

Some Rorty Quotations for Week 3

From "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism" (1980):

[Analytic philosophers] view pragmatism as having suggested various holistic corrections of the atomistic doctrines of the early logical empiricists. This way of looking at pragmatism is not wrong, as far as it goes. [719]

James and Dewey wrote, as Nietzsche and Heidegger did not, in a spirit of social hope. They asked us to liberate our new civilization by giving up the notion of "grounding" our culture, our moral lives, our politics, our religious beliefs, upon "philosophical bases." They asked us to give up the neurotic Cartesian quest for certainty which had been one result of Galileo's frightening new cosmology, the quest for "enduring spiritual values" which had been one reaction to Darwin, the aspiration of academic philosophy to form a tribunal of reason which had been the neo-Kantian response to Hegelian historicism. They asked us to think of the Kantian project of grounding thought or culture in a permanent ahistorical as reactionary. They viewed Kant's idealization of Newton, and Spencer's of Darwin, as just as silly as Plato's idealization of Pythagoras, and Aquinas' of Aristotle. [721]

My first characterization of pragmatism is that it is simply **anti-essentialism** applied to notions like "truth," "knowledge," "language," "morality," and similar objects of philosophical theorizing. Let me illustrate this by **James' definition of true** as "what is good in the way of **belief.**" [721]

James' point, however, was that there is nothing to be said: truth is not the sort of thing which has an essence. More specifically, his point was that it is no use being told that truth is "correspondence to reality." Given a language and a view of what the world is like, one can, to be sure, pair off bits of the language with bits of what one takes the to be in such a way that the sentences one believes true have internal structures isomorphic to relations between things the world. When we rap out routine undeliberated reports like "This is water", "That's red", "That's ugly", "That's moral", our short categorical sentences can easily be thought as pictures, or as symbols which fit together to make a map. Such reports do indeed pair little bits of language with little bits of the world. Once one gets to negative universal hypotheticals, and the like, such pairing will become messy and ad hoc, but perhaps it can be done. James' point was that carrying this exercise will not enlighten us about why truths are good to believe, or offer any clues as to why or whether our present view of the world is, roughly, the one we should hold. Yet nobody would have asked for a "theory" of truth if they had not wanted answers to these latter questions. Those who want truth to have an essence want knowledge, or rationality, inquiry, or the relation between thought and its object, to have an essence. Further, they want to be able to use their

knowledge of such essences to criticize views they take to be false, and point the direction of progress toward the discovery of more truths. James' thinks these hopes are vain. [722]

To say that the parts of properly analyzed true sentences are arranged in a way isomorphic to parts of the world paired with them sounds plausible if one thinks of a sentence like "Jupiter has moons." It sounds slightly less plausible for "The earth goes round the sun", less for "There is no such thing as natural motion", and not plausible at all for "The universe is infinite." **When we want to praise or blame assertions of the latter sort of sentence, we show how the decision to assert them fits into a whole complex of decisions about what terminology to use, what books to read, what projects to engage in, what life to live.** In this respect resemble such sentences as "Love is the only law" and "History is the story of class struggle." The whole vocabulary of isomorphism, picturing, and mapping is out of place here, as indeed is the notion of being true of objects. If we ask what objects these sentences claim to be true of, we get only unhelpful repetitions of the subject terms - "the universe", "the law", "history". Or, even less helpfully we get talk about "the facts," or "the way the world is." [723]

So a second characterization of pragmatism might go like this: there is no epistemological difference between truth about what ought to be and truth about what is, nor any metaphysical difference between facts and values, nor any methodological difference between morality and science. [723]

Traditional, Platonic, epistemologically-centered philosophy is the search for such procedures. It is the search for a way in which one can avoid the need for conversation and deliberation and simply tick off the way things are...by confronting an object and responding to it as programmed. This **urge to substitute *theoria* for *phronesis***... [724]

The great fallacy of the tradition, the pragmatists tell us, is to think that the metaphors of vision, correspondence, mapping, picturing and representation which apply to small routine assertions will apply to large and debatable ones. **This basic error begets the notion that where there are no objects to correspond to we have no hope of rationality, but only taste, passion, and will.** [724]

Let me sum up by offering a third and final characterization of pragmatism: it is the doctrine that **there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones** -- no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers. [726]

I prefer this third way of characterizing pragmatism because it seems to me to focus on a fundamental choice which confronts the reflective mind: that between accepting the contingent character of starting points, and attempting to evade this contingency. To accept the contingency

of starting-points is to accept our inheritance from, and our conversation with, our fellow-humans as our only source of guidance. [726]

The association of pragmatism with relativism is a result of a confusion between the pragmatists' attitude toward *philosophical* theories with his attitude towards *real* theories. [728]

Pragmatists follow Hegel in saying that "philosophy is its time grasped in thought." Anti-pragmatists follow Plato in striving for an escape from conversation to something atemporal which lies in the background of all possible conversations. [737]

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From the Introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982):

The essays in this book are attempts to draw consequences from a pragmatist theory about truth. This theory says that truth is not the sort of thing one should expect to have a philosophically interesting theory about. For pragmatists, "truth" is just the name of a property which all true statements share. Pragmatists doubt that there is much to be said about this common feature. [1]

Pragmatists think that the history of attempts to isolate the True or the Good, or to define the word "true" or "good," supports their suspicion that there is no interesting work to be done in this area. It might, of course, have turned out otherwise... They might have found something interesting to say about the essence of Truth. But in fact they haven't... So pragmatists see the Platonic tradition as having outlived its usefulness. This does not mean that they have a new, non-Platonic set of answers to Platonic questions to offer, but rather that they do not think we should ask those questions any more... They would simply like to change the subject. [2]

Within Philosophy, there has been a traditional difference of opinion about the Nature of Truth, a battle between (as Plato put it) the gods and the giants. On the one hand there have been Philosophers like Plato himself who were otherworldly, possessed of a larger hope. They urged that human beings were entitled to self-respect only because they had one foot beyond space and time... In the nineteenth century, this opposition crystallised into one between "the transcendental philosophy" and "the empirical philosophy," between the "Platonists" and the "positivists."... To be on the transcendental side was to think that natural science was not the last word -that there was more Truth to be found. To be on the empirical side was to think that natural science-facts about how spatio-temporal things worked-was all the Truth there was... It is important to realise that the empirical philosophers -the positivists-were still doing Philosophy...[3]

Pragmatism cuts across this transcendental/empirical distinction by **questioning the common presupposition that there is an invidious distinction to be drawn between kinds of truths.** For the pragmatist, true sentences are not true because they correspond to reality, and so there is no need to worry what sort of reality, if any, a given sentence corresponds to -no need to worry about what "makes" it true. [4]

The Platonist sees the pragmatist as merely a fuzzy-minded sort of positivist. The positivist sees him as lending aid and comfort to Platonism by leveling down the distinction between Objective Truth -the sort of true sentence attained by "the scientific method"-and sentences which lack the precious "correspondence to reality" which only that method can induce. Both join in thinking the pragmatist is not really a philosopher, on the ground that he is not a Philosopher. [4]

On the account of recent analytic philosophy which I offered in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, the history of that movement has been marked by a gradual "pragmaticisation" of the original tenets of logical positivism. I think that analytic philosophy culminates in Quine, the later Wittgenstein, Sellars, and Davidson-which is to say that it transcends and cancels itself. These thinkers successfully, and rightly, blur the positivist distinctions between the semantic and the pragmatic, the analytic and the synthetic, the linguistic and the empirical, theory and observation. Davidson's attack on the scheme/content distinction, in particular, summarises and synthesises Wittgenstein's mockery of his own *Tractatus*, Quine's criticisms of Carnap, and Sellars's attack on the empiricist "Myth of the Given." Davidson's holism and coherentism shows how language looks once we get rid of the central presupposition of Philosophy: that true sentences divide into an upper and a lower division-the sentences which correspond to something and those which are "true" only by courtesy or convention. [6]

This Davidsonian way of looking at language lets us avoid hypostatizing Language in the way in which the Cartesian epistemological tradition, and particularly the idealist tradition which built upon Kant, hypostatized Thought. For it lets us see language not as a *tertium quid* between Subject and Object, nor as a medium in which we try to form pictures of reality, but as part of the behaviour of human beings. On this view, the activity of uttering sentences is one of the things people do in order to cope with their environment. The Deweyan notion of language as tool rather than picture is right as far as it goes. But we must be careful *not* to phrase this analogy so as to suggest that one can separate the tool, Language, from its users and inquire as to its "adequacy" to achieve our purposes. The latter suggestion presupposes that there is some way of breaking out of language in order to compare it with something else. [6]

This last point amounts to saying that what Gustav Bergmann called "the linguistic turn" should not be seen as the logical positivists saw it-as enabling us to ask Kantian questions without having to trespass on the psychologists' turf by talking, with Kant, about "experience" or "consciousness." That was, indeed, the initial motive for the "turn," but (thanks to the holism and pragmatism of the authors I have cited) analytic philosophy of language was able to transcend this Kantian motive and adopt a naturalistic, behaviouristic attitude toward language. [9]

What really needs debate between the pragmatist and the intuitive realist is not whether we have intuitions to the effect that "truth is more than assertibility" or "there is more to pains than brain-states" or "there is a clash between modern physics and our sense of moral responsibility." *Of course* we have such intuitions. How could we escape having them? We have been educated within an intellectual tradition built around such claims-just as we used to be educated within an intellectual tradition built around such claims as "If God does not exist, everything is permitted," "Man's dignity consists in his link with a supernatural order," and "One must not mock holy things." But it begs the question between pragmatist and realist to say that we must find a

philosophical view which "captures" such intuitions. The pragmatist is urging that we do our best to *stop having* such intuitions, that we develop a new intellectual tradition. [17-18]

This upshot of the confrontation between the pragmatist and the intuitive realist about the status of intuitions can be described either as a conflict of intuitions about the importance of intuitions, or as a preference for one vocabulary over another. The realist will favour the first description, and the pragmatist, the second. It does not matter which description one uses, as long as it is clear that the issue is one about whether philosophy should try to find natural starting-points which are distinct from cultural traditions. This is, once again, the issue of whether philosophy should be-Philosophy. [25]

I began by saying that the pragmatist refused to accept the Philosophical distinction between first-rate truth-by-correspondence-to reality and second-rate truth-as-what-it-is-good-to-believe. I said that this raised the question of whether a culture could get along without Philosophy, without the Platonic attempt to sift out the merely contingent and conventional truths from the Truths which were something more than that. [26]

"Intuition" is just the latest name for a device which will get us off the literary-historical-anthropological-political merry-go-round which such intellectuals ride, and onto something "progressive" and "scientific" - a device which will get us from philosophy to Philosophy. I remarked earlier that a third motive for the recent antipragmatist backlash is simply the hope of getting off this merry-go-round. This hope is a correlate of the fear that if there is nothing quasi-scientific for philosophy as an academic discipline to do, if there is no properly professional *Fach* which distinguishes the philosophy professor from the historian or the literary critic, then something will have been lost which has been central to Western intellectual life. This fear is, to be sure, justified. If Philosophy disappears, something will have been lost which was central to Western intellectual life-just as something central was lost when religious intuitions were weeded out from among the intellectually respectable candidates for Philosophical articulation. But the Enlightenment thought, rightly, that what would succeed religion would be *better*. The pragmatist is betting that what succeeds the "scientific," positivist culture which the Enlightenment produced will be *better*. [26]

So the question of whether such a post-Philosophical culture is desirable can also be put as the question:... Can we see ourselves as never encountering reality *except under a chosen description*... the question of whether we can give up what Stanley Cavell calls the impossibility that one among endless true descriptions of me tells who I am."... In a post-Philosophical culture, some other hope would drive us to read through the libraries, and to add new volumes to the ones we found. Presumably it would be the hope of offering our descendants a way of describing the ways of describing we had come across-a description of the descriptions which the race has come up with so far. If one takes "our time" to be "our view of previous times," so that,

in Hegelian fashion) each age of the world recapitulates all the earlier ones, then a post-Philosophical culture would agree with Hegel that philosophy is "its own time apprehended in thoughts." In a post-Philosophical culture it would be clear that **that is all that philosophy can be. It cannot answer questions about the relation of the thought of our time-the descriptions it is using, the vocabularies it employs - to something which is not just some alternative vocabulary.** So it is a study of the comparative advantages and disadvantages of the various ways of talking which our race has invented. [28]

The opposition between mortal vocabularies and immortal propositions is reflected in the opposition between **the inconclusive comparison and contrast of vocabularies (with everybody trying to *aufheben* everybody else's way of putting everything)** characteristic of the literary culture, and rigorous argumentation-the procedure characteristic of mathematics, what Kuhn calls "normal" science, and the law (at least in the lower courts). [29]

On the pragmatist account, a criterion (what follows from the axioms, what the needle points to, what the statute says) *is* a criterion because some particular social practice needs to block the road of inquiry, halt the regress of interpretations, in order to get something done." So rigorous argumentation-the practice which is made-possible by agreement on criteria, on stopping-places - is no more *generally* desirable than blocking the road of inquiry is generally desirable." It is something which it is convenient to have if you can get it. if the purposes you are engaged in fulfilling can be specified pretty clearly in advance (e.g., finding out how an enzyme functions, preventing violence in the streets, proving theorems), then you *can* get it. If they are not (as in the search for a just society, the resolution of a moral dilemma, the choice of a symbol of ultimate concern, the quest for a "postmodernist" sensibility), then you probably cannot, and you should not try for it. **If what you are interested in is *philosophy*, you *certainly* will not get it -for one of the things which the various vocabularies for describing things differ about is the purpose of describing things.** The philosopher will not want to beg the question between these various descriptions in advance. [30]

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From “Antirepresentationalism, Ethnocentrism, and Liberalism” (1991):

By an antirepresentationalist account I mean one which does not view knowledge as a matter of getting reality right, but rather as a matter of acquiring habits of action for coping with reality.

These papers argue that such an account makes it unnecessary to draw Dilthey-like distinctions between explaining "hard" phenomena and interpreting "soft" ones. They offer an account of inquiry which recognizes sociological, but not epistemological, differences between such disciplinary matrices as theoretical physics and literary criticism. [3]

I claim that the representationalism-vs.-antirepresentationalism issue is distinct from the realism-vs.-antirealism one, because the latter issue arises only for representationalists. [3]

The trouble with the later Wittgenstein, Dummett says, is that he cannot "supply us with a *foundation* for future work in the philosophy of language or in philosophy in general."

Wittgenstein gave us no "systematic theory of meaning," and hence nothing on which to build. Indeed, he thought such a theory impossible, since (in Dummett's words) he rejected his earlier view that "the meanings of our sentences are given by the conditions that render them determinately true or false" and substituted the view that "meaning is to be explained in terms of what is taken as *justifying* an utterance." This latter view is typical of antirepresentationalist philosophers, for their concern is to eliminate what they regard as representationalism's pseudo-problems, rather than to build systems or to solve problems. [3]

The later Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey, for example, would all be as dubious about the notion of "truth-makers" — nonlinguistic items which "render" statements determinately true or false — as they are about that of "representation." For representationalists, "making true" and "representing" are reciprocal relations: the nonlinguistic item which makes *S* true is the one represented by *S*. But antirepresentationalists see both notions as equally unfortunate and dispensable — not just in regard to statement of some disputed class, but in regard to all statements. [4]

It is no truer that "atoms are what they are because we use 'atom' as we do" than that "we use 'atom' as we do because atoms are as they are." *Both* of these claims, the antirepresentationist says, are entirely empty. Both are pseudo-explanations. It is particularly important that the antirepresentationalist insist that the *latter* claim is a pseudo-explanation. [5]

On an antirepresentationalist view, it is one thing to say that a prehensile thumb, or an ability to use the word "atom" as physicists do, is useful for coping with the environment. It is another thing to attempt to *explain* this utility by reference to representationalist notions, such as the notion that the reality referred to by "quark" was "determinate" before the word "quark" came

along (whereas that referred to by, for example, "foundation grant" only jelled once the relevant social practices emerged). [5]

Antirepresentationalists think this latter cluster dispensable because they see no way of formulating an *independent* test of accuracy of representation — of reference or correspondence to an "antecedently determinate" reality — no test distinct from the success which is supposedly explained by this accuracy. Representationalists offer us no way of deciding whether a certain linguistic item is usefully deployed because it stands in these relations, or whether its utility is due to some factors which have nothing to do with them — as the utility of a fulcrum or a thumb has nothing to do with its "representing" or "corresponding" to the weights lifted, or the objects manipulated, with its aid. So antirepresentationalists think "we use 'atom' as we do, and atomic physics works, because atoms are as they are" is no more enlightening than "opium puts people to sleep because of its dormitive power." [5]

Lewis thus builds representationalism into the "face value" of physics. '4 This is characteristic of representationalists who are realists rather than skeptics. For they see physics as the area of culture where nonhuman reality, as opposed to human social practices, most obviously gets its innings. The representationalist believes, in Williams's words, that "**we can select among our beliefs and features of our world picture some that we can reasonably claim to represent the world in a way to the maximum degree independent of our perspective and its peculiarities**".⁵ By contrast, **antirepresentationalists see no sense in which physics is more independent of our human peculiarities than astrology or literary criticism.**[6]

Various areas of culture answer different human needs, but there is no way to stand outside of all human needs and observe that some of them (e.g., our need for predictions of what will happen in various circumstances, our need for simple and elegant ways of saving the phenomena) are gratified by detecting "objective sameness and difference in nature" whereas others are gratified by whomping up what Lewis calls "miscellaneous, gerrymandered, ill-demarcated" objects. [6]

Davidson: "Beliefs are true or false, but they represent nothing. It is good to be rid of representations, and with them the correspondence theory of truth, for it is thinking that there are representations that engenders thoughts of relativism."

[Davidson] takes us to be in touch with reality in all areas of culture — ethics as well as physics, literary criticism as well as biology — in a sense of "in touch with" which does not mean "representing reasonably accurately" but simply "caused by and causing." [7]

Papineau: "Anti-realists are philosophers who deny that it makes sense to think of reality as it is in itself in abstraction from the way it is represented in human judgement." [7]

But for Davidson... reflection on what a belief is is not "the analysis of representation." Rather, it is reflection on how a language-using organism interacts with what is going on in its neighborhood. Like Dewey, Davidson takes off from Darwin rather than from Descartes: from beliefs as adaptations to the environment rather than as quasi-pictures. [7]

Such a theory is, instead, an account of how the marks and noises made by certain organisms hang together in a coherent pattern, one which can be fitted into our overall account of the interaction between these organisms and their environment. [7]

Papineau and Lewis share the conviction that there are "objective," theory-independent and language-independent matter-of-factual relationships, detectable by natural science, holding or failing to hold between individual bits of language and individual bits of nonlanguage. When these relations (e.g., "being caused by," "biologically supposed to represent") do hold they cause us to "accurately represent" some item which belongs within what Putnam calls "a certain domain of entities (the ones which are there regardless of what we do or say) such that all ways of using words referentially are just different ways of singling out one or more of those entities.' [8]

The antirepresentationalism common to Putnam and Davidson insists, by contrast, that the notion of "theory-independent and language-independent matter-of-factual relationships" begs all the questions at issue. For this notion brings back the very representationalist picture from which we need to escape. [8]

My principal motive is the belief that we can still make admirable sense of our lives even if we cease to have what Nagel calls "an ambition of transcendence." So I try to show how a culture without this ambition — a Deweyan culture — would be preferable to the culture of what Heidegger calls "the onto-theological tradition." [8]

The lead essay in this volume — "Solidarity or Objectivity?" — announces a theme which is repeated with variations in most of the other essays. There I urge that whatever good the ideas of "objectivity" and "transcendence" have done for our culture can be attained equally well by the idea of a community which strives after both intersubjective agreement and novelty — a democratic, progressive, pluralist community of the sort of which Dewey dreamt. [8]

If you give up on the project of escaping from "human peculiarities and perspectives," then the important question will be about what sort of human being you want to become. If you accept the distinction between the public and the private realms which I draw in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, then this question will divide into two sub-questions. The first is: with what communities should you identify, of which should you think of yourself as a member? The second is (to adapt Whitehead's definition of religion): what should I do with my aloneness? The

first is a question about your obligations to other human beings. The second is about your obligation to, in Nietzsche's words, become who you are. [9]