

September 14, 2020

Week Five Handout

Passages from Rorty's "Nineteenth Century Idealism and Twentieth Century Textualism"

Idealists started off from Berkeley's claim that nothing can be like an idea except another idea. The textualists start off from the claim that **all problems, topics, and distinctions are language-relative—the results of our having chosen to use a certain vocabulary, to play a certain language-game.** [155]

In textualist terms, this becomes the claim that **the vocabulary of science is merely one among others—merely the vocabulary which happens to be handy in predicting and controlling nature. It is not as physicalism would have us think, Nature's Own Vocabulary.** [155]

The whole idea of adopting a new vocabulary because something has been discovered to be the case is just one more element in that "metaphysics of presence" which Heidegger wants to deconstruct.

I have been saying, first, that idealism and textualism have in common an opposition to the claim of science to be **a paradigm of human activity**, and, second, that they differ in that one is a philosophical doctrine and the other an expression of suspicion about philosophy.

I can put these two points together by saying that whereas nineteenth-century idealism wanted to substitute one sort of science (philosophy) for another (natural science) as the center of culture, twentieth-century **textualism wants to place literature in the center and to treat both science and philosophy as, at best, literary genres.** [157]

We don't want works of literature to be criticizable within a terminology we already know; we want both those works and criticism of them to give us new terminologies. [157]

This way of separating science and literature has at least the merit of focusing attention on a distinction which is relevant to both idealism and textualism—**the distinction between finding out whether a proposition is true and finding out whether a vocabulary is good.**

Let me call "romanticism" the thesis that what is most important for human life is not what propositions we believe but what vocabulary we use.

Then I can say that **romanticism is what unites metaphysical idealism and literary textualism.**

Both, as I said earlier, remind us that scientists do not bring a naked eye to nature, that propositions of science are not simple transcriptions of what is present to the senses. Both draw the corollary that **the current scientific vocabulary is one vocabulary among others, and that there is no need to give it primacy, nor to reduce other vocabularies to it.** Both see the scientists' claim

to discover the ways things really are as needing qualification, as a pretension which needs to be curbed. [158]

Romanticism accepts Kant's point that objectivity is conformity to rule, but changes the emphasis, so that objectivity becomes *mere* conformity to rule, merely going along with the crowd, merely consensus [158]

Post-Kantian metaphysical idealism was a specifically philosophical form of romanticism whereas textualism is a specifically post-philosophical form. [159]

Idealism—the view that the ultimate nature of reality is "revealed through those traits which distinguish man as a spiritual being"... [160]

Philosophy came to look like a super-science because of what Kant and Hegel had in common—namely, a solution to the problem of the relation of science to art, morality and religion. One side of transcendental idealism is turned toward Newton, Locke, the way of ideas, and the problem of perception.

The other faces toward Schiller, Hegel and romanticism. [162]

Hegel...began treating the vocabulary of Galilean science as simply one among dozens of others in which the Idea chose to describe itself. [162]

What survived from the disappearance of metaphysical idealism as a scientific, arguable, thesis was, simply, romanticism.

In section I, I defined 'romanticism', unromantically, as the thesis that the one thing needful was to discover not which propositions are true but rather what vocabulary we should use. [163]

Hegel left Kant's ideal of philosophy-as-science a shambles, but he did...create a new literary genre, a genre which exhibited the relativity of significance to choice of vocabulary, the bewildering variety of vocabularies from which we can choose, and the intrinsic instability of each. [164]

Hegel's romantic description of how thought works is appropriate for post-Hegelian politics and literature and almost entirely inappropriate for science. One can respond to this difference by saying "So much the worse for Hegel," or by saying "So much the worse for science."

The choice between those responses is a choice between Snow's "two cultures" (and between "analytic" and "Continental" philosophy, which are, so to speak, the public relations agencies for those two cultures). [164]

The principal legacy of metaphysical idealism is the ability of the literary culture to stand apart from science, to **assert its spiritual superiority to science, to claim to embody what is most important for human beings**. Kant's suggestion that using the vocabulary of Verstand, of science, was simply one of the good things human beings could do, was a first and absolutely crucial step in making a secular but non-scientific culture respectable. Hegel's inadvertent exemplification of what such a culture could offer—namely, the historical sense of the relativity of principles and vocabularies to a place and time, **the romantic sense that everything can be changed by talking in new terms**—was the second, no less necessary step. The romanticism which Hegel brought to philosophy reinforced the hope that literature might be the successor subject to philosophy—that what the philosophers had been seeking, the inmost secrets of the spirit, were to be discovered by the new literary genres which were emerging. [165]

There was, however, a third step in the process of establishing **the autonomy and supremacy of the literary culture**. This was the step taken by Nietzsche and William James. Their contribution was to **replace romanticism by pragmatism**. Instead of saying that the discovery of vocabularies could bring hidden secrets to light, they said that new ways of speaking could help get us what we want. Instead of hinting that literature might succeed philosophy as discoverer of ultimate reality, **they gave up the notion of truth as a correspondence to reality**.... As Nietzsche said, they were the first generation not to believe that they had the truth. [165]

This **replacement of romanticism by pragmatism within philosophy** was paralleled by a change in the literary culture's self-conception. The great **figures** of that culture in our century—the great "modernists," if you like—have tried to show what our lives might be like if we had no hope of what Nietzsche called "metaphysical comfort."

The movement I am calling "textualism" stands to pragmatism and to this body of literature as the nineteenth-century attempt to make literature a discoverer of ultimate truth stood to metaphysical idealism and to Romantic poetry. I think we shall best understand the role of textualism within our culture if we see it as **an attempt to think through a thorough-going pragmatism, a thorough-going abandonment of the notion of discovering the truth which is common to theology and to science**. [166]

The textualist may brush aside the notion of the text as machine which operates quite independently of its creator, and **offer what Bloom calls a "strong misreading"**. The critic asks neither the author nor the text about their intentions **but simply beats the text into a shape which will serve his own purpose**. He makes the text refer to whatever is relevant to that purpose. He does this by imposing a vocabulary—a "grid," in Foucault's terminology—on the text which may have nothing to do with any vocabulary used in the text or by its author, and seeing what happens. The model here is not the curious collector of clever gadgets taking them apart to see what makes them work and carefully ignoring any extrinsic end they may have, but the psychoanalyst blithely interpreting a dream or a joke as a symptom of homicidal mania. [166]

It is important for an understanding of textualism to see both the similarities and the differences between these two models of criticism. The chief similarity is that both **start from the pragmatist refusal to think of truth as correspondence to reality.** [167]

The first sort of textualists—the weak textualist—thinks that each work has its own vocabulary, its own secret code, which may not be commensurable with that of any other.

The second sort of textualist—the strong textualist—has his own vocabulary and doesn't worry about whether anybody shares it...

It is the strong textualist who is the true heir of Nietzsche and James, and thus of Kant and Hegel. The weak textualist—the decoder—is just one more victim of realism, of the "metaphysics of presence." [167]

The strong textualist is trying to live without that comfort. He recognizes what Nietzsche and James recognized, that **the idea of method presupposes that of a privileged vocabulary, the vocabulary which gets to the essence of the object, the one which expresses the properties which it has in itself as opposed to those which read into it.** Nietzsche and James said that the notion of such a vocabulary was a myth—that even in science, not to mention philosophy, we simply cast around for a vocabulary which lets us get what we want. [168]

I can summarize what I've been saying as follows.

- Metaphysical idealism was a momentary, though important, stage in the emergence of romanticism.
- The notion that philosophy might replace science as a **secular substitute for religion** was a momentary, though important, stage in the **replacement of science by literature as the presiding cultural discipline.**
- Romanticism was *aufgehoben* in pragmatism, the claim that the significance of new vocabularies was not their ability to decode but their mere utility.
- Pragmatism is the philosophical counterpart of literary modernism, the kind of literature which prides itself on its autonomy and novelty rather than its truthfulness to experience or its discovery of pre-existing significance.
- Strong textualism draws the moral of modernist literature and creates genuinely modernist criticism. [168]

This summary puts me in a position to return to the somewhat artificial parallel I drew at the beginning of this paper—between the claim that there are only ideas and the claim that there are only texts. The only textualists who make the latter, metaphysical-sounding sort of claim, are the weak ones—the critics who think that they have now found the true method for analyzing literary works because they have now found the fundamental problematic with which these works deal. This sort of claim gets made because such critics have not grasped that, **from a full-**

fledged pragmatist point of view, there is no interesting difference between tables and texts, between protons and poems. To a pragmatist, these are all just permanent possibilities for use, and thus for redescription, reinterpretation, manipulation.

But the weak textualist thinks, with Dilthey and Gadamer, that there is a great difference between what scientists do and what critics do. He thinks that the fact that the former often agree and the latter usually don't shows something about the natures of their respective subject-matters...[168]

Occasionally a great physicist or a great critic comes along and gives us a new vocabulary which enables us to do a lot of new and marvelous things. Then we may exclaim that we have now found out the true nature of matter, or poetry, or whatever. But Hegel's ghost, embodied in Kuhn's romantic philosophy of science or Bloom's philosophy of romantic poetry, reminds us that vocabularies are as mortal as men. The pragmatist reminds us that a new and useful vocabulary is just that, not a sudden unmediated vision of things or texts as they are.

As usual with pithy little formulae, the Derridean claim that "There is nothing outside the text" is right about what it implicitly denies and wrong about what it explicitly asserts. The only force of saying that texts do not refer to non-texts is just the old pragmatist chestnut that any specification of a referent is going to be in some vocabulary. Thus one is really comparing two descriptions of a thing rather than a description with the thing-in-itself. This chestnut, in turn, is just an expanded form of Kant's slogan that "Intuitions without concepts are blind," which, in turn, was just a sophisticated restatement of Berkeley's ingenuous remark that "nothing can be like an idea except an idea."

These are all merely misleading ways of saying that we shall not see reality plain, unmasked, naked to our gaze.

Textualism has nothing to add to this claim except a new misleading image—the image of the world as consisting of everything written in all the vocabularies used so far. [169]

Textualism adds nothing save an extra metaphor to the romanticism of Hegel and the pragmatism of James and Nietzsche...[170]

It is this Kantian conviction, I think, which leads Trilling to protest against one of the most distinctive features of romanticism and of our literary culture, its ability to make what Trilling called "figures" out of writers—a term which he defines as follows:

Figures--that is to say, creative spirits whose work requires an especially conscientious study because in it are to be discerned significances, even mysteries, even powers, which carry it beyond what in a loose and general sense we call literature, beyond even what we think of as very good literature, and bring it to as close an approximation of a sacred wisdom as can be achieved in our culture.

This moral objection to textualism is also a moral objection to pragmatism's claim that all vocabularies, even that of our own liberal imagination, are temporary historical resting-places. It is also an objection to the literary culture's isolation from common human concerns... Put in the pragmatist's own preferred cost-accounting terms, it says that the stimulus to the intellectual's

private moral imagination provided by his strong misreadings, by his search for sacred wisdom, is purchased at the price of his separation from his fellow humans. [173]

Passages from Rorty's "Solidarity or Objectivity":

There are two principal ways in which reflective human beings try, by placing their lives in a larger context, to give sense to those lives.

The first is by telling the story of their contribution to a community. This community may be the actual historical one in which they live, or another actual one, distant in time or place, or a quite imaginary one, consisting perhaps of a dozen heroes and heroines selected from history or fiction or both.

The second way is to describe themselves as standing in immediate relation to a nonhuman reality. [167]

The tradition in Western culture that centers on the notion of the search for Truth, a tradition that runs from the Greek philosophers through the Enlightenment, is the clearest example of the attempt to find a sense in one's existence by turning away from solidarity to objectivity. [167]

To most thinkers of the eighteenth century, it seemed clear that the access to Nature which physical science had provided should now be followed by the establishment of social, political, and economic institutions that were in accordance with Nature. Ever since, liberal social thought has centered upon social reform as made possible by objective knowledge of what human beings are like—not knowledge of what Greeks or Frenchmen or Chinese are like, but of humanity as such. We are the heirs of this objectivist tradition, which centers on the assumption that we must step outside our community long enough to examine it in the light of something that transcends it, namely that which it has in common with every other actual and possible human community. [168]

So they must construct an epistemology that has room for a kind of justification that is not merely social but natural, springing from human nature itself, and made possible by a link between that part of nature and the rest of nature. [169]

From a pragmatist point of view, to say that what is rational for us now to believe may not be *true*, is simply to say that somebody may come up with a better idea. It is to say there is always room for improved belief, since new evidence, or new hypotheses, or a whole new vocabulary, may come along.

For pragmatists, the desire for objectivity is not the desire to escape the limitations of one's community, but simply the desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible, the desire to extend the reference of "us" as far as we can.

Insofar as pragmatists make a distinction between knowledge and opinion, it is simply the distinction between topics on which such agreement is relatively easy to get and topics on which agreement is relatively hard to get. [169]

The question of whether truth or rationality has an intrinsic nature, of whether we ought to have a positive theory about either topic, is just the question of whether our self-description ought to be constructed around a relation to human nature or around a relation to a particular collection of human beings, whether we should desire objectivity or solidarity. [170]

In the most original and powerful section of his book, Putnam argues that the notion that "rationality . . . is defined by the local cultural norms" is merely the demonic counterpart of positivism. It is, as he says, "a scientific theory inspired by anthropology as positivism was a scientific theory inspired by the exact sciences." [172]

Part of the force of Quine's and Davidson's attack on the distinction between the conceptual and the empirical is that the distinction between different cultures does not differ in kind from the distinction between different theories held by members of a single culture. [173]

In the final sentence of his book, Putnam says that, "The very fact that we speak of our different conceptions as different conceptions of *rationality* posits a *Grenzbegriff*, a limited-concept of ideal truth." But what is such a posit supposed to do, except to say that from God's point of view the human race is heading in the right direction?...

To say that *we* think we're heading in the right direction is just to say, with Kuhn, that we can, by hindsight, tell the story of the past as a story of progress. To say that we still have a long way to go, that our present views should not be cast in bronze, is too platitudinous to require support by positing limit-concepts. So it is hard to see what difference is made by the difference between saying "there is only the dialogue" and saying "there is also that to which the dialogue converges." [174]

Positing *Grenzbegriffe* seems merely a way of telling ourselves that a nonexistent God would, if he did exist, be pleased with us. If we could ever be moved solely by the desire for solidarity, setting aside the desire for objectivity altogether, then we should think of human progress as making it possible for human beings to do more interesting things and be more interesting people, not as heading toward a place that has somehow been prepared for humanity in advance. Our self-image would employ images of making rather than finding, the images used by the Romantics to praise poets rather than the images used by the Greeks to praise mathematicians. [174]

The pragmatist gives up the first sort of comfort because he thinks that to say that certain people have certain rights is merely to say that we should treat them in certain ways. It is not to give a *reason* for treating them in those ways. [178]

I think that pragmatism's attack on the various structure-content distinctions that buttress the realist's notion of objectivity can best be seen as an attempt to let us think of truth in this Nietzschean way, as entirely a matter of solidarity. [178]

That is why I think we need to say, despite Putnam, that "there is only the dialogue," only *us*, and to throw out the last residues of the notion of "trans-cultural rationality."

But this should not lead us to repudiate, as Nietzsche sometimes did, the elements in our movable host which embody the ideas of Socratic conversation, Christian fellowship, and Enlightenment science.

Nietzsche ran together his diagnosis of philosophical realism as an expression of fear and resentment with his own resentful idiosyncratic idealizations of silence, solitude, and violence. PostNietzschean thinkers like Adorno and Heidegger and Foucault have run together Nietzsche's criticisms of the metaphysical tradition on the one hand with his criticisms of bourgeois civility, of Christian love, and of the nineteenth century's hope that science would make the world a better place to live, on the other.

I do not think there is any interesting connection between these two sets of criticisms. Pragmatism seems to me, as I have said, a philosophy of solidarity rather than of despair.

From this point of view, Socrates's turn away from the gods, Christianity's turn from an Omnipotent Creator to the man who suffered on the Cross, and the Baconian turn from science as contemplation of eternal truth to science as instrument of social progress, can be seen as so many preparations for the act of social faith that is suggested by a Nietzschean view of truth. [179]

The rhetoric of scientific objectivity, pressed too hard and taken too seriously, has led us to people like B. F. Skinner on the one hand and people like Althusser on the other—two equally pointless fantasies, both produced by the attempt to be "scientific" about our moral and political lives. Reaction against scientism led to attacks on natural science as a sort of false god. But there is nothing wrong with science, there is only something wrong with the attempt to divinize it, the attempt characteristic of realistic philosophy. [180]

Unpacking a Rortyan argument:

Here are five claims or moves Rorty might be seen to be making:

1. Rejecting two-stage talk of two activities, one of instituting meanings and the other of applying them to justify beliefs.
(The appeal here is to Quine’s pragmatist arguments in TDE.)
2. Rejecting the language/theory distinction entirely, in favor of the ‘vocabulary’ vocabulary. All we do is use vocabularies, and those practices *both* institute meanings and apply concepts to undertake commitments (endorse, take-true, some claimables).
3. Rejecting the Kantian problematic of assigning responsibility for some features of our discourse (vocabulary-use) to what we are talking about (what is represented)—the authority of the objective—and responsibility for other features of our discourse to us—the authority of the subjective.
4. Rejecting as ultimately unintelligible the idea that our thought is *normatively* constrained (as opposed to *causally* constrained) by an objective world via the representational semantic dependence of representings on representeds that consists in representeds providing normative standards of assessment of the correctness of representings (in a distinctive sense of “correctness.”).
This is a kind of authority of representeds over representings.
5. Social pragmatism about normativity: all normative statuses (responsibility, authority, being a standard of correctness) are social statuses.

Some questions:

Does (1) require (2)?

Does (2) imply (3)?

Does (3) imply (4)?

Does adding (5) to any of these claims make the implications go through?