

PRAGMATISM AND RADICAL BEHAVIORISM: A RESPONSE TO LEIGLAND

John C. Malone
University of Tennessee—Knoxville

ABSTRACT: Leigland notes that the relation between radical behaviorism and pragmatism is complex and cites Richard Rorty as an exemplar of pragmatism. But Rorty promotes a bizarre version of pragmatism, not to be associated with radical behaviorism or with pragmatism as Peirce conceived it. Rorty is a monist and a brilliant writer, but he dismisses religion *and* science in favor of a humanistic ontology that is based on “imaginative literature.” Skinner would never agree with such a position, and those who would understand pragmatism are advised to read Peirce, not Rorty.

Key words: pragmatism, radical empiricism, humanism, Richard Rorty

I was happy to see Leigland’s comment on my Quine memorial piece (Malone, 2001) because I knew that he wouldn’t say anything with which I would violently disagree. I have meant to compliment him on his excellent chapter in a recent edited volume (Leigland, 1997) in which he characterized modern behaviorism—both methodological and radical—in a masterly fashion. Our review of that book appeared recently (Malone, Armento, & Epps, 2003).

Leigland correctly notes that the relation between pragmatism and radical behaviorism is complex, and I believe that this is because there is no *one* version of either. When I think of pragmatism I think of Charles Peirce, *period*, and when I think of radical behaviorism it is my idealized image of Skinner’s rendition, exemplified in 1964 and maybe in 1974, but seldom elsewhere. Most important, when I think of pragmatism I never, *ever* think of the twisted and humanist version promoted by Richard Rorty! I will consider Leigland’s points one by one, clarifying my position where necessary.

First, Leigland points out that Skinner’s scientific views never amounted to physical reductionism—of course; I never thought so. I just said that Skinner believed in a physical world existing beyond our experience of it—which he did and we all do. But we don’t often think about metaphysical questions regarding a transcendent reality.

Second, we can’t know that world, in any reasonable sense of the word “know,” so it remains a metaphysical belief. As Leigland says, we can’t step into a “God’s-eye view of the world, in and of itself.” I agree, and Skinner surely would have agreed.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: Please address all correspondence to John C. Malone, Department of Psychology, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37996-0900; Email jcmalone@utk.edu

Third, Leigland portrays Richard Rorty as a pragmatist. Well, Rorty is definitely not a fool, but whether he is the kind of pragmatist Peirce could stomach is another matter. I will return to this issue.

Fourth, Leigland emphasizes that Skinner was anti-representational. I could not agree more—that was Skinner’s emblem, of course, and when Skinner spoke of a “real world,” he sometimes meant it in an ordinary language way—like “real cream.” When I said that there is no “real reality” independent of our activity with respect to it, I did not mean to say that there is *no* reality.

Now, my small-print footnote quoting Paul Meehl was elevated to large boldface print by Leigland—Skinner “would have puked had he read Rorty, which he wouldn’t even bother to do.” Why would Skinner be thus repelled? Leigland points out that Rorty is anti-dualist and anti-representationalist, and Skinner wouldn’t object to that—true enough. But, despite an undergraduate degree in English, Skinner was convinced that *science*, not the humanities, held the answer to our most important questions. Rorty, on the other hand, argues that the answers to our most pressing questions—“redemptive questions”—come from *imaginative literature*, not from religion, nor from science or philosophy, or from literature containing arguments, but from John Steinbeck, Vladimir Nabokov, Gore Vidal, Percy Shelley, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and whomever. They make us “more human,” so to speak.

Rorty (e.g., 2000) believes that humankind (defined as “intellectuals”) previously sought final answers in religion (until the Enlightenment), then science and philosophy (which he equates), and now they (the intellectuals) find both religion and philosophy/science to be “quaint” primitive literary “genres.” The answer to the riddles of existence are to be found in the distillation of the works of imaginative fiction that surround us. Here are excerpts from Rorty (2000, p. 6):

For the religious idea that a certain book or tradition might connect you up with a supremely powerful or supremely lovable non-human person, the literary intellectual substitutes the Bloomian thought that the more books you read, the more ways of being human you have considered, the more human you become—the less tempted by dreams of an escape from time and chance, the more convinced that we humans have nothing to rely on save one another.

So what is the product of the history of Western thought?

. . . the last five centuries of Western intellectual life may usefully be thought of first as progress from religion to philosophy, and then from philosophy to literature. I call it progress because I see philosophy as a transitional stage in a process of gradually increasing self-reliance. The great virtue of our new-found literary culture is that it tells young intellectuals that the only source of redemption is the human imagination, and that this fact should occasion pride rather than despair.

Meehl said that Skinner would puke. Who wouldn’t? My only disagreement with and criticism of Leigland is that he may cause some readers to believe that Rorty is a pragmatist. He is not, at least, not in a way that Charles Peirce would

RESPONSE TO LEIGLAND

recognize! Rorty is a nightmarishly extreme *humanist*, and that is a different thing altogether—everyone who doubts the existence of absolute truth is not a pragmatist. I urge everyone to read Peirce (1877/1962) and find out what pragmatism really is. Leave Rorty to the “literary intellectual” (“pop”) humanists and to others who have far too much time on their hands. Everything that I read seems to contain arguments, and the lack of “imaginative fiction” means that I am far from redemption—at least, I hope so.

References

- Leigland, S. (1997). Systems and theories in behavior analytic science: An overview of alternatives. In L. J. Hayes & P. M. Ghezzi (Eds.), *Investigations in behavioral epistemology* (pp. 11-31). Reno, NV: Context Press.
- Malone, J. C. (2001). Ontology recapitulates philology: Willard Van Orman Quine, pragmatism, philosophy, and radical behaviorism. *Behavior and Philosophy*, 29, 63-74.
- Malone, J. C., Armento, M. E. A., & Epps, S. T. (2003). What color is the sky on your planet? A review of Hayes & Ghezzi (Eds.), *Investigations in behavioral epistemology*. *Behavior & Philosophy*, 31, 47-61.
- Peirce, C. S. (1877/1962). How to make our ideas clear. In W. Barrett & H. D. Aiken (Eds.), *Philosophy in the twentieth century*, Vol. 1 (pp. 105-122). New York: Random House.
- Rorty, R. (2000). *The decline of redemptive truth and the rise of literary culture*. <http://www.stanford.edu/~rrorty/decline.htm>, p. 6.
- Skinner, B. F. (1964). Behaviorism at fifty. In T. W. Wann (Ed.), *Behaviorism and phenomenology* (pp. 79-108). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Skinner, B. F. (1974). *About behaviorism*. New York: Knopf.

