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# Pining Away in the Midst of Plenty: The Irony of Rorty's Either/Or Philosophy

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## Pining Away in the Midst of Plenty

### The Irony of Rorty's Either/Or Philosophy

Susan Haack

As too much tendentious history of philosophy whizzed by too fast and one dubious dichotomy was piled on another, Professor Rorty's lecture left me with that old, familiar dizzy feeling, an eerie sense of *déjà vu*. It also presented me with a problem: What could I possibly say here that wouldn't be equally familiar to *my* readers?

I don't care to join the chorus of critics who think it sufficient to complain generically about "postmodern relativism." For one thing, not all the extravagances of postmodernism are relativist; some would be better described as tribalist, or simply skeptical. For another, not all forms of relativism are self-undermining, or otherwise objectionable; some are harmlessly true.<sup>1</sup> So this

isn't a promising avenue to pursue. Nor do I care to engage with Rorty's sweeping speculation that "philosophy occupies an important place in culture only when things seem to be falling apart." For one thing, I'm not convinced that ours *is*, as Rorty supposes, a time of broad political agreement. *Maybe* such comfortable unanimity is to be found in the rarefied circles of elite academia in which Rorty spent his career; but one need only open the newspaper to see that, elsewhere, it looks a lot as if things *are* falling apart. And in any case, I think there's a much simpler and more direct explanation of the self-absorption, over-professionalization, hyper-specialization, cliquishness, and ahistoricism of the neo-analytic

philosophy<sup>2</sup> that, while intellectually close to exhaustion, is institutionally still so firmly established in the English-speaking world—the influence of those wretchedly corrupting "rankings" of graduate programs in our discipline.

Instead, wisely or not, I decided to try—so far as this is possible in the very limited time and space allotted me—to do two things. First, I'll urge that we are not obliged to choose, as Rorty seems to assume, *either* clarity *or else* relevance, *either* truth-seeking, explanation *or else* "re-description," aspiration, meliorism, *either* science *or else* poetry, *either* nature *or else* culture; but that we can, and should, seek a philosophy that has room for all of these. Second, I'll show that, long before the now-familiar rivalry between "analytics" and "continentals" took hold, C.S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead—the remarkable thinkers of the pragmatist tradition that Rorty so often, but so misleadingly, invoked—had shown us the way to just such a rich philosophy of, not Either/Or, but Both/And.

What's needed, James observed in the opening lecture of his *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907), is "a philosophy that will not only exercise your powers of intellectual abstraction, but that will also make some positive connexion with the actual world of finite human lives."<sup>3</sup> That's exactly right: Philosophy needs to track underlying principles without losing sight of particulars, and to engage with key issues of our culture without sacrificing clarity or rigor. This is a tall order: It's not easy to achieve rigor, clarity, and precision, or depth, breadth, and relevance to real human concerns; and combining these desiderata is exponentially harder, since some are apt to pull against others. It's no wonder that what's on offer is often very far from the ideal: impressive-sounding generalities that dissolve under close inspection into banality or falsehood—the fault to which analytic philosophers routinely complain that the rival, continental tradition succumbs; or

self-important technicalities that dissolve under close inspection into pedantry or busywork—the fault to which continental philosophers routinely complain that the rival, analytic tradition succumbs. Nevertheless—while not every piece of philosophical work, or every philosopher, must do it all—it is perfectly possible to satisfy the demands of clarity and relevance together: to combine abstraction *and* detailed description, dry logical analysis *and* the application of theory to practice, engagement with the sciences *and* engagement with other human endeavors (and, I will add, since Rorty seems to suggest that we must choose between them, perfectly possible to learn from Russell *and* from Nietzsche).

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**The ideal is a philosophy that helps us both to understand the world and our place in it, and to redescribe it in ways that help us conceive how we might change it for the better.**

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The ideal, again, is a philosophy that helps us *both* to understand the world and our place in it, *and* to redescribe it in ways that help us conceive how we might change it for the better. But there is a clear order of priority here. The primary task will be explanation, understanding, inquiry into what is real, into how our human world differs from the physical world, what congeries of abilities distinguishes us from even our closest animal relatives, how, and how far, we are able to figure out what the world is like, what social institutions, roles, and rules are hospitable to human flourishing and what inhospitable, and so forth. For without such philosophy-as-inquiry, there can be no philosophy-as-aspiration. The point is familiar from Dewey's ethics, his social philosophy, and his philosophy of education;<sup>4</sup> for, unlike Rorty, Dewey never loses sight of the fact that, if we are to make things better, we need

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knowledge as well as vision: knowledge of how things are now, of how we would like them to be different, and of how we might get there from here. And this in turn requires knowledge of the ways in which the world is determined by natural laws beyond our control, and the ways in which, within those constraints, it could be changed.

To acknowledge the priority of philosophy-as-inquiry is not, as perhaps Rorty supposes, to deny the legitimacy of philosophy-as-aspiration, or to deny the role of imagination in inquiry, or the role of imaginative literature in enabling us to conceive of ways we might change the world. And neither, as perhaps Rorty imagines, is it to assimilate philosophy to the sciences. Here, I'm with Peirce. Like the sciences, philosophy is at its core a form of inquiry; and, like the sciences, it seeks to discover truths about the world, and so is not purely a priori, but needs *both* reasoning *and* experience. But philosophical inquiry is nevertheless different from scientific inquiry in requiring, not the specialized, *recherché* kind of experience obtainable only through instruments, excavations, etc. but, instead, close attention to features of everyday experience so familiar we hardly notice them. As Peirce says, to conduct an experiment to determine whether induction is valid would be like "adding a teaspoonful of saccharine to the ocean in order to sweeten it."<sup>5</sup> We can neither hand over philosophical questions to the sciences to resolve, nor abandon them in favor of scientific questions.

One of the questions that falls to philosophy is "What is real?" An adequate answer would acknowledge that the world is various and multi-layered, that there is *both* natural *and* social reality. There is, first of all, physical stuff, physical objects, and physical phenomena, events, kinds, and laws, making up a vast universe that may, according to some cosmologists, be only one of many "multi-verses." The earth we humans inhabit is just one small corner of this universe, a planet that happens to be hospitable to life, and specifically to human life. But we human animals

are, so far as we know, distinctive in our capacity for a rich mental life, for complex beliefs, hopes, fears, aspirations, plans, designs, imaginings, etc. And so, in this small corner of the universe, natural reality is overlaid and permeated by our human creations: an enormous array of physical artifacts made from natural stuff, or from stuff made from natural stuff or, these days, "bioengineered"; a wide range of social institutions; a wealth of intellectual artifacts; and a welter of imaginative artifacts. Here on earth, the trail of the human serpent really is, as James put it,<sup>6</sup> over everything.

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**We can neither hand over philosophical questions to the sciences to resolve, nor abandon them in favor of scientific questions.**

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All those human artifacts, physical, social, intellectual, and imaginative, exist only because we *bring* them into being; and we can do this only because we are "minded" in a way no other animals are. This human mindedness can be understood neither in exclusively biological, nor in exclusively socio-historical, "narrative," terms. It requires both; as Peirce intimates when he describes the self as developing through a child's interactions with others,<sup>7</sup> and as Mead makes explicit in his subtle theory of how, through such interactions, a child gradually becomes capable of language, belief, and self-awareness.<sup>8</sup> A belief, for example, involves a complex of multi-form dispositions to behavior, verbal and non-verbal, a complex of multi-form dispositions neuro-physiologically realized in some mesh of interconnections between the receptor-mechanisms that take in input from the world and the activator-mechanisms that initiate speech and action; but it gets its content in virtue of the connections of generic neurons to words and to things and events in the

world, and the connections of these words in the person's language to those things and events—connections that can only be understood by reference to the language and its history.<sup>9</sup>

To speak of the history of language is to acknowledge that the meaning of words and the content of concepts isn't fixed and immutable; meanings shift and change subtly over time. As Peirce put it, "[m]en and words reciprocally educate each other," and words "acquire information"; "in use and in experience, . . . meaning grows."<sup>10</sup> Such conceptual and linguistic change is, as Rorty realizes, a problem for philosophy-as-conceptual-analysis. But—far from being, as Rorty apparently assumes, an impediment to philosophy-as-inquiry—such change can move us closer to an unambiguous, informative vocabulary that better fits real kinds of things and phenomena.

Indeed, linguistic and conceptual innovation is no less necessary to serious inquiry, scientific or philosophical, than it is to poetry. But to acknowledge this is not in the least to denigrate the literary, much less to enlist on Plato's side in the war between philosophy and poetry. It's true that Peirce wrote disparagingly of "studying in a literary spirit";<sup>11</sup> but what he meant was that the flowery but obfuscatory prose of the literary journals of his day could only impede serious inquiry. He also averred, after all, that "nothing is truer than true poetry."<sup>12</sup>

Those of us who aspire, as I do, to a multi-faceted philosophy of Both/And want something more than the gnostic late-Heideggerian "poetry" or the hyper-intricate late-Wittgensteinian approach to language that Rorty professes to admire. We won't confine to ourselves to the realm of discourse-and-social practice, or content ourselves with the idea that there is nothing more to a belief's being justified than its conforming to the epistemic practices of our culture. We will hope, rather, for an epistemology that can articulate the differences between genuine inquiry and the sham and the fake, and between stronger



Charles Sanders Peirce, Berlin, 1870s.

evidence and weaker; an epistemology that is informed both by psychologists' and neuroscientists' discoveries and by novelists' imaginative explorations of hypocrisy, self-deception, and pseudo-inquiry; an epistemology that usefully engages with the evidentiary puzzles and dilemmas encountered in the legal system, and with questions about how to organize universities so as to make them more hospitable to serious intellectual work.<sup>13</sup> We will hope for a metaphysics that both articulates the differences between natural and social reality and acknowledges their interrelations; a metaphysics that sheds light on what is distinctive about human mindedness, and how it has enabled us to create the labyrinth of signs in which we humans live; a metaphysics that can engage both with physical

scientists' understanding of the universe, and with literary constructions of imagined worlds. We will hope for an approach to ethics that recognizes the biological roots of our moral sentiments, that draws on the insights of, as William James says, "novels and dramas of the deeper sort,"<sup>14</sup> and that illuminates the distinction Dewey stresses between what is desired and what is really desirable, what really contributes to human flourishing.

And those of us who want this kind of multi-faceted philosophy will find rich resources in the work of those old pragmatists. No doubt that is why, as I read Rorty's lecture, I was put irresistibly in mind of Peirce's description of how unclear ideas act "like an obstruction of inert matter in an artery, . . . condemning [the] victim to pine away in the fullness of his intellectual vigor and in the midst of intellectual plenty."<sup>15</sup> It is truly ironic that Rorty, who once dismissed him as a "whacked-out triadomaniac whose only contribution to pragmatism was to give it its name,"<sup>16</sup> should have succumbed to exactly the sad fate that Peirce so vividly described.

#### Endnotes

- 1 See Susan Haack, "Reflections on Relativism," in Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 149–66.
- 2 See Susan Haack, "The Fragmentation of Philosophy, the Road to Reintegration," in *Susan Haack: Reintegrating Philosophy*, eds. Julia Göhner and Eva-Maria Jung (Berlin, Germany: Springer Verlag, 2016), 3–32.
- 3 William James, "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy," in *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, eds. Frederick Burkhardt and Fredson Bowers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 17. First published 1907.

- 4 See, e.g., John Dewey, "The Construction of Good," *The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action* (Oakville, Canada: Capricorn Books, 1960, first published 1929), chapter 10 [on ethics]; *How We Think* (New York, NY: Cosimo, 2007, first published 1910), chapter 4 [on education]; "Philosophy and Democracy," *University [of California] Chronicle* 21, no. 191 (1939): 39–54 [on political philosophy], available at <http://thehangedman.com/teaching-files/pragmatism/dewey-democracy.pdf>.
- 5 C.S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, eds. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and (vols. 7 and 8) Arthur Burks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931–58), 5.522 [c.1905]. See also Susan Haack, "The Legitimacy of Metaphysics: Kant's Legacy to Peirce, and Peirce's to Philosophy Today," *Polish Journal of Philosophy* 1 (2007): 29–43.
- 6 James, "What Pragmatism Means," in *Pragmatism*, 37.
- 7 Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 5.227ff [c. 1868].
- 8 George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015). First published 1934.
- 9 Susan Haack, "Brave New World: On Nature, Culture, and the Limits of Reductionism," in *Explaining the Mind*, eds. Bartosz Brozek and Jerzy Stelmach (Kraków, Poland: Copernicus Press, forthcoming).
- 10 Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 7.587, 2.302 [c.1895].
- 11 *Ibid.*, 1.33 [1903]. See also Haack, "As for That Phrase, 'Studying in a Literary Spirit'" in *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*, 48–68.
- 12 Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 1.315 [1903].
- 13 See the following, all by Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry: A Pragmatist Reconstruction of Epistemology* (1993; expanded ed., Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2009), chapters 6–8 [on psychology]; "The Ideal of Intellectual Integrity, in Life and Literature" [2005] in *Putting Philosophy to Work: Inquiry and its Place in Culture* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2013), 209–20 [on literature]; *Evidence Matters: Science, Proof, and Truth in the Law* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014) [on law]; "Out of Step: Academic Ethics in a Preposterous Environment," in *Putting Philosophy to Work*, 251–68 [on universities].
- 14 William James "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" [1891], in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, eds. Frederick Burkhardt and Fredson Bowers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 159.
- 15 Peirce, *Collected Papers* 5.393 [1878].
- 16 Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972–1980* (Hassocks, England: Harvester, 1982), 161.