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Michela Bella

1. Introduction

- ¹ 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.¹ 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)² 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.

- 4 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 scientism 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.³
- 5 Neatly distinguishing the logic of the scientific method from the choice of the theoretical frame of reference,⁴ Hook's understanding of pragmatism turns out to be strongly positivistic and thus only partially connected with Dewey's notion of the scientific method⁵ 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).⁶ 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 criteria⁷ 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.⁸ 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 novelties we happen to find in nature.⁹ 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

- 9 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.

10

- 10 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”¹¹ 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.

- 11 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; [...] and 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.
- 12 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 scientificity 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 essays¹² already demonstrate, clearly denies humans the possibility of having an immediate intuition, intellectual or sensible, of reality.

- 13 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.
- 14 As underlined by several scholars, Rorty is mainly opposed to “scientific realism,”¹³ 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,¹⁴ 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.

- 15 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)

- 16 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.¹⁵ 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.
- 17 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

- ¹⁸ 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 Sellars’s lesson on the importance of the history of philosophy for philosophy (Rorty 2010: 15) are outlined.²⁰
- 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 & Kögler 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 “historicist” philosophers (such as Wittgenstein, Dewey and Heidegger, who along with Kuhn, Sellars 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 “attempt to escape from history,” which for Rorty means “an attempt to find nonhistorical conditions of any possible historical development” (PMN: 9).²¹
- 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.²² 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 reconfirms 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

- ²⁴ 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).
- ²⁵ 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).²³ 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*,²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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).
5. On Dewey's conception of method see Sydney Ratner (1992); Gregory Pappas (2008).
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).

12. *Essential Peirce* (vol. 1: 1-55).

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).

14. Among recent works on Rorty's conception of ethics see Voparil (2020) and Marchetti (2019). See also Curtis (2015).

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 Ricœur’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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