

# Philosophical Doubts about reality

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## Abstract

There are many pragmatisms, and it is a little misleading to present this variegated trend of thought as if it were a monolithic doctrine. The founding fathers, too, were all but unanimous. Peirce was not in agreement with James on many issues. Dewey, in turn, did not like various aspects of both Peirce's and James' philosophy, while C.I. Lewis' views on logic were quite different from those held by Dewey. It should not be surprising, then, to find the same amount of disagreement in contemporary neo-pragmatism, where Rescher and Rorty, who both define themselves pragmatists, display different opinions on most subjects. I shall draw some comparisons between the ideas of these two thinkers.

**Keywords:** metaphilosophy; epistemology; metaphysics; science; realism.

## Philosophical Doubts about reality

As a matter of fact there are *many* pragmatisms, so that it is a little misleading to present this variegated trend of thought as if it were a monolithic doctrine. The founding fathers, too, were all but unanimous. Peirce was not in agreement with James on many issues. Dewey, in turn, did not like various aspects of both Peirce's and James' philosophy, while C.I. Lewis' views on logic were quite different from those held by Dewey. It should not be surprising, then, to find the same amount of disagreement in today neopragmatism, where Rescher and Rorty, who both define themselves pragmatists, display different opinions on most subjects. In the present section we shall draw some sketchy comparisons between the ideas of these two thinkers.

Rescher views the contrast between himself and Rorty as a continuation of the struggle between an objective pragmatism (or "pragmatism of the right") which includes the triad Peirce-Lewis-Rescher, and a subjective one (or "pragmatism of the left")<sup>1</sup> which comprises James, the early and middle Dewey, and Rorty. The later Dewey assumes, in this picture, a middle-of-the-road position. While Rorty must certainly be praised for both overcoming the linguistic turn and making pragmatism popular again in American philosophy following several decades of relative forgetfulness, Rescher argues that the Rortyan interpretation of pragmatism is too partial. In particular, by taking Rorty too seriously one is led to believe that pragmatism implies relativism.

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<sup>1</sup> Marsonet, Michele. "Different pragmatist reactions to analytic philosophy." *New Perspectives on Pragmatism and Analytic Philosophy*, edited by Rosa M. Calcaterra, *Studies in Pragmatism and Values*, 2011, 101-107

On the contrary, Rescher insists that relativism is practically absent in the writings of Peirce and C.I. Lewis, so that Rorty ends up with providing an image of pragmatism which is substantially misleading. All these remarks are important especially for the historians of contemporary thought. The contrast between the two authors, however, is not only (or even better: not mainly) historical, but theoretical. Although sharing some basic opinions, among which the reevaluation of pragmatism and the overcoming of analytic philosophy's ideological tenets play a key role, they go in opposite directions as long as many and fundamental philosophical issues are concerned. Rorty for instance claims that logical positivism and, in general, the whole kind of philosophy which stems from Russell and Frege - i.e. analytic philosophy - was not a revolutionary mode of thought, but a reactionary movement. It is:

Like classical Husserlian phenomenology, simply one more attempt to put philosophy in the position which Kant wished it to have - that of judging other areas of culture on the basis of its special knowledge of the "foundations" of these areas. "Analytic" philosophy is one more variant of Kantian philosophy, a variant marked principally by thinking of representation as linguistic rather than mental, and of philosophy of language rather than "transcendental critique," or psychology as the discipline which exhibits the "foundations of knowledge."<sup>2</sup>

The emphasis on language, according to Rorty, although important in itself, does not change the Cartesian-Kantian problematic, and thus does not really give philosophy a new self-image. Analytic philosophy is (or was) still committed to the construction of a permanent, neutral framework for inquiry, and thus for all culture. This idea amounts to saying that there are "non-historical conditions of any possible historical developments," and that we can escape from history. Instead we should totally adhere to Dewey's dictum that philosophers "are parts of history, caught in its movement; creators perhaps in some measure of its future, but also assuredly creatures of its past."<sup>3</sup>

### **The overcoming of analytic philosophy's foundationalism**

According to Rescher, instead, the overcoming of analytic philosophy's ill-based foundationalism means neither the end of philosophy itself, nor the refusal to recognize its cognitive value. He agrees with Rorty's assertion that philosophers cannot detach themselves from history or forsake the everyday and scientific conceptions that provide the stage setting of their discipline, but nevertheless contends that the dissolution of philosophy is a deeply wrong answer. Skeptics of all sorts would like to "liberate" humankind from the need of doing philosophy, pointing out that it has thus far been unable to answer our questions in a proper way. Rescher, to the

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<sup>2</sup> R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1979, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> J. Dewey, *Philosophy and Civilization*, Capricorn Books, New York, 1963, p. 4.

contrary, invites us to take sides because “abandoning philosophical subjects is a leap into nothingness.”<sup>4</sup> Of course we can escape into the history of philosophy conceived of in merely philological terms, or into technical minutiae, but this is tantamount to cognitive vacuity. The need to philosophize stems from our very nature of inquiring beings and is, so to speak, built in the cultural evolutionary heritage that we all share.

We might even say that we need intellectual accommodation at least as much as physical accommodation is requested in our daily life. So, when the skeptics invite to forget about abstract thinking and philosophy in order to focus on practical needs, it may be answered that:

They overlook the crucial fact that an intellectual accommodation to the world is itself one of our deepest practical needs - that in a position of ignorance or cognitive dissonance we cannot function satisfactorily. We are creatures for whom intellectual comfort is no less crucial than physical comfort. The human condition is such that we are going to have some view (after all, skepticism itself is just one such). The question is simply whether we are going to have one that is well thought out or not.<sup>5</sup>

Even someone like Rorty who claims that no philosophical position at all should be endorsed, himself in the end puts forward what is simply another view among many in the spectrum of possibilities at our disposal. The problems that Rorty faces by adopting such a stance emerge very well in his political philosophy (“ironic liberalism”)<sup>6</sup>. In this context let us only note that his tenet, according to which philosophy is more or less harmless, is hardly tenable if we recall the enormous *practical* consequences that the rise and development of a doctrine like Marxism has had on the contemporary world.

### **Praxis and history vs philosophical *a priori* axioms.**

No devotee of the Western democratic thought is inclined to deny that the image of the “philosopher-king” is dangerous and, as a matter of fact, Popper has given us some illuminating analyses in this respect. The real point at stake, however, is not *this* one. Rorty claims - correctly - that any absolute view of reality, which aims at subordinating praxis and history to some philosophical *a priori* axioms in order to build an ideal social order, is bound to failure. Not only that: it even threatens to create more problems than it was meant to solve. But why should we draw, from this correct premise, absolutely relativistic conclusions like Rorty’s? I perceive, in sum, a sort of intellectual jump between his basic assumptions and the results he deduces from them. We do not need to shift from the refusal of any totalitarian view of reality to a complete relativism which - as such - threatens to lead the democratic societies of the Western world to a dangerous nihilism.

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<sup>4</sup> N. Rescher, *The Strife of Systems*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 1985, p. 248.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

<sup>6</sup> Marsonet, Michele. *Idealism and Praxis: The Philosophy of Nicholas Rescher*. De Gruyter, 2008

Some years ago, dealing with Rorty's thought, Ian Hacking remarked that:

Rorty's version of pragmatism is yet another language-based philosophy, which regards all of our life as a matter of conversation. Dewey rightly despised the spectator theory of knowledge. What might he have thought of science as conversation? In my opinion, the right track in Dewey is the attempt to destroy the conception of knowledge and reality as a matter of thought and of representation<sup>7</sup>. He should have turned the minds of philosophers to experimental science, but instead his new followers praise talk.<sup>8</sup>

This is in my view a very good point. In the first place it reminds us that Rorty's reading of Dewey is certainly original, but also problematic: in other words, we should be careful not to confuse "Rorty's Dewey" with the real one. Secondly, it is correct to claim - as I did several times - that he overcame the ideological tenets of analytic philosophy. Nevertheless, language keeps in his thought a paramount importance. It no longer is the ideal language of logical empiricism, but the language as envisioned by the second Wittgenstein with his theory of the linguistic games.

The outcome is that Rorty dissolves reality within a concept of "socio-linguistic practice" that is too loose to explain anything (and this move is not a pragmatist one). Bearing all this in mind, we may now understand why Rorty does not see favorably Davidson's contention that there is a public and objective world which is not created by us and is the ultimate source of our beliefs. Rorty's daring move is, instead, to make that world coincide with our beliefs, which once again puts him at odds with Rescher's philosophy. In fact Rescher, who is a self-declared conceptual idealist, turns out, on this matter, to be much less idealistically inclined than Rorty. I believe that the preceding analysis shows well how distant from each other are two authors both of whom take themselves to be pragmatists.

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<sup>7</sup> Marsonet, Michele. "Different pragmatist reactions to analytic philosophy." *New Perspectives on Pragmatism and Analytic Philosophy*, edited by Rosa M. Calcaterra, Studies in Pragmatism and Values, 2011, 101-107

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