “externalisme du mental.” L’un implique-t-il nécessairement l’autre? Dans sa réponse, Steiner montre que le propre d’une approche pragmatiste inspirée de Brandom et de Wittgenstein est précisément d’abandonner la “logique de réalisation,” c’est-à-dire la question de savoir “comment des événements intracrâniens pourraient réaliser, même partiellement, des épisodes de pensée.” Qu’importe, Chevalier enfonce le clou et se fait le porte-parole de nos intuitions – nos résistances – internalistes: ne peut-on pas concevoir une sensation (ou émotion) indépendante “de tout contexte et de toute expression comportementale”? Steiner oppose à cette hypothèse sa perspective adverbiale et expressiviste. Selon cette approche, “la stimulation cause une sensation (en modifiant une structure matérielle), sensation qui n’est que l’élément initial d’une trame comportementale exprimant la joie, la peine ou la volonté dépendamment de sa qualification par des agents (y compris le sujet de l’expérience) qui maîtrisent les concepts de ‘joie,’ ‘peine,’ ou ‘douleur.’” En d’autres termes, une expérience émotionnelle de joie ou de peine n’est pas identifiable à une sensation quelconque.

Chevalier exprime également un certain scepticisme à l’égard des deux derniers chapitres consacrés à Dewey: il regrette une “parcimonie argumentative qui contraste avec les deux autres tiers du livre” (parcimonie imputable à Dewey plus qu’à Steiner). Dans sa réponse, Steiner explicite toute l’importance méthodologique et stratégique de la position adverbiale de Dewey, et donc des deux chapitres finaux: “c’est à partir de cette ontologie que j’ai été amené à (re)lire Wittgenstein et Brandom.”

Enfin, Chevalier met en exergue un “impensé” du livre de Steiner: on a l’impression que le traitement de l’esprit par les sciences cognitives se heurte encore et toujours au dualisme cartésien, donc à la relation problématique entre le corps et l’esprit. Dans ces conditions, le projet de Steiner n’est-il pas un “projet bifrons”? Steiner l’admet (son ouvrage s’appuie sur ce problème tout en tentant de le dépasser), et il confesse “avoir conscience de son ambiguïté.” Il précise toutefois que, bien que ce problème repose sur une “une compréhension erronée (représentationnelle et substantielle) du vocabulaire mental et des concepts psychologiques,” il n’en reste pas moins “important de revenir sur les multiples formes [qu’il] a pu prendre tout au long de l’histoire, et sur ses différents contextes de formulation et de réapparition (y compris en sciences cognitives).”

Dans Désaturer et naturaliser l’esprit. Deux usages du pragmatisme. Quelques notes sur le livre de Pierre Steiner, Roberta Dreon souligne la variété des références et la clarté expressive avec lesquelles l’auteur, loin des traditionnelles tentations métaphysiques, poursuit son objectif de désaturation de l’esprit en le repensant “en termes de vocabulaire [...] (avec Rorty), ou bien en termes d’engagements normatifs inhérents aux pratiques
linguistiques (avec Brandom), ou encore dans les termes subtils de l’expressivité de Wittgenstein [...] ou enfin, avec Dewey, sous une forme adverbiale.”

Dreon souligne à quel point la stratégie de Rorty – qui focalise l’attention non plus sur l’ontologie mais sur les pratiques linguistiques – est importante pour comprendre l’approche tout à la fois “post-ontologique” (12) et “déontologique” de Steiner (dé-ontologique au sens de “non ontologique” et de “normative”: 52). Qui plus est, Steiner reconstruit la position de Rorty par le menu, s’efforçant de ne pas tomber dans l’écueil d’une banalisation facile de sa pensée (qui consisterait à lui appliquer trop rapidement un “constructivisme” et un “relativisme linguistique”).

Concernant l’approche adverbiale de l’esprit promue par Dewey, Dreon partage les deux aspects sur lesquels Steiner insiste beaucoup: il y a esprit quand il y a relation et signification. Dans ce cadre, “les interactions des êtres humains sont significatives, c’est-à-dire mentales, parce qu’elles ont lieu dans un milieu social caractérisé par une coopération communicationnelle et linguistique, en vue de la réalisation de buts communs, à savoir la régulation mutuelle des actions des locuteurs.” Sa principale critique concerne l’aspect constructif de la conception deweyienne, qui resterait en marge de la lecture de Steiner, mettant ainsi en question l’unité de son projet. À ce sujet, bien qu’il partage l’idée selon laquelle la théorie de Dewey est plus “large” que celle exprimée au sujet de la cognition, Steiner nuance l’idée de Dreon selon laquelle il y aurait une tension “méthodologique” dans son parcours argumentatif, à laquelle s’ajouterait une tension “meta-philosophique,” palpable en particulier dans la difficile conciliation d’une vision positive de l’expérience (Dewey) et une analyse critique-thérapeutique (Rorty, Wittgenstein). Cette réponse lui donne l’occasion de revenir sur sa lecture de Dewey et de rappeler l’importance qu’elle revêt dans son projet d’élaborer une “anthropologie philosophique globale.”

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La proposition expressiviste de Steiner et l’énactivisme
Divergences et convergences

Marta Caravà

1. Introduction

1 Dans son livre Désaturer l’Esprit. Usages du pragmatisme (2019), Pierre Steiner explore certains usages possibles du pragmatisme dans la philosophie de l’esprit et dans les sciences cognitives contemporaines. Les principales thèses de Steiner sont les suivantes: le pragmatisme peut (i) clarifier la façon dont les philosophes utilisent le concept d’esprit dans leurs pratiques de recherche et (ii) proposer une approche théorique et méthodologique de l’esprit qui pourrait dépasser le substantialisme – explicite ou caché – de la philosophie des sciences cognitives. Dans chaque chapitre de son livre, Steiner aborde ces deux points en utilisant des concepts et des figures pragmatistes comme les instruments d’une action philosophique qui prend souvent la forme d’une action critique, en cela qu’elle comporte la déconstruction et la reconstruction de certains couples problèmes/solutions analysés et développés dans la philosophie contemporaine de l’esprit.

2. Steiner, Wittgenstein et l’énactivisme. Convergences et différences

En accord avec d'autres recherches contemporaines au carrefour du pragmatisme et des sciences cognitives (Boncompagni 2013; Dreon 2019; Fabbrichesi 2016; Gallagher 2014; Hutto 2013; Jung & Madzia 2016; Menary 2016), Steiner commence sa discussion de l'approche énactiviste en soulignant la contribution qu'une figure pragmatiste spécifique – Wittgenstein – peut apporter au débat contemporain. Il considère cinq points essentiels qui expriment une convergence théorique générale entre la philosophie de Wittgenstein et l’énactivisme: la position anti-intellectualiste sur la relation entre l'organisme et son environnement; l'action, la pratique, la capacité, le savoir-faire et la forme de vie en tant que concepts fondamentaux pour l'étude des phénomènes cognitifs; la position anti-représentationnaliste sur la cognition; la dimension sociale des normes et ses conséquences externalistes par rapport au processus de signification; la critique de la distinction entre un esprit “interne” et un monde “externe.”

Steiner affirme à juste titre que ces cinq points sont essentiels pour comprendre la contribution théorique de la philosophie de Wittgenstein aux différentes variantes de l’approche énactiviste (l’énactivisme autopoïétique: Varela, Rosch & Thompson 1991; l’énactivisme sensorimoteur: O’Regan & Noé 2011; l’énactivisme radical: Hutto & Myin 2013, 2017). En effet, considérés dans leur ensemble, ces cinq points expriment le projet général de l’énactivisme, à comprendre comme une ligne de recherche qui vise à étudier l’expérience humaine d’un point de vue nouveau et radical. La nouveauté de cette approche consiste en une conception externaliste, incarnée, dynamique et active de l’esprit et de la cognition, qui témoigne d’une séparation radicale d’avec la tradition cognitiviste et les modèles classiques (comme la métaphore de l’“esprit-ordinateur” ou le “modèle-sandwich”: Gardner 1985; Hurley 1998).

Cependant, l'analyse de Steiner va bien au-delà de l'identification des thèmes wittgensteiniens dans le projet énactiviste. En fait, la philosophie de la psychologie de Wittgenstein est utilisée comme une ressource théorique pour dévoiler ce que Steiner considère comme un symptôme de proximité et de continuité entre l’approche énactiviste (et les autres programmes de recherche dans les sciences cognitives – y compris le cognitivisme) et une “forme de mentalisme” (Steiner 2019: 149) qui, d’après l’auteur, devrait être dépassée. La problématisation de l’approche énactiviste proposée par Steiner porte sur deux points centraux.

Tout d’abord, l’auteur fait la critique de l’usage dénotatif des concepts psychologiques, en soutenant que les énactivistes utilisent les concepts psychologiques de manière référentielle, ce qui implique une correspondance entre ces concepts et un état de fait. Deuxièmement, l’idée que, bien que dans l’approche énactiviste la cognition soit conçue comme coextensive à une forme d’action (par exemple, l’action sensorimotrice: Noé 2004) ou à une forme de pratique située (comme la manipulation active des affordances de l’environnement: Gallagher 2017; Krueger & Colombetti 2018; Di Paolo & De Jaegher 2015), cette approche est centrée sur le concept de processus, qui était central dans les approches classiques des sciences cognitives basées sur le concept de information processing (traitement de l’information). Selon Steiner, la centralité du concept du processus, ainsi qu’une utilisation dénotative des concepts psychologiques, impliquent
“une forme minimale et épurée de définition de ce qu’est la cognition” (Steiner 2019: 138). En d’autres termes, une telle conception de la cognition serait symptomatique du fait que le projet énactiviste est beaucoup moins radical que ce qui est généralement affirmé dans le débat courant sur les sciences cognitives incarnées et situées (ibid.: 180).

3. L’usage des concepts psychologiques et le problème du processus. Une recontextualisation énactiviste

Voici un bref aperçu de l’argument développé par Steiner, avec des réflexions générales élaborées à partir d’une perspective énactiviste sur l’épistémologie des sciences cognitives et sur la métaphysique de l’esprit. Steiner problématisé l’approche énactiviste à partir de l’analyse des confusions conceptuelles de la psychologie proposée dans les *Recherches philosophiques* de Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein 2004). L’une de ces confusions est l’usage dénotatif des concepts. En suivant l’argumentation de Wittgenstein, Steiner affirme que les concepts psychologiques (comme ceux de “pensée,” d’“intention,” de “désir” et de “croyance”) ne sont pas des concepts théoriques qui servent à désigner des phénomènes d’un type particulier, mais qu’il s’agit plutôt d’instruments pour qualifier des phénomènes qui, grâce à cette opération de qualification, acquièrent une dimension psychologique. C’est-à-dire qu’ils sont interprétés du point de vue psychologique. Ceci implique qu’il n’existe pas de types de phénomènes qui ont *de facto* des propriétés cognitives ou psychologiques, mais que, au contraire, il y a seulement des phénomènes qui ont ces propriétés *de jure*. Ces phénomènes ont des propriétés mentales en vertu de ce que nous faisons avec les concepts psychologiques à l’intérieur d’une communauté scientifique, qui est caractérisée par des normes épistémiques définies dans et par une pratique de recherche.

Il me semble que ce point de l’argumentation de Steiner peut être interprété en deux sens. D’un côté, il porte sur la nécessité de reconnaître le fait que ce qu’une théorie veut expliquer (à savoir son objet) se construit dans la pratique de recherche elle-même. Ce serait donc dire que chaque théorie doit reconnaître que ce qu’elle affirme ou découvre n’a pas un sens absolu ou objectif mais, au contraire, est influencé par la manière dont les pratiques de recherche sont conduites. Si ce point était compris en ce sens général, je crois que les partisans et partisanes de l’approche énactiviste pourraient être d’accord avec la position de Steiner. En effet, l’approche énactiviste elle-même s’est développée à partir d’une réflexion sur une circularité fondamentale dans les sciences cognitives. Comme dans l’analyse proposée par Steiner, il s’agit d’une circularité épistémologique: nos activités de réflexion (y compris les activités de recherche sur la cognition et sur l’esprit) s’enracinent dans un contexte donné de croyances et de pratiques biologiques, sociales et culturelles, à partir duquel ce qui doit être étudié est défini. C’est-à-dire que, au moins au niveau épistémologique global, l’approche énactiviste ne considère pas ses objets de recherche comme de purs états de fait mais, au contraire, comme des variables de ce que nous sommes en train de faire dans nos pratiques de recherche (Varela, Rosch & Thompson 1991: 9-12). Par conséquent, si cet aspect de l’argumentation wittgensteinienne était compris dans ce sens épistémologique global, il ne constituerait pas une objection substantielle à l’approche énactiviste.
Cependant, la conception de Steiner de nos outils psychologiques – les concepts – peut et doit être comprise dans un sens plus radical, qui est à la base de son attitude critique à l’égard de l’énactivisme et de l’approche alternative et originale qu’il propose. La discussion de Steiner porte sur un point très intéressant: si on admet que l’usage le plus propre des concepts psychologiques n’est pas la dénotation, on doit alors affirmer que ces concepts ne fonctionnent pas de manière référentielle. Ces concepts n’identifient pas un objet mental ou physique, mais ils servent plutôt à connoter cet objet du point de vue psychologique, en spécifiant les **qualités** qui permettent à un phénomène d’être défini comme cognitif ou mental. Si l’on considère ce passage de l’argumentation de Steiner dans le cadre de la littérature contemporaine sur les approches de l’esprit situées et incarnées, il évoque sûrement une question largement débattue: la question de la marque du mental,\(^1\) c’est-à-dire l’enquête sur les caractéristiques et qualités qui sont intrinsèques à un phénomène de nature mentale, qui le distinguerait d’un phénomène qui n’est pas mental.

Cependant, il me semble que l’argumentation de Steiner a une portée différente par rapport aux argumentations des philosophes des sciences cognitives contemporaines. En fait, selon Steiner, la qualité qui permet à un phénomène d’être défini comme un phénomène mental est une qualité qui n’est pas intrinsèque à ce phénomène (comme l’intentionnalité, le rôle fonctionnel, les propriétés téléosémantiques, le contenu intrinsèque). Il s’agit au contraire d’une qualité qui est propre aux usages des concepts psychologiques. Steiner écrit en effet:

> Pour chaque concept, pour chaque phénomène, c’est la diversité de ses usages et de ses manifestations qui est fondamentale, pour ne pas dire fondatrice. [...] Lorsque nous nous intéressons à la pensée, ce qui peut faire la différence, ce ne sont pas des expériences (et des différences d’expérience), mais des concepts (et leurs différents usages). (Steiner 2019: 153)

\(^7\) Ce qui qualifie un phénomène mental ne doit pas être cherché dans des propriétés qui sont considérées comme intrinsèques aux objets mentaux auxquels les concepts psychologiques feraient référence. Au contraire, cette propriété est une conséquence de l’usage des concepts. D’après Steiner, soit les partisanes et partisans de l’énactivisme ne reconnaissent pas ce point de vue, soit elles/ils ne reconnaissent pas les conséquences radicales de ce point de vue, parce qu’elles/ils utilisent les concepts psychologiques en présupposant qu’ils se réfèrent à des phénomènes proprement identifiables et observables, auxquels elles/ils se réfèrent par le concept de **processus**.

\(^8\) Toujours selon Steiner, l’usage que les énactivistes font des concepts psychologiques, qui suppose une métaphysique de l’esprit d’après laquelle les phénomènes mentaux sont des processus, serait particulièrement problématique pour un projet philosophique visant à “désaturer l’esprit,” c’est-à-dire à le caractériser d’une manière nouvelle, en dépassant les approches ontologiques communes. Plus spécifiquement, selon Steiner, ce qui est particulièrement problématique est le fait que les énactivistes identifient les genres psychologiques (comme la perception, la mémoire, l’imagination, la pensée) à des processus spatiotemporels (2019: 150) qui, de manière générale, peuvent être définis comme des processus incarnés et situés dans un environnement physique, affectif et socioculturel. En d’autres termes, ce que Steiner reproche aux énactivistes est une sorte de substantialisation de l’esprit qui – bien qu’il s’agisse d’un genre particulier de substantialisation, car les énactivistes parlent de processus et non de **chose**s mentales –, devrait être abandonnée.
L’objection de l’auteur porte donc – me semble-t-il – sur l’un des présupposés fondamentaux de l’énactivisme, c’est-à-dire sur l’idée que la cognition et l’esprit sont réalisés par un corps actif qui agit dans, sur et surtout avec un environnement au cours du temps. Cette critique n’empêche pas l’auteur de reconnaître la dimension située des pratiques cognitives, qu’il traite en effet en détail dans d’autres parties du livre à partir de la notion de “pratique.” Pourtant, les réflexions de l’auteur servent à souligner ce qu’il considère comme la plus grande erreur de l’énactivisme: l’identification de concepts psychologiques à la cognition, qui serait réalisée par des types psychologiques spécifiques, lesquels seraient de quelque manière observables scientifiquement et analysables grâce à une enquête de nature métaphysique sur l’esprit.

D’un côté, je suis d’accord avec Steiner, c’est-à-dire que je partage son interprétation de l’approche énactiviste comme une théorie qui vise à identifier la cognition et l’esprit à un phénomène qui peut être analysé grâce à des questions de nature métaphysique (“qu’est-ce que l’esprit ?” ou “qu’est-ce que ce type particulier de processus cognitif?”), et comme une théorie qui voudrait se baser sur l’observation scientifique des processus cognitifs et mentaux. D’un autre côté, si on considère la problématisation de l’approche énactiviste proposée par Steiner, en se situant à l’intérieur du débat sur les nouvelles sciences contemporaines, les doutes de l’auteur sur cette approche métaphysique et scientifique pourraient peut-être acquérir une dimension différente.

Tout d’abord, on pourrait soutenir que l’attention que les énactivistes priment à des phénomènes qui sont de quelque manière observables ne dépend pas seulement des présupposés de la théorie (comme le concept de couplage entre l’organisme et son environnement, tant au niveau diachronique, qu’au niveau synchronique: Kirchhoff 2014), mais qu’elle dépend aussi du projet énactiviste et de son niveau idéal, c’est-à-dire de la nécessité de reconstruire les sciences cognitives tant du point de vue philosophique que du point de vue pratique ou expérimental. Le dernier point de vue impliquerait certainement de considérer les phénomènes cognitifs et mentaux comme des phénomènes qui sont en partie observables dans le temps et dans l’espace. C’est là-dessus que l’on doit justement réfléchir, en dévoilant les problèmes possibles que soulève une telle attitude. Pourtant, je crois que, au niveau pratique, cette attitude de l’énactivisme pourrait être fructueuse, puisqu’elle pourrait être utilisée comme une base pour définir des perspectives expérimentales qui rompent avec la tradition computationnelle ou cognitiviste en général. C’est-à-dire que, même dans le cas où le concept de processus poserait des problèmes du point de vue strictement philosophique, il pourrait quand même être utile pour faire des progrès dans les sciences expérimentales. Je reviendrai sur ce point dans le paragraphe suivant.

Deuxièmement, la critique de l’identification métaphysique des phénomènes psychologiques à des processus, qui montre bien la nécessité de dé-substantialisier l’esprit d’une manière radicale (c’est-à-dire la nécessité de dé-mentaliser aussi les processus externes et actifs), semble compromettre le projet énactiviste, mais aussi, plus généralement, le projet d’une philosophie de l’esprit qui utilise certaines méthodes de recherche empirique propres aux sciences cognitives. En d’autres termes, si la cognition n’est pas un processus et, par conséquent, si l’esprit ne s’explique pas par des processus, comment pourrait-on étudier les phénomènes mentaux, étant donné que d’autres outils explicatifs (comme les représentations internes ou le langage de la pensée) ont également été rejetés? Est-ce que le projet d’une philosophie de l’esprit (comme le projet d’une philosophie de l’esprit énactiviste) doit être abandonné? Pour
aborder ces questions et conclure mes réflexions sur le livre de Steiner, je traiterai dans
le paragraphe suivant de la conception de l’auteur – la perspective expressiviste sur
l’esprit – et contextualiserai ces problèmes à la lumière de sa position originale.

4. L’expressivisme et le projet de la philosophie des
sciences cognitives. Une question pragmatiste

À la lumière des doutes sur la position énactiviste considérés ci-dessus, l’auteur
propose de dépasser le concept énactiviste de *processus* par le concept wittgensteinien
d’*expression*. Le concept d’expression sert à rendre compte de la relation de médiation
entre le comportement et les phénomènes mentaux. Plus précisément, le concept
d’expression n’a pas comme référents des phénomènes mentaux et ne désigne pas une
action individuelle. Au contraire, il sert à se référer à ce que l’auteur appelle des
“actions adverbialement expressives” (Steiner 2019: 162), c’est-à-dire des
comportements qui peuvent être interprétés ou qualifiés de mentaux ou cognitifs. En
d’autres termes, au lieu d’utiliser le concept de processus pour identifier l’esprit,
Steiner propose de qualifier la vie mentale par l’expressivité du comportement (*ibid.*:
165) ou par la dimension adverbiale de nos actions, c’est-à-dire par des manières
contextuelles d’effectuer des actions. Alors que pour les énactivistes la cognition et
l’esprit sont réalisés ou constitués par un processus actif, d’après Steiner les actions, le
comportement et la pratique ne réalisent pas la vie mentale mais ils l’*expriment*, et ils le
font précisément parce que des actions, un comportement ou une pratique sont
effectués d’une manière qui peut être interprétée comme mentale ou cognitive à partir
de leur contexte et de l’histoire des capacités et des habitudes qui constituent leur
fond.

Dans son article “Reading and Understanding: On Some Differences Between
Wittgenstein and 4E Cognitive Science,” l’auteur offre un exemple wittgensteinien qui
pourrait permettre de clarifier ce point.

> What instantiates reading – by being ascribed the ability to read – is a system
> consisting of an agent who manipulates or produces signs, following certain
> normative patterns […]. The same strategy applies for understanding: there is not a
> single process that defines what understanding is […]. Understanding is an ability
> which is ascribed on the basis of specific performances involving the manipulation
> of signs. (Steiner 2018: 130)

Ce qui nous permet d’identifier une occurrence mentale ou cognitive, ce n’est pas un
processus qui caractériserait la cognition de manière générale, mais c’est plutôt
l’expression d’une capacité (par exemple la capacité à lire ou à comprendre) que nous
pouvons attribuer non pas à un sujet mais à une situation complexe, en utilisant des
concepts psychologiques pour qualifier cette situation. En d’autres termes, ce que nous
pouvons faire, c’est utiliser l’expressivité comme un instrument pour identifier un
phénomène du point de vue psychologique. Comme le souligne Steiner (2018; 2019),
cela ne signifie pas que l’expressivité nous permet d’*étudier* la cognition ou l’esprit d’un
point de vue général. Steiner rejette en effet toute attitude substantialisante ou
ontologisante à l’égard de l’esprit et, pour lui, il ne serait donc même pas logique
d’essayer d’étudier scientifiquement l’esprit et la cognition, si cette étude scientifique
devait définir ce qu’est l’esprit une fois pour toutes, en définissant les mécanismes qui
régissent toute activité cognitive. Au contraire – selon lui – en analysant les
mécanismes internes et/ou externes qui rendent possibles des actions adverbialement
(c’est-à-dire cognitivement, mentalement) expresses, on peut étudier les conditions de possibilité à partir desquelles ces actions, comportements et pratiques se réalisent. Cela signifierait que la philosophie de l’esprit, tant dans son acception métaphysique que dans sa composante opérationnelle (expérimentale), n’aurait plus pour objet l’esprit ou la cognition, mais le comportement adverbialement expressif.

Si mon interprétation de la position de Steiner est correcte, il est possible de faire deux observations nous permettant de répondre aux questions posées dans la section 3. Si on considère la conception expressiviste de Steiner du point de vue d’une métaphysique de l’esprit, on peut soutenir que la thèse de l’auteur implique un changement de paradigme dans la philosophie de l’esprit et des sciences cognitives, y compris dans la philosophie de l’esprit énactiviste. En effet, ce que Steiner suggère est un changement qui concerne la définition de l’objet de recherche de la philosophie de l’esprit elle-même. Cette dernière n’aura plus comme objet l’esprit ou la cognition, mais ce qui est expressif de l’esprit ou de la cognition. Cela impliquerait – me semble-t-il – qu’une philosophie de l’esprit comme on la conçoit dans le débat contemporain sur les sciences cognitives ne soit plus possible. D’un autre côté, il faut reconnaître que l’auteur est parfaitement conscient des implications de sa conception radicale, c’est d’ailleurs pour cette raison qu’il propose une conception alternative, qui ne serait plus une philosophie de l’esprit, mais une philosophie du comportement expressif, en d’autres termes, une philosophie du comportement adverbialement connoté. C’est cette philosophie du comportement expressif qui devrait inspirer le projet des sciences cognitives. La conception originale de Steiner consisterait donc à dire que la réponse à la question “Que peuvent étudier les sciences cognitives ?” est: le comportement expressif.

Si du point de vue théorique les conséquences de cette conception sont très claires, je crois que du point de vue opérationnel il serait utile de réfléchir davantage à ce qu’elle implique. Du point de vue opérationnel, que serait une étude du comportement expressif? En d’autres termes, en paraphrasant la maxime pragmatiste de Peirce (Peirce 1878), quels sont les effets pratiques concevables de la conception expressiviste de l’auteur sur les pratiques expérimentales des sciences cognitives, y compris les sciences cognitives inspirées de la philosophie de l’esprit énactiviste? Si d’une part, un paradigme expérimental expressiviste ou adverbialiste pouvait se distinguer des paradigmes cognitivistes en insistant sur la dimension historique, contextuelle et circonstancielle des pratiques cognitives, d’autre part, en quoi ce paradigme expressiviste ou adverbialiste serait-il différent d’une conception expérimentale inspirée de l’énactivisme, c’est-dire d’une conception qui vise à étudier les interactions d’un sujet humain avec son environnement?

6. Conclusion

Dans son livre Désaturer l’Esprit. Usages du pragmatisme, Steiner se rapporte à l’énactivisme de manière critique, en faisant dialoguer cette position avec la philosophie de Wittgenstein et en proposant une nouvelle approche de la cognition et de l’esprit. D’un point de vue interne à l’argumentation de Steiner, une telle approche semble résoudre les problèmes qu’il attribue à la position énactiviste, qu’il considère comme une position substantialisante ou ontologisante sur l’esprit et la cognition. Cependant, si l’on considère la possibilité – au moins au niveau idéal – d’appliquer le paradigme expressiviste ou adverbialiste à une étude expérimentale du comportement...
humain, il me semble que la proposition de Steiner pourrait être compatible avec une approche énactiviste.

19 Au niveau pratique, l’attention que Steiner prête à la dimension historique, contextuelle et circonstancielle des pratiques cognitives pourrait être opérationnalisée à partir de quelques suggestions énactivistes, comme par exemple la tentative, bien que particulièrement complexe (Gallagher et al. 2015), de transposer les présupposés philosophiques d’une approche holistique aux pratiques cognitives dans la recherche expérimentale. À un niveau idéal, ce projet pourrait être développé soit en proposant une réflexion systématique sur l’interprétation des données scientifiques à la lumière d’une théorie philosophique, soit en réfléchissant sur la possibilité d’inclure davantage de variables (comme la motivation ou les capacités et connaissances préalables) à étudier à partir d’une perspective complexe (par exemple en intégrant la perspective à la première personne, à la deuxième personne et à la troisième personne).

BIBLIOGRAPHIE


NOTES

2. Voir par exemple le chapitre V du livre, sur la pratique scientifique interprétée à la lumière de la philosophie de Dewey.
4. Pour une discussion de ce point, voir aussi Steiner (2018).

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Désaturer l’esprit, mais sans le dénaturer!

Quelques remarques sur l’ouvrage de Pierre Steiner

Jean-Marie Chevalier

1 Le titre pourrait rebuter. Il présuppose que l’esprit serait saturé. De quoi? Probablement d’attributs superflus tels que des capacités mentales, des représentations, des pouvoirs causaux, une essence, qui tous auraient en commun de renvoyer à une intériorité. En ce sens, on pourrait voir dans Désaturer l’esprit un pamphlet contre le désormais célèbre “mythe de l’intériorité.” Ce n’est toutefois pas seulement, ou pas essentiellement, son mérite. Comme l’écrit Pierre Steiner à propos de Wittgenstein: “Après avoir consacré autant d’énergie à la critique du mythe de l’intériorité, il aurait été décevant de soutenir que l’esprit était réalisé [...] dans des processus extérieurs, comme des processus comportementaux ou corporels” (Steiner 2019: 159). Le but de Steiner n’est pas d’opposer une conception externaliste de l’esprit à l’internalisme qui accompagne souvent les sciences cognitives et la philosophie de l’esprit classiquement représentationnaliste. Il entend plutôt repenser à fond l’ontologie du mental, et prendre la mesure de ce à quoi le conduit son enquête. La méthode est souvent, grossissimo modo, wittgensteinienne: “une énigme concernant le phénomène de pensée est ici dégonflée à partir d’un examen des circonstances d’usage du concept de pensée” (130). Le résultat est vertigineux: peut-être une croyance n’est-elle pas un état mental; peut-être penser n’est-il pas tant une activité qu’une coloration de nos actions; peut-être ce que l’on appelle “pensée” n’est-il pas l’origine de nos actions intentionnelles mais plutôt ce qui accompagne leur expression; peut-être la signification du mental n’apparaît-elle qu’à un niveau social... Si ces pistes sont correctes, alors les conceptions communes, la psychologie populaire, le langage ordinaire sont loin de décrire la réalité de ce qu’est la pensée. L’analyse invite à dégonfler le réalisme et le substantialisme à propos des phénomènes mentaux. In fine, une enquête philosophique rigoureuse sur la nature de la pensée tendrait à montrer que cette enquête n’a pas d’objet, car elle ferait d’emblée l’erreur d’identifier la pensée comme un objet muni de propriétés.
Qu’est-ce donc que la pensée? Steiner a apporté une réponse à cette question dans un autre livre (2017). Désaturer l’esprit entend plutôt proposer un parcours guidé par quatre philosophes présumés pragmatistes (Richard Rorty, Robert Brandom, Ludwig Wittgenstein et John Dewey; d’où le sous-titre Usages du pragmatisme) pour nous aider à nous débarrasser de certaines erreurs de catégorisation et de confusions conceptuelles héritées de la tradition dominante en philosophie de l’esprit. Un autre objectif annoncé est d’évaluer l’utilité de ces penseurs pour faire avancer la réflexion des sciences cognitives contemporaines, en proposant de leurs écrits non pas une utilisation – application instrumentale – mais un usage – poursuite de la radicalité d’une pensée par ses conséquences –, insiste l’auteur (9-11). Avec efficacité et sans pédianderie, l’auteur accompagne notre lecture de textes difficiles (redoutable citation de Wittgenstein p. 171!) pour en tirer à chaque fois un enseignement, souvent sur ce que l’esprit n’est pas, davantage que sur ce qu’il est. Le choix de cinq stations (chaque chapitre étant consacré à un auteur différent, et un dernier à Dewey derechef) a de nombreuses vertus: clarté pédagogique, finesse de l’argumentation, ampleur d’une pensée synthétique, mise en évidence de l’originalité d’un auteur, etc.

La contrepartie en est qu’il semble manquer un aperçu général du propos de l’auteur, et surtout, du lien entre les différentes études (certes évoqué p. 12-9, mais à l’occasion d’une présentation successive des chapitres). Sont-elles cumulatives? S’agit-il d’un parcours progressif? En particulier, les brèves transitions entre chapitres pourraient sembler artificielles. De Rorty à Brandom, on passe à une approche “qui se veut plus radicale” (94). Mais Rorty a déjà réduit l’esprit à un simple vocabulaire. Brandom ne rétablit-il pas tout de même quelque chose de la réalité d’une nature spirituelle, tout ancrée qu’elle est dans le social? Brandom est mobilisé “dans la continuité de ce qui a été suggéré dans l’essai précédent (mais sans nier l’existence de certaines tensions)” (99). Qu’est-ce à dire au juste? Quant à la transition de Wittgenstein à Dewey, réservé à la fin comme un appétissant dessert, elle me paraît particulièrement surfaite et pour tout dire décevante, pour les raisons que j’expliquerai dans ce qui suit (mais la faute en revient à Dewey, et au plus celle de Steiner est-elle d’être un si fervent partisan de celui-ci).

La position que Steiner estime être correcte est-elle la résultante de la combinaison des critiques de Rorty, Brandom, Wittgenstein et Dewey? Sont-elles seulement compatibles entre elles? L’“implémentation dans des pratiques sociales” selon Rorty (60), le recours à la validation institutionnelle des inférences par Brandom, n’ont pas le même statut que l’appel aux normes sociales chez Wittgenstein, ni que l’inscription de la philosophie de l’esprit deweyienne dans une problématique politique: comment les articuler? Les différentes études sont-elles conçues pour dresser un tableau cohérent, dont la synthèse dirait la ou une vérité sur la pensée? Quels sont les éléments d’analyse que Steiner retient à son compte et qui formeraient les piliers d’une conception positive de la pensée? Certes, il serait trop facile de reprocher à Désaturer l’esprit son morcellement en chapitres autonomes, tout comme il serait trop facile à l’inverse de reprocher son cohérentisme autojustifiant à un traité monothétique. Il reste que l’on aimerait connaitre le fin mot de l’histoire, du moins selon l’auteur: que retient-il, qu’approuve-t-il? On est un peu frustré qu’un chapitre conclusif ne vienne faire le point. On a compris que l’auteur penche pour une conception de l’esprit qui, sans être éliminativiste, se veut au moins fortement déflationniste. On comprend qu’il privilégie ce qu’il qualifie (un peu timidement, passim) de conception “déontologique,” au double sens de non...
ontologique et de normative. On devine des sympathies pour une conception adverbiale de la pensée (166-7, 192) et pour le projet dewyien de “reconstruction.” Mais alors, était-il nécessaire d’en passer par Rorty et Brandom?

Il est temps d’examiner plus en détail chacun des chapitres. Après une introduction informative et agréable à lire qui trace un “projet d’anthropologie philosophique” (19), la première étude est consacrée à Rorty. À la faveur d’une lecture minutieuse de textes de jeunesse, se déploie un éliminativisme qui n’est que “le prix à payer” (53) si l’on mène à bien la méthode de Rorty: limiter les phénomènes mentaux à leur usage dans un certain vocabulaire. La seule réalité étant la manière que nous avons de parler des phénomènes, ceux-ci surviennent sur nos usages linguistiques. Il n’existe donc pas une réalité de l’esprit qui excèderait le domaine du vocabulaire portant sur l’esprit – en entendant par vocabulaire non seulement un lexique mais des intérêts, usages et “formes de vie.” Le caractère privé des événements mentaux n’est pas une propriété ontologique mais linguistique. Rorty se montre non seulement anti-essentialiste mais pluraliste: aucun vocabulaire ne possède de privilège, et surtout pas le vocabulaire de la science. Steiner qualifie l’éliminativisme rortyen de thérapeutique, car il énonce moins une thèse ontologique qu’une possibilité de principe: nous pourrions nous passer du vocabulaire de l’esprit, ce qui prouve qu’il ne constitue pas un domaine essentiel.

Après la rencontre avec ce Rorty étonnamment wittgensteinien, le chapitre suivant ose un Brandom discrètement durkheimien (111, 116). Surtout, il déploie les conséquences de l’inférentialisme normatif sur la conception de la pensée. Steiner repère une tension dans l’antireprésentationalisme revendiqué par Brandom, et entend la balayer en radicalisant l’explication inférentialiste des épisodes mentaux conceptuels. Là aussi s’énonce une position “déontologique,” au sens où la maîtrise d’un concept équivaut à une autorisation d’engagement accordée par une communauté. Si les significations reposent sur la maîtrise d’un jeu social, on ne voit pas très bien, conclut Steiner, “comment un événement ou une structure matérielle dans la personne pourrait correspondre à un événement de jugement ou d’engagement envers un contenu conceptuel” (124). S’il existe une relation entre le mental et le neuronal, elle est indirecte, médiatisée par les pratiques sociales. Ainsi, le cerveau jouerait la fonction d’un muscle rendant possibles des comportements inférentiels sur lesquels surviennent les événements mentaux, mais il n’a rien en soi d’un organe mental. Quant aux événements mentaux eux-mêmes, ils n’ont probablement pas de véhicules, leur existence n’étant que le corrélat de certaines performances comportementales appropriées. Puisque la pensée réside dans la maîtrise des relations inférentielles et donc des pratiques sociales d’attributions d’engagement, elle n’a rien d’un événement mental interne. À cet égard, on est pris d’un doute: cet argument ne procède-t-il pas d’une confusion entre l’externalisme des significations, des normes et des contenus conceptuels, un externalisme sémantique donc, et l’externalisme mental, de la pensée? Ce n’est pas parce que la pensée a besoin de conditions institutionnelles pour se développer qu’il n’en demeure rien en tant que processus interne.

Le chapitre sur Wittgenstein parvient à susciter l’intérêt et à apporter un éclairage novateur en dépit de la pléthore des commentaires existants. Car il se concentre sur ce que l’analyse wittgensteinienne pourrait apporter aux sciences de la cognition, d’un point de vue “peut-être plus exigeant” (137) que la convergence superficielle souvent relevée avec le post-cognitivisme. À cet égard, l’énactivisme, au lieu d’être considéré comme l’autre des sciences cognitives mentalistes, est interprété par l’auteur comme
constituant “une épure du plus petit dénominateur commun” (181): en effet, il reconduit une image de la pensée comme processus. La cognition “4E” échappe certes au charybde du mythe de l’intériorité, mais pour s’échouer dans le scylla des processus mentaux. Or, argue Wittgenstein, les concepts psychologiques ne décrivent pas des activités mentales, mais caractérisent la dimension expressive d’un comportement. La vie mentale n’est pas un “média encore inexploité” (151), mais ce qui est “porté” par le comportement humain – comme un sourire peut être porteur de joie: celle-ci n’est pas la manifestation d’une antériorité-intériorité, elle est simplement vue dans le sourire. Ce qui rend un comportement expressif, c’est le fait d’être plongé dans un environnement de pratiques, d’institutions, de symboles, etc. La vie psychologique réside donc dans le caractère situé de notre comportement. En particulier, c’est l’imprévisibilité de ce comportement qui nous invite à parler de vie mentale. Si Wittgenstein permet de repenser la cognition, c’est donc surtout en montrant que nos concepts psychologiques ne recouvrent pas des réalités scientifiques, et doivent par conséquent être éliminés des programmes de la science.

8 L’expressivisme wittgensteinien fournit l’une des discussions les plus intéressantes du livre, mais elle est aussi sujette à de grandes résistances me semble-t-il. Steiner fait état d’une distinction entre des processus mentaux qui pour Wittgenstein existeraient réellement (l’atténuation d’une douleur, une cogitation, l’audition d’un son), et des colorations expressives comme la pensée, la compréhension, l’attente, l’intention, le vouloir-dire (152). Sombrer dans le “mythe des processus mentaux” consisterait à croire que tous les concepts psychologiques renvoient à des processus internes. Le critère de distinction serait, toujours pour Wittgenstein, le caractère continu (mais Wittgenstein était réticent à chercher une marque du mental). Si c’est pour dire que certaines “activités” qui ne prennent pas de temps pour se produire, comme avoir une croyance, sont en réalité des dispositions, c’est une thèse importante mais fort peu radicale en comparaison de l’éliminativisme. Si c’est pour dire que “signifier” n’est pas une activité mentale, ou que “les significations ne sont pas dans la tête,” c’est aussi un point important, mais sans grand rapport avec une “dé-ontologisation” du mental.

9 On a parfois l’impression que Wittgenstein veut à toute force supprimer les événements mentaux pour y substituer une expression qui n’exprimerait rien d’autre qu’elle-même. Concept difficile à saisir que cette expressivité: de même que la musique peut être expressive de manière immanente, sans exprimer autre chose que ce qui est entendu, de même un comportement joyeux serait expressif de la joie sans que celle-ci ne soit ressentie intérieurement, “en amont” du comportement. La phénoménologie de la joie ne contredit-elle pas cette description? “Vouloir quelque chose pourrait ici signifier: l’enfant regarde l’objet les yeux grands ouverts, tente de l’attraper avec sa main, et émet peut-être un plieur” (160). On aurait envie de répondre à un Wittgenstein si soucieux des usages du langage ordinaire: non, vouloir ne saurait signifier cela. Autre “forçage”: pour prouver que ce ne sont pas des épisodes occurents dans l’esprit mais des caractéristiques d’une histoire, Wittgenstein demande: “Quelqu’un pourrait-il éprouver pendant une seconde un amour ou un espoir intenses, – indépendamment de ce qui précède ou suit cette seconde?” (168). J’aurais tendance à répondre affirmativement, au moins pour la peur, le dégoût, la tristesse, et peut-être l’amour. Mais au lieu de se fier à des intuitions, on peut tout simplement imaginer un savant fou nous faisant éprouver ces sensations et émotions en connectant notre cerveau à un ordinateur. Un vécu intime ne pourrait-il être suggéré indépendamment de tout contexte, et donc de toute expressivité? Est-il vrai que dans la douleur d’un individu,
“ce qui compte,” ce n'est pas “son vécu intérieur,” mais “la manière dont son comportement – gestes, mimiques, regards – se déploie” (171)?

Avant de mentionner de possibles résistances que l'on pourrait qualifier de mentalistes, je ferai état de mes réticences au sujet des deux derniers chapitres. Qui y attendrait l’apothéose de l’ouvrage risque d’être déçu. Non que Steiner ne tire le meilleur du propos de Dewey. Mais celui-ci est si vague, imprécis et programmatique que le tout coule entre les doigts. L’objectif général de Dewey est politico-social: permettre l’émergence d’une forme nouvelle d’intelligence, technicienne et expérimentale, à même de surmonter la dualité théorie/pratique, et de créer de nouvelles valeurs, fins et significations. Par-delà la dualité du théorique et du pratique, la connaissance (ou l’intelligence, 219) est un “mode d’action” (183); la dichotomie du sujet et de l’objet fait place à une “transaction”; processus, énergie et événement se substituent à l’ontologie des substances. Dans ce cadre mobiliste et continuiste, il n’y a pas d’esprit ni d’objets mentaux, mais des manières d’interagir avec l’environnement. Une unité thématique relie donc ce chapitre aux précédents, mais au prix d’une parcellisation argumentative qui contraste avec les deux autres tiers du livre. La caractérisation du mental comme qualité d’un comportement rappelle l’expressivisme wittgensteinien, mais n’en atteint ni la profondeur ni la force persuasive. Pour Dewey, la pensée est une “qualité de la conduite qui prévoit les conséquences des événements présents” (192): après avoir congédié l’esprit par la porte, c’est réintroduire par la fenêtre et en toute candeur la nécessité de prévoir, penser des conséquences, concevoir. En affirmant que l’esprit est la marque d’une transaction entre sujet et environnement dans laquelle il se dirige vers une signification, Dewey fait-il autre chose qu’infuser une dose d’externalisme dans la description somme toute classique de l’intentionnalité? Quant à l’identification de la signification et du mental, termes quasi-synonymes pour Dewey (198), elle ne laisse pas de poser de sérieuses difficultés.


Ces considérations de bon aloi ne renforcent guère la magistrale argumentation conduite par Steiner. En ressort-on convaincu? En refermant le livre, le lecteur se jure-t-il de considérer la pensée comme une illusion, l’esprit comme un artefact, le mental comme une qualité de comportement? Ce n’est pas forcément l’objectif de l’auteur, qui prend au sérieux la distinction de l’image manifeste et de l’image scientifique du monde. Du reste, le réformisme n’est sans doute pas davantage la visée de Rorty, Brandom et Wittgenstein (peut-être en revanche va-t-il de pair avec le méliorisme d’un Dewey). Le bon sens résiste à la thèse que les pensées ne sont pas d’une manière ou d’une autre “dans” le cerveau. Que les significations n’y soient pas est aisément acceptable, mais il est plus difficile d’admettre que les conditions de possibilité d’épisodes mentaux conceptuels ne soient pas des instances d’événements physiques. Plus exactement, la discussion frontale du “mind-body problem” ouvrirait des perspectives moins radicales (monisme, émergentisme, etc.) et plus alléchantes que la pure et simple répudiation de l’esprit. Steiner connaît évidemment les objections
internalistes et anti-béhavioristes (cf. notamment 129-30), que je ne développerai pas ici, mais qui conservent toute leur force.

13 Une idée qui me paraît néanmoins particulièrement séduisante est que le cerveau fonctionnerait comme une sorte d’organe non mental manifestant des dispositions et rendant possibles les relations inférentielles ainsi que l’actualisation d’une normativité sociale dont la pensée a besoin par la suite. Toutefois, Steiner explique-t-il vraiment le fonctionnement de ce “muscle”? Comment rendre compte de la fonction particulière du cerveau dès lors que les présupposés du mentalisme ont été congédiés? On peine à imaginer comment les sciences cognitives s’engageant dans cette direction pourraient faire autrement que de restaurer une étude de type internaliste.

14 On peut se demander d’où vient notre “foi commune” si indéracinable dans la théorie de l’esprit et dans l’usage ordinaire des concepts psychologiques. N’est-ce pas en vertu de l’autorité à la première personne et du fait que, connaissant immédiatement notre esprit, nous le savons peuplé de processus, d’événements mentaux, de représentations et d’émotions? N’est-ce pas aussi parce que, dans le cas d’une pluralité de vocabulaires équivalents, le mentalisme constitue la description du monde la plus économique? Comme mû par la peur panique de laisser échapper le nom maudit (“substance”), le projet de “désaturation” de l’esprit semble condamné à multiplier les périphrases et circonlocutions pour parler de l’esprit sans supposer son existence. Quel serait le mal? Probablement celui de lui attribuer une nature. D’où l’impression récurrente d’un déplacement de l’attention, par les auteurs discutés, des processus internes vers leur “manifestation”: comportement, expression, institutions, capacités sociales, formulation linguistique. On pourrait décider de ne plus parler d’immeuble mais de fonction d’habitation, de rituel de logement, de pratiques d’entrée et de sortie, ou on pourrait considérer que l’immeuble dont nous parlons n’est qu’un mot; les immeubles n’en disparaîtraient pas pour autant. L’esprit disparaît-il si l’on cesse de le mentionner? Peut-être. C’est la conviction de Rorty: “Nous pourrions ne plus avoir d’esprit, suite à un changement dans nos manières de parler” (83). Cela semble impliquer que la conscience requiert une capacité métacognitive: la présence immanente d’une cognition dans le champ de l’attention supposerait une capacité réflexive linguistique de nomination de cette cognition. Cela paraît peu vraisemblable, et au moins immotivé. Pour Rorty, quelque Antipodien pourrait exprimer sa douleur par des descriptions purement physiques. À quoi l’on serait tenté de répondre que prendre l’exemple de la douleur facilite la tâche, car elle est au moins partiellement physique. Quid de la joie, de la conception de ma propre finitude, ou de l’effet que cela fait de voir rouge? Rorty rejette ce type d’exemples un peu cavalièrement, en prétendant qu’essayer de séparer la conscience de ses manifestations comportementales, verbales ou physiques, serait un “jeu facile et stérile” (71). J’y vois plutôt une expérience de pensée révélatrice, qui plaide contre l’éliminativisme.

15 Pour résumer, à braquer les projecteurs sur autre chose que l’intériorité, on n’en a pas ipso facto réglé les problèmes. N’est-ce pas simplement une manœuvre destinée à les laisser pudiquement dans l’ombre? Dans Le Cahier bleu, Wittgenstein recommande la chose suivante: “lorsqu’il vous arrive de vous demander quelle peut être la nature de la pensée, de la croyance, du savoir, et autres choses de ce genre, essayez de substituer, à la pensée, l’expression de la pensée, de la croyance, etc.” (Wittgenstein 1965: 106). Où l’on voit que ce qui effraie est le spectre d’une nature de l’esprit. On sait que pour Wittgenstein, la plus grande difficulté face à un embarras philosophique consiste non
pas à en trouver la solution mais à s’apercevoir qu’on l’a atteinte. Si l’éliminativisme est la solution, il est en effet pénible d’en rester là. La réduction de la nature à des mots, de la réalité à des vocabulaires, du mental à des comportements satisfaisant nos critères d’usage d’un verbe d’activité mentale, de l’esprit à des adverbes, autrement dit ce que l’on pourrait légitimement qualifier de nominalisme, dit-il véritablement le dernier mot de la réalité? Il semble qu’il faudrait au moins justifier pourquoi nos propos ne sont pas arbitraires. Si la seule réalité est la manière que nous avons de parler des phénomènes, et si la réalité de ceux-ci survient sur nos usages linguistiques, pourquoi disons-nous de l’esprit ce que nous en disons?

Avant de conclure, j’aimerais m’interroger sur une sorte d’impensé du livre de Steiner. Celui-ci donne l’impression que, en souterrain, le véritable problème de l’esprit, ou des sciences cognitives, est pour l’auteur celui de la relation entre le corps et l’esprit. Le premier chapitre s’appelle “Rorty et le problème corps-esprit,” et sans doute les suivants auraient-ils également pu s’intituler “X et le problème corps-esprit.” Non que Steiner ne traite que de cette question: dès le premier chapitre, il va bien au-delà. Mais n’est-ce pas en définitive la motivation de sa recherche? Son objectif en lisant Brandom est de “penser les relations qui existent entre les épisodes de pensée conceptuels et les événements cérébraux,” pour adopter “une position nouvelle dans le problème classique ‘corps-esprit’” (97). La réflexion s’oriente ainsi sur le rapport entre épisodes mentaux conceptuels et “véhicules intracrâniens” (103), avec pour objectif avoué de “se positionné[r] clairement sur le statut du cerveau dans l’existence de notre vie mentale conceptuelle” (105). Un des mérites reconnus à Dewey est d’avoir tracé l’origine de la distinction du corps et de l’esprit dans la dualité théorie vs. pratique (207). Peut-être n’y a-t-il finalement pas d’autre question dans les sciences cognitives que celle, fondamentale, de l’union de la substance pensante et de la substance étendue. Mais ce retour du refoulé, pour ainsi dire, fait accomplir un pas en arrière par rapport à la radicalité des thèses sur la vacuité, l’absence ou au mieux l’extériorité de la pensée. L’enjeu auquel toutes les sciences cognitives sont reconduites n’est autre que l’insurmontable dualisme cartésien. Cette bizarrerie dans l’ouvrage serait en dernier lieu attachée à un projet bifrons, regardant à la fois vers le pragmatisme et vers son application naturaliste. Signe qu’il faut conserver une place à la nature de l’esprit?


Les explications précises, détaillées, et parfaitement claires offrent l’exemple d’une complète intelligence des distinctions qui sont mobilisées - au point parfois d’avoir
l’impression de recevoir un cours, magistral, plutôt que la défense d’une thèse. En contrepartie, il arrive (mais rarement) que l’exposé s’attarde dans une discussion dont on ne voit guère l’utilité pour la réflexion de l’auteur. Ainsi en est-il, dans l’introduction, d’une longue section (presque un chapitre, 21-49) consacrée aux relations entre pragmatisme et philosophie analytique, pour en venir à l’étiquetage “néo-pragmatiste” et “post-analytique.” Le rappel historique est instructif et très informé, et il n’est pas inintéressant de s’interroger sur ces termes pour saisir l’unité du pragmatisme. Mais il est un peu décevant d’en conclure simplement à “l’inanité de l’alternative ‘analytique’ ou ‘post-analytique’ pour qualifier le pragmatisme” (49). Qu’importe l’étiquette pourvu qu’on ait l’ivresse de l’analyse: si, comme le soutient l’auteur, répertorier une théorie sous tel ou tel “-isme” viendrait baliser d’avance un chemin qui doit rester ouvert, le chemin n’aurait-il pas eu avantage à éviter le tunnel historique et terminologique? Mais c’est un détail.

Malgré mon scepticisme à l’égard des voies ouvertes par Dewey, je trouve en définitive que les deux derniers chapitres complètent utilement, quoique dans un registre plus incantatoire, les riches analyses philosophiques de l’ouvrage. Même en essayant d’entrer modestement dans la discussion de quelques arguments, je crains que mes remarques trop générales soient très en deçà du niveau de discussion du livre de Steiner, qui apporte une contribution extrêmement solide et subtile, et un soutien majeur, à l’anti-essentialisme en philosophie de l’esprit.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE


NOTES


2. On avait déjà repéré cette référence aux “formes de vie” à tout bout de champ, quasi-tic de langage chez le dédicataire du livre de Steiner, Jean-Pierre Cometti. Voir Chevalier (2011).

3. Mais ce serait pour une autre raison que l’attente n’est pas un processus mental. Peut-être parce qu’il ne s’y passe rien, l’attitude d’attendre étant plutôt caractérisée par une absence d’événement mental?

4. On pense notamment à la discussion dans Qu’est-ce que le pragmatisme? de Jean-Pierre Cometti.

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Désaturer et naturaliser l’esprit.
Deux usages du pragmatisme
Quelques notes sur le livre de Pierre Steiner

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2 Cette richesse de sources, de thèmes et de positions ne constitue nullement un obstacle à la poursuite lucide d’un parcours bien précis, tracé par Steiner, qui utilise toutes les ressources disponibles dans le but explicite du titre du livre: effectuer une désaturation de l’esprit (mind), proposer une interprétation déflationniste de son concept, éviter toute forme d’hypostase et repenser l’esprit en termes de vocabulaire, d’option lexicale enracinée dans un contexte culturel spécifique (avec Rorty), ou bien en termes d’engagements normatifs inhérents aux pratiques linguistiques (avec Brandom), ou encore dans les termes subtils de l’expressivité de Wittgenstein, qui renonce au
dualisme entre intériorité et comportement, ou enfin, avec Dewey, sous une forme adverbialiste, comme signification (meaning) et qualité qui concerne les transactions des agents humains avec le monde. Tout cela en résistant ascétiquement, comme le Christ dans le désert, à toute tentation métaphysique, même à celle que Steiner croit encore trouver dans l'énactivisme, selon lequel les événements mentaux sont assimilés à des processus qui seraient déjà là (non plus dans l'esprit, mais étendus dans le corps et le milieu environnant), qu'il s'agirait toujours d'expliquer.

En résumé, on pourrait dire que le style et le goût qui caractérisent ce livre sont sans doute européens et français, mais que la qualité et la clarté argumentative du texte répondent pleinement aux plus hauts standards de la littérature philosophique anglophone.

Afin de maintenir un certain ordre dans mon exposé, je m'attarderai sur les quatre étapes du parcours de “désaturation” de l'esprit proposé par Steiner, en insérant de temps en temps quelques considérations sur des aspects qui pourraient être davantage précisés ou explorés. Enfin, dans un dernier temps, je présenterai une réflexion critique sur le parcours dans son ensemble, en soutenant qu’en épuasant l’approche de l’esprit proposée par Dewey, le discours ne se limite pas à une proposition déflationniste, soucieuse d’ôter toute approche ontologique et épistémologique qui alourdirait la question ; le discours deweyien implique également des engagements positifs en faveur d’une forme de naturalisme non réductionniste, culturel et émergent. Le parcours habilement tracé par l’auteur ne me semble pas pouvoir se dérouler de manière linéaire et sans tension, entre l’“éliminativisme thérapeutique” de Rorty (Steiner 2019: 72) et la conception adverbialiste de l’esprit de Dewey, qui implique une approche naturaliste non réductionniste comme pars construens. Les deux stratégies ne sont pas nécessairement incompatibles. Par contre, contrairement à Rorty et à ses critiques des restes métaphysiques de Dewey, je crois personnellement (et Steiner serait probablement d'accord avec moi) que les deux stratégies peuvent être maintenues ensemble en recourant à une conception de la nature humaine qui n'est pas aprioriste, mais qui est liée et ouverte aux contingences de son évolution. Mais il faut néanmoins reconnaître qu’il s’agit de deux usages différents et éventuellement complémentaires du pragmatisme.

1.

Dans son projet d’offrir une “approche post-ontologique de l’esprit et de la cognition” (12), la confrontation avec Rorty joue un rôle décisif. Elle guide tout le parcours de Steiner, même au-delà du premier chapitre. À la lumière des enquêtes sur le problème corps-esprit menées avant la publication de Philosophy and The Mirror of Nature en 1979, Steiner note que la stratégie de Rorty consiste à déplacer la question du plan de l’ontologie à celui des vocabulaires. Pour Rorty, l’esprit ne préexiste pas à l’ensemble des pratiques linguistiques avec lesquelles nous en parlons, mais il existe dans les conditions prescrites par nos coutumes et pratiques linguistiques. De plus, aucun vocabulaire – ni le vocabulaire psycho-philosophique du mental, ni le vocabulaire scientifique des processus neuronaux – n’a de relation privilégiée avec la réalité que, selon Rorty, les hommes ne touchent qu’à l’intérieur d’une langue. L'imprécision des limites du mental n’est donc pas une indication de sa profondeur ou de son inefficacité, mais indique plutôt la diversité des vocabulaires dans lesquels le mot “esprit” est
nécessaire. Pour résoudre le problème corps-esprit, il faut donc renoncer à la réification indu de deux types de vocabulaires différents, c’est-à-dire de deux types de pratiques sociales différentes. La stratégie de retranscription de la question ontologique en termes de vocabulaire est ensuite complétée par l’anti-représentationalisme radical de Rorty: les termes d’un vocabulaire ne sont pas vrais parce qu’ils désignent quelque chose dans le monde extra-linguistique, mais plutôt parce qu’ils permettent de faire des choses différentes, de poursuivre des fins alternatives. L’irréductibilité d’un vocabulaire à un autre n’est pas due à l’accès présumé à la réalité elle-même, mais aux différentes conséquences des activités linguistiques dans lesquelles se réalisent les relations de l’homme au monde.

Dans la manière dont Steiner reconstruit la position de Rorty, certains éléments – qui mériteraient d’être davantage valorisés – montrent que son analyse de la question ne se réduit pas à une forme banalisée de constructivisme et de relativisme linguistique. D’une part, la notion de vocabulaire de Rorty est tout sauf purement linguistique, incluant plutôt “un ensemble historique de significations, de propositions, de descriptions, de croyances, de métaphores et de valeurs, intimement lié à ce que nous faisons et voulons faire dans un contexte donné” (56). En d’autres termes, le langage n’est pas considéré comme une entité autonome distincte du monde, mais il est compris comme une pluralité contingente de pratiques avec lesquelles les humains font des expériences effectives des contextes dans lesquels ils vivent et agissent – bref, ce n’est pas le monde tout court qui est définitivement perdu, mais l’hypothèse du réalisme dogmatique d’un monde totalement déterminé, indépendant des pratiques humaines, tout comme l’hypothèse du langage comme système essentiellement autonome, indiffèrent aux conséquences existentielles de ses applications. D’autre part, précisément, les pratiques linguistiques ne sont pas détachées de l’existence réelle; au contraire, leur valeur de vérité est mesurée par leur capacité à poursuivre certains buts (Calcaterra 2019: 23 sq.). De ce point de vue, il convient de souligner qu’une approche cohérente de la position de Rorty devrait conduire à une atténuation de l’opposition simpliste entre le langage et l’expérience (alimentée par certaines formulations hâtives de Rorty), comme élément clé du passage du pragmatisme classique au pragmatisme linguistique.²

II.

Pour nous conduire à une conception déflationniste de l’esprit, Steiner mobilise dans un second temps le pragmatisme de Robert Brandom, en en faisant un usage double et original. Tout d’abord, bien qu’il critique certaines ambiguïtés de Brandom liées à ses concessions représentationnalistes, Steiner estime que la proposition du philosophe américain peut être utilisée efficacement pour critiquer la conception internaliste de la pensée, c’est-à-dire pour soutenir que la pensée humaine consiste en une série de pratiques normatives entre locuteurs, assumant ainsi une conception constructiviste des épisodes mentaux. De plus, l’exploration de la thèse de Brandom sur la structure normative des pratiques linguistiques humaines lui permet d’aborder de manière alternative le problème du rôle à attribuer aux événements cérébraux dans la réalisation du comportement mental. Le modèle à éliminer est la conception standard, que Steiner nomme “internalisme véhiculaire” (Steiner 2019: 103), selon laquelle les événements neuronaux sont des véhicules ou des supports pour la réalisation
d’”épisodes mentaux conceptuels” (102), ce sont des entités matérielles ou des processus sans propriétés sémantiques qui véhiculent un contenu sémantique – une pensée, un sens, un concept. L’inférentialisme de Brandom, en revanche, conduit à une dislocation de la signification dans les pratiques sociales où elle se constitue: la signification d’un énoncé ne se fonde pas sur des entités mentales déjà données, mais elle se constitue au cours de l’échange, comme règle de la relation entre les interlocuteurs en rapport avec les actions qu’ils peuvent entreprendre et les objets sur lesquels les pratiques s’appuient. Dans l’”inférentialisme large” de Brandom (115), Steiner souligne la dimension holistique – je dirais réaliste, en revendiquant un usage non dogmatique du terme – qui lie les pratiques linguistiques aux circonstances d’application d’un concept et aux conséquences de son emploi: dans les deux cas, il ne s’agit pas simplement d’activités linguistiques, mais d’activités impliquant des engagements effectifs. En effet, en parlant, chacun prend plus ou moins consciemment des engagements avec l’interlocuteur, notamment en ce qui concerne la prétention de vérité de ses propres propositions, chacun envisage une certaine compatibilité et exclut des incompatibilités avec les usages de l’autre locuteur, chacun se sent autorisé à juger d’une certaine manière sur la base d’inférences spécifiques. L’influence wittgensteinienne est évidente dans la mise en valeur de la dimension normative des pratiques, qui devient prépondérante: comprendre une signification, ce n’est pas appréhender un contenu conceptuel déjà donné dans l’esprit, mais c’est maîtriser l’utilisation d’un concept, sa structure inférentielle et normative, c’est assumer les droits et les engagements inhérents aux pratiques linguistiques humaines.

Par une démarche originale, Steiner reconfigure ici le rôle du cerveau dans la production d’”événements mentaux conceptuels”: les processus cérébraux ne sont pas les véhicules ou les supports de contenus sémantiques déjà déterminés au niveau mental avant les pratiques de profération linguistique – l’inférentialisme large de Brandom conduit à démystifier une telle conception de la signification – et, à ce niveau, il n’y a tout simplement pas besoin de véhicule, puisqu’il n’y a pas de contenu déjà prêt à être transporté. Pour Steiner, le rôle du cerveau dans le développement d’événements mentaux conceptuels est indirect et devrait être formulé différemment, au niveau du comportement inférentiel avec lequel les intervenants considèrent les circonstances et les conséquences réelles liées à l’utilisation de certains lexiques. Fort d’une bonne dose de provocation, Steiner conclut que “[…] en considérant son rôle dans la production et l’existence d’EMC [Épisodes Mentaux Conceptuels], le cerveau joue le même rôle qu’un muscle: il cause et contraint la capacité à déployer un comportement inférentiel” (127). Les questions de savoir quel type de causalité est en jeu, et comment elle est réalisée, devraient être posées à la lumière des ressources les plus avancées fournies par les théories post-cognitives de l’esprit: le cerveau a-t-il une suprématie sur le corps dans l’organisme humain? Sa capacité causale est-elle efficace et unidirectionnelle, ainsi qu’indépendante de son lien avec un environnement donné? Le traitement de ces questions implique un approfondissement des conceptions de l’esprit embodied, embedded, extended et enacted que Steiner, grand connaisseur de ce débat (voir Steiner 2014 et Steiner 2017), pourrait davantage explorer.
Dans la troisième phase du parcours tracé dans ce livre, Steiner se consacre justement à la discussion de la contribution des sciences post-cognitives à une conception déontologisée de l’esprit, mais il préfère se concentrer sur une critique de l’énactivisme avec des arguments dérivés de Wittgenstein. Le programme le plus radical de l’énactivisme soutient une forme d’externalisme cognitif, qui ne nie pas l’existence des processus cérébraux, mais qui considère que le corps et l’environnement ont également un rôle constitutif dans la cognition, comprise comme une action incorporée dans un environnement et en continuité avec les phénomènes vitaux. Néanmoins, Steiner estime que, en dépit de cette importante convergence, l’énactivisme, même dans ses formes anti-représentationnalistes et anti-computationnelles, maintient deux hypothèses problématiques. Tout d’abord, ce que l’auteur appelle “le mythe des processus mentaux”: l’assimilation de tous les événements mentaux à des processus mentaux est trompeuse, car elle suggère qu’ils sont déjà là, quelque part, et qu’il faut les expliquer et les désigner. Avec Wittgenstein, Steiner répond que, lorsqu’on traite des phénomènes mentaux et des crampes philosophiques qui en résultent, il faut changer d’approche: au lieu de se focaliser sur les différentes formes d’expérience – sur l’attitude phénoménologique et sur l’attitude scientifique à la troisième personne – il faut observer les différentes occurrences des mots et des concepts utilisés dans différents contextes. Si dans certains cas la caractérisation du mental en termes de processus est acceptable, l’extension de cette identification à toutes les occurrences du mental est trompeuse. Le fait est que (il s’agit ici de la deuxième critique que Steiner oppose à l’énactivisme) les concepts psychologiques ne figurent pas principalement dans le discours ordinaire en tant que concepts théoriques, à l’égard desquels nous ressentons l’obligation de chercher une explication en termes ontologiques et épistémologiques (Perissinotto 2018: 218-9). Ils sont également présents dans les conversations quotidiennes afin de nous permettre de comprendre les autres, de comprendre leurs actions ou leurs dispositions à l’action, et aussi de réguler notre conduite par rapport à celle des autres. D’après la lecture que Steiner fait de Wittgenstein, un visage exprime une émotion et un geste exprime une forme d’action, non parce que dans l’intériorité humaine quelque chose comme un état mental ou émotionnel préexiste à son extériorisation dans un sourire ou dans une action du corps, mais bien parce que dans l’espace de la vie humaine partagée et dans l’espace de l’action qui a une valeur sociale, une distinction se produit entre ce qui est exprimé et ce qui l’exprime. Une telle distinction a une valeur fonctionnelle en dirigeant la conduite des interlocuteurs vers une discrimination subtile qui permet d’orienter l’action, malgré le haut degré d’imprévisibilité du comportement humain. En d’autres termes, il n’y aurait pas d’être plus profond, mental ou psychique, préalable à son expression, mais la distinction entre les aspects mentaux et la dimension du comportement se ferait à la surface. Il s’agit toutefois d’une surface capable de nuances subtiles, déterminantes dans la régulation réciproque de l’action pacifique ou conflictuelle.
IV.


Le deuxième aspect que souligne Steiner concerne la spécificité du mode d’interaction mentale. Pour Dewey, le mental est “quasi-synonyme” de signification (Steiner 2019: 198): les interactions des êtres humains sont significatives, c’est-à-dire mentales, parce qu’elles ont lieu dans un milieu social caractérisé par une coopération communicationnelle et linguistique, en vue de la réalisation de buts communs, à savoir la régulation mutuelle des actions des locuteurs. En fait, pour Dewey, la pensée émerge de circonstances sociales caractérisées par des pratiques linguistiques partagées, car la signification exige qu’au moins deux interlocuteurs convergent sur un objet en vue d’un autre, c’est-à-dire qu’ils convergent sur une pratique commune. Quoi qu’il en soit, ce qui reste caché dans le discours de Steiner, c’est que la conception adverbiale de l’esprit de Dewey fonctionne non seulement comme un outil critique ou *pars destructiens* de la compulsion philosophique à substantialiser l’esprit, mais qu’elle implique aussi une certaine conception, naturaliste et émergente, des relations organiques-environnementales qu’elle qualifie. En d’autres termes, l’approche de Dewey ne se limite pas à opérer une distinction entre les vocabulaires ou les jeux linguistiques, ni même entre les engagements normatifs, mais elle embrasse une conception des relations que l’on peut dire mentales: les interactions entre les organismes humains et leur environnement naturellement social deviennent mentales, par rapport à d’autres types d’interactions animales qui privilégient la sensibilité et une forme de
signification organique, qui ne se basent pas encore sur l’action différée, mais sur l’impact exercé par certaines circonstances sur la vie de l’organisme en question. L’émergence contingente mais irréversible de la communication linguistique joue par conséquent un rôle central dans le naturalisme culturel de Dewey, puisqu’elle génère des formes de signification très complexes et nouvelles, c'est-à-dire des formes d'orientation des êtres humains dans l’environnement, à partir de ressources préexistantes dont la réorganisation produit de nouvelles propriétés – des propriétés mentales liées à de nouveaux modes de communication et de signification. Évidemment, Steiner reconnaît que Dewey suppose une continuité fondamentale entre le développement biologique et le développement mental et culturel, et il souligne que le concept d’émergence joue un rôle crucial pour expliquer l’origine des interactions mentales entre les organismes et l’environnement, “dans un cadre réaliste et à partir d’un naturalisme culturaliste” (Steiner 2019: 201). Par contre, je ne suis pas sûre que Steiner soit pleinement conscient de la nouveauté que constitue l’histoire naturelle de l’esprit de Dewey par rapport à la vision exposée jusqu’alors. La déconstruction du problème corps-esprit et sa traduction en termes de vocabulaire et d’engagements normatifs ont sans aucun doute un rôle thérapeutique face à l’inflationnisme métaphysique qui subsiste dans le débat philosophique, et elles semblent s’inscrire dans la conception adverbiale de Dewey, que Steiner aborde à la fin de sa réflexion. Il s’agit cependant de comprendre dans quelle mesure cela est compatible avec l’histoire naturelle de l’esprit tracée par Dewey, qui constitue la pars construens de son approche adverbiale, et qui récupère l’organique, la sensibilité, le qualitatif bien au-delà de ce que Rorty et peut-être Wittgenstein lui-même seraient prêts à concéder. Il existe à mon avis une tension importante entre les différents usages que nous pouvons et voulons faire du pragmatisme – au-delà des étiquettes de pragmatisme “analytique” et “post-analytique” que, à la fin de son introduction, Steiner considère à juste titre comme stériles.

12 Steiner n’aborde pas ce point, peut-être en raison des différents chemins qu’il a empruntés tout au long de son parcours pragmatiste (Cometti 2010: 102): Rorty et la question des vocabulaires, qui sont contraints par des pratiques et des conditions spécifiques; Brandom et l’idée que la communication linguistique est d’abord un espace normatif, et pas un espace dans lequel les liens humains sont tissés, maintenus ou démêlés; l’obsession wittgensteinienne pour le grammatical; et une lecture de Dewey à partir de la logique de l’enquête et de sa comparaison avec l’expérimentalisme à l’œuvre dans la physique classique et la physique post-newtonienne.

13 Tout cela est juste mais incomplet, et devrait à mon avis être intégré à la partie plus naturelle du naturalisme culturel que je partage avec Steiner, sans qu’il ait à craindre de se compromettre avec la métaphysique – le fantôme de Rorty qui critique la métaphysique de Dewey continue peut-être à planer (Rorty 1977). Il est certain que nous devons suivre soit les indications de Wittgenstein pour échapper aux crampe philosophiques dues à la façon dont nous utilisons le langage, soit les indications de Dewey pour éviter les erreurs dualistes, l’hypostase excessive, les compulsions à poursuivre la reductio ad unum. Et le naturalisme culturel est certainement un postulat, comme l’affirme Steiner (Steiner 2019: 201). Cependant, contrairement à l’approche du dernier Wittgenstein, le pragmatisme n’est pas seulement une philosophie. Il implique plutôt que nous ne pouvons pas nous débarrasser de toutes les croyances, précisément parce qu’il ne s’agit pas seulement de croyances que p: au contraire, que nous en ayons
conscience ou pas, nous ne pouvons partir que d’une option spécifique qui fonctionne déjà comme une disposition à agir ainsi qu’à faire de la philosophie.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE


NOTES

1. Dans cet article, je ne traiterai pas du chapitre conclusif, qui expose une critique argumentée et largement partagée de la conception tendanciellement autonome de la méthode expérimentale de Dewey, ainsi qu’une problématisation de la technique en tant que question anthropologique et politique. Comme il s’agit d’une enquête importante mais collatérale à la trajectoire principale, je m’abstiendrai d’en parler ici.

2. À ce sujet, voir Hildebrand (2014).


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Réponses à Marta Caravà, Jean-Marie Chevalier et Roberta Dreon

Pierre Steiner

Marta Caravà synthétise de manière très juste et claire les ambitions de la lecture que je propose de Wittgenstein dans le troisième chapitre de l'ouvrage: il s'agit de penser d'une manière critique renouvelée le projet des sciences cognitives, en particulier dans leurs versions énactives ou énactivistes. Avant de répondre aux questions légitimes qu'elle m'adresse, je voudrais dissiper un malentendu concernant le statut de ce que j'appelle, à la suite de Wittgenstein, les “concepts psychologiques.” Dans son texte, Marta Caravà m'attribue l'idée que les concepts psychologiques en tant que concepts de la psychologie ne doivent pas être compris comme des concepts référentiels, c'est-à-dire comme des concepts dont l'usage premier consisterait à référer à ou à dénoter des entités, structures ou processus. Ces concepts permettent au contraire de qualifier des comportements, à partir de "normes épistémiques définies dans et par une pratique de recherche" (je la cite). J'adhère globalement à un tel instrumentalisme sur le sens des concepts scientifiques (même s'il faut aménager, au sein de la pluralité des usages normés des concepts scientifiques, une place pour les usages ponctuellement référentiels); il rejoint d'ailleurs l'inférentialisme que je défends dans le chapitre II de l'ouvrage. Mais lorsque je parle, dans le chapitre III, des concepts psychologiques, je fais avant tout référence, avec Wittgenstein, aux concepts ordinaires que nous mobilisons quotidiennement dans nos explications ou interprétations du comportement d'autrui. Les concepts psychologiques ne sont pas d'abord et principalement les concepts forgés et utilisés dans les laboratoires de psychologie. Ce n'est donc pas un point de vue scientifique, mais l'usage de ces concepts psychologiques ordinaires qui contribue à faire d'un comportement un comportement expressif d'une vie mentale. Avant d'étudier ce qu'il appelle “vision,” le psychologue mobilise et connaît déjà le concept psychologique ordinaire de “voir.” L'étude scientifique de la vision ne consiste pas, ici, à préciser le référent du concept ordinaire de “voir,” car ce dernier concept n'est ni théorique ni référentiel. La psychologie de la vision étudie les processus et mécanismes qui sous-tendent caucausement la production et le maintien d'un comportement que nous appelons “voir” à partir de différents critères. Pour étudier et modéliser ces...
processus, le psychologue peut produire de nouveaux concepts (“module,” “liage perceptif,” “attention,” “représentation”), ici des concepts psychologiques parce que propres à la psychologie, mais il serait erroné de penser que ces concepts de laboratoire ont le même sens et les mêmes usages que les concepts psychologiques ordinaires. Ces derniers, pour Wittgenstein, peuvent d’ailleurs constituer un obstacle à la pratique de la psychologie scientifique: c’est aussi pour cela que ces deux types de concepts psychologiques doivent être soigneusement distingués.

2 Cette précision étant faite, je peux aborder la première question posée par Marta Caravà: critiquer l’énactivisme parce qu’il n’aurait pas renoncé à l’idée que la cognition serait un processus générique dont les différentes déclinaisons sont dénotées par les concepts psychologiques en général, n’est-ce pas là une disqualification philosophique hâtive d’un projet de recherche scientifiquement prometteur? Si, après avoir rejeté des concepts et images classiques de la cognition comme le représentationnalisme, l’internalisme ou l’individualisme, on en vient à jeter aussi par-dessus bord le modèle du processus pour comprendre la cognition, que reste-t-il? En quoi d’ailleurs une adhésion à cette image du processus serait-elle incompatible avec le déploiement d’une véritable alternative scientifique aux théories cognitives classiques? La question est tout à fait légitime. L’énactivisme qui est discuté et critiqué dans l’ouvrage est avant tout une théorie philosophique de la cognition, qui se réclame d’une radicalité conceptuelle: les succès empiriques qui sont invoqués (en robotique, psychologie de la vision, neurosciences de l’action, …) ont rarement été générés par la posture philosophique elle-même. Il s’agit plutôt, pour l’énactivisme, de proposer une interprétation nouvelle et heureuse de résultats empiriques déjà existants. Dans ce sens, je suis assez réservé sur les conséquences empiriques directes et originales qu’aurait pour l’instant cette théorie philosophique de la cognition. Pour discuter, apprécier et critiquer cette théorie, il s’agit de rester sur le terrain de la philosophie, en questionnant sa cohérence et sa radicalité effective. Plus généralement, c’est sur ce terrain que les comparaisons et confrontations entre différentes traditions peuvent être clarifiées, voire avancées. Par exemple, on associe souvent aux sciences cognitives “4E” (embodied, embedded, enactive, extended) une redécouverte de la phénoménologie, phénoménologie qui nourrirait la radicalité de ces approches 4E: il serait pourtant malheureux de limiter la situation actuelle à une confrontation entre une philosophie analytique caricaturée et une phénoménologie libératrice (vers l’action!, vers l’expériencel, vers l’intentionnalité non-représentationnelle!). Ici aussi, il est important de valoriser l’originalité et l’exigence du pragmatisme (et du pragmatisme wittgensteinien) par rapport à ces deux traditions.

3 Cela étant, la deuxième question de Marta Caravà s’impose également: concrètement, d’un point de vue opératoire, quelles sont les conséquences sur le plan de la recherche cognitive de l’approche expressiviste que je défends à partir de Wittgenstein? Cette approche ne prétend pas promouvoir une nouvelle manière de pratiquer une recherche empirique, au-delà de préceptes méthodologiques externalistes, non-représentationnalistes et anti-individualistes déjà progressivement adoptés dans différentes disciplines, préceptes qui ne sont donc pas le monopole du pragmatisme, fût-il wittgensteinien. La différence spécifique faite par la conception expressiviste est notamment la suivante: abandonner le modèle du processus pour étudier la cognition, c’est notamment inviter les théories cognitives putativement “radicales” à s’émanciper d’une métaphysique naturaliste naïve, qui suppose par exemple que “cognition”
correspond à un ensemble spécifique de processus naturels, qui posséderaient une essence ou un trait commun (“la marque du cognitif”) indépendamment de nos conventions et pratiques descriptives. Cela ne signifie pas que “la” cognition n’existe pas, mais plutôt que sa reconnaissance dans un système précède et excède l’étude de sa réalisation matérielle, qu’elle soit neurocentrée, énactée, ou étendue. Qu’est-ce à dire exactement? Je vais préciser cette réponse à Marta Caravà en répondant également à Roberta Dreon et à Jean-Marie Chevalier, qui m’interrogent, dans leurs textes respectifs, sur les effets d’une autre thèse défendue dans le chapitre II de l’ouvrage, et avec laquelle la thèse expressiviste est en continuité. Selon cette thèse défendue dans le chapitre II, le cerveau fonctionne comme un muscle: il conditionne nos performances comportementales (guidage, motricité, attention, …), mais c’est à partir de ces performances – et non pas de la contribution du cerveau à lui seul – que les épisodes mentaux sont attribués ou attribuables, dans un cadre inférentialiste et expressiviste. Les travaux de Thomas Fuchs (2012) (en psychiatrie), de Lambros Malafouris (2019) (en archéologie cognitive), ou d’Ezequiel Di Paolo & Hanne De Jaegher (2012) et Shaun Gallagher (2018) (dans le champ de la cognition sociale) défendent eux aussi cette thèse du cerveau comme muscle. Ajouter à cette thèse la thèse expressiviste sur les concepts psychologiques et la cognition, c’est aller plus loin. Le cerveau possède et exerce des capacités plastiques de réponse à l’environnement, qu’il importe évidemment de comprendre (en forgeant notamment de nouveaux concepts psychologiques); mais il faut aussi – et surtout, dirais-je – comprendre comment ces réponses peuvent s’intégrer à et constituer le répertoire comportemental historiquement, culturellement et anthropologiquement situé à partir duquel les concepts psychologiques ordinaires sont appris et utilisés. L’adverbialisme et l’expressivisme ouvrent cette voie de recherche, en allant donc plus loin que la reconnaissance d’une distribution ou extension factuelle de l’esprit et de la cognition sur un ensemble de dispositifs, de capacités et d’événements (dont le cerveau comme muscle).

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Il m’est impossible de réagir ici aux nombreux points soulevés par Jean-Marie Chevalier dans son texte riche et stimulant. Étant donné que certaines des questions qu’il m’adresse croisent des questions aussi exprimées par Marta Caravà et Roberta Dreon, je vais ici traiter de quelques points abordés spécifiquement par Jean-Marie Chevalier.

**Esprit, intérieur et extérieur.** Jean-Marie Chevalier questionne la valeur des arguments inférentialistes et wittgensteiniens proposés pour délocaliser l’esprit au-delà de la dualité peu éclairante entre “intérieur” et “extérieur.” Ma stratégie lui paraît reposer sur quelques confusions ou raccourcis, dont le suivant: ce n’est pas parce que les conditions d’individuation et d’attribution des significations et concepts ne sont pas intracrâniennes mais sociales que les épisodes de pensée eux-mêmes, ou du moins leurs conditions de possibilité, ne seraient pas dans la tête. Pour citer Jean-Marie Chevalier, “ce n’est pas parce que la pensée a besoin de conditions institutionnelles pour se développer qu’il n’en demeure rien en tant que processus interne,” mais toute la question est justement de savoir ce qui *pourrait* demeurer dans le crâne de manière telle que ce reste puisse réaliser un épisode de pensée. Une pétition de principe prend place si l’on considère *a priori* que les épisodes de pensée sont des événements intracrâniens, à charge pour l’externaliste de montrer le contraire. Il est alors facile de critiquer l’externalisme au nom d’une distinction de principe initiale entre ce qu’est la pensée, et
ses conditions sociales d'individuation et de développement. L'approche pragmatiste que je développe dans l'ouvrage, en particulier à partir de Brandom et de Wittgenstein, renverse la perspective: comment des événements intracrâniens pourraient-ils réaliser, même partiellement, des épisodes de pensée? Avons-nous d'ailleurs besoin d'une telle logique de réalisation? L'approche déontologique considère qu'il n'est plus nécessaire de poser ici un véhicule matériel (interne ou externe) qui transporterait (comment, d'ailleurs?) des contenus de pensée conceptuels. Mais, objecte Jean-Marie Chevalier, ne peut-il pas y avoir des épisodes de sensation ou d'émotion indépendamment de tout contexte et de toute expression comportementale? Ne peut-on pas par exemple imaginer l'occurrence d'une expérience volitive, affective ou émotionnelle chez un sujet à la suite d'une manipulation directe de son tissu cérébral par un savant malintentionné? Qu'un sujet puisse ressentir quelque chose de nouveau, d'inattendu ou d'inédit à la suite d'une telle stimulation n'est pas ici en question. Mais une sensation peut-elle à elle seule constituer une expérience de joie, de plaisir ou encore de volonté? Les différences entre ces expériences sont-elles seulement ou même principalement des différences sensorielles? Il serait facile et décevant d’ invoquer ici des conventions linguistiques qui détermineraient la spécificité mentale de chaque sensation. Mais on peut en revanche s'intéresser aux capacités qui amèneraient le sujet (ou ceux qui l’observent) à qualifier ce qu'il (le sujet) ressent en utilisant de manière préférentielle certains concepts comme “joie” ou “plaisir.” Comment avons-nous appris à utiliser le concept de “joie”? Je ne reviendrai pas ici sur les apories d’une réponse dénotationnelle, qui associe au concept une expérience par principe privée. Le concept de “joie” est acquis et utilisé pour qualifier un ensemble ouvert de trames comportementales possibles et attendues. Si quelqu’un peut être joyeux en ressentant quelque chose, c’est parce que cette sensation s’articule de jure à ces trames comportementales (linguistiques et motrices) qui constituent également les critères d’usage du concept “joie.” La situation imaginée par Jean-Marie Chevalier peut donc être décrite d’au moins deux manières différentes: on peut penser que la stimulation cause non pas seulement une sensation mais un état de joie, de peine, ou de volonté, car elle modifie une structure matérielle qui devient – par le fait de cette intervention, et quelque peu magiquement – la base de réalisation de la joie, peine, volonté... Mais, alternativement – et c’est évidemment la voie privilégiée par l’adverbialisme et par l’expressivisme que je tire de Wittgenstein – on peut soutenir que la stimulation cause une sensation (en modifiant une structure matérielle), sensation qui n’est que l’élément initial d’une trame comportementale exprimant la joie, la peine ou la volonté dépendamment de sa qualification par des agents (y compris le sujet de l’expérience) qui maîtrisent les concepts de “joie,” “peine,” ou “douleur.” Sans sensation causée par stimulation, il n’y aurait probablement pas d’expérience, mais cela ne signifie pas que l’expérience soit identifiable à la sensation. De même, “l’effet que cela fait de voir rouge” requiert plus qu’une sensation de rouge, sans pour autant nécessiter un jugement réflexif: cela nécessite la maîtrise du concept de rouge et (donc) un ensemble de pratiques inférentielles partagées.1 Ici aussi, l’intentionnalité de l’expérience (voir rouge, et non pas voir vert) n’est pas un fait interne. Une stratégie semblable peut être adoptée pour rendre compte de ce que l’on appelle “connaissance à la première personne,” ou “autorité en première personne”: ces phénomènes peuvent s’expliquer sans partir de – ou arriver à – l’hypothèse qu’il existerait des faits mentaux internes qui seraient les objets d’une connaissance échappant aux réquisits publics de la connaissance tout court.4
6 **Esprit, adverbe et dispositions.** J’accorde à Jean-Marie Chevalier qu’il serait pour le moins étrange de penser se débarrasser des immeubles en n’utilisant plus le mot “immeuble,” et en décrivant les immeubles uniquement par un ensemble de fonctions. En tant qu’entités matérielles (survenant sur des points d’espace-temps), les immeubles existent et ne se réduisent pas aux manifestations et fonctions qu’ils rendent en fait possibles. Ce constat pourrait aussi s’appliquer à l’esprit… si ce dernier était une entité matérielle. Or, c’est justement ce point fondamental qui est questionné dans l’ouvrage, en particulier à partir de l’ontologie adverbiale de Dewey, dont la présentation tardive (Steiner 2019: 188-94) ne doit pas dissimuler l’importance méthodologique qu’elle a revêtue pour moi (l’imperfection de l’exposition de ce cheminement m’incombe évidemment): pour simplifier, c’est à partir de cette ontologie que j’ai été amené à (re)lire Wittgenstein et Brandom. Dans ce cadre, l’esprit n’est pas une substance, ce n’est pas une activité (spirituelle ou comportementale) ou une disposition à l’action, c’est un adverbe ou, pour le dire encore autrement, une manière d’agir. Cette manière d’agir peut être décrite par un nombre ouvert d’adverbes (“avec attention,” “intelligemment,” “en anticipant” …). Y a-t-il ici une réintroduction du *definiendum* dans le *definiens*, comme l’objecte Jean-Marie Chevalier? Oui, si l’on présuppose que des attitudes comme l’attention ou l’anticipation sont les effets ou les manifestations de la présence d’un esprit. Non, si ces attitudes sont elles-mêmes ramenées à des manières d’agir circonstanciées: lire avec attention, ce n’est pas lire et faire quelque chose de distinct; c’est lire d’une certaine manière, qui s’atteste dans un ensemble de gestes et de capacités. Capacités et dispositions peuvent figurer parmi les manières d’agir auxquelles l’esprit est ramené, mais il n’y a pas d’identification et encore moins de réduction de l’esprit à des dispositions.

7 **Le problème corps-esprit.** En tant que _vocabulaire_, le mentalisme possède des vertus descriptives et prédictives; il constitue plus fondamentalement une partie de l’image manifeste (Sellars) de l’homme dans le monde. Mais – et c’est là où je me sépare de Jean-Marie Chevalier – cela n’implique pas que ce vocabulaire soit en correspondance avec des faits matériels qui ne devraient rien à ce que nous faisons et disons pour être des faits “mentaux.” Le problème corps-esprit, comme Rorty permet de le comprendre, apparaît lorsque l’on veut faire du vocabulaire mental une _représentation_ d’une réalité substantielle et spécifique (phénoménale, matérielle…). Ce problème corps-esprit, dans l’ouvrage, est un repère: il s’agit d’en traiter pour le dépasser. Jean-Marie Chevalier perçoit bien l’ambivalence de la posture: en traiter, ce serait déjà le conserver, ou du moins lui faire encore trop d’honneur _contrairement_ à la _revendication initiale de dépassement vers une approche adverbiale ou expressiviste_. J’assume cette posture « _bifrons_ » (pour reprendre l’expression de Jean-Marie Chevalier), non sans avoir conscience de son ambiguïté. Le problème corps-esprit repose sur une compréhension erronée (représentationnelle et substantielle) du vocabulaire mental et des concepts psychologiques; une approche “scientifique” ne garantit en rien que l’on neutralise ou dépasse cette compréhension fautive, au contraire. Il est ainsi important de revenir sur les multiples formes que ce problème a pu prendre tout au long de l’histoire, et sur ses différents contextes de formulation et de réapparition (y compris en sciences cognitives). Un certain pragmatisme aurait tort de croire que ce problème est derrière nous: il est l’expression maladroite et biaisée d’une perplexité réelle que nous ressentons quand nous nous interrogeons sur le mode d’existence de nos pensées, intentions, désirs et sensations, et sur le statut des concepts psychologiques.
La question fondamentale que pose Roberta Dreon (mais aussi, d’une manière différente, Jean-Marie Chevalier) concerne l’unité du projet et du propos de l’ouvrage, et en particulier celle des auteurs mobilisés. La linéarité du parcours ne doit notamment pas dissimuler une tension importante entre, d’un côté, une approche purement grammaticale et thérapeutique (Rorty, Wittgenstein) et, de l’autre, une approche qui, en plus d’être critique, serait aussi positive et intégrative (Dewey), alliant une pars construens à une pars destruens. Cette tension apparaîtrait particulièrement lorsque l’on prend connaissance de mes lectures et usages de Dewey: Dewey propose certes une critique des approches substantialistes et intellectualistes de l’esprit, mais il n’en reste pas là. La critique d’une philosophie comme ensemble de croyances théoriques ne peut se faire qu’à partir d’un ensemble de dispositions à agir et à penser qu’il convient aussi d’assumer et de préciser: l’erreur serait de penser que l’on peut philosopher et critiquer de nulle part, et en restant nulle part (Roberta Dreon décrit bien dans sa conclusion le caractère immanent de toute enquête selon le pragmatisme). Cette tension, que je qualifierais de méta-philosophique, est parfois rapprochée par Roberta Dreon d’une autre tension, à mon sens davantage méthodologique: celle entre un pragmatisme qui réduirait l’esprit et l’expérience à un ensemble de vocabulaires et à leurs usages normatifs (qui sont bien plus que linguistiques), et un pragmatisme qui propose une histoire naturelle de l’esprit en récupérant, je la cite, “l’organique, la sensibilité, le qualitatif.” En un mot, une philosophie de l’esprit qui soit aussi une philosophie de l’expérience historiciée.

Je partage évidemment avec Roberta Dreon l’idée que la théorie deweyienne de l’esprit est plus large que la généalogie du problème corps/esprit, la théorie de la signification, l’adverbialeisme ou l’émergentisme qu’il propose et que j’exploite dans le chapitre IV. Roberta Dreon ne me reproche d’ailleurs pas d’être incomplet; ses remarques, bien plus subtiles et constructives, discutent l’architectonique que j’adopte lorsque je traite de Dewey. Dès le départ, si l’on peut parler ainsi, Dewey se situe sur un autre plan que celui des auteurs précédemment discutés, avec des conséquences importantes au niveau de sa conception de l’esprit. Je suis d’accord avec cela. Pourtant, et sans embrasser un œcuménisme facile et stérile, il n’y a pas à choisir entre la philosophie positive de l’expérience proposée par Dewey et l’analyse critique d’obédience rortyenne et wittgensteinienne. Les deux se complètent, ce qui ne signifie pas bien sûr une absence de frictions au niveau des engagements méta-philosophiques et de la question (peut-être trop souvent dramatisée) du statut de l’expérience. Renoncer, avec Rorty et Wittgenstein, à certaines images et mythes portant sur l’esprit, c’est aussi découvrir de nouvelles manières de penser. Faire avec moins, c’est aussi pouvoir faire plus. Critiquer, c’est déjà transformer. Je dirais même que, par rapport au projet d’élaborer une théorie générale de l’esprit et de l’expérience, le travail critique permis par Rorty et Wittgenstein se rapproche davantage, par bien des aspects, de ce que Dewey appelait “enquête.” Le travail critique et thérapeutique est un travail en situation: il prend pour objet des théories et débats contemporains, dont il problématiser les apories. Mais pas seulement. Les assumptions dont on se débarrasse (le représentationnalisme, l’internalisme, le référentialisme) sont les effets d’une mécompréhension de nos pratiques. Rendre compte de cette mécompréhension, c’est alors mettre au jour certaines dimensions de nos pratiques, dimensions qui nous sont devenues opaques. L’histoire naturelle de l’esprit que Roberta Dreon appelle de ses vœux, à partir de
Dewey, ne peut faire l’économie d’une analyse de nos manières de parler de l’esprit; c’est en se débarrassant de certaines de ces manières que nous pourrons aussi penser et concevoir autrement l’esprit et ses dimensions expérimentielles.

Dans l’introduction de l’ouvrage (Steiner 2019: 19-20), je précise que la lecture que je propose de la conception deweyienne de la science et des techniques participe au projet d’élaborer une anthropologie philosophique globale: les pratiques au sein desquelles l’expérience et le langage se font et se transforment sont aussi des pratiques techniquement structurées et constituant. Pour réaliser ce projet, il faut notamment questionner l’articulation proposée par Dewey entre philosophie de l’esprit et intelligence expérimentale. Ce n’est pas l’expérimentalisme technique qui peut être un repère ou un modèle de l’agir social et politique; c’est plutôt la technique comme ensemble de médiations qui devient une ressource structurante et contraignante du champ de l’expérience. La critique de l’articulation faite par Dewey entre sa philosophie de l’esprit et son projet socio-politique m’a plus occupé dans le chapitre V de l’ouvrage que les prolongements positifs de cette philosophie de l’esprit, pour une raison simple: cela m’a permis de problématiser davantage les reprises ou les réactualisations contemporaines de Dewey, dans un contexte historiographique ayant notamment renoncé à une vision héroïque ou discontinuiste de la science moderne. Une fois que l’on a questionné quelques présupposés des ambitions sociales et politiques de la philosophie deweyienne de l’esprit, on peut s’intéresser autrement – et positivement – aux rapports entre technique et esprit chez Dewey. La technique est à la fois un mode d’expérience et un ensemble de significations opératoires (voir Expérience et nature, chapitre 5): elle englobe et articule l’organique et le grammatical, pour reprendre le vocabulaire de Roberta Dreon. Le représentationnalisme estime que nos pratiques linguistiques et cognitives sont face à l’expérience et face au monde, et que c’est en vertu de représentations ou d’une intentionnalité “mentale” qu’elles peuvent atteindre le monde ou faire référence. À la place de la relation de représentation, de figuration, ou de visée intentionnelle, il s’agit d’insister sur les médiations – sémiotiques, normatives, techniques – dans lesquelles nos pratiques se déploient. C’est ici que l’anthropologie philosophique ne rencontre pas seulement les sciences cognitives, mais aussi l’histoire et les sciences sociales. Il ne s’agit alors pas, par exemple, d’ajouter au concept ou à la phrase des dispositifs d’ancrage et de fonctionnement pour qu’ils puissent atteindre le monde, mais d’en proposer une description inférentielle et technique qui fasse l’économie de ces besoins superflus. En faire plus, ce n’est pas ajouter une entité ou un ordre nouveau de phénomènes, c’est décrire autrement l’expérience et le faire humain une fois que nous nous sommes débarrassés de fausses nécessités représentationnalistes ou internalistes. En conclusion, je pense que ces tensions métaphilosophiques et méthodologiques rappelées par Roberta Dreon peuvent être défaits, apaisées ou assumées en jugeant sur pièce, de manière circonstanciée. Si l’on souhaite débuter par une exposition des principes fondamentaux du pragmatisme que l’on prétend ensuite “appliquer,” il est vraisemblable que l’on rencontrera un ensemble de dualités sédimentées (thérapie vs. (re)construction; analyse grammaticale vs. enquête empirique; expérience vs. langage), dualités dont le caractère mutuellement exclusif des éléments risque de s’imposer à nous de façon automatique. Si l’on s’efforce avant tout de faire usage du pragmatisme en problématisant, réaménageant ou dépassant certaines questions (ici: l’esprit), on n’échappera évidemment pas à la nécessité, chemin faisant, d’exprimer et de clarifier des engagements plus généraux, mais il n’est pas certain que les oppositions et dualités
mentionnées plus haut auront entre-temps résisté au travail d'enquête qui aura été mené.

BIBLIOGRAPHIE


NOTES

2. Cette idée se trouve déjà chez Dewey en 1908: “That the brain frees organic behavior from complete servitude to immediate physical conditions, that it makes possible the liberation of energy for remote and ever expanding ends is, indeed, a precious fact, but not one which removes the brain from the category of organic devices of behavior” (2008: 132).
4. Voir par exemple Peirce (1868, question 4).
5. Sur ce point, je me permets de renvoyer à mon essai (2020).
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Pour une pédagogie de la vulnérabilité
La proposition du pragmatisme critique

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2 L’hypothèse que nous souhaitons avancer est en revanche plus complexe: le pragmatisme peut former une base théorique intéressante pour les pédagogies féministes, si et seulement si, il apporte à ces dernières des outils conceptuels pour mieux prendre en charge et penser le “consciousness-raising”:1 passage nécessaire du “gender-blindness” au “gender-consciousness” que les étudiants comme les enseignants doivent opérer pour les pratiquer. Ces deux concepts (“gender-blindness” et “gender-consciousness”), inspirés de la théorie critique, peuvent se définir comme étant l’état cognitif d’un individu qui, pour le premier concept, ignore ces biais sexistes et est aveugle à leurs effets néfastes sur autrui. Et, pour le second, l’état cognitif de celui qui a conscience de son genre, des biais que celui-ci entraîne, et, in fine, des effets de ces derniers au quotidien, dans les interactions sociales, et notamment des risques de perpétuation des domination des hommes sur les femmes.2 Au regard de la théorie critique, la possibilité, la nécessité et la difficulté d’un tel passage, pour les femmes et les hommes, sont des questions centrales pour les pédagogies féministes.

3 En effet, comment rendre responsable un individu de ses biais de genre si ce même individu ignore leurs existences et leurs conséquences sur autrui? Si on ne peut rendre responsable quelqu’un de ce qu’il ignore. Aussi il importe pour les pédagogues féministes d’opérer ce passage de la façon la plus efficace possible, c’est-à-dire pour le
plus grand nombre d’élèves et le plus aisément possible pour l’enseignant. Or, plus l’épistémologie féministe se déploie et révèle les “privileges” (McIntosh 1989) des hommes, et plus opérer ce passage semble pour eux difficile. En effet, pour ces derniers, ne pas reconnaître ses privilèges devient alors une incapacité à changer son point de vue sans paniquer et est ainsi le signe d’une fragilité masculine. C’est pourquoi cette incapacité à “checker ses privilèges” devient la première étape en direction d’un masculinisme étroit, obus et nuisible pour tous. Éviter cet échec à réaliser cette délicate opération de “conscientization” semble donc être un enjeu de taille pour les pédagogies féministes.

Face à ce problème, en quoi le pragmatisme est-il capable d’apporter des outils conceptuels pour améliorer, à la suite de la théorie critique, ce passage de l’ignorance des biais sexistes à leur conscientisation puis à la responsabilité “genrée” de l’individu envers autrui? Ce que nous souhaitons montrer ici par notre hypothèse c’est que le pragmatisme permet à la fois de révéler deux difficultés que rencontrent les pédagogies féministes, inspirées par la théorie critique, dans ce passage – ce sera le premier temps de notre argumentation – et de proposer deux pistes de réponses pour répondre à ces difficultés – ce qui occupera le second temps de notre travail. Pour apporter plus de clarté au sein de notre argumentation, nous avons distingué deux “familles” de pédagogie féministe: l’approche critique et l’approche pragmatiste, que nous allons étudier successivement pour montrer en quoi, dans un dernier temps, ces dernières peuvent se compléter.

1. La pédagogie critique féministe: difficultés et limites

Dans un premier temps, concentrons notre propos sur les difficultés que rencontrent les pédagogies critiques féministes à réaliser cette “conscientisation genrée” (c’est-à-dire le passage du “gender-blindness” au “gender-consciousness”). En effet, d’une part c’est à l’aune de ces difficultés que l’on pourra mesurer l’apport du pragmatisme en philosophie de l’éducation, et d’autre part, celles-ci peuvent s’identifier par deux obstacles majeurs que nous allons d’abord étudier successivement et identifier ensuite comme des limites de l’approche critique en pédagogie que le pragmatisme viendra ensuite dépasser.

1.1 Un premier obstacle: le roi nu ne rougit plus...


En effet, dans la tradition des approches critiques, matérialistes et marxistes, desquelles héritent l’Ecole de Francfort ainsi que sa déclinaison au sein du féminisme (Crenshaw 2005; Martin 1985; Kincheloe 2008), une grande rigueur est portée sur la construction du problème sur lequel va porter notre critique. Il convient d’en saisir toute la portée en maximisant en quelque sorte l’étendue de ses champs d’application, ainsi que la radicalité de sa présence au sein d’une situation. Cette approche a alors souvent pour conséquence de construire des concepts théoriques complexes et
suffisamment généraux pour rendre compte de l’étendue et de la radicalité du problème sur lequel on travaille. Il s’en suit une sorte d’escalade à la radicalité et à l’étendue au sein des approches théoriques critiques qui tentent chacune d’appuyer leur crédibilité en compétitionnant la portée de leur critique. Cela a pour conséquence, pour la pédagogie, d’avoir des concepts extrêmement couteux théoriquement comme le capitalisme, l’aliénation, le marché, le patriarcat, etc., et qui, une fois employés, construisent une interprétation de la réalité sociale trop complexe et problématique pour les acteurs du milieu éducatif.

Le danger d’une telle construction théorique est alors double pour les pédagogies féministes. D’une part, l’abstraction de la réalité visée étant proportionnelle à la généralité de son interprétation théorique, le premier risque est de faire du second moment de la critique, celui de la résolution du problème, une réflexion qui sera sans cesse ajournée, reportée, et éloignée par la radicalité du problème construit. Le second risque est, par l’effort de déconstruction lui aussi proportionnel à l’étendue du problème construit, de ne pouvoir traiter théoriquement ce dernier que par une démarche argumentative basée sur l’utopie (Sandoval 2003: 202). Dans les deux cas, les pédagogues se retrouvent face à des problèmes qu’ils ne peuvent plus résoudre par eux-mêmes et leurs pratiques quotidiennes. Cela peut expliquer en partie pourquoi, dans certaines situations pédagogiques, certaines féministes déclarent hésiter à se réclamer directement des théories féministes et cherchent à “contourner” les difficultés que leur filiation engendrent pour se concentrer sur des pratiques pédagogiques plus efficientes concrètement (Amboulé Abath, Campbell & Pagé 2018: 10-1). Par exemple, si travailler avec ses élèves le caractère malsain des biais sexistes nécessite de comprendre théoriquement ce qu’est le patriarcat dans l’ensemble de sa réalité historique, économique, et politique, tout en étant attentif à ses intrications avec les discriminations sociales, raciales, culturelles, etc. Il y a fort à parier que l’éducateur ou l’éducatrice en question renonce alors à l’expliquer à ses élèves et cède au sentiment de fatalité en pensant que sa pratique est insuffisante face à un problème si complexe.

Ainsi, la première difficulté que la pédagogie critique apporte à certaines théories féministes, c’est de se satisfaire d’une démarche se concentrant principalement sur la construction du problème, puis de crier que le roi est nu. L’illusion que l’innocence déclamative de la critique suffit à transformer et performing la réalité, ici d’aller rhabiller le roi, ne peut être un atout pour la pédagogie. Même nu, si le roi continue de régner, sa honte ne durera pas longtemps. En effet, cette dernière pour être effectivement émancipatrice, a besoin d’une théorie qui construit des problèmes mais également des moyens de les résoudre (au moins partiellement) avec ses élèves.

1.2. Une deuxième limite: le conflit comme péché originel

Deuxièmement, il nous semble que le pragmatisme peut s’avérer pertinent pour compléter la pédagogie critique s’il réussit à ré-orienter cette dernière hors des ornières dans laquelle le plonge une sorte “d’ontologie du conflit.” Celle-ci est la seconde difficulté que nous relevons de la théorie critique: le passage du “gender-blindness” au “gender-consciousness” est principalement conceptualisé par certaines théories critiques féministes à partir du prisme de la science politique (Weiler 1991: 456). Pour sortir les individus d’une “phénoménologie de la violence,” l’idée est de faire du conflit un moyen de déplacer la lutte pour l’égalité des genres sur le terrain de la
politique plutôt que sur le terrain de la violence subie individuellement ou collectivement. Or cette perspective est résolument conflictuelle par le fait que la reconnaissance de la domination et le combat contre cette dernière sont dans le champ politique largement pensées comme des luttes (Hill Collins 2003: 114-5). En ce sens, la présence de la figure hégélienne du maître et de l'esclave illustre bien la résolution conflictuelle de cette dialectique (Pereira 2017). Aussi certaines théories féministes pensent le problème du passage de "la prise de conscience genrée" comme une lutte pour la considération du point de vue des opprimé·e·s (Rancière 2004; Freire 1996; Point 2020). C'est-à-dire un processus de déconstruction de l'agnotologie des dominants qui leur donne le droit d'ignorer le point de vue que les dominé·e·s ont sur eux-mêmes et leurs réalités.  

Or, il nous semble que ces théories adoptent alors une conception "épistémo-politique" de la relation savoir/pouvoir comprise comme un rapport de force (au sens des théories de la domination foucaldiennes (Magar-Braeuner 2018: 162)) plutôt que comme un partage des perspectives (au sens de la standpoint theory féministe (Harding 2003)). L'approche critique met souvent en avant le politique au détriment du pédagogique: la prise de conscience genrée devient alors le lieu d'un affrontement antagoniste entre dominé·e·s et dominant·e·s (Lamoureux 2010). À l'inverse, l'approche pragmatiste fait de celle-ci le lieu d'un dialogue où les perspectives dialoguent et où les acteurs peuvent s'allier pour mieux se comprendre et agir dans un intérêt mutuel (hooks 2003). En effet, loin d'ignorer la conflictualité, Dewey en fait la "gadfly of thought" (Dewey 1922: 207) dont l'importance sera déclinée sur trois niveaux de réflexions (Point 2018). Premièrement, il reconnait, comme Marx (Renault 2013), l'idée d'une lutte des classes conflictuelle au sein des sociétés humaines qui les transforme et les fait évoluer (Dewey 1930; 1935a: 61; 1935b: 259-60). Deuxièmement, il inscrit le conflit au cœur même de la logique de l'enquête, logique immanente à toutes nos pensées critiques et réflexives (Dewey 2011: 137). C'est d'ailleurs là un des traits les plus marqués de l'influence de Hegel sur la construction de la logique deweyenne (Renault 2017; Thayer 1988: 527). Enfin, au sein des luttes sociales, la compréhension de la conflictualité est pour cet auteur indispensable à la formation d'une "organized intelligence" (Dewey 1908b: 50; 1927: 326-52; 2011: 232-3) permettant de mener la lutte. C'est donc une lecture fine de ce qui est en conflit qui permet la recherche des intérêts communs à sa résolution qui est en jeu. Et dans ce cas, le pédagogique devient aussi important que le politique car la conflictualité s'équilibre avec la recherche de biens communs.  

Cependant, au sein des approches critiques, le conflit devient un refus de penser la perspective d'autrui s'il n’est pas reconnu comme dominé, et permet ainsi de délégiter le savoir situé d’autrui pour promouvoir le sien, c’est-à-dire celui des dominé·e·s. Or, penser que la dépossession sociale produit un privilège épistémique pour les personnes subissant une domination (Hartsock 2003: 245) est un postulat qui conduit à deux dérives possibles selon Sandra Harding. Soit, cela mène à une essentialisation de la perspective des dominé·e·s où cette dernière devient la seule perspective valable. Soit, le privilège épistémique des dominé·e·s conduit à une subjectivation de la domination où l’individu, dans son for intérieur, devient la seule source de la perpétuation de la domination ou de l’émancipation. Dans les deux cas, cela mène à une impasse pédagogique où l’enfant se retrouve, soit sommé de choisir seul son camp dans une lutte qu’il n’a aucunement voulu (Magar-Braeuner 2018: 173), soit d’office désigné et réifié (Mozziconacci 2017a: 358-9) comme un individu faisant
irrémédiablement parti du problème (en étant du côté des dominan·te·s). Bref, les pédagogies s’appuyant sur ces approches critiques nous entraînent à penser les pratiques quotidiennes à travers un prisme politique conflictuel, ce qui les rendent peu efficaces.

1.3. Fatalité, culpabilité et désespoir: une pédagogie rabat-joie?

Déjà en 1989, Peggy McIntosh s’interroge sur l’efficacité du concept de “privilège” si ce dernier ne permet pas de distinguer les avantages auxquels héritent certaines populations et qui seraient profitables d’étendre à tous et toutes et ceux qui nuisent de façon injuste aux autres populations à qui ces avantages ont été refusés. Or, réaliser cette distinction est un des enjeux et des signes de l’efficacité du pédagogue à éduquer ses élèves à la conscientisation genrée. Pourquoi une telle distinction est-elle si importante? Si les pédagogues féministes ne se préoccupent que de montrer les problèmes et les injustices que provoquent le “gender-blindness,” alors les enfants se sentiront responsables de quelque chose qu’ils ignoraient auparavant, et ce d’autant plus si on subjectivise ou essentielise cette ignorance (Blidon 2012). La conscientisation genrée réalisée dans cette situation provoquera alors chez les “enfants non-privilégiés” d’une part de la colère, du ressentiment ou de la honte, et d’autre part, chez les “enfants privilégiés” de la honte, de la culpabilité ou de l’incrédulité. Ces affects négatifs, qu’ils se redoublent ou non à l’extérieur de l’espace scolaire, sont des freins conséquents au travail pédagogique (Debarbieux 1999). Dans les deux cas, le mal-être causé ne permet guère un épanouissement des enfants.

Les études menées sur “le climat scolaire” montrent toutes que les conflits scolaires engendrés par des violences physiques ou verbales nuisent à tous les élèves, et plus particulièrement ceux qui appartiennent à des minorités discriminées (Merle 2007).

De plus, il est facile de comprendre que face à la présentation d’un problème provoquant tant d’affects négatifs lors de sa construction, sa résolution risque d’être freinée par un réflexe psychologique d’évitement du problème. La mauvaise foi, le déni, la minimisation des conséquences seront alors le lot des réactions auxquelles se confrontera l’enseignant·e. Or, si ces réflexes peuvent être combattus par les adultes, dont on supposera la maturité émotionnelle qui conditionne leurs responsabilités morales et citoyennes (et sur lesquelles peuvent opérer le politique), à l’inverse, si l’enfant a l’impression de ne faire que partie du problème (en étant soit bourreau soit victime), alors cet apprentissage de la conscientisation genrée lui donnera l’impression de perdre quelque chose et le mettra à mal affectivement.

Ainsi, il nous semble que ces deux difficultés (le déséquilibre du “problem-posing” par rapport au “problem-solving” et la valorisation d’une conflictualité) viennent freiner l’efficacité du travail de la pédagogie féministe, car elles développent chez l’élève des affects négatifs qui ne vont pas lui donner envie de persévérer dans ce processus éducatif, surtout pour les enfants se sentant privilégiés. En un mot, les problèmes des biais sexistes lui apparaîtront si conséquents, si irrésolubles ou si “couteux” émotionnellement qu’il aura plutôt tendance à se décourager ou à nier leur existence. C’est pourquoi l’androcentrisme ne peut être combattu de la même façon sur le terrain de la politique comme sur celui de la pédagogie. La sensibilité et la vulnérabilité des enfants par rapport à celles des adultes imposent aux pédagogues de se munir
d'autres outils théoriques supplémentaires pour compléter ceux construits (pour la lutte politique) par la théorie critique.


2. Les pistes de réponse de la pédagogie pragmatiste féministe

17 Après avoir esquissé rapidement les difficultés auxquelles se trouvent confrontées les pédagogies critiques féministes, il nous faut tenter de trouver des pistes de réponses aux problèmes que nous avons soulevés. La valeur de la pédagogie pragmatiste, si elle veut avoir un quelconque intérêt pour les luttes féministes, se doit de répondre à ces deux questions. Premièrement, quels outils théoriques propose le pragmatisme pour ré-équilibrer la relation du “problem-posing” avec le “problem-solving” qu’amène la théorie critique? Et deuxièmement, comment remplacer la conflictualité lors du processus de conscientisation genrée par d’autres dynamiques plus efficaces pédagogiquement?

2.1. Première piste: œuvrer à une meilleure intelligence culturelle de nos habitudes

18 Pour les pédagogues pragmatistes féministes, le problème de l’équilibre du “problem-posing” avec le “problem-solving” ne trouve sa résolution que dans une définition de l’éducation bien particulière. Celle-ci est celle de l’application intelligente de la méthode de l’enquête où le pédagogue doit se demander à chaque instant comment accompagner l’enfant à développer les outils nécessaires à la fois à la construction du problème mais aussi à sa résolution. Le pédagogue ne peut résoudre le problème à la place de l’enfant (Addams 1913: préface p. 32; Seigfried 1999: 225), ni présupposer en amont de son apprentissage la “bonne” manière de résoudre le problème (Dewey 1934: 344-5), ni encore nier l’existence du problème si l’enfant en ressent la présence. Mais surtout la tâche du pédagogue est de ne pas le laisser démunis face à celui-ci. Cela signifie, a minima, qu’il faut permettre à l’enfant de croire que ce problème est résoluble. Cet engagement, même minime, de la pédagogie pragmatiste féministe permet d’orienter la démarche pédagogique féministe dans une autre direction que celle de la pédagogie féministe uniquement critique.

19 En effet, l’épistémologie sociale pragmatiste comprend la culture comme une somme d’habitudes collectives socialement construites (Dewey 2018: 232). Ces habitudes sont des ensembles complexes de cognition, de jugement et de pratique ayant la
particularité d’être produits par le sujet selon une économie à la fois inconsciente et consciente. La culture nous fait adopter certaines habitudes au sens où elles les désignent comme des solutions “valables” aux problèmes que rencontre le sujet. Ce dernier atteste alors inconsciemment de la validité de ces solutions car il en constate, au gré de ses expériences, leur efficacité face à ces problèmes. La collection de ces habitudes sera chez le sujet ce que l’on appelle sa culture (Cervulle 2012). Or, les effets constatés par le sujet qui orientent le choix d’une habitude par ce dernier ne sont pas des jugements objectifs mais sont, eux aussi, des constructions sociales. Notre culture nous rendra sensible à certains effets et pas à d’autres, selon une économie que l’épistémologie féministe étudie de près (McHugh 2015). Par exemple, un enseignant peut ne pas prêter attention à la répartition de la parole au sein de sa classe car en tant qu’homme il n’a jamais eu à se confronter à l’injustice de se faire couper systématiquement la parole en raison de son appartenance à un genre opprimé. Il ne développera alors aucune habitude de contrôle égalitaire de la participation des élèves dans sa classe, et ce, sans se “sentir” oppresseur envers quiconque. Il ne changera cette habitude que si, premièrement, il vit une expérience lui dévoilant les effets négatifs de celle-ci. Et deuxièmement, si une autre habitude, plus égalitaire de prise de parole entre les garçons et les filles de sa classe pour remplacer l’antécédente lui semble possible et souhaitable. En effet, nous adoptons certaines habitudes car nous en apprécions culturellement certains effets positifs, tout en ignorant les autres effets négatifs. C’est pourquoi l’épistémologie pragmatiste fait de notre intelligence des habitudes un mélange de connaissance et d’ignorance co-produite par la culture et le sujet l’adoptant.

Cette épistémologie féministe pragmatiste explique ainsi comment l’état de “gender-blindness” rend l’individu ignorant des effets négatifs de ses biais sexistes et qu’il ne peut pas être déclaré seul responsable de cette ignorance. Et c’est pourquoi, sur le plan pédagogique, lorsque le ou la pédagogue mène un élève à l’état cognitif du “gender-consciousness” il est de sa responsabilité de faire en sorte que l’élève se rend compte des inconvenients d’une habitude sexiste, par une connaissance plus aiguë des effets négatifs de celle-ci, puis qu’il se mette à rechercher une autre habitude moins nuisible. Et cela n’est possible que si le sujet comprend l’intérêt de cette nouvelle habitude (qui sera alors vécu comme un changement culturel réussi) où les effets négatifs seront moins nombreux et les effets positifs identiques ou supérieures. Ainsi la conséquence de cette définition pragmatiste de l’éducation (comme construction culturelle de nouvelles habitudes) est de chercher dans la pédagogie des outils pour atteindre les finalités éducatives suivantes: 1/ faire maîtriser la méthode de l’enquête sociale, c’est-à-dire doter les élèves d’une intelligence sociale permettant une connaissance plus fine des effets sociaux de leurs habitudes. 2/ placer les élèves dans la perspective d’une éthique du care, c’est-à-dire de leur permettre de juger et de chercher à détruire les habitudes qui causent plus d’effets négatifs que positifs pour soi-même et pour autrui, sans qu’un autre se donne le droit de le faire à sa place (Paperman 2015: 13-4). 3/ faire croire en la créativité émancipatrice de chacun, c’est-à-dire d’aider les élèves à inventer de nouvelles habitudes remplaçant les anciennes, au profit de tous.

Prendre en considération ce dernier point permet de réviser le pragmatisme “classique” et de l’actualiser face aux défis de la pédagogie critique. En effet, en considérant cette épistémologie, il devient clair que l’éducation démocratique et ses écoles doivent être “des espaces où une recherche intelligente sur les normes culturelles et les modes de vie peut façonner et améliorer les habitudes” (Stitzlein 2014: 38)
L'ambition démocratique du pragmatisme implique un rôle de transformation des normes culturelles par l'éducation. Et cette transformation est un travail d'amélioration des habitudes de ces futurs citoyens (Giroux 1997). Aussi, si les habitudes sexistes sont ce que nous voulons critiquer et détruire, alors le méliorisme prônée par l'épistémologie pragmatiste (et étayé par la recherche intelligente de l'enquête et la conviction démocratique) devient une conviction “subversive et transformatrice est liée à l'action politique. [...] Les habitudes d'espoir nous font passer du statut de simples répondants réactionnaires à celui d'agents actifs” (Stitzlein 2014: 83). Ainsi, que ce soit pour bell hooks ou Patrick Shade. Donner de l'espoir en notre capacité à résoudre des problèmes aussi importants que le sexisme est en soi un travail critique dont le pédagogue ne peut se dispenser (hooks 2003; Shade 2001: 22).

2.2. Deuxième piste: construire des outils pour améliorer le partage des perspectives

Maintenant que les finalités éducatives de l'approche pragmatiste pour la pédagogie féministe ont été identifiées, reste à nous de voir si la philosophie pragmatiste a également les moyens de ces dernières. Ces moyens sont-ils des outils permettant de remplacer la conflictualité, et par là, capables d'augmenter l'efficacité pédagogique des féministes à accompagner le “consciousness-raising” de leurs élèves? Ici, nous concentrerons notre propos sur deux de ses outils: la perplexité et la “loving perception” et sur l'épistémologie pragmatiste féministe qui construit ses deux outils.

Le premier outil est conceptualisé dès 1913 par Jane Addams. Grâce à cette auteure le pragmatisme parviendra à se réviser et à se réformer pour répondre aux limites de la pédagogie critique. Un de ses apports majeurs a été de montrer l'importance d'une qualité épistémique jusque-là relativement méprisée, il s'agit de développer une attention à la “perplexité” des individus face aux problèmes qu'ils rencontrent. C'est en étant sensible à cette dernière que l'on peut mieux comprendre quelle est la perception de l'individu sur sa propre situation et quels sont les choix que celui-ci fait pour résoudre son problème (Addams 1913: 50, 77-8, 112-3). En effet, comme le rappellera John Dewey en 1920 en s'inspirant de Jane Addams, la perplexité est toujours la manifestation d'une situation problématique pour le sujet. Or, percevoir cette dernière donne déjà une longueur d'avance à ce sujet par rapport à un autre dans la résolution du problème.

La pensée trouve son origine dans des conflits particuliers et dans l’expérience qui occasionne perplexité et trouble. Les hommes ne pensent pas quand ils n’ont pas d’ennuis à affronter, pas de difficulté à surmonter. Une vie de confort, de succès sans effort serait une vie sans pensée et il en va de même pour une vie toute puissante et facile. Des êtres qui pensent sont des êtres qui se sentent à l’étroit et contraints dans leur vie au point de ne pouvoir conduire une action jusqu’à son terme. (Dewey 1973: 195)

Suivant cette logique, il ne s’agit plus de “plaquer” sa propre compréhension du monde sur celle de l’individu que nous voulons comprendre et aider, mais d’être d’abord sensible à sa perspective pour ensuite pouvoir l’accompagner. L’attention à la perplexité a donc ici trois avantages selon José Médina. Tout d’abord, elle permet de lutter contre la “close-mindedness” en exploitant “les avantages du conflit productif que nous devons reconnaître et valoriser la connaissance située et hétérogène de divers agents” (Medina 2012: 6). Cet usage du conflit se réalise grâce à l’ouverture d’esprit que
l'attention à la perplexité rend possible. Puis, elle permet également de contourner la "
epistemic arrogance" qui inh...
recherchée car elles deviennent motrices de conflictualités et d’opposition.Exprimées par les élèves et écoulées par l’enseignant, elles sont des données précieuses pour ajuster le processus car elles rendent possible une dynamique de partage et de coopération. C’est pourquoi, Nancy A. McHugh et d’autres pédagogues féministes, nous encourage à affiner notre rapport aux affects que nous sollicitons et que nous percevons, en faisant de l’écoute bienveillante un outil et une vertu épistémique indispensable (McHugh 2015: 114-6).

Conclusion

28 Pour conclure, rappelons l’enjeu initial de notre réflexion: comprendre en quoi le pragmatisme peut fournir des outils conceptuels, complétant ceux de la théorie critique, et permettant aux pédagogues d’être plus efficaces à opérer le “consciousness-raising” dans leurs pratiques. Pour résoudre ce problème, nous avons dans un premier temps étudié l’approche critique et ces difficultés, c’est-à-dire la perte progressive d’efficacité pédagogique au fur et à mesure que la critique devient politique, abstraite et conflictuelle. Aussi les risques de subjectivation, d’essentialisation, de culpabilisation et finalement de la reproduction du déni du problème ou du fatalisme semblent importants avec cette approche, et ce de façon proportionnelle (et paradoxe) à la violence de la domination qui est combattue. Mais plus encore, c’est un certain dérive de l’attitude critique qui semble problématique:

Cette prise de conscience ne peut s’effectuer sans une certaine douleur (hooks 1994), violence du monde social. Ce constat conduit alors à considérer comme un préalable nécessaire à une pédagogie émancipatrice la capacité à reconnaître et à supporter cette douleur, tant pour soi-même que pour les autres. (Magar-Braeuner 2018: 175)

29 Face à un tel constat, l’approche pragmatiste se distingue par la proposition d’une autre attitude venant prévenir la dérive possible de la théorie critique; une attitude où l’on cherche à développer chez soi et autrui “la pensée critique et la compassion” (McHugh 2015: 138) pour à la fois construire et résoudre les problèmes, de façon efficace et coopérative. Cela ne signifie donc ni qu’il faille “supporter” stoïquement la douleur du “consciousness-raising” pour l’enseignante, ni en faire un “préalable” à une pédagogie féministe. Au contraire, l’attitude pragmatiste consiste à la reconnaître pour l’imiter le plus possible son pouvoir de nuisance lors des pratiques pédagogiques. Pour ce faire, les épistémologues féministes et pragmatistes développent les vertus épistémiques de la perplexité, de l’humilité, de l’empathie, de la coopération, et ce dans le but de permettre aux pédagogues de construire avec elles des outils pédagogiques efficaces.

30 Si ces vertus (théoriques) produisent effectivement des outils (pratiques) on peut dès lors les considérer comme des convictions pédagogiques se déclinant ainsi. Premièrement, les problèmes du sexisme existent pour chacun et peuvent être résolus ensemble de façon plus efficace que chacun isolément. Deuxièmement, il est de l’intérêt de tous de résoudre ces problèmes et cela demande à tous d’être plus attentifs et responsables des effets affectifs que nos convictions provoquent chez autrui. Et enfin, troisièmement, cette responsabilité collective n’est pas qu’un poids politique ou le fardeau d’une lutte mais est également un “gain” que seule une éducation qui promeut “de manière positive, offensive et constructive la compréhension et la bienveillance essentielle à une société démocratique” (Dewey 1938: 301) rend possible.
Ainsi ce travail vient s’ajouter à celui d’Irène Pereira pour promouvoir un “pragmatisme critique” (Pereira 2016). Toutefois, nous ne justifions pas l’association de la théorie critique et du pragmatisme à partir d’une perspective historique ou politique discutable (Li Vigni 2016) mais à partir de l’intérêt pédagogique de cette association, et ce, au regard du champ particulier qu’est la pédagogie féministe. In fine, nous partageons donc le point de vue Nancy A. McHugh pour qui “l’utilisation des outils de la philosophie pour créer un changement social positif et favorable à la collectivité serait une mesure du succès dans notre domaine” (McHugh 2015: 138). Il nous semble que les théories féministes peuvent s’évaluer dans le champ de la philosophie de l’éducation à l’aune des conséquences de l’usage quotidien de leurs outils respectifs auprès des élèves et des enseignant·e·s. Si le pragmatisme critique permet d’opérer le “consciousness-raising” avec plus de bienveillance (c’est-à-dire une meilleure gestion des affects) et pour un plus grand nombre d’élèves (c’est-à-dire un développement plus important de la coopération des individus entre eux face à ce problème), alors dans ce cas, oui, celui-ci peut avoir un intérêt pour les pédagogies féministes.

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NOTES


2. On peut également comprendre ce passage en le comparant avec le processus que les pédagogues anti-racistes tentent d’effectuer pour mener leurs élèves du “color-blindness” au “color-consciousness” (Cervulle 2012).

3. Là aussi cette fragilité est similaire à bien des égards à la “white fragility” (DiAngelo 2018).

4. Cette distinction théorique n’est pas à l’abri des remises en question sur le plan historique ou de la pratique, mais par elle nous voulons surtout mettre en lumière deux “attitudes” pédagogiques distinctes pour les discuter. La raison en est qu’à nos yeux, l’une des premières tâches de la philosophie de l’éducation pour la pratique pédagogique est d’apporter aux pédagogues un regard clair sur leurs “attitudes” professionnelles pour leur permettre de faire des choix lucides à partir de ces dernières.

5. Il faut cependant noter que ses deux traditions philosophiques, la théorie critique et le pragmatisme, ont largement échangé entre elles et se sont mutuellement influencées, et ce malgré certains désaccords théoriques importants. Il existe donc plusieurs courants au sein de chacun de ses approches que nous ne pouvons distinguer ici dans cette argumentation schématique par nécessité, cependant on se reporterait au travail de Mary Breuing proposant une revue de littérature à ce sujet (Breuing 2011).

6. Malgré cette critique classique de l’utopie déréalisante et démobilisatrice, une approche féministe et pragmatiste, à la suite des travaux de Richard Rorty (Janack 2010) et stimulée par les travaux de chercheure·s comme Vanina Mozzicanoci (Mozziconacci 2015: 6) est cependant possible et consiste une piste intéressante.

8. Prévenons un possible malentendu. On notera que cette première difficulté, où la pratique pédagogique reproche à la théorie de construire des problèmes trop difficiles à résoudre, n’est pas propre aux théories féministes. Au contraire, il ne s’étend qu’à certaines approches inspirées par la théorie critique qui font abstraction de la pratique et oublient que l’application quotidienne pédagogique ne peut s’intéresser qu’à des problèmes auxquels elle peut contribuer à résoudre, et non à des problèmes lui paraissant irrésolubles. De plus, par cette première difficulté soulevée, nous n’insinuons ni que la pédagogie féministe peut se passer de théorie féministe, ni que les problèmes liés aux biais sexistes ne sont pas complexes et ne dépassent pas largement le champ pédagogique.

9. “Quand les proies se mettent à chasser, elles ne deviennent pas chasseurs à leur tour. Elles se défendent par nécessité. Toutefois, dans la généralisation d’un tel monde de prédation, c’est à la transformation de toutes en proies que l’on assiste. C’est l’éradication de toute altérité ou, plutôt, le rabattement du possible dans l’ordre de la menace et du danger; c’est aussi l’éradication de toute conflictualité politique” (Dorlin 2019: 209).

10. “Agnotologie […] le concept d’ignorance permet de saisir l’asymétrie entre l’exploitation cognitive et gnoséologique des dominé·e·s et les infinis bénéfices sociaux et symboliques dégagés de ce travail au profit des dominantes. Ignorant·e·s, les dominante·s sont engagé·e·s dans des postures cognitives qui leur épargnent à proprement parler de ‘voir’ les autres, de s’en soucier, de les prendre en compte, de les connaître, de les considérer” (Dorlin 2019: 207).

11. “To claim that intelligence is a better method than its alternatives, authority, imitation, caprice and ignorance, prejudice and passion, is hardly an excessive claim” (Dewey 1925: 394).

12. “For this reason, the word ‘privilege’ now seems to me misleading. We want, then, to distinguish between earned strength and unearned power conferred systematically. […] But not all of the privileges on my list are inevitably damaging. […] Others, like the privilege to ignore less powerful people, distort the humanity of the holders as well as the ignored groups. We might at least start by distinguishing between positive advantages which we can work to spread, and negative types of advantages which unless rejected will always reinforce our present hierarchies” (McIntosh 1989: 3).


14. Celui-ci est ici entendu comme le mouvement inverse de la “conscientisation genrée” promu par le féminisme.

15. “Une telle philosophie [pragmatiste] verrait s’ouvrir devant elle un vaste champ critique. Mais son esprit critique serait tourné contre la domination exercée par les préjugés, les intérêts étroits, les coutumes routinières et l’autorité provenant d’institutions séparées des fins humaines au service desquelles elle se place. Cette tâche négative ne serait que le revers du travail créatif de l’imagination lorsque cette dernière désigne de nouvelles possibilités que la connaissance de l’effectif dévoile et lorsqu’elle projette des méthodes pour leur réalisation dans la modest expérience quotidienne du genre humain” (Dewey 2014: 326).

16. Cette pédagogue féministe pragmatiste a travaillé au carrefour de la pédagogie, de l’action sociale et de la sociologie, à Chicago au début du siècle dernier. Et, en plus d’être la première femme américaine à recevoir le Prix Nobel de la paix en 1931, elle a eu une influence conséquente d’une part en philosophie de l’éducation (en discutant et inspirant John Dewey par exemple (Seigfried 1999: 225)) et en sociologie urbaine (en inspirant de nombreuses méthodes qui feront l’originalité de la sociologie interactionniste de la première école de Chicago (Chapoulie 2001: 23-50)).
17. En effet, dans la majorité des systèmes d’éducation occidentale, le professeur n’est plus le précepteur d’un seul enfant mais est face à un groupe d’élèves, au sein d’un groupe de niveau ou d’une classe.


RÉSUMÉS


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Book Reviews & Critical Notices
Andreas K. ENGEL, Karl J. FRISTON, & Danica KRAGIC (eds.), *The Pragmatic Turn. Toward Action-Oriented Views in Cognitive Science*

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1 In May 2013, Andreas K. Engel, Alexander Maye, Martin Kurthen, and Peter König published an article entitled “Where’s the Action? The Pragmatic Turn in Cognitive Science” in which they witnessed a “Pragmatic Turn” in cognitive science, *i.e.* the shift from a representation-centered perspective to a paradigm that focuses on the understanding of cognition as “enactive.” This new paradigm suggested that “cognition seems fundamentally grounded in action” (Engel et al. 2013: 206). The authors’ use of the term “pragmatic,” derived from the action-oriented perspectives developed by John Dewey and George H. Mead, meant to stress the conjecture that “cognition is a form of practice” (Engel et al. 2013: 202), namely a skillful activity that implies continuous interaction with the outside world.

2 The article anticipated a Forum on the “Pragmatic Turn” held in October 2013 in Frankfurt in which the debate focused on possible advances in the empirical field of this new paradigm. The result of the debate involving fifty participants is the volume edited by Andreas K. Engel, Karl J. Friston, and Danica Kragic, *The Pragmatic Turn. Toward Action-Oriented Views in Cognitive Science*. The volume collects twenty contributions that provide information on critical aspects of action-oriented

In the introduction to the volume, Engel, Friston and Kragic summarize the conclusions of the five-day forum by arguing that the experimental evidence from cognitive science, neuroscience, psychology, robotics, and philosophy of mind support the possibility of substantial conceptual advances toward action-oriented cognition paradigm. Such advances also refer to “new views on the functional relevance and the presumed ‘representational’ nature of neural processes” (p. 1). According to the action-oriented perspective, cognition should not be considered as a producer of veridical representations but rather as an ability to generate action structures. Neuroscience embracing this perspective should not focus on explanation of how the brain acts as a world-mirroring device, but rather as a “vehicle of world-making.” In this respect, one of the primary references of the pragmatic turn is O’Regan and Noë’s sensorimotor contingency theory (SMC) (O’Regan & Noë 2001), which draws on Gibson’s affordances theory (Gibson 1979) as well as on old concepts from neurobiology such as the “reafference principle” put forth by von Holst and Mittelstaedt (1950). Such contingencies can be identified as relations between movements and changes in the associated sensory inputs which, once learned, are similar to rules that enable us to predict the consequences of our actions. Closely related to the approach of active inference to action and perception is the idea that the learning of such predictions can be mediated by the acquisition of concepts of objects, as well as predictive coding models. Following this path, Maye and Engel’s “pragmatic” proposal (chapter 11) is to extend O’Regan and Noë’s SMC theory to what they call “‘intention-related’ eSMCs, which capture long-term regularities in action sequences and constitute our conscious experience beyond the timescale of object perception” (179).

Given that the pragmatic turn is an expression of enactivist approaches, one of the central epistemological issues is whether such a pragmatic approach to cognition should be included in a scientific research agenda or whether it should be considered as philosophy of nature. In his contribution, Gallagher (chapter 16) contends that, if enactivism, which inspires the pragmatic turn, proposed from the outset to rethink not only the nature of the mind and brain but the very concept of nature, it could not accept a mechanistic definition of nature as presupposed by science. Instead, enactivism “contends that nature cannot be understood apart from the cognitive capacity that we have to investigate it. [...H]olism is a strength rather than a practical complication” (296). However, Gallagher concludes, this does not make enactivism irrelevant to scientific research; instead, it can motivate experimental science in very specific ways by offering or testing concrete hypotheses or raising new scientific questions.

Along with the question of the general nature of the pragmatic turn, there are many other open issues that the pragmatic turn paradigm has to address in order to contribute to this breakthrough in neuroscience, such as the link between neural mechanisms and memory, complex cognitive processes, the construction of inferential mental processes, and social cognition. In chapter 2, for instance, Pezzulo faces the issue of the link between neural mechanisms and higher cognitive processes from a
developmental perspective, arguing that it is difficult to determine if and how the new pragmatic view extends to the domains of higher cognition. Assuming that cognition is “a set of adaptive skills that exist in continuity with action-control mechanisms” (20), the author stresses that the question remains as to how pragmatic skills “support higher cognitive abilities and/or bootstrap them during development” (22). He critically analyzes three perspectives that emphasize the idea that sensorimotor development promotes higher cognition, namely the emergentist perspective, the cognitive mediation perspective, and the abstract-and-amodal perspective, pointing out some open questions that these perspectives pose. More specifically, Pezzulo maintains that the emergentist perspective, according to which the increasingly more complex (inter)action patterns self-organize during development, does not contribute to our understanding and study of circular causality between development and cognition. On the other hand, the cognitive mediation perspective, which stresses that certain abilities developed for the demands of situated action become mediators of higher cognitive abilities, has some difficulties in identifying the most critical cognitive mediators, while the abstract-and-amodal perspective, which stresses that action-based processes contribute to developing cognitive abilities that, once established, become autonomous from perceptual and motor systems, cannot prove the existence and development of amodal domains of cognition. Furthermore, Pezzulo maintains that, from an epistemological perspective, other issues arise related to the representational nature of prediction-based mechanisms, the use of symbols by the brain to mediate thought processes and the causal role of sensorimotor representations in higher cognition.

Another question dealt with in the volume is that of predictive coding and active inference based on the Bayesian paradigm. In his contribution (chapter 6) Friston frames questions about embodied cognition and action in terms of active inference, moving toward a view of the brain as a statistical organ that generates unconscious inferences tested against sensory evidence. Hohwy (chapter 7) takes into account the idea that the brain is fundamentally engaged in prediction error minimization (PEM) (see Friston 2010, Clark 2013, Hohwy 2013) and highlights some issues in unifying PEM’s proclivity for internal processing and the embodied, enactive, extended approach to cognition, whereas Kilner et al. (chapter 10) take into account possible models of the interrelationships between action and cognition, focusing in particular on ideomotor theory and drawing a formalization under the enactivist version of the Bayesian paradigm.

A genuine pragmatist alternative to such formalization is Menary’s “Pragmatism and the Pragmatic Turn in Cognitive Science” (chapter 13), in which the author interprets active inference in a more pragmatist vein as an abductive process. In particular, Menary relates the principle of active inference to concepts of exploratory inference in classical pragmatism, arguing that pragmatists did not rely solely on a behavioural account of sensorimotor interactions with the environment. Instead, they framed the nature of such interactions in terms of “exploratory inferences” and “transactions.” According to Menary, a pragmatist approach to cognition relies on three principles: 1) thinking “is structured by the interaction of an organism with its environment”; 2) cognition “develops via exploratory inference, which remains a core cognitive ability throughout the life cycle”; and 3) inquiry “begins with genuinely irritating doubts that arise in a situation and is carried out by exploratory inference” (216). Moreover, a genuinely pragmatic turn in cognitive science would assume a pluralistic approach to styles of interaction. Thus, although SMCs and predictive inferences are core methods
for understanding cognition as interactive, different styles in interactions imply “differences in how we model or explain those different styles” (217). And though in keeping with enactivism and embodied cognition pragmatists reduced the importance of representational explanation of cognition, they denied a complete break with the role of representation. In line with Peirce’s view, Menary looks at signs as representational mediators that develop in the process of continuous dynamical interpretation. He then refers to the Peircean Principle (Menary 2007), which establishes a sign/intentional/representational relation based on a principle of continuity, allowing “us to explain how sign action works in both natural and social environments, by giving the same structural conditions for teleonomic and teleological signs” (220). Following the pragmatist idea of fallibilism and exploratory inference, Menary maintains an externalist interpretation of the role of active inferences and thereby avoids an internalist view of the Bayesian brain. He refers to the niche construction account of developmental biases, which are both endogenous and exogenous, and focuses on the selective role of Peirce’s abductive inference as instinctual. He thus points out that cognition is “shot through with active exploratory inference that is abductive – a pattern of action that is a search strategy for a conjecture that can be further tested” (226). What is particularly interesting about Menary’s proposal is that he interprets abductive inference in early developmental and at least sensorimotor cases as based on motor activity rather than on beliefs or representations. It would therefore be possible “to give a nonrepresentational account of active inference, and this would be entirely consistent with the likely evolutionary origin of those inferences in sensorimotor interactions with the environment” (226). As he puts it, this interpretation is also consistent with Dewey’s theory of sensory circuit and his externalist explanation of the symmetrical transaction in organism-environment transactions.

8 The perspective that Engel, Friston and Kragic’s The Pragmatic Turn promotes is praiseworthy. However, what can be noticed in reading the contributions is that, although all the essays are presented under the broad umbrella of the “pragmatic turn,” which should be inspired by pragmatist authors, there are very few references to pragmatist authors. The only essay in the volume that contributes to the pragmatic turn debate by referring to pragmatists is Menary’s. Of course, we appreciate that the pragmatic turn in cognitive science somehow reassumes the scientific attitude and experimental approach of the early pragmatists. Nevertheless, however auspicious it may be, such an approach seems to be strongly undermined by an epistemological premise that precludes the profitable use of pragmatist theories in contemporary action-oriented explanations, that is a strong physicalism that reduces any action-oriented perspective to its description in terms of brain activation, networks and neural structures. Although many contributions in the volume take into consideration other aspects besides neural activation, such as behaviour and social interaction, almost all take for granted a focus on the internal states of the cognitive system, identifying them with brain activation, thus distancing itself from pragmatists, and failing to grasp the richness of their non-reductionist naturalism.

9 It is possible, therefore, to trace two possible sides of the pragmatic turn in cognitive science: on the one hand, a physicalist side based on neuroscientific and artificial intelligence studies, which make use of hypotheses useful to implementing empirical insights, and, on the other hand, a theoretical side, which promotes a holistic approach to cognition, aiming to contribute to both a new cognitive ontology and a new
philosophy of nature (see for instance Gallagher and Menary). Almost all contributions to *The Pragmatic Turn* fall on the first side. However, what makes the perspective promoted by Engel and his colleagues particularly interesting and the path traced rich with potential development is that the pragmatic turn is young and strongly influenced by a discussion of the various aspects of cognition. Therefore, more significantly taking into account the differences and potential of pragmatist authors would certainly contribute to consolidating the empirical and philosophical sides, highlighting their natural complementarity.

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John LACHS, *The Cost of Comfort*
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1 John Lachs tells us in the short “Preface” to his latest book that in an earlier work, “*Intermediate Man*, a book I wrote some years ago,” (1981) he “presented similar ideas. But this book is significantly different from the earlier. It covers more topics and makes, I hope, a more compelling case for my analysis” (p. vii). He goes on to state that in *The Cost of Comfort* one can find his analysis of contemporary life a “testable form,” given over to an invitation to experiment (similar to another contemporary philosopher, Anthony Appiah in his *Experiments in Ethics*, 2008), to put into play, his ideas as to how *mediation* impacts our lives, how it removes certain capacities from our well-being and authenticity as living beings, while at the same time for the most part positively contributing to a certain lessening of stress, anxieties, and downright drudge-work in our need to continue our existences and furthering our physical lives. This is the dynamic of this short, but densely argued philosophical work: the give and take of what we gain from living in a complex, multi-layered world of human interrelationships that make possible a certain standard of life, juxtaposed against the inevitable range of possibilities and activities that we must relinquish, give up as it were, in order to maintain that cushion of “comfort.” In short, the price we pay for the lives we have and lead. This is especially self-evident in 2020, during which the Covid-19 pandemic has compelled the citizenry of planet Earth to take stock of the interrelatedness all human beings exist amidst.

2 *Mediation* is the entry point into an understanding of Lachs’ arguments. Given its priority, what, precisely, does it signify for him? In his earlier work, *Intermediate Man*, he utilized the example from Defoe’s fictional creation, *Robinson Crusoe*, of the protagonists Crusoe and Friday as explanatory models, defining *mediation* in its rawest
manifestation, that which can exist between merely two individuals. Writing about the ubiquity of the mediation’s applicability, Lachs claims that “we find it in the rudimentary one of Crusoe and Friday no less than in a Marxist utopia. This fact is that of mediation or action on behalf of the other. Without our Fridays each of us would have to perform by himself all of the actions that support his life and express himself” (Lachs, *Intermediate Man*, Hackett 1981: 11). Conversely, and somewhat in a more expansive reach, he writes in *The Cost of Comfort*:

None of us can accomplish anything of social significance without continued participation of all of the rest. In large-scale actions, then, others are interposed between me and the outcome of my acts. I find myself in a similar position, occupying a place between others and the results of their endeavors. I shall call this interposition of others between oneself and the complete act (which includes the consequences) mediation. (17)

3 The definitions parallel each other, and co-extend each other. To frame it differently, in coarser terms: *Is it plausible, even reasonable, to think about human lives, or one human life, apart from other human lives?* Aside from being an excruciatingly pathetic, arduous state of affairs, human life without any mediation, would be brutal and cruel. How can a human life be appreciated except as shared with and dependent on others? It simply cannot – unless of course, human life is reduced to Crusoe-like conditions, or like Thoreau close to his pond. Yet let us recall, Crusoe did not spend his entire life on the island (twenty-eight years), and Thoreau only roughly twenty-six months on Walden – both not examples of a human life cycle. The question itself compels us to delve deeper into a clearly inconceivable existence that most of us would never care to venture upon. So, yes, there is an inextricable link between *Intermediate Man* and *The Cost of Comfort*, and that link centers in the notion of mediation.

4 Now, this acknowledged, what arguments does Lachs further in this new book? He tells us that there are six inevitable outcomes of mediation, or as he designates them, “consequences.” But before doing so, Lachs brings into the conversation the notion of immediacy. This notion he extrapolates from two other philosophers, Hegel and Peirce, both culpable in reducing (even effacing) the necessary centrality of the immediacy in a human life that maintains “value and goodness,” and which provides us with “pleasure, satisfaction, enjoyment and delight” (25). Hegel eviscerated the momentousness of immediacy with his totalizing effort in the *Phenomenology* at establishing the “ubiquity” of mediation, and Peirce’s overemphasized the “thirds,” (thoughts, laws, rules, signs) rather than the “firsts,” which are “immediate feelings and private apprehensions,” thereby disregarding the importance of immediacy, a notion that I am sure Lachs would claim as indispensable to a meaningful life.

5 These two notions, mediation and immediacy, in their tensional dynamic, help Lachs to lay out his arguments as to why there needs to be more of the latter and less of the former as we careen on into the challenges of the twenty-first century. This is especially applicable in his discussions of two sets of facets to the reality of mediation: one group is a list of tolls it takes on human lives (passivity, impotence, ignorance, manipulation, psychic distance, and irresponsibility); the second group is a number of civilizational forces that circumscribe and define our everyday existences (tools, language, ideology, institutions, and government). The first represents what over-mediation engenders; the second group identifies the primary instruments, the means used, to create and perpetrate that engendering. These discussions are critical and lively, and make up forty pages, nearly half of the book.
Defining each of these six notions as they relate to mediation would be helpful here, all of them interwoven, and I will employ Lachs’ own words to do so. Passivity “is easy to explain. So long as others set the parameters of our lives and determine our daily activities, it is difficult not to feel put upon” (31-2). Stated differently – as long as I am relatively sure that water will continue to course through my faucets and sinks, that electricity will continue to alight the lighting in my house and turn on my computer, then why would I need to worry about it? I become passive to its being a fact of my life, and assume, both correctly and erroneously that it will always be the case – at least for the near future. But what occurs within myself when, assuming it is always going to be there, I place my entire livelihood in my activities with my computer, and either the weather or a natural calamity or some massive crash of the system occurs, shutting it down, a totally unforeseen occurrence – I feel powerless, because I am left no options to secure do what I need to do – i.e., I am impotent. I am impotent due to the fact that I did not plan ahead, that I was passive. Lachs writes: “The sense of passivity can readily turn into a feeling of bitter impotence” (33). And the more layered and complex our situation is, and further we are removed from the source of the mediation that provides us with some product or service, the more intense can be the sense of impotence. Ignorance is interwoven with the previous two. For the more passive one becomes, and potentially the more the sense of impotence augments, both can be aggravated by the ignorance one lives amidst. Lachs writes:

Working in large institutions, people have little idea of the complex wholes to which they contribute […] social acts performed have no idea how they came about […] Today, by contrast, we have direct knowledge of only a few sorts of actions; for everything else that may be needed, we have to call in specialists […] The vaunted ideal of the Renaissance person is not to be conceived in terms of extent of knowledge but scope of skill and experience. Mediation provides us with much unimportant information at the price of surrendering full-bodied engagement with life. (38-9)

Ignorance, willful or not, opens one up to the vulnerability of manipulation, for “mediated chains invite manipulation, and manipulation undermines the moral structure of human interactions. The ultimate results are inability to distinguish sincere from artificial sentiments and reluctance to trust anything” (41). Imagine the brilliant engineer at work on a top-secret project to create a super “smart” missile that he or she believes will be used to defend the country that said engineer is a citizen of. Now, at some stage of the game, some clog in the bureaucracy of the defense maze of national security decides to divert the missile technology to a third party, say an authoritarian regime, a terrorist organization, or even a declared enemy of one’s own nation, for money. Not only has one’s knowledge been manipulated, but one’s very authenticity, one’s innermost credo, what one believed one was working for (a more secure nation for one’s loved ones, one’s children, one’s fellow citizens) has been violated and abused. It is hard to imagine how trust could ever be restored for someone who has experienced such a deception. Psychic distance (a notion that Lachs first broached in Intermediate Man as “a direct result of the lack of direct experience. It shows itself in our unwillingness or even inability to appropriate actions that are clearly ours” (Lachs, Intermediate Man: 13)) results from ignorance:

When actions are performed by others on my behalf, typically I have no direct experience of the act. In some important sense, the action performed for me is mine […] Specialists do everything or almost everything for me, and I end up in isolation from my roots and leaves. (43)
As Lachs has written in another context in the book, and I paraphrase, we know not what we do. And finally, the last notion on this list of consequences is the inevitable outcome of irresponsibility, the twisted and irrevocable existential knot of refusing to claim or assume self-responsibility for something we are not sure about, or are totally ignorant of, since we are ignorant of the other factors that contribute to our actions, or the far-ranging extent of the influence of them: “Irresponsibility grows out of the inability and unwillingness of individuals to appropriate the actions to which they contribute […] They think they are hired hands who can shrug their shoulders when things don’t go right and disclaim responsibility by saying they were just following orders or someone else’s design” (47).

The sweep of the range of “mediators” covers a vast swath of our everyday lives, covering most everything that links humans to other humans, bridging any sort of primeval condition separating humans from their counterparts. The first of these are tools, which were invented, perfected, and used, all to the benefit of humans, but now “the growth of technology changed the balance of power: instead of being their helpmate, in certain respects technology turned humans into appendages of machines” (51); technology has not turned on humans, but the one-way relationship of being a helpful aid has changed. Next is language, the currency of talk or conversation, which “takes the place of direct experience […] We need to acknowledge its value in making large-scale human communication possible” (52-4). Lachs’ cherished immediacy can be lost completely in the fog of layer upon layer of words, or as he writes “a sea of talk” (52). In many instances and situations in life, words are not needed. Formulating them, and then responding to them on the part of others, merely blurs understanding and communication. Ideology is the fourth mediating generating element in our world today. Lachs writes:

As a way of thinking, ideology becomes a mediating force structuring the relations of human beings. Its followers find it difficult to view people as living and suffering individuals. Instead, they think of them as instances of stereotypes – that is as women, Jews, blacks, infidels, or capitalists. This destroys the human kinship between oneself and others, displaying whoever does not agree with the ruling way of thought as blind or alien. (56)

Or the non-ruling. One does not have to be a part of a way of thinking (or a member of a specific political party or a member or functionary in an institution) to possess an ideology. And the fifth and sixth of Lachs’ mediating culprits (institutions and government) share with ideology a we vs. them mentality, and even within an institution or a government these forces may be at work, with internal rules and policies to boot, almost rendering impossible any authentic immediacy in the interactions between human beings. To say nothing of those outside of these institutions and governments. To use an example from the American context, like those who work for the US Dept. of Justice, all others who are not integral to their mission and ranks are non-us, and justice (just-us), is what reigns. All six of these mediating forces that Lachs has identified share one thing: that though they have helped to create the current level of civilized life in the early twenty-first century, they conversely have contributed to making that civilized life more difficult and stressful. The question for Lachs, and the principal question that dominates the raison d’être of this book is: how do we adjust the balance to the point where the stress and difficulties are lessened and rendered more manageable, and are not so overwhelming and stifling? What does Lachs argue for and see for the future?
First, we must comprehend that mediation is here to stay – that civilized, social life demands many degrees of mediation. That indeed, our level of well-being and good fortune is in direct proportion to the benefits brought about by what has been achieved by mediating efforts. However, sadly, Lachs’ forecast for the future is replete with some vague what-ifs, some hypothetical wishful thinking, but is sparse in concrete proposals, apart from some that contradict what Lachs as a philosopher has espoused in the past, and this seems perplexing to those who know Lachs’ œuvre. Lachs published another book, Meddling, in 1914 in which he basically and quite unreservedly lambastes efforts on the part of anyone or any collective (government, institutions, and individuals) to interfere and prescribe what they think is best for others, both on macro and micro scales. In fact, he wrote in the “Introduction” to a book published two years before Meddling (Stoic Pragmatism, 2012) the following: “The stoic side of my view explains also my conviction that many things riling people greatly really do not matter at all. This is the foundation of my desire to leave people alone to conduct their lives as they fit, that is, of my respect for autonomy and also of the tolerant attitude I take to the harmless varieties of human nature” (Lachs, Stoic Pragmatism, Indianapolis, 2012: 2). It just might be the case that for many other thinkers and concerned minds Lachs’ mediation and immediacy are two notions that rile Lachs to the point of forgetting or letting pass over other, seemingly far more pressing, threatening, and consequential problems and questions that we are encountering in our contemporary world. They seem to be not that absorbing to Lachs (the environment, world hunger, poverty, corruption, and the prevalence of an atavistic strain of arrogant populism and authoritarianism). To be sure, the “cost of comfort” is a high price we pay to perpetrate our lives lived out in our first world of twenty-first century development and organized social life. But what is the alternative, at this stage of the game? Maybe a start would be a humble recognition that we do not need any more rules or prescribed ways of acting and valuing (“...we must devise rules for holding every person in a mediated chain responsible for the mayhem caused” 97). Is this even tenable? And a second start might be something to the extent that we could recognize an idea put forth by the contemporary German thinker, Peter Sloterdijk, of co-immunism, or an awareness that each individual is compromised to a recognition of mutual concern and protectiveness (of others), and that basic, common survival for us as a species requires that we become aware that countries, nationalities, classes, do not give anyone safe conduct to privilege or survival, or privileged survival. And given the onset of this pandemic, baffling and lethal, Covid-19, this idea is even more spot-on and portentous. It just might very well be the case that a complete overhaul in our comprehension of what immediacy means for us lies ahead in the 2020s. Other notions such as the other, distance, and decency, might also undergo radical transmogrifications.

Lachs’ book is a fitting final touch to his lifelong work and teaching, and as this it is an edifying work of profound, reflective philosophical thought. Lachs has always evidenced such an attraction and interpretive intention, and this work is a further product of such a mind, a lucid one, whose interests always, in the final say, side with the best examples of our generous, yet commonsensical, aspects of who we are as human beings, always defying the non-personal, the abstract, the exhausting onslaughters of all kinds of forces we are subject to, and continuously confront on a daily basis – which have the power, if unchecked, to destroy us. It is only to be hoped that we have the wisdom to cull from the 101 pages of this text that which can indeed serve us well, as the twenty-first century surges on, racing on into a context of possibilities that
can only be called, modestly, *challenging*. Lachs has given us much to ponder over, and to cherish.

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Katarzyna KREMLEWSKA, *Life as Insinuation: George Santayana’s Hermeneutics of Finite Life and Human Self*

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REFERENCES


In her introduction to *Life as Insinuation: George Santayana’s Hermeneutics of Finite Life and Human Self*, Katarzyna Kremplewska states that the general aim of her book is “reconstructing George Santayana’s conception of human self as embedded in a larger project of philosophy of life” (xi). More specifically, she explains that she is undertaking an inquiry “into the latter in the context of the former” (xvi). Her aim is not only to reconstruct Santayana’s conception of the self, but also show how it provides the basis for understanding a number of key ideas in his philosophy of life or what she calls “contemplative vitalism” – a fitting term intended to capture both the material and the spiritual dimensions of Santayana’s philosophy (xiv). Kremplewska draws widely from the history of philosophy and the breadth of her discussions are impressive. Her book is positively teeming with ideas, but the central themes she addresses after reconstructing Santayana’s conception of the self are his views about of the tragic conception of human life; his account of human freedom and flourishing; and his analysis of the self in relation to social and political life.
Kremplewska’s study of Santayana’s philosophy is hermeneutic in at least a couple of respects. First, there is her thesis that Santayana’s notion of the self is not an independent substance or ego, but an entity that “emerges” via the process of interpreting the world (17). She sums up this idea with the unusual phrase contained in the title of her book, “life as insinuation,” a metaphor she defines as “introducing something alien into something else, of grafting something upon something else” (97). (The metaphor is borrowed from Bergson and grafted onto Santayana.) The notions of emerging and grafting are rather different, but Kremplewska’s main point appears to be that the human self in Santayana’s system is a conditioned reality. Her approach is also hermeneutic in the sense that she seeks to reveal the tacit historical, psychological, and moral motivations that purportedly led Santayana to his ontological categories of the being of essence, the existence of matter, the actuality of spirit or consciousness, and the eternality of truth. For Kremplewska, “[a]ny consideration of selfhood in Santayana must take into account the fact that a naturalistic and quasi-pragmatic philosophy of action precedes and – to some extent – determines the shape of his mature ontology” (29). Whether or not Santayana’s “naturalistic and quasi-pragmatic” philosophy of action precedes his mature ontology or is simply coincidental with it, so that the practical element and the ontology (in particular, matter) are two ways of describing the same thing, Kremplewska is certainly correct to highlight the pragmatic norms embedded in Santayana’s ontology.

Kremplewska’s project with its “large thematic scope” is an ambitious one (xvii). It is ambitious not only because she defends a novel account of Santayana’s notion of the self (more on this below), but also because of her sustained and groundbreaking efforts of bringing Santayana into a comparative and critical conversation with a number of Continental philosophers, such as Henri Bergson, Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Paul Ricoeur, to name a few. By having us look through the lens or, better, lenses of Continental philosophy, Kremplewska believes Santayana’s ideas about the human self are clarified and thereby more readily reconstructed.

The way in which Kremplewska puts Santayana into conversation with major Continental philosophers is often on their terms: phenomenological, transcendental, and with a dramatic tone (e.g., Santayana’s realm of matter is deemed “the sphere of helplessness” (197)). As a result, her reconstruction of Santayana’s account of self is somewhat at odds with his classically-oriented, naturalistic views of human life and ontology. In Scepticism and Animal Faith (1923), Santayana dedicates a chapter to the “Belief in the Self.” In that chapter he defines the self not as a “transcendental ego” or “a flux of sentience,” but a “substantial being preceding all the vicissitudes of experience” (SAF 145). And in Realms of Being (1942), he offers a definition of “Self or Person” as a being with social and political relations that “lives in his ambitions, affections, and repute” (Realms of Being, 571). This last definition would seem to conform with Kremplewska’s claim that the human self emerges through the processes of interpreting and being in the world. However, she does not give these chapters much attention. Instead, she begins her study with a historical overview of the notion of the self and subjectivity. While her survey of the Western philosophical history of subjectivity is extensive, the guiding thread through it is Charles Taylor’s The Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity (1995). Kremplewska appears to take Taylor’s historical analysis of the self to be canonie. As she sees it, Taylor sets the “problematic of selfhood in a cultural context and provides an incomparable thematic framework for
any further discussion of Santayana’s eclectic heritage” (27). Her discussion of this idea is multifaceted, yet her conclusion in the chapter is a modest one, namely, that when Santayana discusses selfhood, “in the background we are dealing with a temporal, dynamic, relational being, which – let us risk a suggestion – implicitly exhibits some ‘nature’” (28). This might be a risky suggestion for some philosophers, but it is a platitude of Santayana’s naturalism, at least if by “nature” Kremplewska means some internal essences or qualities and external relations (also “essences”) that are necessary for a substantial self to exist at all.

The strategy of appealing to Continental philosophers is one of the most interesting aspects of Kremplewska’s book. This is especially so with regard to chapter five, “Coping with Finitude: Santayana Reading Heidegger.” By tapping into Santayana’s marginalia on *Sein und Zeit*, Kremplewska effectively shows that Santayana saw in Heidegger a philosophical ally with an Aristotelian orientation who was also deeply concerned with ontology. She further shows how Santayana struggled to square several of Heidegger’s ontological terms and categories (e.g. *Dasein*, being, *ontish*) with his own terminology (e.g. existence, essence, animal faith). Of particular interest here are Santayana’s comments on Heidegger’s use of the notions of *Nothing* and *Death* (146). Seasoned philosophers are not always receptive to new ideas, but Santayana was evidently inspired, as he wrote, by Heidegger’s “profound analysis” of death as a “totality of life.” Santayana accepted Heidegger’s insight that, as Kremplewska puts it, “[a]s long as a given life, counting as ‘one fact,’ is not yet framed by death, the scenario of the play of life remains underdetermined” (145). By relying on textual evidence in the form of Santayana’s letters discussing Heidegger and his marginalia on Heidegger’s work, Kremplewska reveals some definite affinities between the two philosophers and opens up new avenues for interpreting Santayana’s philosophy, although likely not to the point, as proposed, of “rethinking [Santayana’s] entire œuvre” (xii).

Although Kremplewska’s hermeneutic, Continental-philosophy-oriented highlights new angles on Santayana’s philosophy, it is not without its difficulties. One practical difficulty is the sheer number of passing references to various philosophers Kremplewska makes on page after page of her book. The conceptual generality of Santayana’s ontological categories make it tempting to draw connections between his system and other systems of philosophy that would appear, at least on the surface, radically different (see, for example, Michael Hodges’s and John Lachs’s 2000 comparative study *Wittgenstein and Santayana, Thinking in Ruins: Wittgenstein and Santayana on Contingency*). However, while the multitude of references Kremplewska makes point toward interesting thematic connections that may be worthy of deeper exploration, at times it is difficult to discern the philosophy through all the philosophers. Moreover, Kremplewska’s references are often highly selective, a fact she does not hide. With regard to Santayana and Heidegger, she asserts: “I approach Santayana’s notes not as an evidence of similarities or of his ultimate views on Heidegger but rather as suggestions of possible affinities, which happen to confirm my previously existing ideas” (113). As indicated, the textual evidence she marshals clearly shows that Heidegger’s philosophy sparked Santayana’s interest. Nevertheless, her interpretations sometimes result in omissions that otherwise might round out Santayana’s views. For instance, although it is true that Santayana praised some of Heidegger’s ideas as being “the work of a superior mind,” he also commented that Heidegger is “[n]ot so superior as Descartes, I grant: there you have a first-rate man” (*Letters of George Santayana*, MIT, 5:137). Similarly, with regard to Bergson, Kremplewska
contends that both he and Santayana “represent an untypical kind of naturalism” and that understanding Bergson’s philosophy helps us better understand Santayana’s (107). Yet Santayana’s relationship to Bergson is more complex than Kremplewska lets on. After publishing a review of Bergson’s work, Santayana expressed his misgivings in a letter. “I begin to fear on the contrary that I have taken [Bergson] too seriously,” he wrote, and that “the best way of discrediting a charlatan is perhaps not to call him one” (Letters of George Santayana, MIT, 2:128). Kremplewska largely leaves out such criticisms and so Santayana’s views on Heidegger and Bergson appear more aligned than actually they are. Such interpretive difficulties are somewhat exacerbated by the fact that while her book is nominally about Santayana’s account of human life and the self, it leans more toward a comparative study of his philosophy and the ideas and concerns of major Continental philosophers, with each chapter of the book dealing with a disparate nest of ideas loosely connected to its nominal theme.

7 Santayana believed his philosophy was rooted in common sense; that is, in the everyday, instinctive convictions that govern an animal mind in the presence of nature. In a marginal comment in Realms of Being, he deflates any metaphysical pretentions for his system of ontology by describing it as “ordinary reflection systematized” (Realms of Being: 827). A bedrock of his common sense philosophy is the claim that there is one source of power in the universe: the realm of matter. Since spirit or consciousness is not a material substance, it is not a source of power. Thus, as with the realms of essence and truth, spirit for Santayana is real but causally inefficacious. It is generated by the physiological functions of the human body, or what he calls the psyche, yet intrinsically it is a spectator, not an actor. Kremplewska is well aware of these fundamentals of Santayana’s philosophy. However, rather than a unitary account of the self where spirit is matter become conscious and the psyche is matter’s physiological functions, she asserts that she is “inclined to a view that the opposition between [existence and essence] allows for a dynamic interplay or a dialectic under the condition that a third element – that of a conscious life/a psycho-spiritual unity – is introduced” (39). This additional unity is the self. “The self proper,” she writes, “as I propose, stands for a triadic temporal structure of psyche-spirit-I, or, alternatively, body-psyche-spirit” (45). This “psycho-spiritual unity” with an “irreducible first-person perspective” would appear to be something over and above the human animal taken in its social and political relations, at least insofar as it has “dynamic interplay” with the realm of matter (46). If the self is some kind of emergent substance possessed with “triadic existential dynamics,” then Kremplewska’s reconstruction would contravene Santayana’s naturalism or at least his epiphenomenalism (64). That said, it is possible that she does not intend to substantialize the self and turn it into a power. Much of what she writes works toward a reconfiguration of the concepts or “dialectic distinctions” that Santayana employs to articulate his ontology and account of the self while still respecting his view that matter is the only substantial reality or source of power. If this is her position, then her reconstruction of Santayana’s triadic account of the self would still be novel, but it would not contravene his naturalism.

8 The last chapter of Kremplewska’s book, “Beyond the Self (into the Political Realm),” with its subtitle “The Essential Negativity of Human Being and Rational (Self-)Government,” takes up ideas some of which concern the self directly, such as the material basis of the self in politics, while other ideas address more generally Santayana’s views on political freedom and his critique of 19th early 20th century liberalism. In this short, dense chapter there are passages where she appears to sum up
Santayana’s political philosophy neatly and accurately, such as when she writes that: “Freedom in Santayana’s writings often stands for a harmonious relation between the self and necessity. Thus, it is closely related to self-rule, vital liberty, and rationality” (198). Other claims she makes seem antithetical to Santayana’s view for rational government, for example, when she asserts that the “ideal aim of successful self-government... [according to Santayana] is fully achievable – if at all – only for someone who has learned to transcend worldly concerns and dwell the realm of spirit” (206). This last claim conflates Santayana’s account of the spiritual life with his account of the life of reason in politics. The two might go together or they might not; in Santayana’s philosophy they are separable. Kremplewska’s interpretation of what Santayana means by a political domination and a power is also uncertain. For Santayana, the distinction is moral and not material, but Kremplewska calls them “active vectors in the field of forces,” which suggest the distinction is material (199). She might be led away from Santayana’s meaning since she appears to cast doubt on his moral relativism, an axiom in Santayana’s philosophy, but which is characterized as “the alleged moral relativism ascribed by some critics of Santayana” (210).

I suspect that for many readers the picture of Santayana’s philosophy in Kremplewska’s book will seem unfamiliar. His system, intended to clarify common sense, is found to be riddled with “inescapable aporias” (41). His naturalism, set out in Realms of Being and that reaches back to the writings of Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius, is characterized (indirectly) as the views of “a thinker encaged in a glass house of his own philosophical idiosyncrasies, radicalized by a growing mystical bent” (xiii). And Kremplewska’s triadic account of Santayana’s notion of the self appears to run counter to Santayana’s unitary substantial self. These differences in interpretation aside, Kremplewska presents Santayana’s philosophy in a spectrum of new light and challenges those familiar with his writings to reexamine many aspects of his philosophy. And if one is looking for a through-line from Santayana’s philosophy to the works of many leading Continental philosophers, Kremplewska’s book is the place to start.

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