**Conceptual Change and Future Paths for Pragmatism**

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Abstract: The pragmatist faces the challenge of accounting for the possibility of rational conceptual

change. Some pragmatists have tried to meet this challenge by appealing to Neurathian imagery –

imagery that risks being too figurative to be helpful. I argue that we can develop a clearer view of

what rationally constrained conceptual revision looks like for the pragmatist. I do so by examining

the work of the pragmatist who in recent years has addressed this issue most directly, Richard Rorty. His attempts to solve the puzzle ultimately fall short, but prove instructive. Rorty characterizes inter-language transitions in exclusively causal terms because, along with the very philosophical traditions he criticizes, he uncritically privileges the role of truth claims or assertions in our pragmatics. I show that if we instead broaden our pragmatic imaginations, we encounter various non-assertoric speech acts involved in speakers aiming to change how we make sense of our language and concepts. With these acts in view, we are able to arrive at a demystified view of rational conceptual change from a pragmatist perspective and identify future lines of inquiry for pragmatist projects.

***1. Introduction***

The pragmatist faces a challenge of accounting for the possibility of rational conceptual change. By ‘rational’ conceptual change, I mean a conceptual change that is intelligible not only in causal terms, but one that we can also legitimately say is undertaken because we have a reason for it, because we ought to undertake it.[[1]](#endnote-1) Philosophers of many stripes face this puzzle, but the pragmatist seems to be uniquely vulnerable on this score.

On the one hand, pragmatists reject the notion that our language or thought can provide us with an unmediated view of what the world is really and finally like. Quine sums up this aspect of the pragmatist orientation:

We cannot detach ourselves from [our conceptual scheme] and compare it objectively with an unconceptualized reality. Hence it is meaningless, I suggest, to inquire into the absolute correctness of a conceptual scheme as a mirror of reality. Our standard for appraising basic changes of conceptual scheme must be, not a realistic standard of correspondence to reality, but a pragmatic standard. Concepts are language, and the purpose of concepts and of language is efficacy in communication and in prediction. (1980, 79)

On the other hand, given this rejection of a standard for “absolute correctness,” it is unclear in what sense the pragmatist can legitimately say they have a genuine reason for preferring some “basic changes of conceptual scheme” over others. By contrast, non-pragmatists who claim that there can indeed be such a standard will have a much easier time explaining how these basic changes can be rationally undertaken: we have reasons for preferring some basic changes over others insofar as they correspond to how the world is. The pragmatist instead says that we need to compare the relative “efficacy” of these changes, rather than their “correspondence to reality.”

But what does this mean exactly? If there is a language-independent way of assessing the “efficacy” of conceptual changes, then the pragmatist’s insistence on our constitutively language-bound status seems misguided. A language-independent sense of efficacy would mean that we *can* detach ourselves from our conceptual scheme and arrive at a standard of absolute correctness, that is, whichever language is more efficacious—not from the view of this or that language, but efficacious as such. If, however, the pragmatist clings to this first commitment and does not allow for a language-independent sense of efficacy, it is unclear in what sense we could ever have a genuine reason for making “basic changes of conceptual scheme”: any appeals to efficacy will themselves be determined by our existing conceptual scheme and so cannot generate reasons for altering that very scheme. We may of course end up making these changes, but there will not be an intelligible sense in which the pragmatist can say we have a genuine reason for doing so.

Quine insists that “we can improve our conceptual scheme, our philosophy, bit by bit while continuing to depend on it for support,” and he famously invokes the image of Neurath’s mariner “who must rebuild his ship on the open sea” (79). It is unclear, however, just what this activity of “rebuilding” or “revising” a conceptual scheme consists in.[[2]](#endnote-2) The pragmatist owes us more than figurative sketches of this activity; they need to explain how exactly such claims solve the puzzle of rational conceptual change. As long as we accept the pragmatist thesis that we are constitutively language-bound, then the question remains: In what sense can we ever have reasons for changing that language? An insistence that we nonetheless can and do make such changes (via, for example, “revising,” “rebuilding,” or, as it is sometimes put, “reweaving”) gives us too little to go on.

The pragmatist in recent years whose work addresses the question of conceptual change most directly is Richard Rorty. Unlike those who appeal primarily to vague, Neurathian imagery, Rorty gives a precise and detailed view of what transitions from one kind of language or conceptual scheme to another consist in. He claims that such transitions involve linguistic activity that he calls “metaphors” and that he argues can only be construed in causal terms. Despite Rorty’s refreshing directness here, I argue in the article’s first section that he nonetheless does not escape the problem of explaining how the pragmatist can say we have reason for preferring one type of language to another, and I argue that this problem is not one Rorty can simply wave away given his own view of pragmatism. But I also explain that although Rorty does not give a satisfying solution to the puzzle of rational conceptual change for the pragmatist, his attempts to think through the puzzle are illuminating. In the article’s second section, I argue that Rorty ends up characterizing inter-language transitions in exclusively causal terms because he takes on board an assumption from the very philosophical traditions he criticizes: uncritically privileging the role of truth claims or assertions in our pragmatics. In the third section, I show that if we instead broaden our pragmatic imaginations, we encounter various non-assertoric speech acts involved in speakers aiming to change how we make sense of our language and concepts. In the fourth and final section, I argue that with these speech acts brought to the fore, we are able to arrive at a demystified view of what rationally undertaken conceptual change can look like for the pragmatist.

***2. Rorty on Conceptual Change and Pragmatism***

In this first section, I explain how the puzzle of rational conceptual change plays out in Rorty’s work in general. Rorty often argues that given the pragmatist’s rejection of our ability to step outside of our conceptual scheme, the pragmatist should accept that there is nothing that counts as “rational” conceptual change—that there is only a causal account to be given of such changes. For Rorty, all “reasoning” whether “in physics [or in] ethics is tradition-bound” (2000a, 20). As such, there are no tradition-independent, universally binding reasons one can appeal to in order to justify why one ultimately has the commitments one has. This exhaustion of our justificatory resources becomes particularly apparent in moments of radical conceptual change or moments where we find ourselves disagreeing with interlocutors over our most cherished commitments.

Rorty fleshes out this line of thought by explaining how languages are composed of a “final vocabulary”—that is, “a set of words [speakers] employ to justify their actions, their belief, and their words. These are the words in which we formulate . . . our long-term projects” and “the story of our lives” (1989, 73). Our final vocabulary is “as far as [we] can go with language; beyond [it] there is only helpless passivity or a resort to force” (73). Rorty gives us the following account of this register of a language:

A small part of a final vocabulary is made up of thin, flexible, and ubiquitous terms such as “true,” “good,” “right,” and “beautiful.” The larger part contains thicker, more rigid, and more parochial terms, for example, “Christ,” “England,” “professional standards,” “decency,” “kindness,” “the Revolution,” “the Church,” “progressive,” “rigorous,” “creative.” The more parochial terms do most of the work. (73)

When someone claims that our understanding of the concepts that make up our final vocabulary are wrong and that a novel understanding of these concepts or altogether novel concepts are needed, such claims typically show up to as “absurd” or “irrational” because they depart from our final vocabulary, from the most fundamental ways we have for making sense of the world. In these moments, we have “no noncircular argumentative recourse” we can appeal to in order to move those who do not already subscribe to the same traditions we do (74). When interacting with these speakers, any changes in their or our fundamental commitments will ultimately come from “constellations of causal forces. . . . These various constellations are the random factors which have made some things subjects of conversation for us and others not, have made some projects and not others possible and important” (17). The space of causes—according to this aspect of Rorty’s project—holds sway over the space of reasons. We can shift from one set of commitments to another, but there is no meaningful sense in which we can have “reason” to do so, in which normative vocabulary can meaningfully apply at this register: “Once we raise the question of how we get from one vocabulary to another, from one dominant metaphoric to another, the distinction between reasons and causes begins to lose its utility” (48). Rorty therefore seems to openly bite the bullet in these contexts: a commitment to our status as language-bound creatures means that we can only have a causal story for conceptual change.

But Rorty’s apparent candor here is also misleading. Given his very own vision of pragmatism, Rorty cannot simply argue that there are exclusively causal explanations for, and therefore no genuine reasons for, adopting the ways of thinking and talking that matter to us most. Elsewhere, Rorty insists that pragmatism uniquely illuminates reasons available to us to make these decisions—reasons that are obscured when we are in the thrall of philosophical views that take correspondence to reality to be the goal of inquiry. For Rorty, “pragmatists—both classical and ‘neo-’—do not believe that there is a way things really are. So they want to replace the appearance-reality distinction by that between descriptions of the world and of ourselves which are less useful and those which are more useful” (1999, 27). Utility is the key source of normativity for the pragmatist: it gives us reasons to change or endorse our ways of thinking and talking without our having to accept that there is a way things *really* are in the world to which our ways of talking and thinking must be answerable.

Rorty practices what he preaches: “[I]t would be better for pragmatists to say simply that the vocabulary in which the traditional problems of Western philosophy were formulated were useful at one time, but are no longer useful” (xxii). It is not, then, that these traditional philosophical views are false or do not represent the world as it is; these views have instead outlived their utility: “*we* have different purposes, which will be better served by employing a different vocabulary” (xxii). But it is unclear how these two aspects of Rorty’s project hang together. If a pragmatist orientation does provide us with genuine reasons for changing the way we talk and think about the terms of our final vocabulary, then it seems Rorty is saying that our reasons need not run out in these contexts. But if this is his view, then he is conceding that there is a language-independent standard for evaluating the efficacy or utility of ways of thinking and talking that we can access and that would provide us with the very Archimedean point Rorty wants to repudiate. If pragmatism, however, cannot equip us with these reasons and culminates in an exclusively causal picture of how our commitments shift, then it cannot tell us in any meaningful sense how we ought to proceed in these crucial contexts.

Consider a specific example of how this tension manifests itself in Rorty’s work. When characterizing the contributions of speakers that shift our fundamental ways of thinking and talking in exclusively causal terms, Rorty nonetheless celebrates these contributions:

For genuine novelty can, after all, occur in a world of blind, contingent, mechanical forces. Think of novelty as the sort of thing which happens when, for example, a cosmic ray scrambles the atoms in a DNA molecule, thus sending things off in the direction of the orchids or the anthropoids. The orchids, when their time came, were no less novel or marvelous for the sheer contingency of this necessary condition of their existence. Analogously, for all we know, or should care, Aristotle’s metaphorical use of *ousia*, Saint Paul’s metaphorical use of *agapē*, and Newton’s metaphorical use of *gravitas*, were the results of cosmic rays scrambling the fine structure of some crucial neurons in their respective brains. . . . It hardly matters how the trick was done. The results were marvelous. (1989, 17)

Note the final line in this passage. In what sense were the contributions of these speakers’ “marvelous”? There is a subtle bait-and-switch at play here. The term ‘marvelous’ is less obviously philosophically contentious than terms like ‘useful’ or ‘correct’, so it is easy to skip over on a first read. But it is no less normatively charged than these more familiar bits of philosophical terminology. Presumably, if speakers’ contributions are marvelous, then we have reason to endorse them, and if they fail to be marvelous, we lack reason to endorse them. But for a contribution to count as marvelous and thereby give us reason to endorse or value it, it will only count as such from within the context of a final vocabulary and a given language that will determine what the term ‘marvelous’ means within that language. If contributions of speakers could be evaluated simply in terms of how “good” or “correct” or “marvelous” they are *tout court*, then we would have access to that perfect language capable of revealing how the world ultimately is, a perfect language that Rorty’s pragmatist must reject. All Rorty is entitled to say in the above passage—given his view of how normative vocabulary is meaningful only from within a particular language—is that various, enormously complex causal factors generated a novel way of thinking and talking, and this way of thinking and talking was, in turn, taken up by many other speakers. To try and take an additional, *further* stand on the value of these contributions would take us out of the space of causes that Rorty has already told us is the only appropriate vocabulary for analyzing these inter-language transitions.

One way Rorty has of trying to reconcile this apparent tension is by conceding that we can only rationally appeal to those who already share certain key commitments of ours; we must be unabashedly “ethnocentric.”[[3]](#endnote-3) To say that we “must work by our own lights, that we must be ethnocentric, is merely to say that beliefs suggested by another” way of thinking and talking about the world “must be tested by trying to weave [this] together with beliefs we already have” (Rorty 1991, 26). We saw an example of this earlier when Rorty argued that we should abandon certain ways of thinking and talking about philosophical problems because “*we* have different purposes, which will be better served by employing a different vocabulary.” Rorty seems to be arguing, then, that we can meaningfully endorse changes to our ways of thinking and talking as long as the innovator or skeptic is part of “one’s *ethnos* . . . those who share enough of one’s beliefs to make fruitful conversation possible” (30).

But Rorty again finds himself caught in a bind here. If the innovative thinker is introducing a genuinely novel way of thinking and speaking, a way of thinking and speaking that departs from how we understand and use key elements of our final vocabulary, then we cannot have this kind of “fruitful conversation” or treat them as part of our *ethnos*. As he puts it elsewhere: “Those who speak the old language . . . will regard as altogether *ir*rational the appeal of the new metaphors . . . The question of why people speak this way will be treated as beneath the level of conversation” (Rorty 1989, 48). In these contexts, we have to “give up on the idea that there can be reasons for using languages” in either our current way or in the innovator’s way (48). We may well retrospectively come to endorse the innovator’s novel way of thinking and talking, but it will not in any coherent sense be the result of genuinely normative “reasons”; it will be the result of a set of “blind, contingent, mechanical forces.” Rorty’s ethnocentrism, then, does not offer him an escape from this tension. Either the novel, revolutionary ways of talking and thinking are always intelligible and endorsable by the lights of one’s current commitments (in which case, contra aspects of Rorty’s project, they pose no problem for our having access to an Archimedean point), or the revolutionary ways of talking and thinking are not always intelligible by the lights of one’s current commitments. If the latter, then these revolutionary ways of talking and thinking *do* helpfully point to our constitutively language-bound status, but, as such, they cannot be rationally rejected or endorsed. Rorty’s pragmatism, then, would be unable to offer us a novel source of reasons for rejecting or endorsing the ways of thinking and talking that matter to us most.

The puzzle of rational conceptual change therefore looms for Rorty’s project.[[4]](#endnote-4) But his more direct confrontation with this puzzle provides us material for developing alternative pragmatist lines of thought. I will argue in the following section that if we zero in on Rorty’s specific account of metaphor, we discover a crucial assumption that can be critiqued and that, if overturned, opens up novel paths for addressing the puzzle of rational conceptual change for the pragmatist.

***3. Rorty on Metaphor***

To begin, it will be helpful to take a closer look at how Rorty thinks of the structure of a language. A language for Rorty resembles a Kuhnian normal science. A language exists when “everybody agrees on how to evaluate everything everybody else says. More generally . . . [it is] that which is conducted within an agreed-upon set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution” (Rorty 1979, 320). Speakers can be said to share a language when they converge in how they understand the concepts or terms that matter most to them in making sense of a particular domain. They “converge” in the sense that the content of these concepts do not show up to speakers as up-for-grabs and the meaning of corresponding terms appears settled.

Once a final vocabulary has congealed for speakers in this way, truth claims and assertions become intelligible and felicitous: I can intelligibly and felicitously say, for example, that it is true that a certain dish is kosher if I am speaking from within a Jewish tradition during a period where the meaning of a fundamental term like ‘kosher’ is taken as settled; I can intelligibly and felicitously say that it is false that a player who is fouled in the act of shooting is entitled to ten free throws if I am speaking the language of contemporary professional basketball (again, assuming this language is congealed in the above sense); I can intelligibly and felicitously can say that it is true that *coat* is a polysemous lexeme if I am speaking the language of contemporary lexical semantics, etc. For Rorty, “a ‘truth-value candidate’ . . . is a sentence which one [can] confirm or disconfirm, argue for or against” (1989, 18). One can only engage linguistically in these ways with an utterance, however, when the concepts and expressions involved in the utterance are antecedently intelligible. If they are, then I will know how to treat the utterance—for example, determining whether or not I should defend and endorse it (call it ‘true’) or reject it (call it ‘false’). Absent this antecedent intelligibility, I cannot engage with the utterance in these ways.

But when the very concepts or terms by which we currently make sense of some domain are challenged and alternatives presented (as when we encounter intransigent skeptics or revolutionary thinkers), then we find ourselves lacking a way to “confirm or disconfirm, argue for or against” what these figures are saying because they are departing from the most fundamental ways of talking and thinking we have to make sense of the world or the relevant domain. This is why the linguistic behavior of these speakers often shows up as bizarre, nonsensical, or irrational “suggestions . . . suggestions which [may retrospectively] strike *us* as luminous truths” (Rorty 2008, 15). We cannot treat an utterance as true or false—or even treat it as an appropriate candidate for such an evaluation—if we cannot make sense of it. And we cannot make sense of these utterances because they transcend, by their very nature, the limits of our current language. I can of course insist that the skeptic or revolutionary thinker is wrong, that this is what some concept X *is* or consists in or this is what some term ‘x’ means. But, in doing so, I will only be reporting on the nature of my existing language. This figure, however, is not denying that I currently make sense of concept X or term ‘x’ in this way; they are trying to get me to think about the concept or term in a fundamentally different way. And until I acquire this novel understanding—until I learn to cope linguistically with it (what linguistic moves it licenses and is licensed by, for example)—I cannot make truth claims regarding this novel understanding or novel concept or term.

If truth claims *were* to be felicitous in such moments, we would need, somehow, to already possess a language that contained these concepts and therefore would allow us to evaluate whether the resulting views are true or false. We would need, in other words, a perfect language where all concepts, no matter how revolutionary or novel, were antecedently intelligible—where they did not need to be acquired. As we have seen, Rorty rejects the possibility of such a perfect language because it requires ignoring the kinds of language-bound creatures we are. Moreover, it is difficult to make sense of the view that our language could somehow, embryonically, “contain” within it all future concepts and categories of sense-making. And if it does not—if such concepts have to be acquired—then truth claims (understood in Rorty’s sense) will be infelicitous in moments of inter-language acquisition and transition since they require a settled final vocabulary to be felicitously deployed.

In sum, then, Rorty thinks that there are only two options for making sense of our linguistic activity in moments where the ways of talking and thinking that matter to us most are at stake. Either the utterance in question is intelligible to us because it is articulated against the backdrop of a language we already share or possess and can therefore prove truth-apt, *or* the utterance is not intelligible to us because it is articulated against the backdrop of a novel language, and, as such, we cannot felicitously issue truth claims regarding it.

Rorty therefore argues that we need a further account of our linguistic activity at this register, and, to give his account, he turns to Davidson’s view of metaphor. Following Davidson, Rorty argues that metaphors do not contain within them some sort of “latent” or “hidden” meaning. If they did, we would be able to convey that meaning using the resources of our existing language. But—echoing the above line—either an utterance is meaningful to us (i.e., capable of being understood within our existing language), or it is not. Because metaphors are attempts to violate or transcend our existing ways of talking about and understanding the world, Rorty argues that they are not carriers of embryonic meaning. But that does not mean they should be ignored or dismissed. Metaphors are crucial linguistic devices for Rorty, and we should think of them, on his Davidsonian view, exclusively as noises that cause us to change how we view the world. Consider familiar examples of metaphors such as “scraps of poetry which send shivers down our spine . . . [or] phrases which reverberate endlessly” that seem to operate according to this causal model (Rorty 1991, 163).

Rorty’s further move is to treat *any* utterance that violates or transcends our existing ways of thinking and talking to cause changes in how we view the world as a metaphor. He therefore thinks the utterances of revolutionary speakers that cause us to rethink the concepts or terms of our final vocabulary or that introduce novel terms or concepts should be understood as metaphors in this sense: “A metaphor is, so to speak, a voice from outside logical space, rather than an empirical filling-up of a portion of that space, or a logical-philosophical clarification of the structure of that space. It is a call to change one’s language and one’s life, rather than a proposal about how to systematize either” (Rorty 2008, 12–13).[[5]](#endnote-5) Truth claims and assertions, by contrast, can only be felicitously issued from *within* a language (or “logical space”)—once the fundamental concepts and terms of that language are treated as settled among speakers. When the language itself is in question, however, truth claims are no longer in order. Metaphors lack “a fixed place in a language game . . . [and so] utter something which is neither true nor false” (Rorty 1989, 18).

Now metaphors do not permanently remain at this causal register. Once they catch on among speakers, and we learn how to cope with them linguistically, then they become fodder for intelligible and felicitous truth claims and assertions. A metaphor that is taken up widely by speakers will “thereby have ceased to be a metaphor—or, if you like, it will have become what most sentences of our language are, a dead metaphor. It will be just one more, literally true or literally false, sentence of the language” (18). Once we know how to engage linguistically with the once metaphorical utterance, it will be capable of serving as a reason (and not just a cause) for belief. For example, if we imagine ourselves first confronting the concept of human rights in a world where we had only ever thought of rights as belonging to citizens of nation states, we can imagine that it would take time to acquire and linguistically cope with this novel concept. But once in hand, we could then start to evaluate, for example, whether it is true or false that a given regime is engaging in human rights abuses, whether it is or is not the case that human rights claims should outweigh claims of national sovereignty, etc. This metaphorical rethinking of the concept of rights will have become a “dead metaphor” that, in turn, generates a host of novel “literally true or literally false” sentences.

Rorty’s view of inter-language transitions is therefore directly tied to his view of the role of truth claims or assertions in our linguistic lives. For Rorty, since we are not making truth claims when we articulate or defend our understanding of the concepts and terms that matter most to us, our linguistic behavior in these moments cannot be analyzed normatively and so must be understood in exclusively causal terms. For linguistic activity to be meaningful and have rational import for Rorty, then, it must be ultimately formulable as a set of truth claims, or else it is amenable only to a causal analysis.

Three points of clarification are important here. First, given how frequently Rorty rails against truth playing any deep metasemantic or epistemological explanatory role, it might seem that I am inflating or mischaracterizing the importance of this aspect of Rorty’s project. But note that my target here is pragmatics and not the metasemantic or epistemological role of truth that Rorty is skeptical of—a notion of truth-as-correspondence used to interpret utterances and beliefs as aiming to represent the world as it really is. My target instead is the central role Rorty takes the speech act of a truth claim or assertion to play in our linguistic lives. Second, it is worth emphasizing that Rorty is not saying that truth claims or assertions should be a philosopher’s sole preoccupation when analyzing the pragmatics of language. On the contrary, Rorty’s view is that truth claims are for the most part uninteresting because they are so mundane: the natural consequence of a language functioning smoothly (and thus immaterial when a language finds itself in crisis). Third, Rorty is not saying that the only speech acts we ever perform are assertions. He would of course not be surprised to hear that we do plenty of other things with words. But he does think that assertions play a central role in our pragmatics in at least two ways: first, they are his paradigm case of how we cope linguistically with an utterance; second, Rorty thinks that if we are not making truth claims or assertions at moments of inter-language crisis or transition, then we are not doing something meaningful. We are, instead, engaging in linguistic behavior that can only be characterized in causal terms.

By privileging truth claims and assertions in these ways, Rorty commits a version of what Nuel Belnap calls the “Declarative Fallacy,” a reductive approach to pragmatics glossed by Quill Kukla (writing as Rebecca Kukla) and Mark Lance as “philosophers . . . act[ing] as though the most fundamental, important, and common thing we do with language is use it to make propositionally structured declarative assertions with truth-values,” where even if we give accounts of, say, imperatives or interrogatives, we do so in terms of their departure from “assertion as the paradigm of ‘normal’ language” (Belnap 1990, 1; Kukla and Lance 2009, 10). The problem, however, is not only that Rorty’s account of metaphor reveals that he falls prey to this fallacy; the problem is that, in taking on board this assumption, he seems to condemn himself to an untenable position on the possibility of rational conceptual change. Rorty cannot allow that truth claims are felicitous in moments of inter-language transition or else in such moments we would be able to appropriately make claims regarding what is the case in the world that can arbitrate and even settle apparent disagreements between conflicting conceptual schemes. Such a view of our linguistic activity would imply that we can have a standard of “absolute correctness” or a God’s-eye view on the world—which Rorty of course repudiates. But in claiming that the only alternative to felicitous truth claims for analyzing inter-language is an exclusively causal lens, Rorty pulls the rug out from under his own pragmatism: inquirers lack any normative resources for saying why anyone should hold the views of their final vocabulary that they do. My wager in the remainder of this paper is that if we move beyond the Declarative Fallacy and broaden our pragmatic imaginations, we will also be able to avoid committing the pragmatist to either of these two unappealing options that leave the puzzle of rational conceptual change unsolved.

***4. Suppositions, Metalinguistic Proposals, and Stipulations***

In order to determine what we are doing as speakers when we articulate or defend novel understandings of concepts or terms that are central in how we make sense of some domain (i.e., the kinds of speech acts at stake in the inter-language transitions Rorty considers), we should begin with simpler cases—cases where we are articulating or defending a view of a concept, even if the concept does not play a role in our final vocabulary. Consider, for example, the following exchange between friends Abbi and Ilana involving the term ‘bullshit’. Abbi says that a mutual acquaintance of theirs is a bullshitter because they are always lying. Ilana says the acquaintance is not a bullshitter precisely because they are a liar. Ilana has been reading Harry Frankfurt and says that a bullshitter is someone who has no investment in the truth one way or the other and says only what suits their interests (Frankfurt 2005). Abbi is a bit confused: this way of understanding ‘bullshit’ seems to depart from how the term or underlying concept is ordinarily understood and used. Ilana agrees. She says, though, that we should begin adopting this novel understanding because it can help us distinguish among different ways that misinformation can spread, especially in political contexts (and preventing this kind of disinformation is something Ilana knows that Abbi cares a great deal about).

When Ilana says that the concept of bullshit consists in an indifference to truth that serves the speaker’s interests, what should we say she is she doing as a speaker exactly—that is, what kind of speech act should we say she is performing? Despite the surface grammar of her utterance (“Bullshit *is . . .*”), it seems implausible to view her as making an assertion. She is explicitly *not* trying to represent how we in fact use or understand this term or concept. But neither is she issuing a command demanding that others adopt her usage; she wants others to endorse her understanding as correct because of the considerations she raises in favor of it, not adopt it on the basis of whatever speaker authority she may have.

There are various alterative speech act candidates we might consider as plausible glosses on the pragmatics of Ilana’s utterance. Perhaps, for example, Ilana is carrying out the speech act of *supposition*, which Mitchell Green takes to be the “acceptance of a proposition for the sake of argument” (2000, 376). As Green notes, supposition does not comfortably conform to standard speech act models that invoke direction of fit: “It is not the case that the onus is on a supposition (or one making it) to have the propositional content of that supposition conform to the ways things are. But neither does supposition have world to word direction of fit, since it is not the case that the onus is on the world to conform to the content of that act” (377). Suppositions are neither assertions nor commands; they are something else we do with words, and they allow us—precisely by bracketing questions of the way things are—to entertain changes in how we think about the world, including how we may think about concepts or terms.

Alternatively, Ilana may be better understood as *proposing* an understanding of a concept—or even more specifically engaging in what Nat Hansen has recently called a “metalinguistic proposal”: “speech acts that involve an intention for an audience to come to have a reason to use or understand the use of a linguistic expression in a particular way” (2019, 1). Or consider another account: Ilana *stipulates* that the concept in question should be understood in a certain way (Shields forthcoming; 2020). According to this gloss, Ilana is aiming to generate a shared inferential entitlement for all relevant speakers to understand the concept in a specific way on the basis of the utility, rather than the truth, of this understanding.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Now this is not the place to develop a full pragmatics of any of these speech acts. My point here, though, is that there is no reason to default to a reductive, declaratival treatment of the speech acts involved in conceptual articulation, as Rorty assumes. There are many kinds of speech acts we perform that allow us to alter how we and others make sense of a particular term or concept—acts that have a distinct, non-assertoric pragmatic structure.[[7]](#endnote-7)

With these candidate acts in mind, consider an example Rorty would likely treat as a metaphor (which is not how he would treat the previous example). The following is a plausible candidate of Rortyean metaphor for two reasons: first, because the concept or term at stake is one that seems to be a part of many speakers’ final vocabularies and, second, because of the apparent novelty of the view. The view in question is Tolstoy’s account of the concept of art in his late nineteenth-century manifesto *What Is Art*?, in which he argues that the dominant aesthetics of his day is fundamentally and perniciously misguided. On the question of the view’s novelty, Aylmer Maude, the book’s English translator, gives the following assessment: “The fundamental thought expressed in this book leads inevitably to conclusions so new, so unexpected, and so contrary to what is usually maintained in literary and artistic circles, that although it is clearly and emphatically expressed . . . most readers who wish to possess themselves of it will have to read the work carefully, and to digest it slowly” ([1898] 1996, 3). Now whether or not Maude’s assessment is entirely accurate is not an issue I will delve into here, but for the subsequent discussion, let us suppose it is. The fact, for example, that Tolstoy argues that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, and his own novels *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* are all at best count as “counterfeit” works of art on his view gives a sense of its radical nature.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The entrenched view Tolstoy targets is a broadly Kantian picture according to which art aims at beauty, where beauty is understood in terms of its ability to generate pleasure for the viewer—a pleasure not reducible to any other activity. Even more generally, Tolstoy is taking aim at the notion of art-for-art’s-sake. Here is Tolstoy’s alternative view: “Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them” (Tolstoy [1896] 1996, 51).[[9]](#endnote-9) Note that Tolstoy, as with the exchange involving Ilana, presents his view assertorically: “Art *is . . .* .” He returns to this framing throughout his discussion. If something claims to be a work of art but “there be no such infection [of feeling], if there be not this union with the author and with others who are moved by the same work—then it is not art” (140). Despite this assertoric framing, however, Tolstoy is clearly not representing how he takes this concept to be currently used or understood. His manifesto is a polemic *against* what he takes to be the dominant understanding of this concept. What he is instead saying is that the concept of art *ought* to be understood in the terms he lays out. But he is not trying to generate this ‘ought’ by invoking his speaker authority (say, as an accomplished novelist and thinker) to order or command his readers to adopt this understanding. Tolstoy wants his audience to endorse his understanding as correct on the basis of the considerations he raises.

What are these considerations? On a certain reading of the text (a question I return to below), they include that any understanding of the concept of art must take into account how art can contribute to the flourishing of humanity: “The evolution of feeling proceeds through art—feelings less kind and less needful for the well-being of mankind are replaced by others kinder and more needful for that end. That is the purpose of art” (143). Relatedly, any understanding of the concept of art should ensure that art remains maximally egalitarian: “If art is an important matter, a spiritual blessing essential for all men (‘like religion,’ as the devotees of art are fond of saying), then it should be accessible to everyone” (70). The dominant Kantian picture of art-for-art’s sake that divorces morality from art and that proves inaccessible to the vast majority of the population fails on both of these scores. By contrast, Tolstoy’s view is to be preferred because it promotes both—encouraging compassion for our fellows and accessibility to large audiences.

Assuming that the term ‘art’ (or the concept ART) occupies a place in a speaker’s final vocabulary, then if Rorty’s account of how changes to our final vocabulary occur is right, it seems that Tolstoy’s project of trying to shift other speakers’ understanding of this term or concept can only be analyzed in causal terms; Tolstoy’s assertoric framing is therefore misleading. He is instead producing a metaphor.

We have now seen, however, that there is a variety of speech act candidates that are not assertoric, that have distinct pragmatic structures, and that can nonetheless help to account for what speakers are doing when they articulate or defend a novel understanding of a term or concept. The differences between the case of Tolstoy and more mundane cases of conceptual articulation (such as Abbi and Ilana’s exchange) are two-fold: first, that the term or concept in question plays a more central role in our sense-making and, second, that Tolstoy’s view is, for the relevant community of speakers (and following Maude’s assessment), novel. But there is no reason to think that just because the specific content of the project of conceptual articulation or the conceptual disagreement is more fundamental to our sense-making, that the speech acts speakers are performing are therefore different from those performed when the content in question is more mundane. That speakers’ performances of a speech act may have more wide-ranging implications for the relevant context does not mean that they are therefore, necessarily, performing different acts.

The best analysis of this kind of case, then, may be to say that Tolstoy is carrying out a metalinguistic proposal concerning the term ‘art’ or concept ART, or that Tolstoy is engaging in an act of supposition, or that Tolstoy is stipulating that whenever the term ‘art’ or concept ART is invoked, all speakers should draw the following inference—that it involves a conscious attempt by an individual to transfer, via external signs, their feelings to other individuals. We therefore have many more options available to us other than the monochromatic choice Rorty presents us with between an exclusively causal lens for analyzing this linguistic activity or a reduction of the relevant acts to assertions—a choice seemingly dictated by Rorty’s falling prey to the Declarative Fallacy.

Consider a second example.[[10]](#endnote-10) In recent work, Elizabeth Anderson has articulated a novel understanding of the concept of government as something that “exists wherever some have the authority to issue orders to others, backed by sanctions in one or more domains of life” (2017, 42). Such a view of GOVERNMENT involves expanding our understanding of the concept. For many, “*government* is often treated as synonymous with the state, which, by supposed definition, is part of the *public sphere*” (41). But Anderson argues that even in nonstate spheres, such as places of employment, we can be subjected to government in this expanded sense: employers, especially in the U.S. context, exercise enormous power over the lives of their employees. But this government is rarely democratic since employees rarely have any (let alone equal) say over the conditions of their working lives; this kind of government is far more likely to consist of “dictatorships” (xxii).

Now what kind of speech act is Anderson performing? It seems implausible, despite the assertoric surface grammar of some of her formulations, to view her as making a series of assertions. She is certainly aware that her understanding and use of the concept of government departs from how most speakers use and understand this concept. As she says above, she is challenging a seemingly analytic connection between the concept of the government and the concept of the state. But she is not simply commanding her readers to adopt this novel understanding and usage. A driving concern of Anderson’s account is that we develop a view of this concept that can help promote a more economically just society: we need to find “a better way to talk about the ways employers constrain workers’ lives, which can open up discussion about how the workplace could be designed to be more responsive to workers’ interests” (xx).

Perhaps the best reading will be to say that Anderson is asking us to engage in an act of supposition in order to have readers imagine a novel understanding of this concept. Or perhaps she is carrying out a metalinguistic proposal regarding the term ‘government.’ Or she may be carrying out a stipulative speech act, where she is attempting to impart an inferential entitlement to both herself and her audience regarding the concept of government, an entitlement justified on the basis of the audience’s shared investment in the end of promoting economic justice.

Rorty, however, will be pushed toward characterizing this kind of metaconceptual or metalinguistic activity in exclusively causal terms. This is because the concept of government is a clear candidate for playing a role in speakers’ final vocabularies, and the view is one that will strike many readers as novel (as Anderson herself points out). Consider as well Rorty’s own examples of novel, seemingly “highly paradoxical” utterances that he takes to be metaphors: “‘No harm can come to a good man,’ ‘Love is the only law,’ ‘The earth whirls round the sun,’ ‘There is no largest set,’ ‘The heavens will fill with commerce,’ ‘Meaning does not determine reference’” (1991, 170). If these are plausible candidates for counting as metaphors in Rorty’s sense, then Anderson’s account seems equally appropriate. But we have just found that there are plenty of non-assertoric speech acts that can be identified that Anderson may be performing and that do not require us to abandon normative language for characterizing this activity.

In addition to the fact that these non-assertoric speech acts come to the fore once we abandon Rorty’s declaratival lens, we are also on our way to cashing out the vague imagery that pragmatists have often appealed to in order to address the tension they face concerning the possibility of rational conceptual change. In the introduction, I explained that those with pragmatist sympathies tend to opt for a Neurathian image of a plank-by-plank or “bit-by-bit” revising of our conceptual schemes, but that it remains unclear just what such “revising” amounts to and therefore in what sense it can resolve this tension. Consider other invocations of this imagery. Nelson Goodman, for example, similarly takes as his starting point our constitutively language-bound status: “The overwhelming case against perception without conception, the pure given, absolute immediacy, the innocent eye, substance as substratum, has been so fully and frequently set forth . . . as to need no restatement here” (1978, 6). Goodman then argues that because we always find ourselves within a given conceptual scheme or schemes (inhabiting a set of variously conceptually structured “worlds”), then in developing novel ways of thinking and talking, we do so “from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking” (6). Innovative figures such as “Cervantes and Bosch and Goya, no less than Boswell and Newton and Darwin, take and unmake and remake and retake familiar worlds, recasting them in remarkable and sometimes recondite but eventually recognizable—that is *re-cognizable*—ways” (104–5). But what exactly this activity of “making” and “remaking” a world consists in is left obscure.

Hilary Putnam similarly argues that our inheritance of conceptual schemes need not condemn us to enacting conceptual and linguistic moves determined in advance by these schemes:

Traditions, cultures, history, deserve to be emphasized, as they are not by those who seek Archimedian points in metaphysics or epistemology. It is true that we speak a public language, that we inherit versions, that talk of truth and falsity only make sense against the background of an ‘inherited tradition,’ as Wittgenstein says. But it is also true that we constantly remake our language, that we make new versions out of old ones, and that we have reason to do all this. (1989, 240)

Putnam shares the view that our language-bound status means that we cannot introduce changes in our ways of thinking and talking by stepping outside of our conceptual schemes and representing the world as it is in and of itself, by occupying a God’s-eye view; similarly, we cannot generate these novel ways of thinking and talking *ex nihilo*. Instead, situated as we are within various “traditions, culture, history,” we “remake our language” by developing “new versions out of old ones” in a way that we genuinely “have reason to do.” But Putnam, like both Goodman and Quine, leaves this activity of conceptual and linguistic revision obscure.

Now one response to this obscurity would be to double down on Rorty’s view of metaphor. Rather than remaining at this vague, figurative register that avoids spelling out what exactly this revisionary activity consists in and how it can be rationally endorsed, it would be better to bite the bullet and simply concede that our activity in moments of inter-language transition can be analyzed only in causal terms, as Rorty does. Honesty, that is to say, should be preferred over obscurity.

But I have raised two worries for this Rortyean approach. First, biting the bullet in this way introduces a deep tension within Rorty’s own project—eliminating the very normativity Rorty takes pragmatism to generate. Second, I argued that we should not assume that because this linguistic activity has proved difficult to account for, any attempts to do so will *necessarily* fail. I diagnosed this strong claim as a product of Rorty’s subscribing to a version of the Declarative Fallacy, approaching the question of speech act structure by treating assertions and truth claims as the paradigmatic speech acts in terms of which all other speech acts must be understood (rather than treating different acts as having their own distinct pragmatic structure). The speech acts of supposition, proposals, and stipulations all represent important candidates for making sense of what we are doing as speakers when we engage in metalinguistic and metaconceptual activity, and these acts all seem to have pragmatic structures that are distinctly non-assertoric.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Furthermore, what highlighting these acts allows for is a demystified version of the kind of view of conceptual revision that Quine, Goodman, and Putnam all seem to have in mind in the passages I have cited. These speech acts point to ways that speakers can change their view of certain concepts by utilizing one aspect of an existing conceptual scheme to alter other aspects of that scheme (i.e., how they understand the target concept in question) without leaving obscure what this “utilizing” involves. Consider in this light the speech act of stipulation as it has been glossed in this section. This is a speech act where speakers implicitly appeal to certain ends they take to be shared with their audience in order to justify and establish a novel inferential connection that can be imparted to all relevant speakers. One aspect of the conceptual scheme is therefore appealed to (the ends the speaker assumes are shared with their audience) in order to change another aspect of that scheme (in the cases of interest here, how we understand the relevant term or concept). This ability to change how a concept or term is understood is, I have shown, not a magical one. I began with a mundane example in order to show how we perform these kinds of speech acts even in low-stakes contexts. That the concepts or terms involved in moments of inter-language transition play a role in speakers’ final vocabularies as opposed to the concepts or terms involved in these more mundane contexts does not entail that the speech acts performed are therefore different. If this is right, then we have hit on one way of cashing out the notion of plank-by-plank, bit-by-bit conceptual revision that, whatever other worries we might want to raise for this view, cannot now be credibly accused of trading only in vague, figurative imagery.

But it will likely be argued that even if everything I have argued in this and the previous section is right, the pragmatist is still no better off with respect to the specific puzzle of *rational* conceptual change. A more nuanced understanding of the speech acts involved in this linguistic activity does not by itself show that inquirers can have genuine reasons for adopting novel understandings of concepts or terms that play a role in their final vocabularies. In the next section, I argue that the relationship between these speech acts and considerations of utility does point the way to more promising paths for addressing the puzzle of rational conceptual change for the pragmatist.

***5. The Role of Practical Reasons***

As I noted in the previous section, the non-assertoric speech acts that seem to play a key role in the activity of conceptual articulation involve a unique relationship to speaker and audience ends. Green, for example, emphasizes that supposition involves an important link to conversational or argumentative utility. In my work, I emphasize that stipulation is ends-directed—that it aims to serve the perceived shared ends of speaker and audience and is always subject to the felicitous criticism that it fails to serve these ends.[[12]](#endnote-12) But because speakers tend to default to assertoric framings of their views in these conceptual disagreements (as I explain in more detail just below), these ends are not always explicitly articulated, nor are they always apparent to the speakers themselves. If, then, when speakers are saying a term or concept ought to be understood in a certain way, they are performing the kinds of speech acts that constitutively involve an appeal to speaker’s and audience’s (perceived) shared ends, it may be that in the cases we are interested in there are additional normative reasons for entertaining or even endorsing the views in question. It would not be the case, then, that our reasons necessarily run out in such moments and only a causal vocabulary would be available to us to analyze them. The space of reasons would not, in other words, end up cannibalized by the space of causes for the pragmatist.

Consider first that conceptual disagreements are very often framed assertorically. We saw this in the Tolstoy and Anderson examples above (“Art *is . . .*”; “Government is . . .”), and we find examples of this assertoric framing throughout philosophy: “The concept of justice refers to . . .”; “Knowledge is . . .”; “What gender is, is . . . .” Amie Thomasson offers the following diagnosis for why speakers, and philosophers in particular, generally default to this assertoric framing when they articulate or defend a view of a concept. If philosophers

can think of themselves, and represent themselves as reporting discoveries of the world (rather than advocating for ways we should employ our concepts) that gives their work the air of authority, objectivity, and respectability characteristic of the sciences. . . . Where we present something explicitly as a normative suggestion, by contrast, it is far more open to being repudiated or ignored by others who do not share our values or our goals. So it is not hard to see why some deception, even self-deception about the *grounds* for . . . [philosophers’ normative] suggestions might be tempting. (2017, 26)

Whether or not we accept Thomasson’s diagnosis here, what we found in the previous section is that even in low-stakes cases of conceptual disagreement, taking the assertoric surface grammar of these disagreements as decisive for analyzing them fails to capture what speakers are doing with their words in these contexts. They are not primarily trying to represent existing usage or understanding; they are saying that we ought to understand the concept in a specific and possibly novel way, regardless of how we may currently understand the concept in question.

The tendency of speakers to interpret themselves and others as nonetheless attempting to represent the world when engaged in conceptual disagreements leads us to focus primarily on theoretical reasons as the relevant considerations for deciding whether a given view of a concept is correct. Now even if we disagree with Rorty’s position that our normative reasons run out in cases where the concept in question is part of our final vocabulary, it nonetheless seems right that our reasons often *appear* to run out in such cases. Part of the explanation for this phenomenon is that because it is our very categories for making sense of the world that are at stake, considerations that point to what is or is not the case in the world (i.e., theoretical reasons) will not show up as rationally compelling to those who do not already have or subscribe to the same conceptual scheme or understanding of the relevant concepts as we do.[[13]](#endnote-13) If “there is . . . no theory-independent way to reconstruct phrases like ‘really there,’” as Kuhn argues in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, then simply appealing to what is the case in the world to try and defend a position in a conceptual disagreement will only show up as rationally compelling, it seems, to those who already subscribe to our “theory” or our categories for making sense of the world ([1970] 2012, 205).[[14]](#endnote-14)

For Rorty, there is not just an appearance of justificatory exhaustion in such moments; our reasons really do run out. Echoing Wittgenstein, he writes that in such moments “our spade is turned . . . we have exhausted our argumentative resources” (1999, 83). There are no reasons we can appeal to that somehow transcend our final vocabulary and could prompt rational assent from those with different final vocabularies. Speakers that interpret themselves and others in such moments as felicitously issuing truth claims are therefore misguided, on Rorty’s view. They would be felicitous only if we could genuinely offer reasons to one another in these cases; only a causal analysis remains to be given.

But note that Rorty shares a key assumption here with proponents of the more traditional picture he rejects—where the traditional picture claims that speakers felicitously issue truth claims in such moments and can resolve their conceptual disagreements via theoretical reasons. Rorty assumes with this picture that inquirers are only doing something with genuine rational import if they are making assertions or truth claims. If, however, inquirers are in part engaging in, say, stipulative speech acts in contexts of conceptual articulation and conceptual disagreement, then what will come to the fore are practical reasons these inquirers are appealing to (perhaps without even realizing it) in order to defend their view of the relevant concept—practical reasons that may otherwise be obscured given our default assertoric framing of what we are doing as speakers in these contexts.

Consider the case of Tolstoy on art again. My reconstruction of Tolstoy’s view in the previous section does not follow his own presentation of that view. By utilizing a pragmatics to analyze Tolstoy’s discussion that does not treat as decisive the assertoric surface grammar of his account, we are able to more clearly discern the crucial role various ends play in Tolstoy’s project. And with the role of these ends highlighted, we can begin to ask whether these are the ends that ought to play such a central role in deciding how to think and talk about this concept, especially if the understanding Tolstoy supposes, stipulates, or metalinguistically proposes is novel for us. That is, we can ask if an appeal to these ends gives us good reason to start speaking and thinking in this novel way. We can also ask what other ends, if any, should play a role in our understanding of this concept. Should we, for example, understand the concept of art in such a way that works of art necessarily promote human flourishing and compassion? Should we understand this concept in such a way that works of art should be accessible to the widest possible audience? These are difficult questions, but what matters for our purposes is that they provide fodder for further argument and represent further normative reasons that speakers can appeal to in order to defend their view of the concept in question, reasons that are not as apparent when we accept speakers’ assertoric framing of their views or disagreements at face value. Rather than appealing to how a certain concept is in fact already used or understood—and remaining vulnerable to the accusation Rorty thinks plagues all such disagreement (that we have “no noncircular argumentative recourse”)—further reasons can therefore appear on the scene that can continue to engage speakers, even when those speakers view the target concept in fundamentally different ways.

And consider again Anderson’s account of the concept of government. While she does make more explicit the ends to which she is appealing than other philosophers (or other inquirers in similar contexts) tend to, the rereadings I proposed above offer an even more direct route to disclosing and assessing these ends and using them as fodder for further inquiry. For example, we can easily imagine that the defender of the traditional view of GOVERNMENT might simply reject that our understanding of this concept should have anything to do with the end of protecting or promoting “workers’ interests.” Similarly, speakers may well conclude that the variability in ends they take this concept to be accountable to means we are actually best off opting for a segmented treatment of what initially appeared to be a concept that we required a univocal understanding of—that there are, in other words, several different concepts at stake here (GOVERNMENT1, GOVERNMENT2, etc.) that we ought to utilize in different contexts. Were the argument to evolve in these ways, we will have moved from what may have appeared to be a justificatory stalemate—where speakers say we should understand concept X in a specific way because that is just what X *is*—to arguing over different ends speakers are appealing to in order to justify their preferred understanding of this concept and the role these ends should play in determining how we understand this concept. If this is how the exchange evolves, then the speakers are not hitting justificatory bedrock: they have located further questions and issues they can continue to meaningfully argue over.

Now there is no guarantee, of course, that appealing to these further reasons will magically resolve these disagreements. But what we are looking for is not a standard of “absolute correctness” or an Archimedean point that will solve these disagreements once and for all. What the pragmatist tackling the puzzle of conceptual change needs instead is a way of allowing speakers to continue rationally engaging with one another despite deep differences in their understanding of the concepts that matter to them most. A reinterpretation of speakers’ linguistic activity in these contexts as in part non-assertoric and implicating a range of practical reasons that may otherwise remain relegated to the background, helps explain how speakers can continue this rational engagement—can continue in a game of giving and asking for reasons—even when their final vocabularies are at stake.

Several clarifications are important here. First, my claim is not that these practical reasons will *only* ever show up when we adopt the kinds of rereadings of the speech acts involved in conceptual disagreements I am advocating for in this discussion. It is of course possible that one could recognize the relevance of these considerations without such rereadings. But the more in-depth approach to analyzing speakers’ utterances in these contexts and the broadening of our sense of the relevant speech acts I have advocated for is a particularly effective route for illuminating the role of these reasons because they are linked to the specific speech acts that these rereadings highlight.

Second, it will likely be objected that even if we are able to better foreground these practical reasons as a result of the reading of conceptual disagreements I am recommending, pragmatists will be no better off because these practical reasons will *themselves* be a product of our existing conceptual schemes and therefore cannot provide us with reasons for altering those very schemes. At best, we are back to Rorty’s ethnocentrism.

This objection, however, presupposes with Rorty the same static view of our final vocabulary—that any apparent conceptual revisions that take place for inquirers must either be ones that are already determined in advance by our existing conceptual scheme or that these revisions will be prompted by something external to the scheme (such as a set of causal factors). But as I pointed out at the end of the previous section, the speech acts I have highlighted provide us with a nonstatic, diachronic view of how we can initiate changes in our conceptual schemes—a clear, nonfigurative sense in which we can utilize some aspects of our conceptual scheme to change others. When we carry out acts of supposition, metalinguistic proposals, or stipulations regarding how a concept or term in our final vocabulary should be understood, we are not just playing out linguistic moves that are in some sense already “contained” within our existing conceptual scheme; we are often forging novel inferential connections that, if they are granted sufficient uptake from the relevant community of speakers, will change that scheme.

But the critic might now argue that I have not really answered their objection. Their point is that the practical reasons I am highlighting are themselves ones we *already* endorse and therefore cannot give anyone reason to change their view of a concept or piece of their final vocabulary who does not already similarly endorse such reasons. For example, if I am a convinced proponent of an art-for-art’s-sake view and therefore think that art has no obligation to be accessible to a wide audience, I will not be moved by Tolstoy’s appeal to egalitarian considerations. Either the reasons are the product of a conceptual scheme I already subscribe to, or they are not, in which case I will not be rationally moved.

Crucially, however, the performance of these speech acts involved in conceptual revision that I have in mind are not one-off phenomena. They can iterate, and they can iterate *ad infinitum*.[[15]](#endnote-15) In the imagined exchange between the proponent of art-for-art’s-sake and Tolstoy, inquirers can now argue over how the concept of egalitarianism should be understood or used—whether, for example, it is best construed as something that should be promoted across domains of life or whether it only has a legitimate function in political contexts, say. Similarly, inquirers can argue over how to understand ‘worker interests’ and whether it is best viewed as something that is exclusively linked to a worker’s economic situation or whether it should also be viewed as something that is importantly linked to a worker’s role in shaping their own working conditions. Such arguments will, if the view I have advanced in this paper is right, inevitably involve further non-assertoric speech acts articulating how the new target concept is to be understood, and these acts will appeal, whether the speakers themselves are aware of it, to various practical reasons—practical reasons that will themselves in turn implicate concepts that can then be foregrounded and subject to further articulation via further speech acts of supposition, stipulation, metalinguistic proposals, etc. It will not be the case, then, that inquirers are constrained by their existing conceptual schemes in such a way that any moves they make must either be already determined by that scheme or generated by causal factors outside that scheme. Inquirers, on the view I have advanced here, will always have the capacity to (if successful) change that scheme by performing acts that, by their very nature, utilize one part of that scheme to alter another.

And to reiterate, the goal is not to settle the conceptual disagreement once and for all. The latter resolution is at odds with the pragmatist insistence that our language-bound status precludes a standard for “absolute correctness.” What we are instead looking for is a way for speakers to continue rationally engaging with one another, even when confronted with challenges and alternatives to their final vocabularies. And we want to do this in a way that does not rely on an appeal to vague imagery, but begins to explain, in demystified terms, how such rational revisions might transpire. The account I have sketched in this article points in both of these directions.

A final important point of clarification is that I am not arguing that the account I have sketched here allows pragmatists to advance rationally in the face of *every* conceptual change. All actual conceptual disagreements will take place under non-ideal epistemic conditions, and so inquirers’ failures to acknowledge reasons that they should acknowledge will of course be widespread. But even under ideal conditions, where inquirers are responding to normative reasons just as they ought, there may well be cases where however many times they perform the kinds of metalinguistic and metaconceptual speech acts I have described in this article and however many further practical reasons they disclose, there is simply no common ground among these inquirers to ground rational inquiry. But this possibility is not a problem for my view. My goal in this discussion has been to show what rational conceptual revision can begin to look like for the pragmatist and to do so in a way that does not rely on unexplained imagery. Someone who wants to defend the aspect of Rorty’s project that insists on the exclusively causal view of inter-language transition will have to point not only to individual instances of cases where speakers really do lack any such common ground; they will have to show that *all* cases of conceptual change that involve the terms of our final vocabularies should be handled in this way. Absent such an account, what this article’s discussion has shown is that we can indeed make basic changes to how we think and talk about the world—plank by plank and bit by bit—through a process of conceptual reweaving and revision and in a way that is normatively constrained. None of this need be mysterious. It grows out of our mundane, but overlooked, ability to do things with our words beyond representing how things are.

***6. Conclusion***

There remains an inevitable meta-worry for the view I have advanced in this article: Am I not myself *asserting* that conceptual dispute and articulation *are not truly represented* *as* a series of assertions?[[16]](#endnote-16) One response here would be to invoke the image of the Wittgensteinian ladder, where I am using the tools of the very framework I critique to help us reach a point where we can mutually dispense with this framework as well as the preceding philosophical debate. This is not the approach I will take, however, because I have not attempted this kind of strategic subversion in this paper. What I have attempted to do, instead, is apply the method I am advocating for: I am attempting to have us think about the activity of conceptual articulation in a distinct and novel light as importantly the product of a range of non-assertoric speech acts. I am doing this because I take it to be useful, because it helps us preserve key pragmatist insights regarding our language-bound status without having our views bottom out in obscurity or an unacceptable relativism—ends that I assume are shared with my audience (though they may of course not be). We should also think about conceptual articulation in this light because it opens up new avenues of inquiry. This project calls for future in-depth exploration of our abilities as the kinds of linguistic creatures we are to alter the very categories by which we make sense of the world. As I note above, this project is in its earliest stages, and there is a great deal of exciting work to do. This is work that pragmatists in particular should welcome because, as I have argued here, it bears directly on the development of the pragmatist project itself.[[17]](#endnote-17)

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1. I use italics for stress and for certain terms-of-art, small caps to refer to concepts (or the language of ‘concept of’ followed by the concept without small caps), single quotes to mention terms, and double quotes for quoting other authors and for scare quoting. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The language of “revising” is a nod to Quine’s formulations in “Two Dogmas” (1980, e.g., 43). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting the importance of this aspect of Rorty’s project for this paper’s discussion. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For criticisms of Rorty’s project that similarly question his approach to normativity, see Putnam (1989, 234–40) and see Rorty (1984) for discussion of Putnam; see Ramberg (2000), Rorty’s response (2000b), and for illuminating recent commentary on Ramberg and Rorty’s exchange, see Huetter-Almerigi (2020); also see McDowell (1996, 146–61) and Rorty (1998) for discussion of McDowell. While these accounts all raise questions regarding the relationship between the spaces of reasons and causes in Rorty’s work, my criticism is unique in focusing on the specific question of how this relationship plays out in Rorty’s account of conceptual change. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Brandom therefore cannot be right (at least as a reading of Rorty) when he says: “For the characteristic feature distinguishing vocabularies from nondiscursive tools is their function in generating novel claims, and hence novel purposes” (2000, 175). Metaphors are the paradigm case of how “novel claims” and “novel purposes” are generated for Rorty, and they are precisely *non*discursive tools in that they operate purely within the space of causes. Rorty claims that any anxiety about giving the “highest flights of genius the same metaphysical status as thunderclaps and birdsongs” in fact depends on a mistaken picture of language (1991, 168). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out the Peircean echoes of this project. Consider, for example, Cheryl Misak’s observations regarding Peirce on the project of definition: “Peirce suggests we can avoid these empty definitions . . . by starting with the project of specifying consequences, rather than the project of definition. Rather than begin with the specification of necessary and sufficient conditions for ‘H is true’, we ought to specify the consequences of ‘H is true’. In doing so, we might find ourselves with some necessary conditions—but they will be substantial ones. Pragmatism will thus offer, at least in the first instance, something other than a biconditional definition of ‘H is true’” (2004, 36). For more on Peirce and conceptual change, see Short (1980; 2007). I had not considered this connection, and I plan to pursue it in future. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. It is particularly surprising that Rorty does not consider the speech act of proposal as an important candidate here given that in the volume *The Linguistic Turn*, which Rorty edited, he includes and discusses Alice Ambrose’s view that “philosophical theories are not, as they appear to be, answers to questions, but are proposals to alter language” ([1952] 1992, 151). Rorty himself refers to this as the “‘proposal’ theory of philosophy” (155 n. 16). He seems to reject the “proposal” view implicitly in a passage cited above, though he does not tell us exactly why: a metaphor is “a call to change one’s language and one’s life, rather than a proposal about how to systematize either.” [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For Tolstoy’s discussion of these specific examples, see ([1896] 1996, 137, 157, and 155 n. 5). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. In the text, this entire passage is italicized, but I have removed the italics here to make it easier to read. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. I discuss this example in more detail in Shields (forthcoming). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. To clarify, my claim is not that these speech acts are the *only* ones involved in these moments of conceptual articulation and revision, but that they are a crucial part of what is involved. There is much more work to be done both expanding the accounts of these acts and identifying additional aspects of the pragmatics involved in conceptual articulation and revision. My account of these acts and the role they can play in this article is intended to lay the groundwork for this future work. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See especially Shields (2020, 504–12) and the discussion of categorizing different objections to speech acts. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. “Theoretical reason . . . addresses the considerations that recommend accepting particular claims as to what is or is not the case” (Wallace 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. I give a similar account of the phenomenon of deep disagreement in my (2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. There is an interesting parallel between this aspect of my account and Carnapian explication as articulated by Novaes. Carnapian explication is “an open-ended process that can be iterated: the explicatum (the result) of one explication can then become the explicandum (the starting point) for a different explication” (Novaes 2020, 1025). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting I address this objection. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Special thanks to Garrett Bredeson, Jason Potter, Dave Youkey, Roger Conarroe, Eric Fox, and the Fall 2019 Pragmatism Reading Group at CU Boulder for feedback on an earlier version of this paper. I am grateful to my dissertation committee—Mark Lance, Quill Kukla, Kate Withy, Bryce Huebner, and Sally McConnell-Ginet—for their invaluable help in developing many of the ideas presented in this paper. Many thanks as well to Hailey Huget, Brian Klug, and Yvonne Huetter-Almerigi for discussing this material with me. I am also grateful to two anonymous referees for insightful comments that helped me to restructure and rethink key elements of the paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)