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Canadian Journal of Philosophy, 2010

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CANADIAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY
Volume 40, Number 4, December 2010, pp. 567-590

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Rehabilitating Objectivity:

Rorty, Brandom, and the New

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I

In recent years, a renascent form of pragmatism has developed which argues that a satisfactory pragmatic position must integrate into itself the concepts of truth and objectivity. This New Pragmatism, as Cheryl Misak calls it, is directed primarily against Rorty's neo-pragmatic dismissal of these concepts. For Rorty, the goal of our epistemic practices should not be to achieve an objective view, one that tries to represent things as they are 'in themselves,' but rather to attain a view of things that can gain as much inter-subjective agreement as possible. In Rorty's language, we need to replace the aim of objectivity with that of solidarity. While the New Pragmatists agree with Rorty's 'humanist' and 'anti-authoritarian' notion that the world by itself cannot dictate to us what we should think about it, they demur from his suggestion that this requires us to give up

- 1 I would like to thank the National Endowment for the Humanities for support in the writing of this paper. I would also like to thank Russell Goodman, Cheryl Misak, Alex Klein, Carl Sachs, and all of the participants in the NEH seminar on Pragmatism: A Living Tradition.

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the notions of truth and objectivity. The new pragmatic line of thought goes something like this: Implicit in the inter-subjective practice of giving and asking for reasons there are norms of correctness, of getting things objectively right, that go beyond the warrantedness that agents ascribe to each other's justificatory speech acts. In being guided by such norms, we are not, as Rorty thinks, simply trying to convince a dialogical partner that our view of something is justified, we are also trying to make sure that our mutual beliefs about that something are right. Because the question of whether these beliefs are right cannot be answered by pointing to a social consensus — as we can always be wrong about any given question — their truth or falsity is an objective matter. Since the commitments to both warrantedness and objective truth are implicit in our discursive and inquiring practices, a pragmatic reconstruction of these practices, one that takes the point of view of the agent seriously, will show them both to be philosophically legitimate.

Many of the New Pragmatists — most notably Bjorn Ramberg, Jeffrey Stout, and Robert Brandom — argue that the aim of getting things objectively right is in fact consistent with Rorty's own best insights. If Rorty only took seriously the lessons of his pragmatic radicalization of the linguistic turn, the argument goes, he would either be a New Pragmatist

the linguistic turn, the argument goes, he would either be a New Pragmatist² or, in Brandom's story — the story we will be concerned with in this paper — he would recognize that his anti-authoritarianism is at least consistent with a pragmatically reconstructed notion of objectivity. In this paper I argue that Brandom's attempted recruitment of Rorty for the new pragmatic cause fails because it misdiagnoses the source of his hostility to the concept of objectivity.

Later in Rorty's career, the reasons for this hostility are clear: The search for truth and objectivity as they have been construed in the philosophical tradition is not consistent with human dignity and freedom. Rorty often put this thought in terms of his prophetic desire to help institute a second Enlightenment.³ The great achievement of the first Enlightenment was the change that it effected in our moral view of ourselves. Instead of seeing ourselves as morally indebted to something outside of ourselves, i.e., God, we came to think that the 'source of normativity' was internal to our own moral being. The norms of moral action are not *given* but are something that *we* need to take responsi-

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- 2 For this story, see Ramberg (2000) and Stout (2007). Ramberg and Stout take Rorty to be a New Pragmatist because in his response to Ramberg's paper Rorty accepts — based upon a new reading of Davidson — a hygienic notion of objectivity (see Rorty 2000). In Levine (2008) I argue that there is less to this admission than meets the eye, and that Rorty, even in his later stages, rejects the new pragmatic project.
 - 3 For more on this, see Rorty (1999), Brandom (2008), and McDowell (2000).

bility for by deliberating together about what to do and what type of people we want to be. Rorty's envisaged second Enlightenment transfers this train of thought from the practical to the theoretical sphere. Just as we threw off our tutelage to an outside moral authority in the first Enlightenment, in the second we would additionally unburden ourselves of the need to bow down before the epistemic authority of objective reality. For Rorty, objective reality cannot dictate to us how we should represent it because it is mute, i.e., it does not speak and offer reasons to us. This is something that only we do in the inter-subjective space of giving and asking for reasons. In a second Enlightenment we would realize this fact and accordingly shoot for solidarity rather than objectivity.

The question is: Where does the original source of this hostility to

the question of where the original source of the hostility to objectivity lie? In his paper 'An Arc of Thought: From Rorty's Eliminative Materialism to his Pragmatism,' Brandom argues, I think correctly, that it stems from the constellation of ideas that informed Rorty's eliminative materialism. However, I think Brandom stresses the wrong idea in this constellation. In his opinion, it is Rorty's views concerning the *in corrigibility* of the mental that leads to his eschewal of the concept of objectivity, whereas I think that it is Rorty's views concerning the eliminability of *sensory experience*. What I try to show in this paper is that it is Rorty's views on the eliminability of sensory experience that open the way to his later hostility to objectivity, and that any attempt to pragmatically rehabilitate objectivity must address this thesis if it is to be successful.⁴

Let me say one more thing. I agree with the New Pragmatists that the rehabilitation of objectivity is necessary and important, but we agree about the theoretical direction that such a project must take. The paper's focus on Rorty is meant to sharpen this disagreement. While this might seem a roundabout way to get at our divergence, this focus is necessary because Brandom and most of the New Pragmatists arrive at their positions in large measure by working through the perceived deficiencies of Rorty's account of objectivity.⁵ While Brandom thinks that Rorty's account of objectivity can be rehabilitated through *communicative-theoretic* means, I argue that this rehabilitation can only be achieved through a consideration of the objectivity that pertains to *perceptual experience*, and therefore through a much more thoroughgoing revision of the Rortyan picture than allowed for by the New Pragmatists.

4 I adopt the language of 'rehabilitation' from McDowell (2000).

5 See Brandom (2000a and 2008), Misak (2000 and 2007), Ramberg (2000), Stout (2007), and Price (2003).

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