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# Did Rorty's Pragmatism Have Foundations?

*James Tartaglia*

## Abstract

There is an overt tension between Rorty's pragmatist critique of philosophy and his apparent epistemological and metaphysical commitments, which it is instructive to examine in order to assess not only Rorty's overall position, but also renewed contemporary interest in pragmatism and its metaphilosophical implications. After showing why Rorty's attempts to limit the scope of his critique failed to resolve this tension, I try reading him as a constructive metaphysician who was attempting to balance a causal account of the language / world relation with panrelationism. However, Rorty intended these commitments to be interpreted in light of his pragmatism about vocabularies, and relied upon a 'social standpoint strategy' to render his overall position consistent. I conclude that to the extent that this strategy succeeds, it removes almost all of the argumentative force from Rorty's pragmatism.

**Keywords:** Rorty; pragmatism; metaphilosophy; metaphysics; epistemology; panrelationism

## I

In the early 1970s, Richard Rorty was best known for his eliminative materialism. In the first significant critique it received, William Lycan and George Pappas said they found it 'startling' that 'it is more or less assumed on all sides that Rorty's theory is self-consistent' (Lycan and Pappas, 1972: p. 149), and they went on to argue that the theory necessarily collapses into either Smart's reductive materialism, according to which sensation-talk denotes brain processes, or Feyerabend's 'strong' eliminative materialism, according to which sensation-talk fails to denote. Since Rorty's theory was intended to be both distinct from and intermediate between these two other theories, they concluded that it was incoherent. With hindsight, the tension Lycan and Pappas pointed out seems as obvious as they said it was, since Rorty aligns himself with eliminativism, by setting out to 'impugn the existence of sensations' (Rorty 1965: p. 33), and yet he also aligns himself with reductivism, by equating the inconvenience of talking about brain processes rather than sensations, which would be so great only a 'fanatical materialist'

(*ibid.*: p. 37) would insist upon it, with the inconvenience of talking about clouds of molecules rather than tables, which is all he requires to ensure the continued existence of tables. In fact, the tension is even built into Rorty's original choice of label, the 'Disappearance Form of the Identity Theory' (*ibid.*: p. 33), for this immediately raises the question of whether sensations are set to disappear from our ontological commitments, or whether they are here to stay as brain processes. Subsequent discussion did little to resolve this tension, but Rorty had soon moved on in any case, abandoning eliminative materialism in favour of the metaphilosophical stance that it is a mistake to adopt any position on the mind-body problem (Rorty, 1979: pp. 118–27).<sup>1</sup>

Rorty's transition from eliminating the mind to eliminating the philosophical problem of the mind was just one element in his transition towards the pragmatist critique of philosophy for which he is best known. The suggestion I want to pursue in this paper, however, is that this mature project contains a similar tension to his eliminative materialism, for just as Lycan and Pappas could find no stable resting place for Rorty to occupy between eliminating sensations and defending a materialist account of them, there seems to be a parallel and equally overt instability to Rorty's attempt to eliminate philosophical inquiry on the basis of epistemological and metaphysical commitments; Rorty has often been accused of possessing particular philosophical commitments he was not entitled to, but the general tension to be treated here bears upon all his views at once, to the extent that they are thought to be rooted in a distinctively pragmatist perspective. This tension within Rorty's project is important to understand at the present time, when there is renewed interest in pragmatism (see Misak, 2007), especially the linguistic variety Rorty championed, as well as metaphilosophy (see Chalmers et al., 2009) and the metaphilosophical implications of pragmatism (see, for example, Macarthur and Price, 2007: pp. 97 ff.), for although Rorty considered his linguistic pragmatism and general scepticism about philosophical inquiry to be mutually reinforcing, reflection upon his career-long attempt to combine these concerns suggests otherwise. Moreover, in the course of examining this general tension, there will also be opportunity to evaluate the most persistent of the specific concerns that have been raised about Rorty's project, such as whether he was committed to a form of linguistic idealism, whether his commitment to non-linguistic causal pressures can be made sense of, and whether he violated his own injunction against attempts to 'step outside our skins' (Rorty, 1982: p. xix).

Now, the quickest way to dispense with the apparent tension between Rorty's critique of philosophy and his philosophical commitments, would be to read the critique of philosophy as partial rather than total, since there is obviously no tension involved in using philosophical arguments to criticize one particular type of philosophy from the standpoint of another; this is the

way Rorty is usually read, and he did much to encourage it. My first task in Section II, however, will be to show that even if there is a kind of philosophy that can survive Rorty's critique, the critique itself involves commitments that belong to the tradition Rorty is targeting. In Section III, I will put Rorty's metaphilosophy to one side, to try to make sense of what appear to be his underlying metaphysical commitments. Since Rorty made it clear that he did not want to be interpreted as a constructive philosopher, however, I will assess his strategy for avoiding philosophical partisanship in Section IV, before concluding, in Section V, that if read charitably, there is indeed a consistent position to be found in Rorty's work, albeit one which he gave us very little reason to believe.

## II

In an autobiographical essay, Rorty described himself as having 'spent 40 years looking for a coherent and convincing way of formulating my worries about what, if anything, philosophy is good for' (Rorty, 1999: p. 11), and confirmation that this metaphilosophical agenda did indeed pervade his career was recently provided by the publication of an essay from his earliest days as a philosopher, in which a young Rorty can be found struggling to find something positive to say about philosophy as an area of culture. Despite stressing his suspicions about technical debates in which the participants 'talk only to themselves' (Rorty, 2009: p. 404), the conclusion of this early piece is, perhaps surprisingly, a vindication of philosophy, with Rorty arguing that the contribution it has to offer a free society is to 'raise questions about questions' (ibid.: p. 406), thereby encouraging innovation. This assessment stands in stark contrast to the negativity of his mature view, a negativity that was based upon historical and theoretical considerations concerning the origins and nature of philosophy; this critique of philosophy is set out most fully in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is a critique of representationalist epistemology framed within the context of a historical reconstruction that portrays philosophy itself as originating in the project of representationalist epistemology. According to Rorty's history, philosophy first arose as a distinct academic pursuit in the seventeenth century, when Descartes set out to provide foundations for knowledge that would be capable of supporting the newly emerging mathematical sciences in their struggle for intellectual hegemony against church doctrine. This project was made possible, according to Rorty, by Descartes's 'invention' of the representational mind, which was achieved by literalizing the pre-existing metaphor of the mind as a mirror of nature, and thereby transforming the concept of mind into the concept of a subjective arena in which the objective world is represented. Kant later entrenched the idea of philosophy as an *a priori* study of how our minds represent the world by making two technical distinctions that

facilitated future inquiry, namely the analytic / synthetic and intuition / concepts distinctions, and by tying these distinctions in with continuities in intellectual history that made it possible for nineteenth-century historians to construct a standard history of philosophy that stretched from ancient Greece to the present. Thus rather than philosophy being an ancient subject dealing with perennial and inevitable problems for the human intellect, in Rorty's story it turns out to be a modern project that arose in response to a specific social concern.

Rorty has three main lines of objection to this project, borrowed from a variety of philosophers. The objections he attributes to Sellars and Quine are that representationalism confuses causation with justification, by locating the justification for our beliefs in the causal impact of the environment upon our minds, and that representationalism is undermined by holism, since experience bears evidentially on our claims only as a collective whole, making it impossible to isolate the support the world provides for an individual claim. According to Rorty, these points undermine Kant's intuition / concept and analytic / synthetic distinctions, showing that our beliefs are justified not through a quasi-mechanical transaction between mind and world that might be studied *a priori* to determine the conditions of successful representation, but rather by the outcome of large-scale social interactions that cannot in principle be predicted in advance; consequently, there was never any prospect of using *a priori* reflection to devise a theory of knowledge capable of objectively adjudicating disputes such as those between science and the church. Rorty's second main line of objection, which shows the influence of Nietzsche, is that representationalism was an attempt to reassure ourselves in our beliefs through the approval of the world, rather as we previously reassured ourselves through the approval of God, with the overcoming of this insecurity to be welcomed as progress towards a more consistent atheism and humanism. And finally, Rorty's third line of objection is to contemporary concern with the representationalist problematic, on the Deweyan grounds that these problems have lost any social relevance they might once have possessed, since science succeeded in its struggle with the church without the need for epistemology, and is now culturally secure.

Rorty's conception of the origins of philosophy maximizes the scope of his critique: we are told about the motivations and methodological underpinnings of the subject, and then we are told that the motivations were undesirable and the methodology irreparably flawed. This makes Rorty's critique hard to read as simply directed against a certain kind of philosophy, the representationalist, epistemology-centred kind. Moreover, Rorty reinforces the impression that his critique is total, by portraying metaphysics as a repository of pseudo-problems which arose as an offshoot of epistemology (Rorty, 1979: pp. 148 ff.; see also Rorty, 1995: pp. 29–36), and by arguing at length against any attempt to 'preserve some-

thing from the Cartesian tradition' by initiating a new, post-Cartesian approach to epistemological problems (Rorty, 1979: p. 210). Therefore, given that Rorty makes it quite clear that his critique is directed not just at certain approaches to epistemological questions, but at the very idea of epistemology itself, and given also that he portrays the invention of epistemology as the invention of philosophy, it seems, on the face of it, that Rorty is arguing for the disappearance of philosophy, just as he had earlier argued for the disappearance of mind. If this is right, however, then there would seem to be an obvious inconsistency in his position, for the main theoretical basis of his critique, his views about justification, meaning, and the relationship between language and the world, is patently philosophical. He effectively admits as much by calling this conjunction of views 'epistemological behaviourism', and although he goes on to make the Quixotic disclaimer that he does not mean to suggest that 'Quine and Sellars enable us to have a new, better "behaviouristic" sort of epistemology' (ibid.: p. 315), the only reason he can deny this with any seriousness is that he sometimes, but by no means always, uses 'epistemology' to include only systematic theories of knowledge that aspire, according to Rorty, to adjudicate knowledge claims algorithmically. The fact remains, however, that Rorty has his own, albeit more schematic, epistemological views, according to which matters of justification are determined exclusively by social behaviour, and this would seem to be all that is required to place him firmly within the very tradition of thought he wanted to undermine.<sup>2</sup>

There seems to be an overt tension, then, between the 'end of philosophy' logic to Rorty's critique and his endorsement of various philosophical positions in support of this critique. Rorty rather effectively managed to draw attention away from this tension, however, by making some apparently positive suggestions about the future of philosophy, the most prominent of which was his endorsement of 'edifying', as opposed to 'systematic', philosophy. But this is not the positive suggestion for a new direction in philosophy that the name might suggest, for Rorty characterizes edifying philosophy as 'intrinsically reactive' against systematic philosophy, which is the kind that 'centers in epistemology' (ibid.: p. 366). In effect, then, he is only really endorsing critiques of epistemology such as his own, and given that such critiques aim to bring about an end to systematic philosophy, they would, if successful, presumably bring about an end to edifying philosophy as well. This is not to deny Rorty's commitment to the enduring value of edification, which he understands as the creation of, and hermeneutic engagement with, unfamiliar forms of discourse, as a means to interrupting intellectual stagnation and complacency; this recalls his emphasis on the importance of asking 'questions about questions', presented as the chief virtue of philosophy in his early essay. What has changed in his mature view, however, is that Rorty no longer sees any reason why this activity should be specifically philosophical, and indeed, in his later writings (especially Rorty,

1989), he makes it clear that he considers novels more useful than philosophy for the purpose of edification.

Rorty also drew attention away from this tension by explicitly drawing back from an 'end of philosophy' conclusion in the final section of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, where he says that the philosophical profession will inevitably continue because specialists in reading the canonical texts of Western philosophy will continue to be required. He conspicuously omits to say that the philosophical profession *should* continue, however, and given the story he has just been telling, according to which these texts deal with pointless and confused problems, it is hard to regard the fact that people will continue reading them as anything but regrettable. He also makes the positive suggestion that these specialists could play a useful cultural role in the future, by acting as intermediaries between disciplines, providing synoptic visions and generalizations that foster interdisciplinary discussion. In a slightly later treatment, he revisited this suggestion, proposing that philosophers become 'all-purpose intellectuals' engaged in 'culture-criticism', who aim to form non-specialist but panoramic views of culture, and this time he also provided a link to traditional philosophical activity by saying that past philosophers were often, but not always (according to Rorty, Frege was less 'philosophical' than Henry Adams (Rorty, 1982: p. xv)), trying to form a panoramic view of the world. But even if we grant this abstract continuity of motivation, there would still seem to be little in common between the panoramic views themselves, that is, between the systematic, all-encompassing views aimed at by traditional metaphysicians, for instance, and the casual eclecticism and pluralism of Rorty's culture-criticism. And neither, moreover, does this provide any reason to think that philosophers should be especially well suited to culture-criticism; it seems, on the contrary, that any other kind of academic would have a distinct advantage, since unlike the philosopher, they would be able to incorporate their own area of expertise into the panoramic view.<sup>3</sup>

Although Rorty says that he is not calling for an end to philosophy, then, his suggestions for the future of philosophy sound like suggestions for a new kind of academic pursuit altogether. Rorty would disagree on the grounds that what makes someone count as a philosopher is simply the books they read, and that the survival of a certain canon of literature is all that is required for the survival of philosophy (Rorty, 1979: p. 391; Rorty, 1982: p. 92), but the problem is that given his critique of philosophy, there would seem to be no reason to think that these books would be of any use to 'culture-critics', especially since that critique presents traditional philosophy as seeking universal commensuration (Rorty, 1979: pp. 315 ff.), and hence as antithetical to the pluralist culture they inhabit. What Rorty has in mind, however, is for the texts of the philosophical canon to be given radical new interpretations, which is why he ends *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* wondering what roles they 'will play in our descendants'

conversation' (ibid.: p. 394). He was never arguing for the end of philosophy, then, only for the end of conventional interpretations of philosophy texts, and he once made this point by saying that he only wanted an end to 'Philosophy 101':

I hope that people will never stop reading, e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel, but also hope that they will, sooner or later, stop tying to sucker freshmen into taking an interest in the Problem of the External World and the Problem of Other Minds.

(Rorty 1998: p. 47)

One such new way of reading philosophical texts that Rorty enthusiastically endorsed was Derrida's innovation of converting philosophers into characters in a private fantasy, and then making lewd comments about them (Rorty, 1989: chapter 6). Whatever you make of such radical reinterpretations, however, they are of little use in removing the tension from Rorty's position, for his critique of philosophy is based on generally conventional readings of the history of philosophy, that is, on arguments about causation, justification, and the like, and not on psychoanalytical re-readings, for instance. Thus even on the most charitable interpretation, according to which Rorty can be said to have envisaged a legitimate way for philosophy to survive his critique, the positions he defends in support of that critique still fall firmly within the domain of the traditional philosophical concerns he was trying to undermine.<sup>4</sup>

### III

If Rorty did envisage a new kind of philosophical activity unsullied by his critique, then, he did not engage in it during his critique. Rather, he employed standard interpretations of the history of philosophy, according to which Descartes and Kant addressed the problem of the external world, for instance, and he then went on to argue that this problem, and others like it, would never have arisen had they employed a different conception of knowledge, namely the social and holistic conception endorsed by Rorty himself. This is a familiar pattern of argumentation in philosophy, in which problems are dissolved by showing that they embody some misconception or other, and yet Rorty had seemed to be promising something much more radical and original when he set out to 'undermine the reader's confidence in ... "philosophy" as it has been conceived since Kant' (Rorty, 1979: p. 7) and later extolled the virtues of a 'post-Philosophical culture' (Rorty, 1982: pp. xl ff.). What he seemed to be offering, and is widely regarded as having offered, was a metaphilosophical critique of philosophy which shows why it is a mistake to take up any position on a philosophical topic, with Rorty



leading by example by refusing to climb onto the treadmill of philosophical claim and counterclaim, in the laconic name of what David Hiley has called a 'metaphilosophy of boredom' (Hiley, 1988: p. 157). Moreover, it seemed that Rorty was actually required to adopt this kind of stance by the extensive scope of his critique: he needed to step outside traditional philosophical concerns in order to criticize them *en masse*.

But perhaps this is to take Rorty's metaphilosophical pronouncements too seriously; perhaps, as Robert Brandom thinks, all the 'metaphilosophical dust and dazzle' is 'at best tangential to the central philosophical thrust of the argument' (Brandom, 2000: p. 160), which is that representationalism must be replaced with a causal account of the relation between language and the world. In a similar vein, it has been argued that Rorty is best interpreted as part of a Quinean movement in philosophy that rejected logical empiricism on holistic grounds, with Rorty simply overdramatizing his opposition to earlier forms of analytic philosophy as if it were opposition to philosophy *simpliciter* (MacIntyre, 1982; Peters and Marshall, 1999). If we take this line, and read Rorty as defending philosophical positions like any other philosopher, then *prima facie* at least, his own position starts to make a lot more sense, for then we can interpret his opposition to epistemology as based on an understanding of knowledge which makes any systematic, *a priori* study of knowledge impossible. Rorty is not opposed to taking a stance on the nature of knowledge, then, even a stance derived from *a priori* reflection, as his own position clearly is, but is rather saying that the correct account of knowledge forecloses the possibility of any kind of systematic epistemological research programme, and shows that traditional philosophical problems, which sprang from the representationalist agenda and became essential to philosophy's self-image, do not need to be addressed, and indeed, given the Nietzschean and Deweyan elements to his critique, they should not be addressed.

If we read Rorty as putting forward philosophical views, however, such that he is criticizing traditional philosophy not for having a view about the nature of knowledge, but rather for having the wrong view about the nature of knowledge, then it seems reasonable to ask what his views on other traditional philosophical questions are. It might be supposed that no answers will be forthcoming, since Rorty thought that the other traditional questions were simply offshoots of representationalism, but this is not what we actually find in his work. Rather, we find what seems to amount to a revisionary metaphysical position, despite the fact that 'metaphysician', which he standardly opposed to 'pragmatist' or 'ironist', was one of his favourite terms of abuse.<sup>5</sup> The central plank of this apparently metaphysical position is Rorty's famous claim, appropriated from Nelson Goodman, that 'there is no one Way the World Is' (Rorty, 1999: p. 33).<sup>6</sup> This claim is based on the verificationist reasoning that since 'there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language' (Rorty, 1979: p. 178) to assess the adequacy of our best

descriptions of the world, to the way the world is independently of our descriptions, then we must conclude either that there is no point in talking about the way the world is (Rorty, 1979: p. 281) or simply that there is no such thing; Rorty gravitated towards the latter claim in his later writings. Since there is no way to appraise our descriptions against a language-independent world, then, all we can do is to compare them with other descriptions, thus aiming for coherence rather than correspondence.

This thesis of the 'ubiquity of language' (Rorty, 1982: p. xx) has often attracted the charge that Rorty was a 'linguistic idealist' (e.g. Farrell, 1994: p. 122), someone who regards the world as a projection of language. Rorty certainly did plenty to suggest this attribution, for the target of most of his polemics was metaphysical realism, his holism and coherentism are taken straight from the idealist tradition, and he often stressed affinities between his own pragmatist views and themes from idealism, such as 'the slogan of the British Idealists: Only Thought Relates' (Rorty, 1979: p. 147) and 'Berkeley's ingenious remark that "nothing can be like an idea except an idea"' (Rorty, 1982: p. 154). Linguistic idealism, however, can easily be shown to be absurd (e.g. Geras, 1995: 118 ff.), since the world itself must be differentiated and structured in order to account for the possibility of public language, given that unlike the 'ideas' of the idealists, words are not even candidates for independent existence. But this was never Rorty's position in any case, as he once showed by arguing that 'textualism', as he called it, rests on the false inference from "We can't think without concepts or talk without words" to "We can't think or talk except about what has been created by our thought or talk"' (Rorty, 1982: p. 155). What is really distinctive about Rorty's pragmatism is not that it privileges language, but that it refuses to accord any vocabulary a privileged status, and hence denies that physical particles, ideas, language, or anything else should be regarded as ontologically fundamental, on the pluralist grounds that the world has no essential nature. That is the real reason Rorty professed to see 'no interesting difference between tables and texts' (*ibid.*: p. 153).

The basis of Rorty's denial of a way the world is, then, was not linguistic idealism, but rather anti-essentialism and a rejection of intrinsicity. He expressed these commitments through his extended conception of existentialism, according to which humans are not distinctive in lacking an essence, as per the standard doctrine, because nothing else has an essence either (Rorty, 1979: pp. 361–2), and also through his career-long opposition to intrinsic properties in the philosophy of mind (e.g. Rorty, 1998: pp. 98–121). Rorty did not want to deny that words relate to a world beyond themselves, then, but he did want to deny that the world our words relate to has an essence, and he also wanted to replace the representationalist model of the language–world relation with an exclusively causal one. A problem for this stance arises, however, when some of the details of his causal model are

filled in, since they seem to contradict Rorty's 'ubiquity of language' thesis, and commit him to a kind of metaphysical realism.

According to Rorty's causal model of the relation between language and the world, the world can 'cause us to hold beliefs' and can 'decide the competition between alternative sentences', but only 'once we have programmed ourselves with a language' (Rorty, 1989: pp. 5–6). Rorty understands this 'programming' in terms of Darwinian natural selection, and thus sees changes in vocabulary as adaptations to the causal pressures exerted by the world, with language bearing 'no more of a *representational* relation to an intrinsic nature of things than does the anteater's snout or the bowerbird's skill at weaving' (Rorty, 1998: p. 48). Rorty also strongly suggests that the 'causal pressures' our words relate to are vocabulary-independent, for he says that they 'will be described in different ways at different times and for different purposes, but they are pressures none the less' (Rorty, 1999: p. 33), and describes them as a 'nonlinguistic brutality' (Rorty, 1991a: p. 81) and 'unmediated pressure' (Rorty, 1979: p. 375). Thus he says that when Galileo looked through his telescope, there was a 'brute physical resistance – the pressure of light waves of Galileo's eyeball', but there were 'as many facts ... brought into the world as there are languages for describing that causal transaction' (Rorty, 1991a: p. 81); the causal pressure can be described in any number of ways, then, thereby providing it with different significances to serve different adaptational purposes, but no description can represent its intrinsic nature.

This combination of views is puzzling. The commitment to causal pressures certainly shakes off any suspicion of linguistic idealism, but it makes it hard to see why causal pressures which remain constant throughout changes of vocabulary should not count as a single 'way the world is', and thus constitute a commitment to metaphysical realism about causal pressures. Rorty wants to deny that causal pressures have any intrinsic nature, independent of the multiplicity of ways they can be described, but in that case, why does he insist that there are causal pressures that exist however we describe them? What would account for their guaranteed existence as causal pressures if not an intrinsic nature? Now, one way to render Rorty's position consistent would be to interpret his hostility to intrinsicity as epistemological rather than metaphysical, so that the claim would simply be that the world is unknowable except as described within some vocabulary or other. This interpretation can be reinforced if we dismiss his bold claim that there is no one way the world is in favour of his alternative formulation that there is no point in talking about the way the world is, for then the idea might simply be that 'respect for unmediated causal forces is pointless' (Rorty, 1991a: p. 81), given that there is no way for us to know them except as mediated by language. But if this is Rorty's view, and causal pressures do have an unknowable intrinsic nature, then he was committed to Kantian things-in-themselves, as some critics have indeed claimed (e.g. Hall, 1994: pp. 91–3; Guignon and Hiley, 2003: pp. 31–2).

This was certainly not Rorty's intention, for in 'A World without Substances or Essences' (Rorty, 1999: pp. 47–71), he presented Kantian things-in-themselves as a *reductio ad absurdum* of Western philosophy's subject–object distinction (ibid.: p. 49), and presented pragmatists like himself as trying to replace this distinction with 'a flux of continually changing relations' (ibid.: p. 47). This essay is Rorty's most explicit statement of his 'panrelationism', according to which 'there is no such thing as a nonrelational feature of X' (ibid.: p. 50) since '[e]verything that can serve as the term of a relation can be dissolved into another set of relations, and so on for ever' (ibid.: p. 53). Panrelationism is the positive counterpart to Rorty's anti-essentialism and hostility to intrinsicity, and strongly suggests that these commitments were indeed metaphysical rather than epistemological. In light of panrelationism, then, Rorty's causal pressures cannot be interpreted as things-in-themselves, since things-in-themselves have an intrinsic nature that we cannot know, whereas for Rorty, all properties are extrinsic, since 'there is nothing to be known about anything save what is stated in sentences describing it' (ibid.: p. 54), or as he once put it, 'things are what they are known as' (Rorty, 1982: p. xlvi, n. 31). In Rorty's view, then, it is not because of some epistemological failing, an inability of the subject to ascertain the nature of the object without dint of subjectivity, that no vocabulary can capture the essential nature of a causal pressure, or of anything else, but it is rather because of the metaphysical fact that things have no essential natures of their own, only relations to other things; the relations go 'all the way down, all the way up, and all the way out in every direction: you never reach something which is not just one more nexus of relations' (Rorty, 1999: p. 54).

But if things lack any nature except as they are related to other things by a vocabulary, and vocabularies themselves can of course be no exception to this rule, then the question that naturally arises is: what is being related? Rorty's answer is that 'the distinction between things related and relations is just an alternative way of making the distinction between what we are talking about and what we say about it. [which in turn is] just a hypostatization of the relation between linguistic subject and linguistic predicate' (ibid.: p. 56).<sup>7</sup> Since the distinction between things and relations is a hypostatization of grammar, then, and hence by implication does not denote any ontological distinction in the world, Rorty does not think that the existence of relations requires pre-existing things to be related: relations are self-sustaining. But if all that exists is a self-sustaining relational flux, we are once more brought back to the question of why Rorty insists that causal pressures exist however we describe them. Surely their status as 'causal pressures' must depend on their being so described, in which case there can be no guarantee that they will not lose this status with the next change of vocabulary.

One way to balance Rorty's commitments to causal pressures and panrelationism is to bring his naturalism into consideration. This non-ontological,

narrative naturalism amounts to Rorty's ethnocentric loyalty to the physical 'genre of world story' that became 'definatory of the West', on the grounds that our cultural background makes it hard for us to 'tell a story of changing physical universes against the background of an unchanging Moral Law of poetic canon, but very easy to tell the reverse sort of story' (Rorty, 1979: p. 345). Since Rorty's naturalism commits him to the view that a causal vocabulary has remained in place throughout Western history, providing a constant backdrop against which other changes of vocabulary have been understood, and that as a result of this contingent cultural background, causal vocabularies enjoy a privileged position in our understanding of the world, we can charitably interpret his apparent claims about the vocabulary-independence of causal pressures as simply claiming that causal pressures have always so far been treated as the factor which remains constant throughout redescrptions, with there being every reason to expect this thoroughly embedded practice to continue. Thus causal pressures are not actually vocabulary-independent, but they always have been, and perhaps always will be, treated as if they were.<sup>8</sup>

Along these lines, then, it may be possible to reconcile Rorty's panrelationism and denial of a way the world is, with his causal theory of the language-world relation and realist-sounding commitment to causal pressures. But although the result might be consistent, it would also be a radical metaphysical position displaying clear continuities with the idealist tradition, and it is notable that Rorty himself compared his panrelationism to both Whitehead's view that 'every actual occasion is constituted by relations to all other actual occasions' and Leibniz's view that 'each monad is nothing but all the other monads seen from a certain perspective' (Rorty, 1999: p. 70, n. 4). If this is the kind of position that Rorty had in mind, however, why did he think of himself as an opponent of metaphysics rather than a metaphysician? One reason is clear, which is that he employed a restrictive definition according to which a 'metaphysician' is an essentialist, as opposed to the anti-essentialist pragmatist (ibid.: p. 48), in just the same way that he employed a restrictive definition according to which an 'epistemologist' is a foundationalist, as opposed to the coherentist pragmatist. According to almost any less artificial and tactical understanding of metaphysics, however, Rorty's *a priori* assertions about the relational nature of all reality are obviously metaphysical; if there is Parmenidean metaphysics, then there is Heraclitean metaphysics also.

#### IV

If Rorty is read as a metaphysician, then panrelationism is certainly a metaphysic well suited to uniting his various other commitments, such as semantic holism, epistemic coherentism, and the 'ubiquity of language' thesis. However, Rorty clearly did not want to be read as a metaphysician,

for after providing his most explicit statement of panrelationalism, he immediately went on to describe it as simply one more 'redescription of the relation between human beings and the rest of the universe' which must be 'judged on the basis of its utility for a purpose', with one of the main purposes he had in mind for this vocabulary being to make it 'impossible to formulate a lot of the traditional philosophical problems' (ibid.: pp. 65–6). This is an example of Rorty's standard strategy for sidestepping philosophical commitment, namely to claim that any given putative commitment of his was actually nothing more than an employment of a certain vocabulary for a certain purpose, with the purpose usually being that of short-circuiting what to his mind were socially irrelevant philosophical problems. This strategy seems to suffer, however, from the general tension within Rorty's thought we have been examining, namely that of renouncing philosophical commitment from a philosophical standpoint.

The basic problem is that Rorty's claim that panrelationalism is just another redescription, with no privileged attachment to reality, presupposes his pragmatist view that descriptions must be evaluated solely on the grounds of usefulness, and so if this is itself a philosophical commitment, which it certainly seems to be, then Rorty's strategy immediately undermines itself. But the problem goes deeper than this, because Rorty's pragmatism about vocabularies is only convincing if we accept his arguments for rejecting representationalism and objective truth, and yet to be consistent, Rorty must apply his pragmatism across the board by claiming that these arguments too are only justified on account of their usefulness. Rorty cannot say, for example, that the problem with representationalism is that it runs causation together with justification, and thereby fails to correspond with the objective truth that causation and justification are distinct. Rather, he can only say that a description of the world that keeps causation and justification apart is useful for the purposes of undermining representationalism. But in that case, Rorty has provided no case against representationalism: the belief that representationalism is undermined if we adopt a description of the world that keeps causation and justification distinct cannot in itself provide a reason to adopt such a description, unless we have an independent reason for wanting to undermine representationalism, and feel at liberty to adopt any description of the world that serves our purposes. Likewise, Rorty cannot regard it as an objective fact that we cannot assess the adequacy of our best descriptions of the world to the way the world is, but can only consistently argue that it is useful for the purposes of undermining belief in objective truth that we describe ourselves as unable to escape the 'ubiquity of language'. Thus when positions Rorty advocates, such as epistemological behaviourism and panrelationalism, are reinterpreted in light of his pragmatism, they can no longer offer any support to his pragmatism, which seems to leave his position both inconsistent and unargued: he is renouncing philosophical commitment on the basis of a philosophical commitment he is unable to justify.

Now, Rorty did suggest a way in which his position might be rendered consistent as well as justified, in response to a related objection that was first raised by Hilary Putnam, and which has been developed by a number of other philosophers (Williams, 1991; Dworkin, 1991; see also Kirk, 1999). In Putnam's original version, the charge is that Rorty attempts to say '*from a God's-Eye View there is no God's-Eye View*' (Putnam, 1990: p. 25), since he criticizes representationalist philosophy for trying to adopt an impossible stance which neglects the ubiquity of language, and yet in claiming that justification is determined exclusively by societal agreement and usefulness, Rorty adopts exactly the same philosophical stance he advises us to abandon. This is because if we really were to abandon the philosophical perspective as Rorty advises, then our ordinary concept of justification would assure us that whether or not our claims are justified is determined independently of whether our community finds them useful. And in Williams' and Dworkin's version of the argument, the similar but stronger claim is that if we really were to abandon the philosophical perspective as Rorty advises, and thus did not try to step outside of our ordinary vocabularies for describing the world, then these vocabularies would assure us that there is indeed a vocabulary-independent world about which we can discover objective truths, namely the world described by common sense and science.

Rorty's response to this objection was to say that,

[M]y strategy for escaping the self-referential difficulties into which 'the Relativist' [as Putnam labels Rorty] keeps getting himself 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, 1998: p. 57)

The suggestion, then, is that Rorty is not speaking as a traditional philosopher when he denies that there is a way the world is, but rather as a 'pragmatic social reformer' (ibid.: p. 57) who thinks we would be better off if we all believed that there is no way the world is. Thus he is not adopting an impossible standpoint external to our vocabularies in order to deny that there is a vocabulary-independent world to which our vocabularies answer, but is rather proposing an internal modification to our vocabularies on the grounds of 'the hope of greater convenience in the future' that might be achieved by 'avoiding fruitless disagreements on dead-end issues' (ibid.: p. 57). The social convenience or usefulness which Rorty has in mind is not limited to academic debates, however, for he also distinguishes 'the short-run and the long-run effects of change in philosophical opinion' (ibid.: p. 80), and makes it clear that the long-run effect he envisages from an

abandonment of representationalism and objective truth is to 'take away a few more excuses for fanaticism and intolerance' (ibid.: p. 83), since the belief that we are representing the objective truth can always be invoked to short-circuit conversation and override the need for compromise; this kind of 'nudge in the right direction' towards an open society and away from all kinds of totalitarianism is 'the sort of modest little contribution to social progress to which a somewhat peripheral academic discipline may aspire' (ibid.: p. 58).

Now, this still seems to presuppose a commitment to pragmatism about vocabularies, for it presupposes that we are free to revise our descriptions of the world if it is useful to do so, but Rorty can claim that his advocacy of pragmatism is itself a suggestion for social reform, put forward 'in the spirit of Deweyan experimentalism' (ibid.: p. 48). He is not making the philosophical claim that vocabularies can only be justified socially, then, but rather the practical suggestion that we adopt the practice of justifying our vocabularies pragmatically rather than in terms of their proximity to the truth. His reasons for making this suggestion are provided by the Nietzschean and Deweyan objections to representationalism mentioned earlier. Thus Rorty recommends that 'pragmatists take the same dim view of Absolute Truth and Reality as It Is in Itself as the Enlightenment took of Divine Wrath and Divine Judgement' (ibid.: p. 76), since he thinks that these philosophical notions are rooted in the same need for non-human guidance as the religious notions were, and that by helping us 'outgrow' (ibid.: p. 78) this need, pragmatism may have the long-term social effects of promoting greater self-reliance and tolerance, thereby ushering in something like a second Enlightenment. It is the prospect of bringing about these changes, then, that persuades Rorty that pragmatism can renew the social relevance of philosophy, which is an aim he inherits from Dewey, who thought that philosophy in his time had become 'an ingenious dialectic exercised in professorial corners by a few who have retained ancient premises while rejecting their application to the conduct of life' (Dewey, 1917: p. 58); Rorty takes himself to be offering the same 'pragmatic justification of pragmatism' (Rorty, 1998: p. 58) as Dewey.

## V

I said earlier that Rorty is often regarded as having offered a metaphilosophical critique of philosophy that shows why it is a mistake to take up any position on a philosophical topic, with Rorty leading by example by refusing to climb onto the treadmill of philosophical claim and counterclaim. I also suggested, however, that this interpretation is at odds with his apparently various philosophical commitments, such as his social and holistic conception of knowledge, his rejection of any fixed way the world is, and his panrelationism. By applying the social standpoint strategy, we have a way



of rendering the metaphilosophical interpretation consistent, for we can read his support for a social and holistic conception of justification, for instance, as not based on the philosophical arguments of Quine and Sellars, but rather on the anticipated social benefits of such a conception of justification becoming widely accepted. Thus Rorty is not in the inconsistent position of calling for the discontinuation of epistemology on epistemological grounds, but is rather suggesting that the conception of justification suggested by Quine and Sellars would be useful to adopt for the purposes of bringing epistemological inquiry to an end, since such a conception makes it difficult to raise traditional sceptical problems, and cannot be used as the basis of systematic, *a priori* theory building. It is not that Rorty is persuaded by holist, nominalist, and verificationist considerations that the epistemological enterprise is theoretically untenable, then, but rather that he is persuaded by historical and social considerations that the epistemological enterprise has become an obstacle to progress, and so endorses holist, nominalist, and verificationist descriptions on the grounds that they rule it out. Although he does have philosophical commitments, then, they are embraced from a social standpoint.

This social standpoint strategy might be suspected of being an *ad hoc* response to Putnam's objection, but there were occasions when it did seem to provide the basis of Rorty's thinking. In a review of John McDowell's *Mind and World*, for instance, Rorty made no attempt to rebut McDowell's defence of empiricism against the arguments of Sellars and Quine, despite the fact that he had endorsed these arguments for most of his career, but rather blithely conceded that McDowell had found a way of rehabilitating empiricist philosophy, only to object that such a rehabilitation would be unmotivated and counterproductive (Rorty, 1998: p. 150). Quine's and Sellars' arguments were not unanswerable, then, but they were best left unanswered, in order to avoid the continuation of a socially useless and potentially counterproductive debate; this style of argument does suggest a social rather than philosophical standpoint. But if this really was Rorty's standpoint, then it is tempting to concur with Susan Haack's assessment of Rorty as a 'cynic' who engaged in philosophical argumentation as 'a ploy to persuade others less enlightened than himself by playing the game by their rules' (Haack, 1993: p. 193). Tempting, but not quite right, however, for Rorty was a self-professed ironist and pragmatist, who thought that all vocabularies were thoroughly contingent and justified only on account of their usefulness. His advocacy of certain philosophical arguments can hardly be called cynical, then, for he really did endorse them to the extent that he thought they were useful, and he was entirely open about the fact that usefulness rather than objective truth was his aim.

The real problem with a social standpoint interpretation of Rorty, however, is that it removes at a stroke most of the argumentative force from his position, for although Rorty has plenty of conventional philosophical

arguments against representationalism, his reasons for thinking that abandoning representationalism would be socially useful are speculative to say the least; he certainly offers no empirical evidence about the likely effects, which is something that might reasonably have been expected from a serious social reformer. Now, to speak of 'empirical evidence' in this context is clearly to put Rorty in a position he does not want to be in, for he is offering a suggestion based on a historical grand narrative, not a clear-cut hypothesis based on observational data. Moreover, in the background of the suggestion are his views about the edifying value of abnormal discourse, the aim of which is 'to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings' (Rorty, 1979: p. 360), and also the similar idea he takes from Nietzsche and Harold Bloom of 'the strong maker ... who uses words as they have never been used before' (Rorty, 1989: p. 28) in order to bring our descriptions of ourselves and the world under our own control. In short, Rorty thinks it is vitally important to cultural progress and personal growth that bold, initially counterintuitive ideas are regularly proposed as a defence against intellectual stagnation, and this is one aspect of what he is doing with his rejection of objective truth. Nevertheless, even if this is important, we still obviously need reasons to accept one idea rather than another, whether these are reasons to believe that the idea is true, useful, or edifying, since we cannot accept just anything. And yet although a glance at Rorty's philosophical output would suggest that he had plenty of reasons to offer in support of pragmatism, it now seems that all he could consistently offer was a highly speculative, highly contestable reading of history.

So is our notion of an intrinsic nature of reality that exists indifferently to human opinion really a relic of religious belief that we would be better off without? Well, given the religious heritage of the West, it is easy to see that there might be a strong connection between the ideas of objective moral truth and God's conception of right and wrong. However, it is not so clear why the idea of objective truth in physical matters, in particular, should be thought to derive from anything more than the fact that we determine them by consulting the world rather than other people; we need 'non-human guidance' from fossil records and satellite imaging to find out about the past or the surfaces of distant planets, but rather than this indicating an insecure need to rely on 'something big and strong' (ibid.: p. 82), this just seems to be a practical necessity born of the fact that non-human reality contains latent information unknown to any human being until it is uncovered. And neither does physical inquiry seem to be a matter of 'finding descriptions of reality that satisfy particular human needs' as opposed to finding out about 'intrinsic features of reality, without regard to human needs' (ibid.: p. 83), since what we find out can be entirely unwelcome: would the discovery that an asteroid is about to put an end to life on Earth satisfy any human needs, or would it rather be an objective fact destined to have the same consequences however we chose to spend our last moments redescribing it?

Although Rorty's historical narrative may provide some reason to be suspicious about notions of objective truth in morality, then, the generalization to all objective truth is considerably more strained, and it is noteworthy that the benefits Rorty hopes for, such as increased toleration, seem to have little to do with abandoning physical objective truth, and might perhaps be secured just as well by some form of moral relativism. So why reject all objective truth? Maybe the real reason is that pragmatism itself was born of religious yearning. Maybe its underlying motivation was a desire to avoid accepting the objective falsity of religious belief, which by the twentieth century was becoming ever more apparent; this suggestion is lent some support by William James' attempt to use pragmatism to salvage religion, as well as Rorty's own efforts in this direction.<sup>9</sup> And maybe pragmatism's muddying of the intellectual waters has been socially disadvantageous, since many benefits would follow if it were widely accepted as an objective fact that there is no afterlife to reward religious or patriotic fanaticism, for instance. These sorts of speculation are hard to settle, and so not much store should be put on them, but the point is that we should put similarly little store on Rorty's speculations. Certainly they are not nearly enough to motivate the kind of widespread experiment he suggests, when for all he has established this might have anything from mildly bad to disastrous consequences. And besides, unless we are persuaded by Rorty's historical narrative, we should not be evaluating pragmatism according to social benefits anyway; the question of whether there is an objective truth that human beings can represent may have nothing to do with whether it is socially advantageous to discuss objective truth and representation.

At the heart of Rorty's views, including the moral, political, and religious views we have not discussed, is his pragmatist conviction that whether we accept or reject a vocabulary should depend only on whether or not it is socially useful. On the face of it, this seems to be a philosophical commitment which Rorty supports with arguments for a social epistemology and panrelationist metaphysics, but if this were so, he could hardly claim to be undermining the practice of theorizing about the nature of knowledge and reality; his general position would be as overtly inconsistent as his eliminative materialism was in denying the existence of sensations while identifying them with brain states. Rorty's position can be made consistent if we take his social standpoint strategy seriously, but then his pragmatism loses all support from the arguments he marshals against representationalism and objective truth; the arguments cannot provide a motivation for evaluating vocabularies by usefulness if they are justified by usefulness themselves. The only support Rorty can consistently offer for his pragmatism comes from his reading of history, which might at best be thought to suggest mildly the need to experiment with an alternative to evaluating descriptions according to their ability to represent the truth. But if this is all he has to offer, then we must conclude that the main significance of Rorty's work was

to explore the consequences of a largely unargued conviction; he did say that he was less interested in arguing than in creating 'a pattern of linguistic behaviour which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it' (Rorty, 1989: p. 9), but this is of course simply one more manifestation of that very conviction. The conviction may have arisen from Rorty's lifelong desire for philosophy to make a positive difference in society, or from a cluster of metaphysical beliefs he knew he could not consistently embrace, but regardless of its origin, once stripped of any philosophical support, Rorty's pragmatism has little to recommend it.

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### Notes

- 1 Subsequent commentators sought to defend Rorty from the charge of incoherence, but inadvertently had the effect of confirming Lycan and Pappas' central analysis by arguing that Rorty's view collapses into either reductive materialism (Bush, 1974) or 'strong' eliminative materialism (Cam, 1978). For a more detailed discussion of Rorty's eliminative materialism than is possible here, see Tartaglia, 2007: chapter 4.
- 2 As Fred Dretske remarked about epistemological behaviourism in his review of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 'this sounds to my ear like a theory of knowledge. Not a very well articulated theory to be sure, but a theory nonetheless' (Dretske, 1982: p. 97). On Rorty's varying uses of 'epistemology', see Tartaglia, 2007: p. 181 ff.
- 3 In a later essay, he says that pragmatists like himself 'should try to work [themselves] out of [their] jobs by conscientiously blurring the literature-philosophy distinction' (Rorty, 1991b: p. 86).
- 4 Given that Rorty does defend Quine and Sellars against Descartes and Kant, for instance, the tension in his position cannot be removed by reading his critique as a *reductio* undertaken at arm's length, and designed to show that representationalist epistemology inevitably leads to holism and pragmatism, thereby undermining itself; in any case, Rorty could hardly be taken to have established, or even tried to establish, the inevitability of this transition. Thanks to an audience at the University of Cardiff for raising this objection.
- 5 For a neat analysis of the inconsistency in Rorty's use of 'metaphysician', see Young, 1997.
- 6 Rorty used this statement as simply a colourful rejection of metaphysical realism, without showing any indication of also wanting to endorse Goodman's pluralistic metaphysics of many ways the world is. Nevertheless, my suggestion will be that even the more restricted interpretation involves metaphysical commitment.
- 7 Like much in Rorty, this kind of view derives from Nietzsche; for a recent defence, which makes the connection to Nietzsche, see Strawson, 2008.
- 8 This resembles William James' view that causal pressure, or 'influence', is an 'antediluvian conception' that has become part of the 'mother-tongue of thought' (James, 1995 / 1907: p. 69); James emphasizes that even concepts this deeply entrenched may ultimately be discarded. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out.
- 9 See James, 1995 / 1907, Lecture VIII; for a comprehensive overview and assessment of Rorty's views on religion, see Smith, 2005.

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