

Rorty's Antirepresentationalist Arguments

Introduction:

[Mention new Pitt-Zoom requirement that everyone go into a "Waiting Room" until I release them.]

Periodizing Rorty's Antirepresentationalism:

1. PMN, epistemological foundationalism is the result of representationalism, and it is bad.
2. Gets to social pragmatism about normativity, already in CP. But doesn't yet know how to use this as an argument for the conclusion he wants.
3. 'Vocabulary' vocabulary undercuts idea of some aspects of our discursive practice being responsible to how things are, as opposed to contingent (relative to how things are) features of our practices. But how does this work, exactly? Urges vocabulary-relativity of everything. But quick argument of that form is retrograde, backsliding Carnapian pragmatism, not post-Quinean.

What more careful antirepresentationalist uses can RR make of the 'vocabulary' vocabulary?

4. Some ideas that get explored in trying to make 'vocabulary' vocabulary's undercutting of Kantian problematic the basis for an argument for antirepresentationalism that goes beyond "that old pragmatist chestnut: when you describe what is represented, you are using another description."
5. Antiauthoritarianism. This has some variants, at least one of which (combining social pragmatism about normativity with a normative analysis of representation) yields his best argument.

A Closer look at the Various Antirepresentationalist Arguments:

1. *PMN*: **representationalism leads to foundationalism.**

I want to look here at the *other* arguments that seem to be in play at various points in Rorty's texts.

Re RR's exile from philosophy after *PMN*:

Misak: “Many of Rorty’s followers still believe that to have been his student or to work on pragmatist topics is to put oneself at risk failure in the academic job market. In the preface to his volume in the *Library of Living Philosophers*, which Rorty saw to completion in the final days of his life, Randy Auxier says: “Rorty prudently exiled himself from professional philosophy so as not to damage the careers of those who wanted to study with him”. [370]

Me, Cornel West, Mike Williams, Barry Allen, were not held back.

[Tell German academic anecdote about *Doktorarbeit* and *Doktorvater*.]

2. **Social character of ontology:**

- a) “Arc of Thought” argument (see also my very early “Freedom and Constraint by Norms”) leading from eliminative materialism, through a lesson about vocabularies as *determining* ontologies, rather than the other way around.
Note that such an argument *put this way* presupposes the intelligibility of the Kantian division of authority/responsibility between objective and subjective centers.
But in its final form, the conception of the distinction between subjective, social, and objective things as itself ultimately a social distinction is a different way of describing things, and does *not* presuppose the intelligibility of the Kantian problematic.
- b) This leads to thinking of **the distinction between subjective, social, and objective things as one of who has ultimate authority over claims of those kinds.**
 - **Subjective:** sincere first-person reports are incorrigible, unoverridable, unchallengeably authoritative.
 - **Social** (by analogy to subjective): social practices wholly authoritative over things like what a proper greeting-gesture for the community is. There clearly are things like this. Social practices fund a notion of what is “fitting,” in the way of manners, behavior, and more. The Greeks called “Barbarians” anyone who did not know and abide by *their* (Greek) practices and implicit norms. They took those “fittingnesses” to apply to others than those (the Greeks) who had instituted them. That was a kind of fetishism.
 - **Objective:** Things about which *neither* individuals *nor* communities are authoritative.
- c) Here we combine:
 - i. The idea that the division of things into subjective, social, and objective things is ultimately a *normative* one—we are redescribing it in normative terms—in the form of a distinction about the locus of *authority of claims* of the various kinds.
and
 - ii. The idea of social pragmatism about norms (authority and responsibility),
Yielding:
 - iii. The idea that this trifold partition of kinds of things is itself ultimately a *social* division. For it is a division w/res to the role claims play in the social practices of the community—a matter of where the *community* assigns authority over them.
 - iv. [Approaching the ontological distinction between kinds of *things* in terms of the practical distinction between kinds of *claims* (‘about’ them) is a version of the move Price will make in distinguishing between “subject- and object- naturalism” (holding the “naturalism”).]

- d) We'll see that the antiauthoritarian argument picks up this theme of social pragmatism about norms.

[Note that "norm," "normative," and "normativity" are not Rorty's terms.

(I use this terminology in the 1978 "Freedom and Constraint by Norms." A couple of years later, Kripke makes the issue popular under the heading of "rule-following." Korsgaard later popularizes "normativity" in discussions of Kant.)

Rorty does talk about "authority" and "responsibility."

I have redescribed his views in this terminology (vocabulary) of norms and normativity.]

3. Post-Quinean arguments from the 'vocabulary'-vocabulary as a successor to distinguishing language/theory, meaning/belief, in the two-stage Carnapian way.

Rorty clearly aspired to use the pragmatist considerations about language *use* not distinguishing between what we do to *institute* discursive norms (fix the language by conferring meanings) and what we are doing when we *apply* those discursive norms (fix the theory, settle on beliefs). We just defend claims (commitments) by giving reasons for them and challenge claims by giving reasons against them, and what *counts* as such reasons is a matter of our practice, since we can't step out of it and "see the world naked."

RR wanted to use the pragmatist considerations that speak in favor of the vocabulary-in-use vocabulary to undercut the Kantian problematic of assigning *responsibility* for different features of our discursive practice to what is represented by it and to aspects of our practices of representing it.

But he didn't know how to make the argument gel. I think the anti-authoritarian antirepresentationalist argument(s) rehearsed in (6) are the result, and that what underlies them is the line of thought sketched in (7).

4. Vehicleless content.

Rorty argues that we cannot pick out "sentence-like bits of the world" (individual facts) to make our sentences true one by one. The whole constellation of our commitments faces the world (as a tribunal) as a whole. This last is a near paraphrase of Quine from TDE, and is a Davidsonian thought.

This is an argument against Fodor's "LoT": language of thought hypothesis, that there is something (in our brains) that stands to thinking that things are thus and so, as some noises or marks stand to *saying* that things are thus and so and *writing* that things are thus and so. The question is whether intentional states have "sign designs" associated with them.

Q: How could they not?

Note that McDowell is perhaps the one most associated with this claim, and that, following Davidson, [Lynne Rudder Baker] had developed it.

- a) The same argument that Davidson uses against the possibility of identifying any particular nonintentionally specified state of persons as beliefs (from the holism of attribution of belief-and-meaning, together with interpretivist methodology that says that what one means and believes *is*, ontologically, and not just in terms of its epistemic accessibility, whatever the best overall interpretation takes it to be.

Note two different dimensions of vehiclelessness:

- i) not identifiable with bearers *smaller than* the whole person and
- ii) not specifiable in nonintentional (nonsemantic) terms.

These are two dimensions of denial that the intentional states can be specified in “*subpersonal*” terms.

- b) Then: **apply this argument not just to intentional states, but to the idea of things that make those states *true* (or false): truthmakers** (Armstrong).

The claim here is that the idea of *facts* as bits of the world that *make* individual claims (in particular vocabularies) true, rather than as just being true claims (in the sense of claimables, rather than claimings—cf. Frege “A fact is a thought that is true”).

Now we have the same options as for the intentional-state case:

- i) Is there anything less than the *whole world* that makes any particular claim true?

If we are holists about *belief* (and meaning), so vocabularies, must we not be holists about objective reality?

- ii) What *vocabulary* is what makes the claims true to be specified in? If it is specified in some such terms as “the fact *that...*” then what vocabulary is the ellipsis to be thought of as filled in with?
 - “Nature’s own vocabulary”?
 - Or the vocabulary in which the original claim is stated?

In the latter case,

- α) that is one of *our* vocabularies, and
- β) How is this different from the Fregean option that there are no truthmakers, and “a fact is just a thinkable that is true”? i.e. in the conceptually articulated “realm of sense” rather than the “realm of reference”?

5. **Practices of justifying vs. a Property of truth.**

a) Social practices can intelligibly be understood as inducing norms of *justification*, of giving and challenging reasons, not of *truth*.

Justifying is something we *do*. It is a practice. (Compare: asserting vs. referring.)

b) Note how inappropriate it is to think of this as an “irrationalist” view.

For Rorty, it is *all* about practices of giving and asking for reasons.

He doesn’t think that we should understand what is a reason for and against what in representationalist terms, as being something to be read off of how things anyway, objectively, are. That is the Platonic conception.

- c) Argument of Whyte’s “**Success Semantics**,” which attempts to do a pragmatist argument that is Jamesean rather than Peircean (“the truth is what works” in the form of an argument that true beliefs are those that lead to success—thought of as preconceptually assessable by satisfaction) and my counterargument.

- d) Here it is worth rehearsing **Crispin Wright's** version of **Peirce's** "limit of inquiry" attempt to define truth by justification. His notion of superassertibility. A claim is superassertible if it is assertible, in the sense of being best-justified according to our current practices, and its assertibility is stable and robust under arbitrary increases of our information (evidence).

Objection: This definition is either circular or evidently inadequate .

For we can ask: what do you mean by "information (evidence)"?

- If information or evidence is restricted to claims that are *true*, then it is circular. For we need to know what is true in order to apply this concept from the *definiens*.
- If information or evidence is instead understood in terms of acceptance, that is, claims that are merely assertible, then it includes false claims, too. And inferences made from premise-sets that include false claims can be misleading. Further, *ignorance* is as bad as *error*. Cf. the inferences for "the cookies and in the cupboard" to "I can easily get a cookie," from my "Unsuccessful Semantics" essay.

- e) Reminder of my **JTB social-perspectival argument** about attributing knowledge, and the separation of truth condition (undertaking commitment) from justification condition (attributing entitlement) and belief condition (attributing commitment).

- f) **Reliabilism**. This is an attempt to get an *objective* notion of justification, via "reliable belief-forming mechanism." The idea is that reliability is definable in terms of *objective* likelihoods of leading to truth. Response: reliability is *description relative*. Barn façade case shows that by changing *true* descriptions (in front of a barn, in Barn Façade county, in the state, in the country...) one can generate an *epistemic* Sobel sequence.

- g) Justification as inference vs. truth: Here can invoke the **Fregean principle**.

FP: Good inference (patterns) never lead from true premises to conclusions that are not true.

- i. Can exploit this in the
 α) truth \rightarrow inference direction, or the
 β) inference \rightarrow truth direction.

ii. The invocation of "patterns" shows where *description-relativity* comes in. Cf. Massey "Are There Any Good Arguments that Bad Arguments Are Bad?". Any inference exemplifies an infinite number of different patterns. What *privileges* some of them as the relevant ones?

This is the issue between semantic *representationalists* (of one stripe: start with truth conditions) and semantic *inferentialists*. That is the (i- α), (i- β) issue.

iii. One argument: truth conditions are necessary *and* sufficient. That is, individually necessary and jointly sufficient. But circumstances and consequences of application (Dummett's inferential alternative) can be substantially different, at least for *nonlogical* concepts. (For logical ones, conservativeness of Introduction and Elimination rules is needed to avoid Prior's "tonk.")

h) **Every object** (cf., vocabulary-relativity of “object”, given need for sortal) **is similar to any other in an infinite number of respects, and dissimilar to it in an infinite number of respects.** What *privileges some* of those respects, to make *any* groupings *objective*, in the sense of *not* vocabulary-relative? Pragmatist says: only their relation to *us*. Metaphysical objectivist (David Lewis, David Armstrong) says that some respects of similarity, properties-or-relations, are *natural*, in an objective sense, that is in a vocabulary-independent sense. These *are*, or are the basis for, “Nature’s own vocabulary.”

LW on “going on in the same way.” Here again, the issue is one of what *privileges some* of the infinite numbers of respects of similarity/dissimilarity that things stand in to one another? Goodman’s “grue” argument asks the same questions. LW’s answer, like Goodman’s, is social pragmatism about the normative notion of privilege.

Underlying point is

6. Rorty’s Political Turn: Pragmatism as Antiauthoritarianism.

Antiauthoritarian arguments against representationalism (descriptivist declarativism).

2 stories about a **second Enlightenment**:

- a) Mine about CSP (from “The Pragmatist Enlightenment...” and “When Philosophy Paints its Blue on Grey”)
- b) Rorty’s antiauthoritarian one.

[Look at marked **passages from Handout**, on p. 1, and first one from p. 3 from RR’s Preface to *PaV*.]

Antiauthoritarian argument seems to come in three flavors:

- a) We cannot in fact intelligibly acknowledge the authority of anything nonhuman. The idea that we can do this is a mistaken metaphilosophical idea (the Platonic ideal). In fact, authority is always social, and it is fetishism to suppose otherwise. Here the question is what it would be to grant authority to “how things anyway are,” swinging free of our practices and attitudes, which requires a “view from nowhere” or “nature’s own vocabulary.”
- b) It is *beneath our dignity* to acknowledge the authority of anything nonhuman. This seems to presuppose that *in fact* the authority lies with us both for improving our practices and for saying what improving them comes to or requires. This would be the “social character of ontology” downstream from social pragmatism about norms, in (2) above.
- c) We ought not grant authority over our reasons to anything that can’t talk—to anything that cannot have its reasons challenged and be required to defend them. Thinking of what we are doing as ultimately “answering” to something of which we cannot demand that it “answer back,” by defending its claims, showing that they are justified. On this limb of the antiauthoritarian argument, we can acknowledge, or at least concede for the sake of argument, contra (a) that it is *intelligible* to do so, to grant authority to

something that is not one of us. And we can, for the sake of argument, put aside the argument from our *dignity as free inquirers*—the Deweyan argument. The question is just whether it is not *irrational* (see the complaint against Rorty's critics in (3b) above) to cede ultimate authority over our practices of defending claims by giving reasons *for* them and challenging claims by giving reasons *against* them, to something that cannot *in principle* take part in those reasoning practices, something whose *only* involvement with those practices is to set an objective standard for normative assessment of how well we are doing.

The argument would be that *don't need* such an external standard, and *shouldn't want* one, for the same reasons (on the theoretical side) that (on the practical side) we *don't need* Old Nobodaddy to set ultimate objective moral standards for our practical undertakings, and *shouldn't want* him too. (The Nietzschean thought that "If God existed, we would have to kill Him.")

7. What is behind the antiauthoritarian argument for antirepresentationalism seems to be these two theses:

- a) Social pragmatism about normative statuses (i.e. that they are instituted by normative attitudes) together with
- b) The lesson my Hegel learns from Kant about the normative character of representation relations. To take or treat something as a representing of a represented is to take it that what is represented has a distinctive kind of authority over what counts as a representing of it just in virtue of being responsible to it in a correlative way. (I take it that for X to have authority over Y is for Y to be responsible to X). The particular sort of normative authority/responsibility in question is that what is represented serves as a standard of normative assessment of the correctness of what qualifies a representing of it just insofar as it is properly subject to such assessments of correctness.
- c) The kind of correctness in question is *representational* correctness. One of the issues is how we understand that. Is it an objective matter of isomorphism? But in what vocabulary (i.e. in what vocabulary do we specify the relations that are preserved by the isomorphism)? And is Spinoza right that such isomorphism is always a *holistic* matter? Both these questions raise the issue of "vehiclelessness" from (4) above.
- d)

Notes on Rorty's Preface to *PaV*

A lesson about concepts, in 4 parts:

1. Rorty redescribes the history of philosophy (the philosophical tradition) using the vocabulary of the distinction between the *beautiful* and the *sublime*.

This comes from Kant, and gets picked up and further articulated by Edmund Burke. Burke (along with Kenneth Burke), is one of Rorty's favorite writers.

[Cf. Rorty's memorable description of his response to Burke's prose: the sonorous, periodic sentences of the eighteenth century. He said that he felt like a tiny Pekingese puppy who comes into the Master's study and finds that the Great Dane has left a steaming pile on the oriental carpet, and just wants to roll around in it to imbue himself with the scent so as to merge imaginatively with the great beast, at least for a time.]

One striking illustration of the difference is that before 1700, passengers in carriages going through the Alps kept the window shades tightly rolled down, to avoid looking at the horrifying vistas. Over the course of the eighteenth century, landscape painters taught people to see those vistas as "picturesque": literally, the sort of thing one painted pictures of. By the end of that century, people would get in carriages to go into the Alps specifically to look at what they had previously shunned. The terrible sublime had become domesticated as the beautiful. Rorty uses this distinction to enrich by redescription the opposition between Platonists and pragmatists that we have seen him make before.

It is worth thinking about how this works, as a case-study in what happens when we redescribe something familiar in a new vocabulary.

2. Rorty here is playing a characteristic *intellectual's* game (which, to be sure, has variants we play as *Fachleute*, professional researchers and scholars, too).

Though for his immediate purposes, Rorty wants to classify Aristotle as a philosopher of the sublime, along with Plato, in fact I think it much more sensible to think of the contrast between them in these terms: Aristotle as a philosopher of the beautiful by contrast to Plato, the philosopher of the sublime. (Rorty invokes *Metaphysics lambda* here, and that is what he wrote his Yale Ph.D. dissertation on, so I should be very careful here. Nonetheless).

And though Rorty classes Heidegger as on the side of the sublime (surely correctly, as far as he goes), that is much truer of the later Heidegger than of the earlier work. In effect, the reason Heidegger later repudiated *Being and Time* as a "juvenile, merely anthropological work" is precisely because failed sufficiently to ascend from the merely beautiful to the sublime.

Clearly, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* belongs on the side of the sublime, and the *Investigations* on the side of the beautiful.

And in logic, Russell and Tarski are on the side of the beautiful and Goedel on the side of the sublime.

Indeed, I would argue that Frege's *Begriffsschrift* and *Grundgesetze* are beautiful and his *Grundlagen* and "The Thought" are sublime.

Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*: beautiful. His *Saint Genet*, like Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*, sublime.

Milton and Wordsworth: beautiful. Blake and Coleridge: sublime.

Louis Armstrong: beautiful. Charlie Parker: sublime.

The Star Wars films: beautiful. The Matrix films: sublime.

Italian cuisine/French cuisine, but then both of them in relation to Chinese or Indian cuisine?

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. .
. .
Has something gone wrong here?

3. E.H. Gombrich in *Art and Illusion*, cited on this point by the pragmatist Nelson Goodman in *Languages of Art*, invokes a psychological experiment in which two contrasting nonsense terms, ‘ping; and ‘pong’ are given a sense by applying them to 6 or 8 cases. It is found that very often, when presented with the same training cases, people learn to “go on in the same way” and will agree on how to apply the terms to new cases.

Gombrich means this as a deflationary, cautionary tale about discerning genres and using classifications in cultural history. (His particular concern is ranking paintings as “realistic” or not.). Such terms, Gombrich thinks, are as meaningless as ‘ping’ and ‘pong’, and all the training on paradigmatic examples does is “engender an illusion of understanding” (to use the phrase Quine applied disparagingly to modal logic).

We should worry, particularly given the very broad extension of the beautiful/sublime that I offered a minute ago, that this is true of that distinction in Rorty’s hands.

4. But this deflationary conclusion is *not* one a pragmatist should draw. It depends on distinguishing genuinely meaningful, conceptually contentful, distinctions, like ‘beautiful’/‘sublime’, with nonsensical ones like ‘ping’/‘pong’, where all there is is the capacity to “go on in the same way” in applying the terms to novel cases, engendering an illusion of understanding where there is nothing to understand.

But the pragmatist lesson Wittgenstein argues for (or at least tries to teach us by examples) is that all there is to understanding is being able in practice to “go on in the same way” in applying terms, in deploying a vocabulary.

The distinction Gombrich implicitly appeals to belongs with the preQuinean, Carnapian two-stage picture, where first meanings are instituted or stipulated, and then the subject-matter they address (represent) serves as a normative standard determining the correctness of applications (uses) of the vocabulary. But in fact, all there is is uses of the vocabulary. Agreement in practice, practical consilience of application, “going on in the same way” is all there is to confer meaning and institute standards of assessments of correctness.

Far from being a criticism, warning us off from nonsense, **the ‘ping’/‘pong’ example Gombrich cites reinforces an important pragmatist lesson about vocabularies-in-use.** For it tells us something important about the features of the *use* of expressions in virtue of which they have the *meanings* they do.

“After all, there are an infinite number of respects in which the ‘ping’ items are similar to each other and dissimilar to the ‘pong’ items (‘beautiful’/ ‘sublime’), but also an infinite number of respects in which the ‘ping’ items are different from each other and similar to the ‘pong’ items. What is it that *privileges* some of them and permits us to go on the same way?” The Kantian problematic invites us to ask: is it something about *them* (the items) or something about *us* that we are registering in “going on in the same way” in applying them? If using the

‘vocabulary-in-use’ vocabulary teaches us to be suspicious of the Kantian problematic, what are we to learn from these examples?

Rorty is using the ‘beautiful’/‘sublime’ vocabulary to *teach* us how to “go on in the same way.” That is teaching us to notice something, under this redescription, that we could not or would not have noticed otherwise. His deploying of this distinction is filling in the content of his notion of pragmatism.

(To be aware of something, in the sapient, rather than the merely sentient sense of ‘aware’, apperception, is to apply a concept to it. To notice something, one must already have the concept. Sellars diagnoses as an instance of the Myth of the Given the idea that grasp of concepts flows from antecedent awareness.)

Transition to next week (Week 7):

It seems that antirepresentationalism has been Rorty’s principal target (as pragmatism has been his principal constructive response) pretty much from *PMN* on through the last decade of his life.

Q: Why?

It *could* just be that he identified that as the (well, one of two, with experience) central concepts of modern philosophy, and wanted to see (in an experimental, pragmatist spirit) what it would be like to do without it.

But I think there is more to the story.

Understanding our discursive practice in a descriptivist-declarativist (declarativism treats all declarative sentences as on a par semantically, i.e. to be assimilated by being understood according to the same semantic model, and descriptivism takes that model to be describing or representing how things are), so representationalist way is for him the essential flaw in Enlightenment philosophy, as *alienation* was the worm in the apple of modernity for Hegel.

Indeed, I think Rorty saw representational understandings of discursive practice as the distinctively philosophical form of alienation.

It is specifically *semantic* alienation.

In its final, antiauthoritarian form, the accusation is that representationalism is semantic alienation as a form of *fetishism*.

Fetishism is a failure to recognize what is in fact the product of one’s own activity as one’s own, attributing the powers one has oneself imbued it with to its objective (practical attitude-independent) properties.

It is a failure, ultimately, of self-consciousness.