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## **LANGUAGE AND REALITY: THE ALIEN PATHS OF CLASSICAL PRAGMATISM AND RORTY**

Within the contemporary philosophic scene, classical American pragmatism is not unique in its rejection of foundationalism in all its forms, positions which all hold, in varying ways, that there is a bedrock basis on which to build an edifice of knowledge, something objective which justifies rational arguments concerning what is the single best position for making available or picturing the structure of reality as it exists independently of our various contextually set inquiries. There can be no non-perspectival framework within which differences--social, moral, scientific, etc., can be evaluated and resolved. Nor is pragmatism unique in its focus on the pluralistic, contextualistic ways of dealing with life, on the role of novelty and diversity, on a turn away from abstract reason to imagination, feeling and practice, and on the need to solve the concrete problems of political, social, and moral life.

While Rorty's „neo-pragmatism” is in agreement with these themes in some sense, yet this agreement is colored by differences which are both wide and deep and which contextualize in a radically different way what similarities the two positions do seem to manifest, for they structure two very opposed understandings of the way in which language situates humans in the world. These opposing understandings revolve around four major and ultimately interdependent departures from classical pragmatism which Rorty makes. First, he sees a radical antifoundationalism in the form of linguistic conventionalism to

be the only alternative to objectivism or foundationalism and all the suspect baggage it carries along. Second, he rejects the naturalist view that human interpretive activity is a biologically and socially evolved dimension of human existence which is continuous with non-human biological activities and which, as such, houses significant epistemic and ontological implications. Third, he replaces the concept of experience with that of language. Finally, he rejects the method of experimentalism as the method of gaining knowledge via the testing of our linguistically structured interpretations in favor of an anti-methodological stance. The following discussion will turn to these interdependent points of divergence. And, to conserve on repetition of long labels, the discussion of classical American pragmatism as distinct from Rorty's neopragmatism will proceed in terms of pragmatism as distinct from Rorty or Rorty's position.

While Rorty, like pragmatism, rejects foundationalism, he holds, unlike pragmatism, that „'language' is a more suitable notion than 'experience' for saying the holistic and antifoundationalist things which Dewey and James wanted to say.”<sup>1</sup> The alternative to foundationalism becomes an antifoundationalism in which language, in its construction of various texts, is not constrained or controlled by independent conditions at all, and hence the philosopher's quest for truth rooted in the constraints of reality is not a legitimate endeavor. We have no accessibility to an independent „thereness” that constrains our various vocabularies and various texts. We can never reach anything just „given”, because it must always be expressed in some vocabulary, through some text. While there is a reality out there, truth has nothing to do with it, for truth is a property of sentences or elements of human languages, which are human creations.<sup>2</sup>

Rorty, then, rejects all ontological claims and holds that what is involved is only a plurality of language games subject to an internal criterion of coherence but carrying no ontological implications. For, according to Rorty, the sole alternative to this position is to think that our language mirrors the world. Thus, the alternatives for Rorty are to accept the metaphysics of representation or mirroring and truth as correspondence with reality or to recognize that our language is not about reality; it is just language. Language carries no ontological weight; it is the vehicle of conversation. Philosophy, with its claims that knowledge provides a mirror of reality and propositions which are thus true, must be discarded, and all that remains is a linguistic conventionalism and ongoing conversation.

Rorty does not deny that the world is out there in the sense that „most things in space and time are effects of causes which do not include human mental states,”<sup>3</sup> but truth, including the truth of sentences, has nothing to do with „out there”. The 'world' as an extralinguistic content is inaccessible, for „as soon as we start thinking of 'the world' as atoms and the void, or sense data and awareness of them... we are...well within some particular theory of how the world is.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, Rorty looks for our access to the world in

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<sup>1</sup> „Comments on Sleeper and Edel” in „Symposium on Rorty's Consequences of Pragmatism”, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy*, Vol. XXI, 1985, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> „The World Well Lost”, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 14.

its correspondence with language and, not finding this possible, concludes that we have no access. The alternative to the correspondence theory of truth is the rejection of the concern for truth in favor of poetic discourse.

Pragmatism, in rejecting foundationalism and its respective philosophic baggage, rejects as well anti-foundationalism. Rather, it rethinks the nature of foundations, standing the tradition on its head, so to speak. The development of this point, however, requires a turn to the centrality of experience and naturalism within the pragmatic position.

For all the pragmatists, humans are understood as natural organisms in interaction with a natural environment. One of the most distinctive and most crucial aspects of pragmatism is its concept of experience as having the character of an interaction or transaction between organism and environment. Experience is that rich ongoing transactional unity between organism and environment, and only within the context of meanings which reflect such an interactional unity does what is given emerge for conscious awareness. Such a transactional unity is more than a postulate of abstract thought for it has experiential dimensions. That which intrudes itself inexplicably into experience is not bare datum, but rather evidences itself as the over-againstness of a dense world „there” for my activity. And, if experience is an interactional unity of our responses with the world, then the nature of experience reflects both the responses we bring and the pervasive textures of that independent reality or surrounding natural environment. In such an interactional unity both poles are manifest: the reality of the otherness onto which experience opens, and active organism within whose purposive activity it emerges.

This intertwining of organism-environment interaction at the heart of experience is well expressed in Dewey's claim that „Experience is of as well as in nature... Things interacting in certain ways are experience; they are what is experienced. Linked in certain other ways with another natural object--the human organism--they are how things are experienced as well. Experience thus reaches down into nature; it has depth.”<sup>5</sup> Mead's description of the ontological dimension of experience is well encapsulated in his claim that, in becoming an object, something has the character of „actually or potentially acting upon the organism from within itself.” He calls this character that of having an inside.<sup>6</sup> And, such an acting upon the organism cannot be understood in terms of passive resistance but as active resistance, resistance to our organic activity.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the experiential sense at the heart of human existence provides the primal sense of ourselves as active beings immersed in a dense world within which we must successfully proceed. Awareness is awareness of reality as it intrudes within our interpretive field of active engagement with it. The phenomenological features of experience themselves point toward a concrete organism immersed in a natural universe and belie any interpretation of the field of awareness as any type of self-enclosed experience, linguistic or otherwise.

There is thus a three-directional openness in experience. What appears within experience embodies the structure of experience, the structure of the independently real or the surrounding natural universe, and the structures of our modes of grasping that independ-

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<sup>5</sup> Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, pp. 12-13 (italics in text).

<sup>6</sup> Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present*, ed. Arthur Murphy (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1959), p. 137.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

ently real, for what appears within experience is a structural unity formed by the interaction of our modes of grasping and that which is there to grasp. The pervasive textures of experience, which are exemplified in every experience, are at the same time indications of the pervasive textures of the independent universe which, in every experience, gives itself for our responses and which provides the touchstone for the workability of our meanings. Thus, the being of humans in the natural universe and the knowing by humans of the natural universe are inseparably connected within the structure of experience and its pervasive textures, which include the features of continuity, of temporal flow, of novelty and of vagueness.

In this way, there is an elusive resistance at the basis of meaning selection which must be acknowledged in our creative development of meaning systems and choice among them. Moreover, the very textures of experience indicate that this resistance cannot be understood in terms of discrete, structured realities as the furniture of the universe which we merely find, and the finding of which requires that we in some way escape our interpretations and the structures they provide. Rather, this resisting element provides a general compulsiveness which constrains the way networks of beliefs interrelate, and may at times lead to changes, sometimes radical changes, in our understanding of the world which our beliefs--both perceptual and more reflective, incorporate.

The notion that if language is to relate to reality it must be able to capture a series of independently existing fully structured facts, and if it cannot do so it bears no relation to reality at all, is itself a remnant of the alternatives offered by the spectator theory of knowledge and the atomism of the modern period. The compulsiveness of the world enters experience within the interpretive net we have cast upon it for delineating facts, for breaking its continuities, for rendering precise its vagueness. Pragmatism does not reject the linkage of language and the world but rather rethinks the nature of this linkage. It does not reject the idea of reality's constraints on our language structures but rather rethinks the nature of these constraints as one which is not that of correspondence. Language does not deny the presence of reality within experience, nor does it mirror this reality, but rather it opens us on to reality's presence as mediated by meanings, for language is emergent from and intertwined with ongoing praxis in a „dense” universe. We do not think to a reality to which language or experience corresponds, but rather we live through a reality with which we are intertwined, and the intertwining with which constitutes experience. Our primal interactive embeddedness in the world is something which can never be adequately objectified.

The structure of the mute world of active engagement with others is one of ongoing interpretive activity such that the possibilities of language are already given in it. Mead thus explains the origins and function of language by examining its role in the social process. As he states, language „has to be studied from the point of view of the gestural type of conduct within which it existed without being as such a definite language. And we have to see how the communicative function could have arisen out of that prior sort of conduct.”<sup>8</sup> Hence, „Our so-called laws of thought are the abstractions of social intercourse.”<sup>9</sup> Language is a type of gesture which is intimately incorporated into experience,

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<sup>8</sup> *Mind, Self, and Society*, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90, fn. 20.

is inseparably intertwined with thought, and, as lived, incorporates both settled tradition and present creativity. Language cannot be divorced from temporally grounded human praxis in a „dense” universe.

Rorty holds that novel vocabularies are „not the result of successfully fitting together pieces of a puzzle. They are not discoveries of a reality behind the appearances, of an undistorted view of the whole picture with which to replace myopic views of its parts. The proper analogy is with the invention of new tools to take the place of old tools. To come up with such a vocabulary is more like discarding the lever and the chock because one has envisaged the pulley.<sup>10</sup> But, what makes some tools work better than others? According to Rorty, better descriptions are able to link with already successful descriptions, ones that allow for predictability and control. But, what predictability and control? For Rorty, what constrains workability can only be the constraints of a wider vocabulary, which constrains the specific vocabulary in question. But, the resistances we encounter when we act on our expectations and the surprises that at times compel us to create novel vocabularies are not language resisting itself. Yet for Rorty, while the world as independent of our various vocabularies „contains causes unrelated to human mental states”, such a world can only be a Kantian *ding an sich*, for it does not enter our experience; it is inaccessible.

For pragmatism, language is a tool, as Rorty says, but it is a tool for providing a perspectival grasp of the natural world in which we are embedded. Tools are used because they work, and they work because they fit. This fitting is not the fitting of a copy corresponding to an original, but the fitting of a key opening a lock.<sup>11</sup> Language is a tool born of our primal bond with nature and it mediates our experience in and of nature; it does not cut us off from nature's real properties; it does not stand between us and nature; and, if the tools are well formed, it is not something which distorts nature. Dewey agrees that language is a tool, but any tool „is a thing in which a connection, a sequential bond with nature is embodied. It possesses an objective relation as its own defining property... A tool denotes a perception and acknowledgment of sequential bonds in nature.”<sup>12</sup>

The centrality of naturalism and concrete experience within pragmatism, evinced above in their inseparable intertwining with the issue of language, leads to the centrality of experimental method in gaining knowledge about the world, in securing beliefs that are true: not knowledge as a mirror of reality, but knowledge as a creative, perspectival grasp of reality via the tool of various interrelated networks of meanings; true beliefs not as mirrors of reality, but true beliefs, at whatever level of abstraction, as beliefs that can withstand the experimental test of allowing the dense reality with which we are intertwined to reveal itself in experience in workable ways.

There is a generic form of human behavior which is continuous with and emergent from the generic form of behavior of lower animals. There is an ongoing problem solving behavior, a coping with the environment by which we attempt to stay in dynamic equilibrium with it. This generic form of behavior manifests itself in all areas of human endeavor, from the problematic situations of abstract science to the problematic situations

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<sup>10</sup> Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> James uses this precise analogy.

<sup>12</sup> Experience and Nature, p. 101.

of concrete moral experience. We form creative hypothesis which direct our purposive activity and the truth of which is tested by the occurrence within experience of the anticipated consequences. Reality answers our questions, and determines the workability of our meaning structures, but what answers it gives are partially dependent on what questions we ask, and what meaning structures work are partially dependent upon the structures we bring. Truth is relative to a perspective, and we create the perspectives, but what perspectives work is dependent on that resistant reality that provides the touchstone of workability. Indeed, for pragmatism, truth as workability is understood in terms of answering. The true belief is one that answers,<sup>13</sup> and the relation of „answering” is ultimately two directional.

As Peirce summarizes, truth is always contextually set truth, for „nothing else than a Fact possibly can be a 'witness' or 'testimony’”,<sup>14</sup> and facts are always relative to the framework of a discriminating mind. Yet the witness of a fact is the real, „since it is truly in that which occurs.”<sup>15</sup> Truth is relative to a context of interpretation, not because truth is relative, but because without an interpretive context the concept of truth is meaningless. Truth is not an absolute grasp, a correspondence with an external reality, but neither is it relative. It is perspectival. One create the perspective, but whether or not it allows us to grasp that which enters into experience in workable ways is dependent not on our creativity but on the features of that which enters our perspectival net.

Rorty speaks of „pragmatism without method”.<sup>16</sup> He holds that we „have a duty to talk to each other, to converse about our views of the world; to use persuasion rather than force, to be tolerant of diversity, to be contritely fallibilist. But this is not the same thing as duty to have methodological principles.”<sup>17</sup> Yet for pragmatism, experimental method is a methodological principle, the principle which offers us tolerance, diversity, and radical fallibilism. It is, for pragmatism, the method by which we grasp reality in workable ways, ways which provide perspectival accesses to its dense richness. Our interpretive networks do not copy reality but rather allow us to live in it in enriching ways by grasping various ways it reveals itself in various types of workable contexts.

Truth is relative to a context of interpretation, then, not because truth is relative, but because without an interpretive context the concept of truth is meaningless. Truth is not an absolute grasp, a correspondence with an external reality, but neither is it relative. It is perspectival. We create the perspective, but whether or not it allows us to grasp that which enters into experience in workable ways is dependent not on our creativity but on the resistant features of that which enters our perspectival net and provides the touchstone for the workability of our interpretations. Truth as workability is understood in terms of answering. The true belief is one that answers,<sup>18</sup> and the relation of „answering” is ultimately two direc-

<sup>13</sup> Peirce, MS 934, p.24.

<sup>14</sup> MS 647, p. 26.

<sup>15</sup> MS 647, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> „Pragmatism without Method,” Papers, I, pp. 62-77.

<sup>17</sup> „Pragmatism without Method”, p. 67.

<sup>18</sup> Peirce, MS 934, p. 24. As Peirce summarizes, truth is always contextually set truth, for „nothing else than a Fact possibly can be a 'witness' or 'testimony’”, MS 647, p. 26, and facts are always relative to the framework of a discriminating mind. Yet the witness of a fact is the real, „since it is truly in that which occurs.” MS 647, p. 9.

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tional. A true belief is a tool that fits--not the fitting of a copy corresponding to an original, but the fitting of a key opening a lock.<sup>19</sup>

For pragmatism, then, true beliefs allow us to engage reality in workable ways, and we can come to recognize, via the method of experimental inquiry, that some perspectival nets are more successful than others in rendering intelligible a reality which is not beyond the reach of experience, which may be unknown in many ways, but is eminently knowable, though always via a perspectival net by which we render intelligible its indeterminate richness. To separate, as Rorty does, the importance of creative diversity from its rootedness in compelling constraints, to reject the epistemic and ontological interactive unity of experience and nature with its resulting openness onto reality at the heart of our concrete existence in the world in favor of self-enclosed linguistic conventionalism, to ignore experimental method as the method for learning linguistically contoured perspectival truths about our world in favor of the ultimacy of uprooted conversation, is to lose the very pulse of classical pragmatism which flows through and uniquely unifies its various particular claims.

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<sup>19</sup> James uses this precise analogy.