

Language, the world and the nature of philosophy

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Of what use is a philosopher who doesn't hurt anybody's feelings?

Diogenes of Sinope

Introduction

Richard Rorty's philosophy is the kind which rarely leaves one calm – usually it elicits either an enthusiastic approval, or a vigorous disagreement. I think that what is often not realized by Rorty's critics is the fact that the element of spectacularity permanently present in Rorty's writings is necessarily brought about by Rorty's view on what philosophy can be reasonably taken to be and to be able to achieve. Rorty, having repudiated the possibility that philosophy could be seen as spelling out 'philosophical facts' (in the sense in which natural science is thought of as spelling out its facts), has arrived at the conviction that the real task of philosophy is to move people to dispell various ideas which "sitzen gleichsam als Brille auf unsrer Nase" (Wittgenstein, 1953, §103) and distort our vision. As a consequence, he is convinced that unless philosophy can awake people from their slumbers and shatter how they conceive of the world and of each other, it is of little use. This is to say that philosophy *cannot* be scholastic; it must be exciting and provocative.

I think that it is this attitude, in combination with Rorty's thoroughgoing pragmatism, which should be seen as the source of his dramatic overthrowings of traditional wisdoms and commonly accepted views; and especially of his attacks on traditional philosophy as something which is no longer interesting and helpful. For more traditionally oriented philosophers, this kind of stance may not be quite intelligible: it is one thing, they would insist, to discover how things are, and it is quite another thing to discuss the extent that particular cases of such discovering are 'interesting', 'fruitful' or 'exciting'. And the true business of a philosopher must always fall into the former category – for the latter is a matter of subjective attitudes and evaluations, which cannot become the subject matter of a serious study. However, Rorty, as other pragmatists, believes that human interests are more basic than how things are: that even the answer to the question what is a 'hard' fact and what not is human-interest-dependent.

In this paper I would like to argue for the thesis that pragmatism, and especially what I will call Rorty's *exhibitionistic* version thereof, is a good servant, but can also become a bad master. I will briefly review the historical conditions of its genesis, then I will try to show that many of the usual ways of attacking it miss their target; and finally I will warn that it can serve us well only as long as we resist the temptation to turn it into an 'ultimate philosophical doctrine'.

The fall of metaphysical realism

In an article written in 1932, Moritz Schlick, articulating the revolutionary views of the Viennese logical empiricists, urged that human theoretic coping with the world should be divided into the *pursuit of meaning*, a matter of philosophy, and the *pursuit of truth*, the business of science. The former is to clarify the material from which we build our theories of the world, the latter is then to use the language so clarified to assemble the true theory. In this way, Schlick and his colleagues thought to be able to reinstate philosophy as a respectable enterprise: it no longer was to pursue its prior speculative, indeed misguided tasks, but rather in a scientifically respectable way prepare the ground for science. And indeed it appeared that no real science was possible without this kind of philosophy: for how can you ask whether a scientific hypothesis is true before you are definitely clear about what it *says*?

Wittgenstein, whom the logical empiricists long wanted as their god, soon became somewhat suspicious of this kind of rescuing philosophy. Although he never put it that way, I think an important thread in his philosophical development could be portrayed as the increasing realization of the urgency of the question *Is the pursuit of meaning to be understood as the pursuit of truth about meaning?* It seems that whichever answer we give to this question, we are in trouble. If we answer *yes*, then the whole *pursuit of meaning*, and hence philosophy, collapses into a chapter of the *pursuit of truth*, i.e. science (namely into empirical semantics); and we would have to say goodbye not only to the picture of philosophy as securing the foundation for science, but to the very notion of philosophy as something over and above (or, perhaps, ‘under and below’?) science. However, if we answer *no*, we will have to conclude that philosophy is not to yield truths, i.e. that it cannot yield anything like theories, or answers to questions; which again threatens to banish philosophy into non-being. So the situation resembles a zen koan: if you say yes, philosophy will get thirty blows with a stick; but if you say no, philosophy will also get thirty blows with a stick (and as every adept of zen knows, there is no help in giving such answers as *yes and no* or staying mute - these will most probably result in something like philosophy’s getting sixty blows).

The view of language underlying the philosophical views of Schlick and his Viennese colleagues was largely influenced by the picture theory implicit to Russell’s *logical atomism* and envisaged in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. It was based on seeing language-users as makers of (adequate, or, more often, not entirely adequate) pictures of the world. The place assigned to philosophy was then, in effect, based on supplementing the picture of a man picturing the world by the picture of a philosopher picturing – and criticizing – the man picturing the world. A philosopher makes a ‘meta-picture’, investigating into the possibilities and limitations of making pictures, into the capacities of our words (or, as the case may be, ideas) to reflect things. And during this process he finds out where the means of language are not adequate to the furniture of the world and where thus the world-as-mediated-by-language-and-our-theories is bound to differ from the world-as-it-really-is and hence to mislead us.

However, the obvious question, haunting both the late Wittgenstein and a part of the next generation of analytic (or should we rather say *postanalytic*?) philosophers, was how could a philosopher possibly accomplish this? How could he compare the world-as-mediated-by-our-language-and-our-theories with the world-as-it-really-is? Is there a possibility to penetrate to the world as it is without the mediation of our theory-producing science? But if so, why

should anybody ever take the roundabout based on our tedious science and on the capacities of our mutilating language? It seems we must either take the world-as-it-really-is as a mysterious, Kantian ‘thing-in-itself’ about which nothing can be said; or alternatively dismiss it as a mere chimera. However, as the former option does not appear to give us anything significant over and above the latter (as Goodman, 1975, p. 70, puts it, this kind of world-as-it-really-is would be so impoverished and so ineffable that it would be “a world not worth fighting for or against”) we seem to be driven to the conclusion there is nothing ‘behind’ the theories of the world we weave by means of our languages. (Moreover, it starts to appear as if the early analytic philosophers’ crusade against metaphysics may have succeeded only thanks to their alliance with an idea as metaphysical as an idea can be: an idea of a world-in-itself, never accessible to us, sublunary beings.)

The inevitable outcome of these quandaries seems to be sheer relativism: There is no world over and above ‘worlds’ yielded by human theories, and as different communities or even different people can clearly have different concepts and hence different theories, they must be seen as living within different worlds which are tied to each other by nothing ‘behind’ them; they become ‘windowless monads’. However, this kind of relativism is clearly a stance that is hard even to consistently assume; let alone defend. So has not the rejection of the ‘metaphysical realism’ underlying the picture theory of language now led us down a blind alley, thereby providing its *reductio ad absurdum* and hence proving the inevitability of *rejecting* relativism? To be able to answer this question, we have to look more closely at what relativism is supposed to be.

Varieties of relativism

Before we turn to the sheer variety of relativism, we must distinguish it from certain other versions of relativism. In particular, we must acknowledge the existence of some more or less harmless - and inescapable - versions of relativism.

It is clear, to begin with, that there are pluralities of viewpoints, of habits, of forms of life and of languages. It is evident that each of us uses many of his words in ways slightly differing from those of his fellow speakers; that the moral standards applied within western liberal democracies differ, to a certain extent, from the standards entertained by animistic African tribes; or that what looks like a rabbit from one visual angle may look like a duck from another. It is hard to imagine that someone would want to deny this plurality (and in fact, given the present ‘globalized’ state of the world, trying to deny it might have disastrous consequences). No serious troubles appear to be forthcoming as long as we keep relativism within the limits of such platitudes.

More importantly, there is a basic misunderstanding connected to the concept of “world-as-mediated-by-language“. Language, it is sometimes argued, is a ‘social construct’, and hence everything that is mediated by it is bound to be ‘socially constructed’ too; and as something socially constructed cannot be independent of us, human beings, a world ‘mediated by language’ cannot be the world which is real in the crucial sense of the word (it cannot be, as Rorty, 1972, p. 661, puts it, the “hard, unyielding, rigid, *être-en-soi* which stands aloof, sublimely indifferent to the attentions we lavish upon it”.)

However, it is easy to see that this argument is essentially misguided: there are plenty of things which are ‘socially constructed’ and in this sense dependent on us, but at the same time clearly independent of us in the sense that what is true about them is not determined by what we hold for true. The examples are numerous: such things as chess (cf. Wittgenstein, 1969, p. 321), or money, or NATO are clearly socially constructed and in this sense ‘human-dependent’, but their human-dependence is no deeper than that of, say, mustaches – if there were no humans, there would be no chess, no money, no NATO and no mustaches – but this far from implies that any of them are unreal. (Even Frege, the arch-objectivist, stressed that the humanly attainable objectivity means independence of our perception, our views and our imagination [Empfinden, Anschauen und Vorstellen], not, however, of reason¹.)

People claiming that language, meaning, truth, etc. are ultimately human matters are often taken to be simple-mindedly holding that truth is what comes out of the majority’s vote. But of course there are other, more meaningful ways of understanding the kind of human-dependence in question. Call a property *first-order Protagorean* with respect to a community if for something to have that property it is enough to be taken to have it by the majority of the community (or by the relevant authorities in the sense of Putnam’s division of linguistic labor). Some properties do appear to be more or less like this: it is hard to imagine that something could be, say, *amusing* without being widely taken to be amusing.

Now call a property P *second-order Protagorean* if P is not first-order Protagorean, but the property of being the criterion of P-ness is a first-order Protagorean property. Thus, although, e.g., to have a certain length is surely not a first-order Protagorean property (a thing can have a certain length despite the majority of our community mistakenly taking it to have another one), it would appear to be second-order Protagorean: the criterion for deciding how long something is consists in measuring, and it seems to be so because we take it to be so, because we interpret the term „length“ in the way we do. Hence the property *to be the criterion of length* appears to be first-order Protagorean.

In general, call a property P *n-order Protagorean* if it is not $(n-1)$ -order Protagorean, but the criterion of P-ness is. (Are there properties that are more than second-order Protagorean? Take the property *to be wise*. Is it Protagorean, and if so, then in which order? It appears not to be first-order Protagorean - it surely is possible that someone is wise despite being generally taken to be silly. Is it, then, second-order Protagorean? It might seem so: how to determine whether one is wise seems to be simply a matter of our community’s decision how to use the term “wise”. However, could we not imagine the situation - not unlike the present one - where the majority of the community were convinced that wisdom is to be determined by IQ-tests, despite the fact that this does not really capture how they understand the term “wise”?)

Now with the help of this terminology, we can characterize some traditional philosophical standpoints. First, there is the stance that we shall call *bald relativism*: this is the view that every property is first-order Protagorean (or, expressed in the formal mode of speech, that truth is generally first-order Protagorean). Bald relativism is clearly untenable; and there is also, I am sure, no serious bald relativist. On the other hand, there are many bald relativist strawmen torn to pieces by the opponents of relativism.

As an example of a baldly relativistic doctrine, let us look at what Blackburn (1984) considers under the name of the *democratic harmony theory*. The theory consists in the identification (intended as a response to the Wittgensteinian claim that our concepts somehow

rest on communal agreement) of *to be correct* with *to be in accordance with the majority*. The idea is that just as a bunch of jamming jazzmen renders wrong those of its members who have fallen behind the majority and hence are not playing in harmony with the others, so the community renders wrong anybody not using a concept as the majority does. This proposal might be considered attractive in that it promises to reduce a normative property (*to be correct*) to a non-normative one (*to be like the majority*) and so to fulfil the dream of every naturalist; but it is, as Blackburn takes pains to show, hopeless .

That every property is either first-order Protagorean *or second-order Protagorean* is the assumption which underpins the traditional verificationism, as entertained by the Viennese logical empiricists. They would claim that whereas meaning, and hence analytic truth, is first-order Protagorean (or, as they would put it, *conventional*), empirical truth is second-order Protagorean. The fact that the predicate “to be 10 m long” means what it does is a matter of our arbitrary decision; but the fact that a particular rod is 10 m long is not.

Now clearly we can think about still weaker forms of ‘Protagoreanism’: we can, e.g., merely claim that every property is Protagorean at *some* order. And we can, moreover, admit that our assignment of the orders to properties is fuzzy (*to be wise* is probably neither a second- nor a third-order, but rather something in between). Assuming this position still means accepting that the truth of all sentences is *ultimately* a matter of our attitudes, of our ‘taking something as something’, but at the same time admitting that the truth of at least some of them is so at one or more removes from our direct reach, thus giving the world leeway to intervene. Hence it is compatible to claim that truth is generally ultimately human-dependent in this sense, and that something can be true despite everybody being convinced that it is false.

Sheer relativism

So we may safely leave the opponents of bald relativism gloriously defeating armies of dreadful strawmen and turn to a less obviously untenable version of relativism, which we will call *sheer relativism*. This variety of relativism claims that there is nothing over and above linguistic or conceptual frameworks, nothing that would justify us in favoring one over another. Unlike bald relativism, this is not a doctrine for which we could not find a precedent. Carnap’s (1934) famous “principle of tolerance” appears to be the model expression of this very stance. (We should, however, note that Carnap was not altogether unambiguous in its endorsement; and it seems that a much purer representative of this view was Neurath, under whose influence a part of Carnap’s self became converted to it².)

For the sake of illustration, let us summarize the discussion about the nature of geometry which took place at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and which constituted a strong impulse for people like Carnap towards their conventionalism. The emergence of non-Euclidean geometries made urgent the question whether the traditional, Euclidean geometry is *the* geometry. The defendants of the view that it is, especially Frege and Russell, argued (more or less following Kant) that geometry is answerable to the spatial aspect of the world, that geometrical terms must be somehow linked to the right elements of the pre-formal geometric intuition before they can meaningfully figure within the axioms of geometry; that “if the quantities with which we end are capable of spatial interpretation, then, and only then, our

result may be regarded as geometrical.” (Russell, 1897, p. 45). On the other hand, opponents of the view, like Poincaré or Hilbert, insisted that it is only the axioms of geometry that confer meanings on geometric terms. We are free to decide whether we accept the Euclidean geometry or some of its alternatives. What we call *lines, triangles* etc. is a matter of our own decision – hence, „one geometry cannot be more true than another; it can only be more convenient” (Poincaré, 1908, p. 235)³.

Considerations of this kind led people like Carnap to the conclusion that human knowledge is a two-step enterprise: First, we accept a linguistic framework and make it express a conceptual framework by accepting some of the sentence of the framework as axioms. This is a wholly arbitrary matter. Second, we apply this framework to the (‘raw’) reality, letting the reality verify or falsify the empirical sentences which our framework provides – and here we no longer have any freedom, the most we can do is present our hypotheses to the tribunal of the world and provoke its verdict. As a consequence, there appears to be nothing that would make one framework or one language better than another and nothing that would force different languages to be alike enough to make it possible to translate one of them into another. Whereas for Carnap this particular point did not appear to be terribly important (in fact all languages *he* investigated had quite a lot in common), for linguistic anthropologists like Whorf, or for historians of science like Kuhn it became central: their crucial point was that it is futile to assume that all languages must be intertranslatable and all conceptual frameworks ‘commensurable’.

However, flaws of relativism of this kind are also well-known, and it seems that in view of them no philosopher has ever managed to embrace it quite consequentially. The point is that sheer relativism is clearly self-stultifying: once you want to claim that “there is no absolute truth”, you are on the verge of the paradox: either what you say is to be taken as true only relatively to your parochial viewpoint, and then the question is why should anybody bother to take it into account; or it is to be taken as true *simpliciter*, and hence it presupposes what it denies⁴.

The pragmatist’s way out

However, if we are determined to abandon metaphysical realism, do we have another option than to embrace sheer relativism? Once we give up the idea of the world-in-itself acting as a last on which our theories of the world are placed and sorted according to their degree of fit, how can we warrantably favor one theory over another? If we abandon the idea that our geometry is answerable to the spatial aspect of the world, how can we justify the claim that the Euclidean geometry is superior to a non-Euclidean one, or indeed to *any* haphazard collection of axioms⁵? There is, quite obviously, *something* wrong with the Carnapian egalitarian stance: it seems to be clear that Euclidean geometry *is* somehow superior if not to the usual non-Euclidean ones, then surely to ‘geometries’ based on haphazard patchworks of terms accepted as axioms⁶.

Carnap encapsulated his stance into the slogan that there are no morals in logic. Well, neither are there morals in, say, swimming – but this far from implies that we should not favor one way of swimming over another. There are clearly good (‘correct’) ways of swimming and there are bad (‘incorrect’) ways – there are ways that get you across rivers and there are ways

that get you to the graveyard. The world sifts the correct from the incorrect ones, we can say, by ‘resisting’ some of them more than others.

The same is true with practices whose ‘incorrect’ versions do not have such immediately noxious consequences. There are surely better or worse ways of, say, making boots or playing theater – for there are more and less useful boots and more or less engaging theater performances; and there may be boots which are of no use whatsoever or performances which interest nobody. (Of course, the less fatal the resistance of the world, the more context-dependent the evaluation: boots useless for standard purposes may be apt as, say, a prop for a surrealistic theater play.) And surely there are, in this very sense, also better and worse ways of doing such things as mathematics: there are ways which facilitate (maybe indirectly and maybe in the long run) building bridges or spaceships, or simply bring people the particular feeling of appropriateness or satisfaction associated with mathematics; and there are ways which do not lead to anything like this.

Hence ‘we are free in accepting conventions’ does not entail, *pace* one of Carnap’s selves and his critics, ‘any convention is as good as any other’. True, we are free to set up any language we please; *nevertheless some languages turn out to be more useful than others*. We are free to set up any ‘geometry’ we please, but only some of them will help us account for the spatial aspect of our world. This is a basic message of *pragmatism*: we are free to set up languages, conceptual frameworks or ‘logics’, but we are not free to decide which of them will be of any use.

So even if there are no languages morally better than other languages, there are surely languages that are more useful than others. There are languages which help us cope with the world and with each other (all the natural ones belonging in this category, probably being picked by natural selection), but nothing prevents us from creating also ‘languages’ for which we find no such use. The world, as we put it, resists some languages more than others - hence Quine’s (1992, p. 36) *dictum* “man proposes; the world disposes“ holds not only for hypotheses within a language, but also for languages themselves.

The Carnapian view can lead us to the conclusion that by choosing a language we choose a ‘form’ which the world fills with a ‘content’: we choose which propositions are available as potential truth-bearers, and the world then determines which of them do actually bear it. However, to this the pragmatist must add that the world makes its appearance at an *earlier* stage: it may veto, or put a premium on, the very choice of language. To say this, in the terminology introduced above, is to abandon the verificationist idea that every property is either first- or second-order Protagorean: that it is either a conventional matter of meaning, or an empirical matter of contingent truth resolved by the world. The pragmatist follows Quine in denying that there is a clear boundary between matters of meaning and matters of contingent truth, and hence between setting up a language and formulating a theory in the language.

Hence the pragmatist hopes to be able to balance his ‘relativistic pull’ resulting from his rejection of metaphysical realism (with its claim that our languages are bound to picture a language-independent world) by admitting that this does not make every language and every theory as good, indeed as true, as any other. As Nelson Goodman (1984, p. 53) puts it, “my sort of relativism holds that there are many world-versions, some of them conflicting with each other, but insists on the distinction between right and wrong versions.”

Inside and outside of norms

However, does this pragmatistic stance bring us anything nontrivially over and above realism?⁷ Consider, once more, the problem of rightness or wrongness of a language. On the one hand, the pragmatist is bound to insist that it is not the case that languages would better or worse ‘correspond to the world’ or ‘get the nature of reality’; so in this sense all languages are equal - there is no absolute saying that some of them are ‘right’ and some ‘wrong’. However, on the other hand, he would admit that some languages are more useful or more fruitful than others, hence that *in this sense* some are ‘more equal than others’. Thus in this sense some of them *are* ‘right’ and some ‘wrong’ (although as a matter of degree). Hence he is able to both deny and accept that a way to speak is better than another: he can deny it in its ‘absolutist’ sense while accept it in the ‘pragmatist’ sense. Is this more than a despicable sophistry? Is it not simply so that the pragmatist, at the end of the day if not at the beginning, says the same things as the realist, only insisting that he means them differently? (And could we not even, in the end, vindicate the realists’ “better corresponds to the world” or “gets closer to the nature of reality” by noticing that it simply translates into the pragmatist’s “incites a smaller resistance of the world”, or simply “is more useful”?) Hence is it not so that the pragmatist simply makes much ado about nothing?

What I want to claim is that this is not the case. I want to argue that the ambiguity between the ‘absolutist’ talk and the ‘pragmatist’ talk is more than mere sophistry or rhetorical sleight of hand – that it is something we do need and should endorse. The point is that what is now more than ever characteristic of the present state of mankind is that we cannot agree upon a source of an absolute truth and hence about a transcendent arbiter of our disagreements – and to survive we have to make do with a non-transcendent one. (There are still people believing that the role of such an arbiter can be played by a god, and there are others believing that it can be played by the world itself, but even if some of these options were viable, there is little hope of uniting ourselves on a *common* authority.) If we do not want to end up as sheer relativists (not only alethic, but also moral!) and if we want to live in (at least a relative) peace with each other, we have to treat the standards we have *accepted* in the same way as our ancestors did those which they took for absolute. And in this way we are fated to live on two levels: on the level *inside* the rules which we have accepted (assuming the perspective from which the rules are seen as necessities), but being also able to step *outside* of them (assuming the perspective from which they appear to be mere contingencies). And we cannot let the two levels collapse into each other.

This is to say that the ambiguity mentioned above neither can, nor should, be neutralized – for it is not an eccentric fabrication of pragmatist philosophers, but rather a crucial determinant of human predicament. As Kant taught us (and as Brandom, 1994, has recently vividly reminded us), within the ‘realm of law’ something simply either happens, or does not happen. However, within the ‘realm of freedom’, which we inhabit, there is an additional, crucial distinction: it may be the case that something *should* happen, or *should not* do so. Hence the space of that which happens is further divided, in many different ways, into that which *should* happen (or is *right*) and that which *should not* (or is *wrong*). Now in view of the fact that ours is not only *Verstand*, the ability to follow rules, but also *Vernunft*, the ability to

consider the appropriateness of the rules which we create to govern our action, we are essentially creatures of two levels.

Consider the case of our liberal democracy; imagine somebody argues that people should not use cars. The „should not“ can be interpreted in two crucially different ways: either it can be read as promoting a kind of an ultimate principle which should be forced on people whether they agree with it or not; or as meaning „I vote for it“. However, in a truly democratic society using „should not“ in the first of these senses is in fact unacceptable: there is no authority over and above the outcome of the democratic discussion and the democratic vote of the community. However, in the second sense it is not only permitted, but indeed desired: for in order for the community to be able to produce decisions via discussions and confrontations among its members, the members must have opinions and argue for them. This is to say that the fact that nobody should be able to force his views on others in an undemocratic way (including claiming his privileged access to ‘the genuine will of the gods’ or to ‘the true nature of things’) must not be taken as meaning that he should not argue for his views with all the vigor which is in him.

An ambiguity analogous to that of “should” in the previous example penetrates all rule-governed activities. Imagine we say that one is bad at football or that he did something wrong when playing it - in one sense this can mean that he violates the rules; in another it means that he is not a skilled player. But here the ambiguity is relatively harmless, for we have the explicit rules of football, which makes it easy to resolve, and it is even at least partly possible to do away with it terminologically, e.g., by using “wrong” in the former sense and “bad” in the latter. However, the situation is different with a rule-governed activity like using language, where the rules are not explicit. Here there is again the distinction between speaking wrongly in the sense of violating the rules, and speaking wrongly in the sense of using the language to do something one should not do in some other sense (e.g. to lie, or to offend somebody, or simply not to work towards the fulfillment of his desires). However, now there are no explicit rules of language to consult.

In this way, every activity governed by a system of rules provides for two levels of discourse: the *intrasystemic* discourse going on ‘inside’ the rules, and the *extra-* or *metasystemic* discourse going on ‘outside’ them. The boundary is not simply ‘there’, it is we who maintain it – and we must not stop doing so, we must not let one of the levels swallow up the other⁸. If we lose the intrasystemic level, we collapse into the sheer kind of relativism, not allowing us to rest on any system of norms or rules and consequently losing any values and, indeed, meanings⁹; if we lose the metasystemic one, the result is a dogmatism making us the prisoners of our rules unable to reflect the fact that these may become obsolete. And if the system of rules is, by its nature, not explicit (e.g. if it is ‘natural’ rather than ‘conventional’), then to sustain the two-level edifice demands a perpetual care.

‘Exhibitionist pragmatism’

Let us return to Schlick’s distinction between *the pursuit of truth* and *the pursuit of meaning* and to the question of whether *the pursuit of meaning* is to be identified with *the pursuit of truth about meaning*. In contrast to Quine, who later chose the way of, in effect, subsuming

philosophy to science, Wittgenstein opted for the other way: for denigrating philosophy into an enterprise leading to no kind of truths and no kind of theories. According to him, philosophy had to be an essentially *practical* enterprise, a *therapy*, which does not answer questions, but helps us expunge them. Hence Wittgenstein's answer to the zen-like question about the nature of philosophy was indeed zen-like: you cannot answer philosophical questions, for there are in fact no such questions, which is what is to be made clear to those who think otherwise.

Thus it came about that Wittgenstein arrived at a position where he claimed he was „in a sense making propaganda for one style of thinking as opposed to another“ (see Wittgenstein, 1966, p. 28). I think this sentence may well be a motto of Richard Rorty's philosophy: neither Wittgenstein nor Rorty think that it is possible to give a *theory* answering 'philosophical questions'; but both believe that it is possible to help people think (and speak) differently than they actually do and thereby cause the questions to lose their gripping power.

Now how is it possible to make people think differently? Can we change languages and ways of thinking as we change shirts? Wittgenstein (1969, p. 110) once suggested that although we *could* use a grammar different from our current one (and hence alter the way we think), the one we use is no less forced on us than our fear of fire. So if this be the case, is there any chance to change it at all? I suggest that the key to Rorty's attitude toward philosophy (just like Wittgenstein's) is based on the twin conviction that this is indeed a formidable task; but nevertheless a task worth pursuing. This is, I think, why he takes philosophy – despite his recurring outbursts of disrespect to it - still as something to pursue.

Let us elaborate on the comparison between the efforts of a philosopher and those of a zen guru. The latter's aim is also to make his disciples radically change their mind, to make them avoid the „mistake consisting in our splitting into two what is really and absolutely one“ (Suzuki, 1949, p. 15)¹⁰. I think that just like a zen guru, the Rortyan philosopher has no chance of succeeding unless he manages to completely shatter the adepts' minds and sabotage the rails upon which their thinking runs. And it is, according to Rorty, just such a successful, large-scale sabotage of this kind, a “Gestalt-switch”, that is the highest achievement of a philosopher: “The history of philosophy is the history of Gestalt-switches, not of the painstaking carrying out of research programs.” (1998, p. 11)

The zen guru's favorite means is a blow with a stick at the right moment; that of the Rortyan philosopher is the confrontation with the 'outside' of what the disciple perceives as the constitutive limits of his view of a matter in question. To be able to recognize that something which looks like a necessity is a mere habit or a rule once willfully chosen – a contingent matter – one must be shown the 'outside' of this apparent limit, one must be confronted with a story about a world/community/mind which is not subject to this necessity. Thus, the usual enterprise of the Rortyan philosopher, as Rorty (1980, p. 360) himself puts it, is the effort “to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness”. (And when Rorty is sometimes accused of superficiality, we must realize that when one is not after 'a faithful description of the true gears of the world', but rather after 'a vivid envisaging of possibilities which we have troubles to see as such', brio may be more than filigree – and sometimes even more than rigor.)

In this way, the paradigmatic method of the Rortyan philosopher verges upon what is often effected by literary works. Take an example: around 1950 the Western civilization was in

principle relatively clear about the perversity of communism, but for the majority of them it took something like Orwell's apocalyptic exposition of one of the possible futures to genuinely realize it. Now seen from our current perspective, *1984* was (fortunately!) an exaggeration – when the very year came, the communist regimes were not gaining dominance over the whole earth, but rather beginning to fade away. However, the exposition of some such extreme picture was precisely what was needed to make people genuinely *grasp* the monstrosity, and the potential menace, of communism – and to expunge the sentiments which blurred their clear recognition of the facts.

Now compare this to the method of the Rortyan philosopher. Take, say, the problem of physicalism. The best way, the philosopher would claim, of convincing people that we need not buy Cartesian dualism, with the host of unsolvable (pseudo)problems it generates, is to show how far we can get along without it, by restricting ourselves to the conceptual means of physics alone. However, on the other hand, the best way to awake diehard physicalists from their dogmatic slumbers is to show them how it is possible to live with a quite different picture of the world not only without being thereby 'deprived', but perhaps gaining a healthier view of our lives. The best way of fighting against the over-estimation of science is to look at science as "one more image of the world to be placed alongside others" (Rorty, 1998, p. 294); whereas the best way to fight against its *under*-estimation is to elaborate the scientific (e.g. physicalist and Darwinist) picture so that it covers the whole universe.

To present the picture of a world ruled by the quintessentially evil communists, or the picture of a universe consisting of the particles in the void and nothing else, or the picture of a world where science is merely one, unprivileged way of human activity is not to claim the discovery of the true nature of the world or the universe; it is rather to urge that this is the way things could be or could be seen, and hence that it is *we* who keep them not being so. It is we who keep the world from being taken over by tyrants; it is we who construe the world as particles in the void, or, on the contrary as, say, the embodiment of a spirit.

In view of this fact – *viz.* the fact that the Rortyan variety of pragmatism is based on *exhibiting* unexpected aspects of things and unexpected versions of events (either past or yet to happen) – we could call this approach to philosophy *exhibitionist* pragmatism. The exhibitionist pragmatist is a pragmatist only in so far as he measures everything by its value for us, and he is an exhibitionist in so far as he tries to bring out this value by means of narratively envisaging its consequences (rather than by, say, logical analysis).

Consider people having fallen for malicious religious sects: the reports of interviews with them are usually quite frustrating, in that the victims - although apparently not having lost the general ability of reasoning - as if have some obviously absurd claims or rules frozen within their heads into the form of principally unsurpassable limits precluding the free movement of their thoughts within the whole 'space of reasons'. We, humans, are creatures of norms – we subject ourselves to norms and rules thereby availing ourselves meanings and values, but the norms and rules, once deliberately accepted, tend to petrify into our straight-jackets. What the Rortyan exhibitionist pragmatist is after is to exhibit these norms from outside, thereby offering us a vantage point from which we can deliberate whether we indeed *want* to subject ourselves to *this* norm or *that* rule.

This is not to say that we should try to get outside of all norms and rules: this would be both futile and pernicious. We are what we are due to the fact that we do subject ourselves to

norms. It is to say that we should see any norm or rule for what it is (i.e. as something that does have an outside). However, the fact that we should be able to consider any rule from the viewpoint of its deserving to be obeyed is not supposed to imply that norms are to somehow release their grip on us. As Rorty (1989, p. 189) puts it, “a belief ... can still be thought worth dying for among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstances.”

Some pitfalls of pragmatism

So much towards (what I take to be) a reconstruction and exegesis of the Rortyan variety of pragmatism; now a few words about its pitfalls. The way in which I have defended this attitude to philosophy might seem to suggest that I hold it for a universal therapy capable of ultimately curing us of all traditional philosophical problems. But of course this would be far-fetched. Consider the following bright characterization of prospects of philosophical ‘ultimate answers’ and ‘final solutions’¹¹:

The history of philosophy is punctuated by revolts against the practices of previous philosophers and by attempts to transform philosophy into a science – a discipline in which universally recognized decision procedures are available for testing philosophical theses. ... In the past, every such revolution has failed, and always for the same reason. The revolutionaries were found to have presupposed, both in their criticisms of their predecessors and in their directives for the future, the truth of certain philosophical theses. The new method which each proposed was one which, in good conscience, could be adopted only by those who subscribed to those theses. Every philosophical rebel has tried to be “presuppositionless”, but none has succeeded. ... Since philosophical method is in itself a philosophical topic (...), every philosophical revolutionary is open to the charge of circularity or to the charge of having begged the question.

Now both the late Wittgenstein and the explicit pragmatists¹² have done their best to refrain from “attempts to transform philosophy into a science” and from putting forward substantial philosophical theses, and instead tried to offer therapeutical hints and exhibitions of things from angles which we may tend to overlook. In short, pragmatists have appeared to believe their approach will be able to alter *how* people think without telling them *what* to think¹³.

However, I am afraid that this is really not possible. Wittgenstein, in his single-minded devotion to getting to the rock bottom of language and thought, was perhaps the one to pursue this ideal most consequentially, but even he was far from genuinely achieving it. Consider his approach to the problem of ‘rightness’ or ‘wrongness’ of a language mentioned above. According to Wittgenstein’s express claims, the grammar, and consequently language, is arbitrary: “Die Regeln der Grammatik sind in demselben Sinne willkürlich, wie die Wahl einer Maßeinheit.” (1965, p. 189). However, as Coffa (1991, p. 271) points out, this does not prevent him from arguing that some linguistic systems, e.g. the one underlying non-constructivist mathematics, are simply wrong. Sometimes he even claims that there is only

one mathematical symbolism that is ‘really’ possible: “Die Mengenlehre ist darum falsch, weil sie scheinbar einen Symbolismus voraussetzt, den es nicht gibt, statt dessen, den es gibt (der allein möglich ist). Sie baut auf einem fiktiven Symbolismus auf, also auf Unsinn.”

It seems that in human hands the development of any technique or practical skill tends to produce some sediments of theoretical knowledge – that know-how inevitably tends to engender know-that: it is hard – if not impossible – to consequently avoid the temptation to turn non-theorizing into (at least elements of) a theory of non-theoretizing¹⁴. Moreover, it is, as far as I can see, hardly possible to live without – such or other – philosophical views. So I think that the possibility of doing philosophy without producing philosophical theses is ultimately an illusion. And it follows that it would be hard to believe that a pragmatist could do her job in a “presuppositionless” manner, without making her method into “a philosophical topic”.

Thus, although I think that philosophical pragmatism has been genuinely successful in helping us loosen the grip of many philosophical problems – by persuading us to assume a vantage point from which they no longer seem pressing or even intelligible –, I do not think it is immune to the danger of being turned into an established doctrine claiming to have reached the ultimate resolution of the problems of philosophy. This is to say that although pragmatism may be an effective antidote to sterile dogmatism, to speculative metaphysics or to being captured by other obsessive pictures, and although its exhibitionist variety is effective at awaking people of the post-modern age from their lethargy (witness the fact that Rorty’s writings usually provoke either enthusiastic endorsement, or a vigorous rebuke - rarely indifference), it too may become a captivating theory in need of an antidote.

I think that Rorty is aware of the fact that he cannot avoid producing philosophical theses. “I am also happy to say,” he admits (1998, 92n16), “that when I put forward large philosophical views I am making ‘claims to truth’ (...) rather than simply a recommendation to speak differently.” However I am not quite sure whether he always wholly appreciates the fact that whereas within the context of a pragmatist exhibition, brio, as I put it above, may be more than rigor, on the way from a mind-shaking performance to a part of a theory the import of brio diminishes and that of rigor increases.

Consider Rorty’s recurrent claims to the effect of the vanity of such notions as the appearance/reality distinction, truth as correspondence with reality or objectivity over and above communal agreement. Efficient as such claims may be when attacking the minds of philosophers imprisoned within the traditional picture of metaphysical realism, they become much more problematic when extracted from the context of the attack. Thus, although, e.g., the urge to drop the appearance/reality distinction and the attempts to tell the story about the world without its help is extremely useful when what one wants is to bewilder philosophers who have overloaded it, to say “we suggest that the appearance-reality distinction be dropped in favor of a distinction between less useful and more useful ways of talking” (Rorty, 1998, p. 1) may be felt by many as calling for a Moorean (essentially pragmatist!) kind of objection: “Well, yesterday evening, after drinking too much beer, it *appeared* to me that I could jump out of the window and fly like a bird, but when I tried I came to *realize* that this was not the case. However, what should I make of this if I were to drop the distinction between appearance and reality? Should I say that at first I had a less useful thought (that I could fly)

and then, after the confrontation with reality, I acquired a more useful one (that I cannot)? But would this not be simply a ridiculous way to talk?"

I think that Rorty's reckless pronouncements also increase the danger of pragmatism getting into a position at which it can do more harm than good. The point is that pragmatism is powerful only if it is entertained within the context of philosophy carried out as a cooperative enterprise: it builds on the assumption that although there are no formal criteria of judging what is better for us, something *is* better and we can be led to appreciating the difference – it is only necessary to bring out the available options and their consequences. However, it becomes useless – if not harmful – in the context where it is precisely *criteria* which we need most, namely when philosophy is practised as an intellectual catch-as-catch-can. Then pragmatism merely furnishes the combatants with an extra lethal weapon: that of simply dismissing the opponent's views on the score of not being helpful or interesting.

I think that Rorty could have avoided many misunderstandings, and prevented much abuse of his doctrines, if he had more carefully articulated and repeated, in all such cases, what it is that he claims or suggests. I think that he should have stressed more patiently that his point is not that such notions as "correspondence to reality", "the appearance-reality distinction" or "objectivity over and above agreement" make no sense whatsoever, but that the sense they make is a *local* and *relative* one, and hence they are not suited for the role of key philosophical concepts which is so often assigned to them. Obviously, regular readers of Rorty's writings can work this out; but it is much harder for those who chance upon some of his isolated papers.

Thus it is my conviction that Rorty is at his best when he shows us that our, seemingly inescapable, ways of seeing things have alternatives and that some of the alternatives may be better than the ways we stick to; when he leads us to helpful 'shocks of recognition'. However, I think that sometimes he is not patient enough when putting his know-how into the form of know-that. I think this is a result of his general impatience, which he himself is well aware of: „I am impatient to see what culture will look like when these issues [about realism and anti-realism] come to seem as obsolete as do controversies about the nature of the elements of the Eucharist“ (Rorty, 1998, 47n). I personally think that this kind of impatience is misplaced – for I do not believe that our culture will look, for that matter, substantially different. I do not believe that the discussions about realism vs. anti-realism, if extirpated, would not be replaced by some other, similarly 'scholastic' disputations.

Notes

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¹ See Frege (1884, §26).

² See Coffa (1991, Chapter 17).

³ See Coffa (*op.cit.*) for more details. See also Peregrin (2000).

⁴ The point is being made in many different guises: from Davidson's (1974) urge that should there be a language not sharing an essential logical backbone with our language, there would

be no reason to call it 'language' in the first place, to Nagel's (1997, p. 32) more traditionally conceived claim that „there are types of thought we cannot do without” or “get outside of”.

⁵ Note that we can even not add the qualification „haphazard lot of *geometrical* axioms“. For what makes an axiom geometrical? Clearly being based on geometrical extralogical terms - but what makes a *term* geometrical? From the conventionalist standpoint, surely not a linkage to something within the world (or our spatial intuition thereof), but rather only to being embedded within – and thereby being ‚implicitly defined‘ by – a system of axioms which we are willing to consider as ‚a geometry‘.

⁶ That such an egalitarianism need not be part and parcel of the Poincaré-Hilbert variety of conventionalism is documented by Poincaré's exclamation reported by Putnam (1980, p. 471): „Convention, yes! Arbitrary, no!“

⁷ It is clear that as long as the pragmatist assumes that, as we put it, ‘the world resists our theories’, his stance cannot provide any comfort to those for whom the realism/relativism issue is primarily a matter of resolving skeptical doubts about the existence of the real world. However, the pragmatist usually takes for granted that the skeptical question makes no intelligible sense – that, as Davidson puts it, it does not make any sense to “imagine a mind asking itself, ‘is there really a world out there?’” (see Abrams et al., 1993).

⁸ It is important to realize in which sense and to what extent this can be taken to imply a challenge to Quine's rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction (which clearly is closely related to the meta-/intra-systemic distinction applied to language). As long as we take the distinction to be a natural-scientific matter, there is no clash with Quine. We only insist that there *is* a *normative* version of the boundary, yielded by the fact that we often have to distinguish between *talking about* expressive means and *using* the means. In particular, in any language we have some sentences which serve as touchstones of understanding the language; and this leads to the notion of the analytic/synthetic distinction proposed by Lance and O'Leary-Hawthorne (1997, p. 69): an analytic sentence is a sentence such that “failure to assent to it is (or would be) taken as excellent evidence that the person has failed to understand one word or other (and thus, relatedly, as good grounds for moving from the realm of substantive argument to that of stipulation, paraphrase, or pedagogy)”.

⁹ I discuss the inseparability of norms and values and the construal of meanings as values elsewhere (see Peregrin, in print).

¹⁰ Cf. Peregrin (to appear).

¹¹ Rorty (1967, pp. 1-2).

¹² Let me note in passing that as Brandom (in print) points out, besides the usual, narrow sense of pragmatism there is a wider, but still reasonable sense, in which pragmatism is more or less the subscription to the primacy of the practical, according to which it is possible to regard the late Wittgenstein (and also Davidson, Heidegger etc.) as a pragmatist.

¹³ According to Brandom (in print), ‘fundamental pragmatism‘ is characterized by granting ‘knowing *how*‘ explanatory priority over ‚knowing *that*‘.

¹⁴ Zen buddhism again: it is crucial for an adept of zen not only to avoid striving for money, glory or power; he must also avoid striving for non-striving.

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