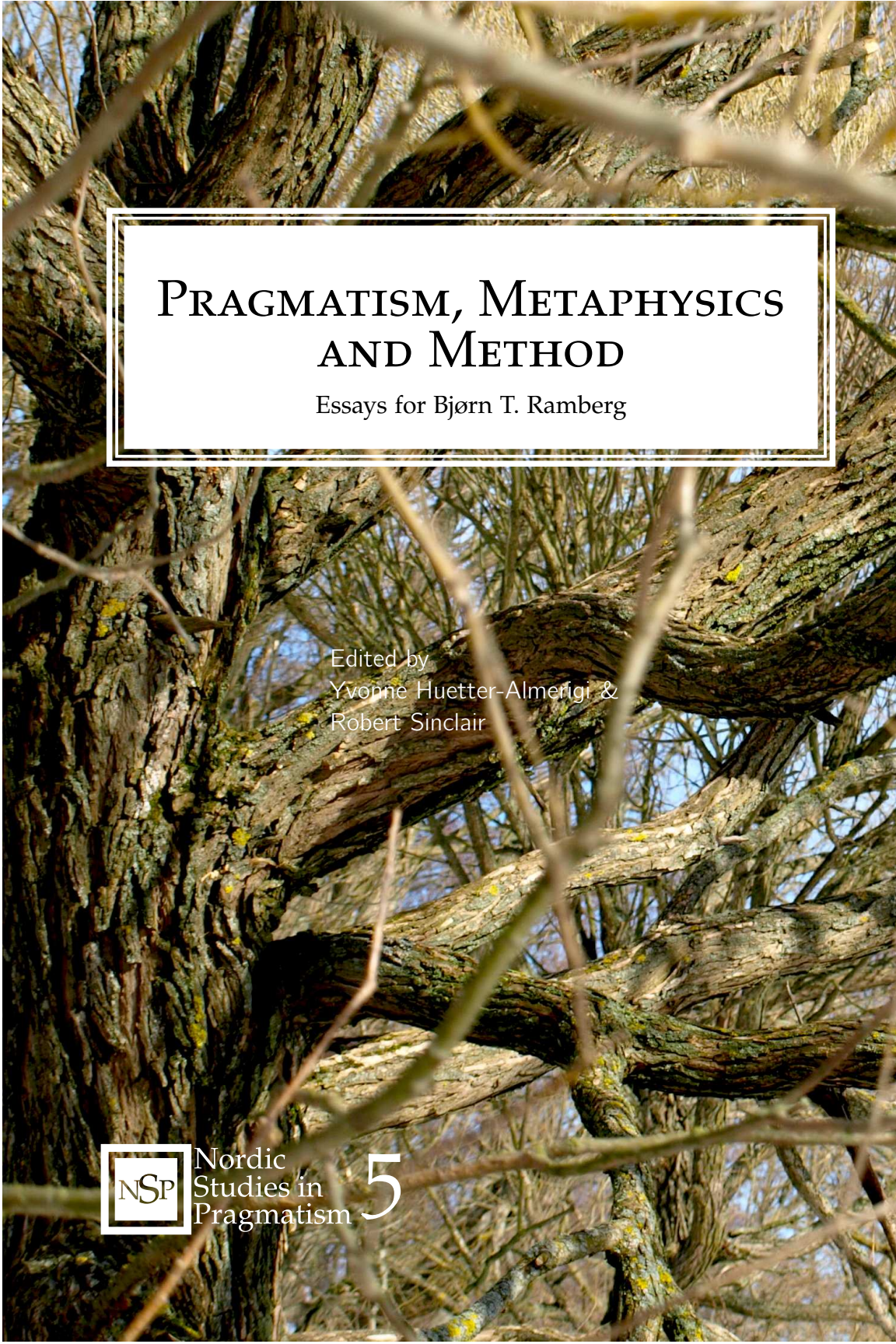

Pragmatism, Metaphysics and Method

Essays for Bjørn T. Ramberg

Edited by
Yvonne Huetter-Almerigi &
Robert Sinclair

NSP Nordic Studies in Pragmatism 5

PRAGMATISM, METAPHYSICS AND METHOD

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Nordic Pragmatism Network,
Helsinki 2026

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Introduction

Bjørn Torgrim Ramberg as Philosopher and Mentor — Editors' Introduction

It is with great pleasure that we offer you this collection in honor of Bjørn Ramberg's career as philosopher and teacher. The essays touch on both of these features; the philosophical concerns that have motivated Ramberg's reflections, as well as his guiding role as teacher and mentor for many of the contributors to this volume. We are eager to let the essays speak for themselves but will briefly touch on these two themes in this short introduction.

In terms of philosophical work, allow us to point to a few highlights and overarching themes in Ramberg's oeuvre. Ramberg burst onto the scene with his book on Davidson's philosophy of language, which he interprets as an attempt to expose and remove the dubious theoretical assumptions philosophers have made in the study of language (1989). This text was extremely well-received by both Davidson and Rorty, but perhaps less so by analytic philosophers interested in maintaining Davidson's status as a constructive, systematic and metaphysical thinker. Other important treatments of Davidson's views followed, including a discussion of his anti-representationalism and its link to his criticism of skepticism (2001). In addition, there is Ramberg's contribution to the Library of Living Philosophers volume devoted to Davidson titled 'The Significance of Charity' (1999). Here, he attempts to clarify the importance of Davidson's use of charity principles in interpretation by juxtaposing them with his less appreciated conception of the physical. Davidson's response showed great admiration for Ramberg's clarification of his view. In our view, this article serves as one of the best attempts to capture the interconnectedness of Davidson's thought by structuring it around the basic contrast between the intentional vocabulary of agency and the physical vocabularies of science.

Another central theme in Ramberg's work is his discussions of Davidson and Rorty and their key debates. Here his 'Post-Ontological Philosophy of Mind: Rorty versus Davidson' (2000), must take pride of place,

as it famously and successfully defends Davidson's emphasis on the significance of intentional discourse in response to Rorty's negative reading. There is also an ongoing concern with Rorty's neopragmatism especially with its connection to the rejection of metaphysics (2008, 2011a). Further, Ramberg often places Rorty and Davidson in conversation with the continental tradition, hermeneutics and the works of Gadamer in particular (2003, 2011b). Lastly, we detect a noticeable political, social turn in some of his most recent work, where Ramberg attempts to sort out the implications of his neopragmatist view for our moral, social, and cultural lives (2014, 2017, 2018). Here, he further draws on recent work in sociolinguistics (2016, 2025). As indicated, all of these themes and many more are addressed in the contributions that follow.

In terms of Bjørn's role as a teacher and mentor, I (Sinclair) will very briefly speak to my own case by simply noting his extreme kindness and generosity in accepting me as a doctoral student many years ago. This was during a transition in his own life, when his family was deciding whether to remain in Canada or return to Norway. It would have been perfectly understandable and justified if he kindly directed me elsewhere. I am eternally grateful.

As for my case (Huetter-Almerigi), when Richard Bernstein told me I should talk about my work to Ramberg, I was shy to approach him because he was such a major figure. I am glad I did because I didn't only find a generous and attentive mentor, but a kind and unpretentious person whose first question, when I arrived in Oslo was not about work but on whether I had brought my hiking shoes.

Bjørn left this impression on many people—exceptional intellectual abilities paired with unusual candor and modesty. The enthusiasm with which the contributors to this volume accepted our invitation provides lively testimony to the many people influenced by his thought, touched by his kindness, and owe part of their paths to his guidance.

Yvonne Huetter-Almerigi
& Robert Sinclair

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PART I

PRAGMATISM AND METHOD

The Rortyan "We", the Disappearing "We", And the Transcendental "We" —Reflections on Pragmatist Methodology

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Introduction

For pragmatists—or for *us* pragmatists—there is no non-committed, "merely theoretical", or value-neutral place to stand in philosophical discussion, no abstract level of purely intellectual argumentation beyond our reflection on how to live, or beyond an on-going self-examination seeking to understand what it means for us to engage in the practices we do engage in, both epistemic and ethical. This insight into the profound entanglement of the *theoretical* and the *practical* has received different articulations in the pragmatist tradition.[1] One of them is William James's (1975 [1907], Lecture I) famous (or notorious) concept of a "philosophical temperament", which reminds us that we always engage in philosophical thinking

[1] It is obvious that an essay honoring Bjørn Ramberg's philosophical achievements should address pragmatism in a way or another. It is, of course, primarily in the context of Nordic and European pragmatism collaboration that I have come to know him over the years. I recall first meeting him in person at the University of Oslo when I gave a guest talk there in September 2001 (a week after 9/11) and he invited me to a wonderful dinner—with rather serious conversations—at Theatercaféen. Since then, we both participated in a collaborative Nordic project on the concept of rationality led by Leila Haaparanta in the early 2000s, as well as various pragmatism-related activities, including a memorable panel (with Cheryl Misak) on pragmatism and subjectivity at the APA Pacific Division Meeting in Vancouver, BC in 2009.

and argumentation as flesh-and-blood human beings, with our individual needs and interests, seeking our own voice in philosophizing. Another articulation, emphasizing the first-person plural rather than the first-person singular, is the methodology that Richard Rorty (e.g., 1989) seems to advocate (insofar as it is appropriate to call it a "methodology" at all): trying to look and see how things seem to be "to us", or from "our" point of view, realizing that we have to "start from where we are" when aspiring to transform ourselves into something (hopefully) better. In these terms, philosophical reflection can be regarded as an inquiry into who, and what, *we* are—not simply "work on oneself", on "one's own conception", on "how one sees things", as Ludwig Wittgenstein (1998, 24) characterized the nature of philosophy in 1931, but (as we might say) "work on ourselves", on how we see things (and on how we ought to see them).

The very possibility of this "ought" is what should trouble us here. Where does our self-reflection draw its normative force from? The purpose of this paper is to explore, in dialogue with not only Rorty but various other contemporary thinkers emphasizing the philosophical significance of "us", what exactly it means, or could mean (for a pragmatist, or for us pragmatists), to inquire into who we are, and how the concept of "us" ought to be characterized in this context. We will thereby encounter different versions of the philosophical "we".

The transcendental "we": understanding our "mindedness"

Instead of Rorty's well-known rhetorics of "us",[2] I will begin from an attempt to *transcendentally* elucidate the significance of "starting from where we are". It is against this background that the relevance of Rorty's insistence on our thoroughgoing contingency will emerge. The conception of philosophy as "work on ourselves" may be characterized as an inquiry into the "transcendental 'us'"—a "pragmatic transcendental anthropology", as we might also call it (cf. Pihlström, 2016). Jonathan Lear (1998, chapters 11 and 12) is one of the relatively few interpreters of Wittgenstein explicitly employing the expression, "transcendental anthropology".[3] Let me first introduce this idea in broad strokes.

[2] See, e.g., Rorty 1999 and 2007. Rorty repeatedly refers to various contingent groups of "us": "us modern Western liberals", "us pragmatists", "us Kuhnians", and so forth. For a recent analysis of the "we" rhetorics Rorty engages in, especially in the context of feminism, see Dieleman, 2021, 179–81.

[3] I will also try to make some other philosophers', especially Raimond Gaita's (2004 [1991]), occasionally somewhat cryptic reflections on the significance of the ethical "for us" more precise by utilizing Lear's notion of our being "minded".

Lear defines someone's being "minded" in a certain way in terms of their "shar[ing] the perceptions of salience, routes of interest, feelings of naturalness in following a rule which constitute being part of a form of life" (ibid., 290).[4] This characterization is irreducibly *normative*, because being minded is crucially about rule-following (a profoundly Wittgensteinian concept, of course), while also invoking contingently *natural* features of our rule-following practices, including even "feelings of naturalness", as well as our contingently inhabiting a form of life situated within its natural surroundings. It is easy to extrapolate this to considerations of various ways of being "minded" as "we" are: we are dealing with boundary-drawing that is natural for us while also being inescapably normative, constraining any choices and moves possible for us within the boundaries thus drawn.

This conceptualization will help us cash out the idea of "our common humanity"—emphasized by Raimond Gaita (2000; 2004 [1991])—by giving it a transcendental shape in terms of the notion of the "transcendental 'we' ".[5] As Lear (1998, chapter 12) carefully analyzes, this Wittgensteinian "we" (the "we" understood as a subject of a form of life within which our rule-following practices take place) in a sense seems to "disappear", just like the Kantian "I"—as purely formal—disappears from the "I think" that must be able to accompany all my representations.[6] What this means is that our being, at the transcendental level, "minded" in a cer-

[4] As Boncompagni (2022, 36) notes, this echoes Stanley Cavell's (1962) description of the concept of a form of life in Wittgenstein.

[5] Pragmatist analogies of the notion of "our common humanity" might include, for example, Peirce's "critical commonsensism" and James's account of common sense (in James, 1975 [1907], Lecture V) as a kind of evolutionized Kantianism, as well as (by extension) Wittgenstein's occasional references to forms of life and "*die gemeinsame menschliche Handlungsweise*" as incorporating convictions that are not epistemologically indubitable but are just not doubted as they are rooted in our habits of action. (Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* would be the primary source in this regard.) With a minor stretch, even Dewey's pragmatic naturalism, insofar as it involves the idea of our inescapably viewing the world in terms of human values and meanings, could be considered a variant of this idea (thanks to Rob Sinclair for insightful comments on this matter).

[6] See Kant's analysis of the original unity of transcendental apperception in the First Critique (1781/1787). Constantine Sandis (2020) reminds us that there is a multiplicity of different uses of "us" in Wittgenstein, and clearly not all of them can be said to be transcendental in the sense investigated by Lear. Sandis specifically distinguishes between "we philosophers", "we language users", and "we normal people"—and it seems that often "we" for Wittgenstein just means "most of us" (ibid., 184). Sandis distances himself from any transcendental or idealist readings of Wittgenstein (ibid., 186–88). While I am mainly using Lear's interpretation for my own purposes here, I am not taking any firm stand on who actually gets Wittgenstein right. See Boncompagni's (2022) critique of transcendental inter-

tain way entails *our being so minded that we do not, and cannot, see this "us" as merely one social group or practice among others*. In short, there is no relevant alternative to the group of "us", given that we *are* minded in the way we are.[7] For example, our being "minded" to regard something as not merely wrong but "unthinkable" (that is, not to be seriously considered at all, either in an epistemic or an ethical sense) means, then, that that something *is* unthinkable.[8] If we are so minded that a certain view or practice—a truly weird way of measuring, political murder, or Holocaust denialism, for instance[9]—is unthinkable for us as a serious candidate for discussion, this means, *for us*, that it *is* unthinkable, period. In particular, the meaning of the ethical for us is grounded in our "mindedness", and our drawing the boundary between the thinkable and the unthinkable plays a crucial role in the constitution of this meaning (see Pihlström, 2025, especially chapters 1–2).

However, it may seem to be problematic to ground the ethical unthinkability of (e.g.) political murder or Holocaust denialism in *mere facts* about how we happen to think. Let us therefore pursue Lear's considerations in some more detail. He begins his discussion of the "we" by identifying what he calls the "anthropological stance" in Wittgenstein—a sideways-on description (as we might put it) of a form of life. However, he notes that this does not encourage relativism: "We cannot step outside our form of life and discuss it like some *objet trouvé*. Any attempt to *say* what our form of life is like will itself be part of the form of life [...]. For Wittgenstein is not here talking about one culture among others." (Ibid., 249.) Being minded "as we are" is simply "not one possibility we can explore among

pretations of the concept of form(s) of life in Wittgenstein; her own view is "methodological" rather than transcendental (or naturalistic).

[7] Analogously, the Kuhnian "normal scientist" working within a paradigm cannot, when doing so, conceive of her- or himself having adopted some alternative paradigm (one among many); to be committed to a paradigm and to practice normal science within it is to fail to see relevant alternatives—and thus to find the contingent revolutionary history of the paradigm itself "invisible". See Kuhn, 1970 [1962], and recall Rorty's occasional references to "us Kuhnians".

[8] The concept of the (ethically) unthinkable is central in Gaita, 2004 [1991], chapter 17. Compare, e.g., Wittgenstein's examples concerning our concept of measuring, extensively discussed by Lear (1998).

[9] These are of course very different examples, and many others could be given. This paper cannot settle the difference between the ethically unthinkable and the (merely, though deeply) wrong, but the intuitive idea is that the unthinkable could not even be considered and thus found to be wrong—by us.

others" (ibid., 250); imagining counterfactuals to our mindedness "cannot for us express real possibilities" (ibid.).[10]

Now, what *kind* of impossibility is this? That is, what *kind* of "illusion of possibility" (ibid.) is created by thinking that we could step out of our mindedness?[11] Clearly we are not simply speaking of a natural (im)possibility or even a metaphysical one, let alone a logical one.

I am tempted to agree with Lear that this situation needs to be analyzed in terms of transcendental investigation (ibid., 252ff.). At the same time, this is an inquiry into what it is to be, naturally and contingently, "us": "Even when we try to come to grips with a form of 'other-mindedness,' it is we who have posed it and we who are trying to come to grips with it." (Ibid., 258.) So, who are *we* (cf. ibid., 263, 275)? Asking such questions, a transcendental inquiry into our rule-following practices and (thus) our mindedness is a quasi-Kantian critique of the illusoriness of any purely anthropological stance, exposing "its pretense of pure observer" (ibid., 273). The "who are we" question, then, troubles *us*, and *we* need to avoid illusory answers distracting our self-understanding:

> There are certain truths about us which, though they must be expressed anthropologically, are not confined to any particular form of life. Nor are they merely universal in the sense of occurring in all forms of life. Rather they try to express the conditions of being minded in any way at all. For example, the reflective philosophical claim that what correct measurement is is itself dependent on our interests, desires, practices is not supposed to be a local claim about what constitutes correct measurement around here. Nor is it a universal sociological claim about human groups. It is a philosophical claim about the constitutive conditions of a form of life. (Ibid., 276.)

[10] James's (1975 [1907], Lecture v) analysis of common sense as our inherited background is pluralistic, however, because science (or "philosophic criticism") can challenge common-sense convictions, and none among these spheres of life is absolutely true in comparison to the others. In classical pragmatism, a clearer analogy to the transcendental "we" might be available in Peirce's conception of the idealized community of researchers employing the scientific method—a "we" that would thus ultimately reach the "final opinion". See, e.g., "The Fixation of Belief" (1877) and "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (1878) in Peirce 1992–98, vol. 1.

[11] Lear (1998, 270) specifically says that the "sideways-on perspective" is an illusion: not a perspective at all but an "imaginative fiction". This may be compared to Phillips's (1992, 232) claim about there being only "horror or madness", "not an alternative attitude", lying outside the consensus of responses and expectations constituting our relations to other human beings.

Thus, Lear tells us, we eventually "reach truths which express basic conditions of being minded, and the 'We' is just the subject for whom these truths are true" (ibid., 278). By analogy, when speaking about what is thinkable or unthinkable "for us", we are referring not simply to the contingent group of us we (anthropologically or sociologically) happen to be, or to the (contingently) universal totality of all human beings, but at a philosophical level to what it means to be (any) "us" at all as seen from within the "us" we are, even though any such "us" is, of course, also a fully natural and contingent social group situated in a concrete world. The core of the illusion of the sideways-on perspective is the failure to view this as a transcendental issue in the first place.

However, while drawing the transcendental moral Lear introduces us with, we must—from the point of view of our (already) being "us"—recognize the *contingency* of all this, of our being anyone or anything at all. True, the phrase, "We are so minded:" "by itself is empty; it gains content by what we (are so minded as to) place after the colon" (ibid., 291).[12] Yet, as Lear himself points out, the "we" does *not* "disappear" in the sense of collapsing to "a bare formal condition of thought", because the "laws of thought" at work in our mindedness "have no content in abstraction from the myriad activities in which we engage" (ibid., 280). This is a kind of *pragmatism*, we may say, though Lear does not explicitly link his views with the pragmatist tradition. That the prefix, "We are so minded:", "does not disappear", after all, but only seems to do so, "makes us reflectively aware that our form of life is not some fixed, frozen entity existing totally independently of us" but "(our) active mind"—even though this is, again, something we can be aware of only "from the inside" (ibid., 300). What this means is that the boundaries we draw between the thinkable and the unthinkable—for and by us, whoever we are—constitute what it means to be, actively, any "we" at all, and this constitutivity takes place not at an abstract transcendent level but (transcendentally) *within* any activities, ethical as well as epistemic or conceptual, that we engage in (and hence, we may say, "pragmatically", qualifying any such activities *as* we engage in them). Our drawing and redrawing the thinkability vs. unthinkability divide are itself an activity of ours, *our* drawing that line.[13]

[12] The obvious analogy, as Lear repeatedly reminds us, is Kant's "I think", the purely formal unity of transcendental apperception: "The 'We are so minded:' must thus stand in an analogous 'master-slave' relation to our form of life as the Kantian synthetic unity of apperception stands to the object of judgment." (Lear, 1998, 300.)

[13] The position I am (with some qualifications) deriving from Lear, without claiming it to be exactly his, can also be compared to Phillips's (1992, 107) account of what he finds a

There is, then, no metaphysically realist God's-Eye View—no higher court of appeal—for viewing our being minded in a certain way as merely one option among others. As has often been remarked, metaphysical realism postulating a "ready-made world" and radical relativism denying any shared reality are two sides of the same coin (cf., e.g., Putnam, 1981). Therefore, we cannot really make sense of the possibility of *our* being minded in a radically different way, either. We cannot do so because the relevant "sense-making" would have to be performed by *us*. This is one way of articulating what it means to say that the "mindedness" we are dealing with is transcendental. In particular, our views on what is ethically thinkable or unthinkable cannot be just transformed or revised in the way we revise ordinary empirical beliefs or our "first-order" moral views within the limits fixed by what we regard as thinkable—any more than a Kuhnian paradigm change could simply take place as a result of our acquiring more empirical evidence (though novel evidence is relevant to such shifts in leading to anomalies and crises). More positively, this can also be expressed by saying that when viewing the world in terms of "our" distinction between the thinkable and the unthinkable, that is, when being minded in a certain way that rules some things out as possible candidates of serious moral (or epistemic) consideration,[14] we are inviting all others, each and everyone, to do the same (no matter who they are), that is, to look at the world with our eyes—and as far as possible, we should issue this invitation by "using persuasion instead of force", quoting Rorty's oft-used apt phrase.

The contingency of "us"

After having preliminarily introduced the transcendental perspective on "us" and our "mindedness", let us pursue a quite different way of philosophically appealing to "us" by turning to Rorty.

Rorty's (e.g., 1989; 1991; 1999; 2007) heavily rhetorical "we" is explicitly *non-transcendental*—always denoting a specific cultural group, a historically contingent "us"—and thus very far from Lear's, even though

condition of moral seriousness: "If someone has moral beliefs, it must matter to him that some things are believed or done and not others. A man who says all views are equal has no views."

[14] It is, admittedly, pleonastic to speak about "serious moral consideration", as anything that is morally considered at all is by definition serious. Morality is a serious business to begin with. This pleonasm may, however, be needed as a continuous reminder of this fact about "us" and "our" concept of morality.

Wittgenstein is one of the main sources for both. While it may be argued that Rorty's radical pragmatism lacks the normative resources of a transcendental inquiry into the necessary preconditions of our being "minded" (and especially into any rational criteria of critically transforming that mindedness), we may take home from Rorty the lesson of our thoroughgoing fallibilism and historical contingency. Even if we cannot, as we now stand, meaningfully regard our way of viewing the world as just one among many possible ones, that is, even if "other" ways of drawing the boundary between the thinkable and the unthinkable are, indeed, unthinkable for us and there is no relevant alternative we could non-illusorily make sense of (while remaining "us"), we must be able to entertain the idea that *our* life *could* be, or could have been, dramatically different from what it is, if only for the trivial reason that we could have been born into a different time and place.[15] We have to acknowledge this possibility in a self-critical—transcendental—sense *from within* our being minded in the way we are, especially as we view our mindedness as "active" in Lear's sense. This is analogous to a Kantian transcendental thinker recognizing that human cognition could, in principle, be different from what it is: it is not metaphysically necessary that we organize our experience, and any possible experience, in terms of the forms of intuition and the categories of the understanding. "Our common humanity" could be different. Yet, sharing the humanity we contingently do share (indeed, in my view Rorty offers one of the best articulations of human historical contingency in the history of philosophy), we can only engage in a never-ending ethical reflection on what it means to be human together with others, and it is right here that we need ethical persuasion directed to others to adopt what we find the only possible ways of seeing some things as unthinkable.

The reflexivity of such reflection is not very far from transcendental approaches, however. For example, we are (and ought to be) so minded that we realize that cruelty "is the worst thing we do"—as Rorty repeatedly phrased his definition of what it is to be "liberal", drawing from Judith Shklar. It is, and must be, unthinkable for us to be intentionally cruel. It would be ethically impossible to claim that cruelty (for its own sake) would in some cases be justified. The question of justification cannot (or, better, simply does not) even arise here. Engaging with Rorty's views may

[15] However, is this really trivial? Could *we* really have been born into another time and place? We would never have been "us" if we had. Yet, there is presumably something non-trivial and important that the possibly incoherent thought of "our" possibly having been born into different surroundings tries to express.

lead us to ask what exactly the word "we" refers to (that is, again, who are the "we" denoted by this word) when we (!) are invited to describe ourselves as "liberal ironists" according to whom "cruelty is the worst thing we do" but who nevertheless, ironically, recognize the contingency of our liberalism, the fact that "there is no answer to the question 'Why not be cruel?'—no noncircular theoretical backup for the belief that cruelty is horrible" (Rorty, 1989, xv). There is no way of engaging with this question about "us" being identified by self-descriptions such as "we liberal ironists" without our already (contingently yet constitutively) finding ourselves amongst the "us" recognizing this precarious yet (switching to Lear's terms again) arguably transcendentally constitutive limit marking an impossibility of appealing to anything more fundamental than the horribility of cruelty itself in support of our commitment to avoiding cruelty.[16]

Now, if our meta-level views on what is thinkable or unthinkable and what our mindedness thus constitutively consists in are themselves open to ethical critique in terms of the ethical discourse they at the same time define and constitute, are the ethical unthinkabilities that we take to define us and our form of life "really" unthinkable, after all? Aren't they, rather, within the ("thinkable") ethical realm? There is no easy way out from this predicament. Anticipating a non-conclusive pragmatist response, it may be suggested that there is only our on-going ethical discussion itself to rely on, a discussion also continuously exploring the boundaries between the thinkable and the unthinkable themselves, and constantly actively renegotiating where exactly such boundaries lie, when we seek a deeper philosophical understanding of, for example, the relation between the unthinkable and the "merely wrong", or the sense in which the thinkability vs. unthinkability boundary defines "us". Engaging in this discussion is to practice transcendental moral philosophy, one of whose defining characteristics is its resolutely *reflexive*—uncompromisingly self-critical—focus.[17]

[16] As Rorty himself acknowledges (e.g., Rorty, 1989, xv; see also ibid., 74, 146), the notion of the liberal as someone according to whom cruelty is the worst thing we do is drawn from Judith Shklar (see her 1984, chapter 1). On "us liberals" and our contingency, see also, e.g., Rorty, 1991, 13-15.

[17] One reflexive question that might be asked at this point is the following. Does the Rortyan rhetoric of "us" set up a meta-level boundary acknowledging that the historical contingency of "us" (our mindedness, or our drawing the thinkability vs. unthinkability boundary in the way we do) is itself *not* contingent but defines us *ahistorically*? Is this the kind of reflexivity inherent in critical (transcendental) philosophy or just a vicious circle? The pragmatist reflexivity defining what I take to be the most promising approach here is committed to indefinitely exploring the necessary contingency and the contingent necessity of "us", and the entanglement of these contingencies and necessities. *We* quasi-necessarily

My purpose here is not to enter into any full-fledged critique of Rorty. However, many other critics have persuasively argued over the decades (ever since his early *magnum opus*, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 1979), that Rorty lacks the normative resources for critically and rationally assessing—and thus non-arbitrarily changing or transforming—the contingent "us" that we are. On the other hand, doesn't everyone? As our drawing at least some distinction between the thinkable and the unthinkable is arguably constitutive of the possibility of normative discussion, Rorty does deserve a fair hearing, even though we cannot follow him into his radical ironism which ultimately reduces all normative and rational persuasion to mere causal clashes between "vocabularies". The references to Lear above may be seen as one way of normatively enriching the flatly reductive Rortyan "us".[18] Furthermore, Gaita's (2004 [1991]) method of exploring both real-life and literary cases where "our" thinking (and its very possibility) is compared with ways in which we could not possibly think—ways characteristic of "cranks", "lunatics", or those who are "wicked" (cf. Glover, 2011)—may not in the end be radically different from Rorty's own approach that takes imaginative literature extremely seriously in philosophically analyzing "us".

This can be turned into an implicit lesson of *pragmatist methodology*: what is needed is a pragmatic methodological pluralism and a pluralism of the different, contextually relevant, senses of "us" at work in any (even transcendental) critical and transformative reflection on what our contingent life could and possibly should be like.[19] The question remains, however, who (which group of "us") is able to switch the perspective from one of such senses to another. A transcendental (meta-level) "we" needs to be postulated in order to make sense of this possibility, and here we cannot follow Rorty's lead. It is only transcendentally, "from within" (and seek-

eclipse, or make invisible, our historical contingency by finding our mindedness equivalent to mindedness *überhaupt*, by not being able to genuinely imagine a radically different form of life, and by recognizing this inability. We are inevitably "normal" or ordinary subjects of our form of life analogously to Kuhn's "normal scientists" within a paradigm: without such "normality", neither science nor life is possible. But then, occasionally, there are crises and even revolutions in both. After a revolution, we (again ordinarily) make it invisible. Historical, or historicist, self-awareness—Rortyan ironism—is an abnormality, an indication of a crisis state.

[18] Conversely, Rorty's "we" is, we may say, a deflated, fully naturalized version of Lear's transcendental "we". Instead of constitutive (transcendental) conditions for the possibility of our being who we are, the Rortyan "we" is characterized by its (our) contingent use of certain ("final") vocabularies to which it (we) can always take an ironic attitude.

[19] On the significance of pluralism in Rorty's pragmatism, see Koopman 2021.

ing to elucidate what it means to look at things "from within"), that we may recognize the contingency of "us" in the sense of recognizing that we are something for whom (for which) the unthinkable *could* become thinkable, and vice versa, as paradoxical as this may sound. This, I think, is an important quasi-Rortyan lesson in pragmatist methodology.

Holistic pragmatism

One important type of pragmatism that may be applied in the kind of reflection proposed here, elaborating on Kuhn's, Rorty's, Lear's, and Gaita's views (among others), is the *holistic* pragmatism defended by Morton White (e.g., 2002).[20] Holistic pragmatism refuses to recognize any epistemologically essential dichotomy between the normative and the descriptive; everything—our entire system of beliefs—is tested holistically along its "edges" whenever we are testing any item within that system. If we need to revise our most fundamental beliefs—even logical ones—in order to accommodate a "recalcitrant" perceptual belief,[21] then such a revision, as radical as it may be, should be among the options to be considered. We have to ask, however, whether holistic pragmatism makes it impossible to maintain a distinction between the unthinkable and the "merely" wrong, or between boundaries constitutive of us and disagreements within such boundaries. I do not think it necessarily does, but such distinctions must be understood as local in the sense of being inevitably discourse- or language-game-relative. As already explained, it is only from within an already acknowledged ("thinkable") area bounded by the unthinkable that we can engage in any boundary-drawing at all. Yet, we need something like holistic pragmatism to keep the distinction alive as an object of the on-going self-reflection of our "active mind", even when there is no sharp dichotomy between the transcendental and the empirical to rely on.[22]

[20] One motivation for developing holistic pragmatism in this context is its ability to avoid both Rorty's problem—the lack of normativity—and what we may perceive as Gaita's problem, which might be considered another kind of lack of normativity based on too rigid a conception of the division between the thinkable and the unthinkable (criticized, e.g., in Glover, 2011). Because our boundary-drawing itself is tested all the time, pragmatically and processually, albeit always within some boundaries, both of these excesses may be avoided.

[21] In "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", Quine (1980 [1953], chapter 2) famously refers to "recalcitrant experience" when articulating his holism according to which the whole of science is empirically tested on its edges. White's holistic pragmatism is a normatively (including ethically) enriched extension of Quine's holism, which was more narrowly confined to logic, epistemology, and the philosophy of science.

[22] Admittedly, however, holistic pragmatism is a double-edged sword in the context of the present inquiry. It might seem that it makes everything "thinkable"—anything can be

Holistic pragmatism—precisely because it treats our situation as "holistic" world-engagement with both ethical and epistemic aspects, instead of focusing on isolated or individual moral statements—equips us with some of the conceptual resources necessary for reflecting on the possible changes that might occur in the boundaries we draw between the thinkable and the unthinkable in highly exceptional situations. Even if we do structure the world we live in in terms of those boundaries and attach a quasi-transcendental necessity to this structuring, it would be illusory to believe that the boundaries will always remain the same. To account for this dynamic, we need philosophical tools provided not only by transcendental philosophy *à la* Lear (and Lear's Wittgenstein) but also by pragmatism—not, however, merely Rorty's but also White's (2002), with its irreducible commitment to genuine normativity (cf. Pihlström, 2021, especially chapter 5).

In terms of holistic pragmatism, we may also say that whatever framework of thought and action defined by our (current) understanding of what is to be considered thinkable and unthinkable we are committed to, that framework must do some practical "work" for us in our lives. In standard pragmatist terms, it must be "satisfactory" in some sense, or serve our values, needs, and interests (which are themselves holistically tested, too). The basic difficulty we have to face, and which we must examine by entangling pragmatist and transcendental approaches, is our ability to pragmatically assess the success or satisfactoriness of such frameworks only within one or another framework itself (or *the* framework *we* find constitutive of our mindedness). There are no values, needs, or interests that would be prior to our framework in the sense of being independently available in our assessments of that framework; instead, our ethical valuations depend on what we find thinkable and unthinkable. It is precisely in this sense and for these reasons—in the interest of avoiding both an excessive conservatism of a permanently stable "we" and an excessive relativism too easily imagining the availability of genuine alternatives to "us"—that we need holistic pragmatism (transcendentally rearticulated) as an implicit guiding thread of a truly pragmatist-cum-transcendental inquiry into what it is to be minded in our way while being simultaneously committed to actively considering how our mindedness might become better.

empirically tested, and (to rephrase Quine again) "any statement can be held true come what may"—while on the other hand, it enables a holistic analysis of everything, including the boundary between the thinkable and the unthinkable itself (or its various uses in our practices).

We have to maintain a *reflective equilibrium* between the particular (e.g., ethical) views and arguments presented within an area of thinking constituted by our ruling out the unthinkable and the overall critical pragmatic consideration of how that particular way of ruling something out serves our lives.[23] The specific ethical views and arguments presented within the area of the thinkable may thus in some cases play a pragmatic role in challenging the entire framework and its defining limits, and thereby challenging "us" to become something different from what we currently are.

Consequently, the recognition of the historical contingency and revisability of the boundaries of our mindedness (viz., of what is constitutive of "us") can itself play a transcendental role as a necessary condition for the possibility of our being able to take an *active* stance to developing our mindedness, never being fully satisfied with (or even fully at home in) who we are. The possibility of transformation transcendentally requires contingency—even the contingency of the transcendental itself—and developing pragmatist methodology is arguably centered around the self-critical transformation of who we as rational inquirers are.[24]

"How we think"

Moral philosophy, when critically investigating the boundary between the ethically thinkable and the unthinkable in a transcendental sense, must continuously seek to enhance our understanding of what it means to view the world "with our eyes", or "with the eyes of humanity" (Gaita, 2005, 165). Only within the perspective(s) opened by such viewing is it possible for us to discuss, compare, evaluate, and criticize moral positions. Those who are not viewing the world with our eyes are beyond such discussion, and beyond "us"; we can only, following Rorty's (1989) advise, try to use

[23] In White's (2002) holistic pragmatism, reflective equilibrium is a key method—and it has, as is well known, been employed by many important thinkers (e.g., Rawls, 1971) not standardly classified as pragmatists. On the significance of holism in Gaita's account of unthinkability, see also Glover 2011.

[24] Even though I have avoided extensive references to Dewey's pragmatism in this paper, it would be an interesting exercise to consider how exactly even Deweyan naturalism (e.g., Dewey, 1986 [1929]) could be turned quasi-transcendental by interpreting it in terms of the kind of holistic pragmatism outlined here. A continuous critical inquiry into how we ought to continue our inquiries, yielding a critical self-transformation of "us" through changing problematic situations, could be seen as a kind of Deweyan equivalent of the approach I am developing. Again, I am grateful to Rob Sinclair for challenging me to consider these issues in relation to Dewey.

persuasion rather than force in inviting them to this open and hopefully maximally inclusive group of "us".[25]

It is, as we have seen, essential to distinguish between different senses of "us": the radically contingent Rortyan "we", the disappearing "we" (cf. Lear, 1998), and the transcendental "we". A pragmatist-cum-transcendental account of "us" may in the end arrive at the *indistinguishability* of these senses of "us", but the complicated philosophical route leading up to that result is worth traveling.[26] Moreover, considering what and how "we" can, must, or cannot think about historical moral catastrophes such as the Holocaust[27] and what these modalities (pragmatically) mean for us in our lives may be a vital step on that route. Rorty (1989), in his controversial account of "final vocabularies" and ironism, emphasizes the historical contingency of everything, including (though these are not his exact words) what *we* find thinkable or unthinkable—and who we, thus, are. His famous ironism can be characterized as the disillusioned recognition of this radical contingency conjoined with an openness to the possibility of enlarging the sphere of us to ever new and more inclusive directions. However, the transcendentally inclined pragmatist may ask how we can recognize this contingency and still remain sincerely *committed* to the "final vocabularies" we employ to define our lives and identities, as well as committed to actively transforming those vocabularies—and ourselves as their subjects—whenever necessary (indeed, to having an "active mind", in Lear's sense). What we arrive at here is a historicized and naturalized account of the "transcendental 'we' " radically aware of its (our) own historical contingency.[28]

[25] Dictators and totalitarian regimes, in contrast, exclude all even minimally diverse individuals and groups from their "us". The Nazis, in particular, can be said to have expunged the Jews from the "we" of history (Patterson, 2018, 67–8).

[26] This indistinguishability is, arguably, analogous to the sense in which the transcendental self (or ego) can be claimed to be, at the same time, just the natural self (albeit seen or considered *qua* transcendental). See, e.g., Carr, 1999; Pihlström, 2003.

[27] When asking this question, we must never overlook the historical and political variability of "us". Susan Neiman (2020, 28, 44, 87) refers to "Todorov's rule" (formulated by Tzvetan Todorov): while Germans should focus on the singularity of the Holocaust, Jews should focus on its universality. This has enormous significance on, e.g., to how exactly the crimes of Nazism and communism can be compared, and in what contexts. Nothing in my admittedly abstract use of "we" signifies any attempt to downplay the *political* complexity of the "us" in what is (un)thinkable for us.

[28] When lucidly acknowledging our contingency, "we" (whoever we are) may also recognize that the ways in which our moral ideals make sense to us, or are compelling for us, depend on the changing natural and social world we historically live in. Hence the power of thought-experimenting ethical reflections such as Tim Mulgan's (2011) ethics for a "broken

When negotiating—individually or socio-culturally, displaying an awareness of the contingency of us—"how we think",[29] how we are able to think, how we ought to think, and what we are able to find thinkable in the first place, we are, almost by definition, examining the *human condition*, how we live and what we are. Failing to recognize this would be a form of thoughtlessness. Paradoxically, if a philosophical investigation of the "unthinkable" can teach us anything, it should teach us that we must do everything we can to avoid falling into thoughtlessness, an inability to think.[30] A full recognition of this in my view requires an active interplay of pragmatist and transcendental approaches in the effort to understand "our common humanity".

Recall Jean-Paul Sartre's famous 1946 essay on antisemitism. Sartre argued that antisemitism does not enjoy the right to the freedom of expression, because it undermines the conditions of such rights and freedoms. Sartre's view can at a general level be extended to a criticism of the allegedly free expression of opinions hostile to ethnic or sexual minorities, for instance. Referring to a person who handed two Jews to Gestapo, he notes that someone who finds it natural to betray others in that manner cannot view humanity in our way; such a person does not view even their beneficiaries "in the same light as we do" (see Sartre, 1976 [1946]). The same might be said today, *mutatis mutandis*, not only about racists and fascists but also about, say, conservative religious thinkers who maintain that a just God could (possibly) condemn alleged sinners, such as homosexuals, to an eternal torture. Such a theory should be unthinkable for decent believers and non-believers alike.

This example brings us back to the investigation of the transcendental "us" and its historical contingency. We may agree with Rorty's (controversially titled) "ethnocentrism" in realizing that "we have to start from where we are". There is no way in which *we* could in a state of alleged neutrality *argue* that, for example, homosexuals should have all the same human rights as heterosexuals or that those who get abortion are not murderers. For *us* it is unthinkable that this should not be so. If we had to argue for the equal rights of sexual minorities against someone opposed to those rights, no argumentative exchange would get off the ground

world", which can be seen as an inquiry into the possibly changing natural conditions for certain (for us natural and even inescapable) ways of drawing the boundaries between the ethically thinkable and the unthinkable.

[29] Dewey wrote a book with this very title: see Dewey 1997 [1910].

[30] This is a famous theme in Hannah Arendt's analyses of evil, totalitarianism, and politics (see especially her 1994 [1963]).

as the argument itself would be possible only in a framework that had already granted such rights equally to everyone. Sound argument depends on such contexts of sanity. This is comparable to the Rortyan insistence (with Shklar) that the sheer non-argued and unjustifiable necessity of avoiding cruelty must be placed first in our ethical orientation to others. Thus, it is not obvious that we can ever defend the need or duty to take our shared common humanity seriously when facing others. Any such argument depends on our already acknowledging (in Gaita's terms) our common humanity; accordingly, those who fail in such acknowledgment (such as anti-Semites or homophobic conservatives) are in this sense beyond argument.[31]

Raising yet another example, we are (arguably) so "minded" that we cannot—to invoke a scenario Gaita (2004 [1991], chapter 17) formulates in his critical engagement with Peter Singer's straightforward ethical consequentialism—find the question of whether to kill a healthy three-week-old baby a serious question. We are so minded that we can only treat someone considering it seriously as not fully belonging to us, even if they tried to discuss the matter in terms of sophisticated utilitarian arguments along Singerian lines. We can again only, in Rortyan terms, use persuasion rather than force to bring them (back) to us, but there is only so much we can do here. Most importantly, we do not and cannot merely think that this holds for us as people in a specific culture. This unthinkability defining "us", or "our culture" is, from our perspective, the only decent way of thinking about the matter. Again, the transcendental "we" does not recognize any genuine alternative to its (our) mindedness. There just is, when the matter is seen from within our form of life, with our eyes, no other way of being minded. Being minded as we are is being minded (cf. again Lear, 1998). If we find something truly unthinkable, then *we* can only say that it *is* unthinkable and that it cannot be decently found thinkable by *anyone*. Morality is everywhere—it is unthinkable that it shouldn't be—and therefore there is no outside, no way of thinking otherwise. "Thinking otherwise" is possible only within ethics. Take this, if you wish, as a holistic pragmatist rephrasing of Wittgenstein's well-known cryptic remark, in the *Tractatus*, that "[e]thics is transcendental".[32]

[31] I have earlier tentatively experimented with a quasi-transcendental argument of this type against racism and sexism (see Pihlström, 2021, chapter 5).

[32] It is extremely important to keep in mind that Wittgenstein does not claim ethics to be "transcendent" but, precisely, "transcendental". For discussion, see Appelqvist, 2020, "Introduction"; cf. Pihlström, 2023.

Conclusion: transcendental anthropology

As has become clear, Rorty's version of the "we" is explicitly non-transcendental and thus very different from Lear's. As important as it is to recognize, with Rorty, that our conception of who "we" are and "how we think" is grounded in our changing ways of speaking and acting in the contingent historical circumstances we live in, my worry is that Rorty's radical pragmatism lacks the normative level enabling a transcendental inquiry into the nature of our being "minded" (in a certain way, or in any way at all).[33] A Rortyan pragmatist might easily admit that for us in our contingent historical situation some particular view is unthinkable, but s/he would urge that just as our surroundings could be different, so could the role played by that view in our thought and action.

What we still may and should learn from Rorty is the lesson of the thoroughgoing fallibilism and contingency of our conception—even any transcendental conception—of "us": even when we cannot meaningfully regard our own way of viewing the world as just one among many possible ones, that is, even if "other" ways of drawing the boundary between the thinkable and the unthinkable are, indeed, unthinkable for us, we must still be able to entertain the idea that *our* life *could*—and possibly should—be (dramatically) different from what it is: something we find unthinkable could be thinkable or even right, and we currently find thinkable some things we shouldn't.[34] We have to recognize this possibility in a self-critical—*pace* Rorty, transcendental—sense from within our being minded in the way we are. This is, as noted above, analogous to a Kantian transcendental thinker recognizing that human cognition could be different from what it is: it is not metaphysically necessary from any imagined God's-Eye View that we organize all possible experience in terms of the forms of intuition and the categories as laid out in Kant's First Critique. In brief, our humanity *could* be different.

In the vocabulary used above, when something is transcendentally constitutive of "us", the "we" in a sense disappears (as in Lear's analysis): "we are so minded that X" means, for us, just "X". This equivalence depends on our contingently being minded in the way we are. How-

[33] For this critique of Rorty, see, e.g., Pihlström, 2013, chapter 3. For diverging critical perspectives on Rorty's enormous relevance to contemporary philosophy, see the essays in Rondel, 2021.

[34] Admittedly, it is paradoxical to suggest that some view is unthinkable for us but could be thinkable. If it were thinkable, it would presumably have to be considered thinkable by a somewhat different (imagined) group of "us".

ever, the question remains: *couldn't we* be (or turn to being) differently "minded" (though we aren't and don't, and cannot see how we could), even if we followed Gaita and Lear in thinking that someone who is differently minded fails to be "one of us"? Shouldn't we acknowledge the possibility that in some sense we contingently *could*? Couldn't, moreover, *someone else* successfully "use persuasion instead of force" to bring *us* out of our mindedness and into something different? Isn't this still in some sense a possibility *for us*, for our active mind, even though in another sense there is no other-minded "group" out there for *us* to join, given who we are? In other words, isn't it at least conceivable to us that we could become truly different, after all? Even if something is, for transcendental reasons, unthinkable (for us), it might in some sense become an option for a reconsidered and transformed "us"—presumably analogously to the way in which we might, in the Kantian context, imagine that we had the capacity of intellectual intuition which we actually (quasi-necessarily) lack, given the kind of finite rational beings we are.

There is no genuine contrast *within* the "transcendental 'we'" and its (our) mindedness, however. Even transcendental mindedness invokes, as a condition of its intelligibility, an outside "other", because the transcendental concept of being minded (the "transcendental 'we'") potentially criticized by non-transcendental pragmatists like Rorty cannot function without presupposing such an other—just like a vast abyss of the unthinkable needs to be presupposed for us to be able to acknowledge the contingency of the transcendental boundaries of the (for us) thinkable. *This* holds for "us", whoever we are. All, also all "others", need such a contrast between "us" and (possible) "others". Therefore, it seems to me that transcendental inquiries into our mindedness may in the end fail in the sense of making other-mindedness a kind of impossibility it cannot really be—for us. While ruling something out, we can hardly avoid entertaining the *possibility* of not ruling it out. This is something that Rortyan pragmatism may lead us to appreciate, while avoiding any transcendental investigations of who and what "we" are.

My conclusion, finally, is that there is a sense in which we (pragmatically) need all the three versions of "us" listed in the title of this paper. The idea of our "disappearing 'we'" reminds us that when we get to the level of drawing the line between the thinkable and the unthinkable, there are no genuine alternatives to our way of viewing the world. The Rortyan "we", however, recognizes the historical contingency and revisability of this lack of alternatives. The transcendental inquiry into "us"

then analyzes the necessary conditions for the possibility of both epistemic and ethical world-engagement based on these contingently necessary boundaries of our human situation. At a meta-level, such a transcendental investigation also explores the need to actively—as an exercise of what Lear calls our "active mind"—switch perspectives (when necessary) from one of these forms of "us" to another and to holistically apply the considerations of reflective equilibrium into their relationships. It is only the transcendental subject (the "transcendental 'we'") that is capable of such perspective-switching. Therefore, the transcendental reflection on "us", when pragmatically carried out, ultimately incorporates all three senses of "us" in the spirit of critical holistic pragmatism. Only by so doing can we hope, with Rorty, to continuously transform our selves to match our hopes, to (always) try to become better versions of ourselves.[35]

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On the Way to a Pragmatist Theory of the Categories

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1. Introduction

Several decades ago, Richard Rorty suggested that philosophical admirers of Wilfrid Sellars could be divided into two schools, defined by which of two famous passages from his masterwork "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" are taken to express his most important insight. The two passages are:

> In the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not. Feigl & Scriven, 1956, § 41[1]

and

> [In] characterizing an episode or a state as that of *knowing*, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.
>
> Feigl & Scriven, 1956, § 36

The first passage, often called the "*scientia mensura*," expresses a kind of scientific naturalism. Its opening qualification is important: there are

[1] In Herbert Feigl and Michael Scriven, eds., *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. I (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956); reprinted in Sellars's *Science, Perception, and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956; reissued Atascadero, Ridgeview, 1991); reprinted as a monograph, with an Introduction by Richard Rorty and a Study Guide by Robert Brandom (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

other discursive and cognitive activities besides describing and explaining. The second passage says that characterizing something as a knowing is one of them. And indeed, Sellars means that in characterizing something even as a believing or a believable, as conceptually contentful at all, one is doing something other than describing it. One is placing the item in a normative space articulated by relations of what is a reason for what. Meaning, for him, is a normative phenomenon that does not fall within the descriptive realm over which natural science is authoritative.

Rorty called those impressed by the scientific naturalism epitomized in the *scientia mensura* "right wing Sellarsians," and those impressed by the normative nonnaturalism about semantics expressed in the other passage "left wing Sellarsians." Acknowledging the antecedents of this usage, he used to express the hope that right wing and left wing Sellarsians would be able to discuss their disagreements more amicably and irenically than did the right wing and left wing Hegelians, who, as he put it, "eventually sorted out their differences at a six-month-long seminar called 'the Battle of Stalingrad.'" According to this botanization, I am, like my teacher Rorty and my colleague John McDowell, a left wing Sellarsian, by contrast to such eminent and admirable right wing Sellarsians as Ruth Millikan, Jay Rosenberg, and Paul Churchland.

While I think Rorty's way of dividing things up is helpful (there really are "41-ers" and "36-ers"), I want here to explore a different perspective on some of the same issues. I, too, will focus on two big ideas that orient Sellars's thought. I also want to say that one of them is a good idea and the other one, on the whole, a bad idea—a structure that is in common between those who would self-identify as either right- or left-wing Sellarsians. And the one I want to reject is near and dear to the heart of the right wing. But I want, first, to situate the ideas I'll consider in the context of Sellars's neo-Kantianism: they are his ways of working out central ideas of Kant's. Specifically, they are what Sellars makes of two fundamental ideas that are at the center of Kant's transcendental idealism: the metaconcept of *categories*, or *pure concepts of the understanding*, and the distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena*. The latter is a version of the distinction between appearance and reality, not in a light epistemological sense, but in the ontologically weighty sense that is given voice by the *scientia mensura*. I cannot say that these fall under the headings, respectively, of What Is Living and What Is Dead in Sellars's thought, since the sort of scientific naturalism he uses to interpret Kant's phenomena/noumena distinction is undoubtedly very widespread and influential in contemporary Anglo-

phone philosophy. My aim here is to explain what I take it Sellars makes of the most promising of these Kantian ideas.

When asked what he hoped the effect of his work might be, Sellars said he would be happy if it helped usher analytic philosophy from its Humean into its Kantian phase. (*A propos* of this remark, Rorty also said, not without justice, that in these terms my own work could be seen as an effort to help clear the way from analytic philosophy's incipient Kantian phase to an eventual Hegelian one.[2]) Sellars tells us that his reading of Kant lies at the center of his work. He used that theme to structure his John Locke lectures, to the point of devoting the first lecture to presenting a version of the Transcendental Aesthetic with which Kant opens the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Those lectures, published as *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes*, are Sellars's only book-length, systematic exposition of his views during his crucial middle period. The development of Kantian themes is not only self-consciously used to give that book its distinctive shape, but also implicitly determines the contours of Sellars's work as a whole. I think the best way to think about Sellars's work is as a continuation of the neo-Kantian tradition. In particular, I think he is the figure we should look to today in seeking an appropriation of Kant's theoretical philosophy that might be as fruitful as the appropriation of Kant's practical philosophy that Rawls initiated. On the theoretical side, Sellars was the greatest neo-Kantian philosopher of his generation.[3]

In fact, the most prominent neo-Kantians of the previous generation: C. I. Lewis and Rudolf Carnap were among the most immediate influences on Sellars's thought. Kant was the door through which Lewis found philosophy, and later, the common root to which he reverted in his attempt to reconcile what seemed right to him about the apparently antithetical views of his teachers, William James and Josiah Royce. (Had he instead been trying to synthesize Royce with Dewey, instead of James, he would have fetched up at Hegel.) In his 1929 *Mind and the World Order*, Lewis introduced as a central technical conception the notion of the sensory "Given", which Sellars would famously use (characteristically, without mentioning Lewis by name) as the paradigm of what he in EPM called the "Myth of the Given." (Indeed, shortly after his 1946 *An Analysis of*

[2] In his Introduction to my Harvard University Press edition of "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind."

[3] His only rival for this accolade, I think, would be Peter Strawson, who certainly did a lot to make us realize that a reappropriation of some of Kant's theoretical philosophy might be a viable contemporary project. But I do not think of Peter Strawson's work as *systematically* neo-Kantian in the way I want to argue that Sellars's is.

Knowledge and Valuation, which Sellars also clearly has in mind in EPM, Lewis wrote a piece addressing the question "Is The Givenness of the Given Given?" His answer was No: It is a necessary postulate of high philosophical theory, which dictates that without a sensory Given, empirical knowledge would be impossible.)

In the book I argue that Sellars modeled his own Kantian "metalinguistic" treatments of modality and the ontological status of universals explicitly on ideas of Carnap. Although, like Lewis, Carnap is not explicitly mentioned in EPM, his presence is registered for the philosophical cognoscenti Sellars took himself to be addressing there by the use of the Carnapian term "protocol sentence" (as well as Schlick's "Konstatierung") for noninferential observations. Unlike Lewis, Carnap actually stood in the line of inheritance of classical nineteenth-century German neo-Kantianism. His teacher, Bruno Bauch, was (like Heidegger), a student of Heinrich Rickert in Freiburg—who, with the older Wilhelm Windelband, led the Southwest or Baden neo-Kantian school. In spite of these antecedents, Bauch was in many ways closer to the Marburg neo-Kantians, Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp, in reading Kant as first and foremost a philosopher of the natural sciences, mathematics, and logic. I suppose that if one had asked Carnap in what way his own work could be seen as a continuation of the neo-Kantian tradition of his teacher, he would first have identified with this Marburg neo-Kantian understanding of Kant, and then pointed to the *logical* element of his logical empiricism—itself a development of the pathbreaking work of Frege, Bauch's friend and colleague at Jena when Carnap studied with both there—as giving a precise and modern form to the conceptual element in empirical knowledge, which deserved to be seen as a worthy successor to Kant's own version of the conceptual.

If Lewis and Carnap do not immediately spring to mind as neo-Kantians, that is because each of them gave Kant an empiricist twist, which Sellars was concerned to undo. If you thought that Kant thought that the classical empiricists' Cartesian understanding of the sensory contribution to knowledge was pretty much all right, and just needed to be supplemented by an account of the independent contribution made by a conceptual element, you might well respond to the development of the new twentieth century logic with a version of Kant that looks like Lewis's *Mind and the World Order,* and *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation,* and Carnap's *Aufbau* (and for that matter, Nelson Goodman's *Structure of Appearance*). That assumption about Kant's understanding of the role played

by sense experience in empirical knowledge is exactly what Sellars challenges in EPM.

One of the consequences of his doing that is to make visible the neo-Kantian strand in analytic philosophy that Lewis and Carnap each, in his own way, represented—and which Sellars and, in our own time, John McDowell further developed. Quine was a student of both Lewis and Carnap, and the Kantian element of the common empiricism he found congenial in their thought for him drops out entirely—even though the logic remains. His Lewis and his Carnap are much more congenial to a narrative of the history of analytic philosophy initiated by Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore, according to which the movement is given its characteristic defining shape as a recoil from Hegel (seen through the lenses of the British Idealism of the waning years of the nineteenth century). They understood enough about the Kantian basis of Hegel's thought to know that a *holus bolus* rejection of Hegel required a diagnosis of the idealist rot as having set in already with Kant. This narrative does pick out one current in the analytic river—indeed, the one that makes necessary the reappropriation of the metaconceptual resources of Kant's theoretical philosophy in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. But it was never the whole story.[4] The neo-Kantian tradition comprising Lewis, Carnap, and Sellars can be thought of as an undercurrent, somewhat occluded from view by the empiricist surface.

2. Categories in Kant

Many Kantian themes run through Sellars's philosophy. My Sellars book is oriented around two master-ideas, each of which orients and ties together a number of otherwise apparently disparate aspects of his work. One is a strand of scientific naturalism, which I reject, on behalf of Sellars own better wisdom—so I claim. The one I'll focus on here is the good idea that besides concepts whose characteristic expressive job it is to describe and explain empirical goings-on, ***there are concepts whose characteristic expressive job it is to make explicit necessary structural features of the discursive framework within which alone description and explanation are possible.*** Failing to acknowledge and appreciate this crucial difference between the expressive roles different bits of vocabulary play

[4] Paul Redding begins the process of recovering the necessary counter-narrative in the Introduction to his *Analytic Philosophy and the Return of Hegelian Thought* [Cambridge University Press, 2010].

is a perennial source of distinctively philosophical misunderstanding. In particular, Sellars thinks, attempting to understand concepts doing the second, framework-explicating sort of work on the model of those whose proper use is in empirical description and explanation is a fount of metaphysical and semantic confusion.[5] Among the vocabularies that play the second sort of role, Sellars includes *modal* vocabulary (not only the alethic, but also the deontic species), *semantic* vocabulary, *intentional* vocabulary, and *ontological-categorial* vocabulary (such as 'proposition', 'property' or 'universal', and 'object' or 'particular'). It is a mistake, he thinks, to understand the use of any of these sorts of vocabulary as fact-stating in the narrow sense that assimilates it to *describing* how the world is. It is a corresponding mistake to recoil from the metaphysical peculiarity and extravagance of the kinds of facts one must postulate in order to understand statements couched in these vocabularies as fact-stating in the narrow sense (e.g. normative facts, semantic facts, conditional facts, facts about abstract universals) by denying that such statements are legitimate, or even that they can be true. (Though to say that they are true is not, for Sellars, to describe them.) Both mistakes (the dogmatic metaphysical and the skeptical), though opposed to one another, stem from the common root of the *descriptivist fallacy*. That is the failure to see that some perfectly legitimate concepts do not play a narrowly *descriptive* role, but rather a different, *explicative* one with respect to the practices of description and explanation. Following Carnap, Sellars instead analyses the use of all these kinds of vocabulary as, each in its own distinctive way, "covertly metalinguistic."

In opposing a Procrustean descriptivism about the expressive roles locutions can play, Sellars makes common cause with the later Wittgenstein. For Wittgenstein, too, devotes a good deal of effort and attention to warning us of the dangers of being in thrall to ("bewitched by") a descriptivist picture. We must not simply assume that the job of all declarative sentences is to state facts ("I am in pain," "It is a fact that . . . "), that the job of all singular terms is to pick out objects ("*I* think . . . ," "I have a pain in my foot,"), and so on. In addition to tools for attaching, detaching, and in general re-shaping material objects (hammer and nails, saws, draw-knives. . .)

[5] Distinguishing two broadly different kinds of *use* bits of vocabulary can play does not entail that there are two corresponding kinds of *concepts*—even in the presence of the auxiliary Sellarsian hypothesis that grasp of a concept is mastery of the use of a word. Though I suppress the distinction between these two moves in these introductory formulations, it will become important later in the story.

the carpenter's tools also include plans, a foot-rule, level, pencil, and toolbelt. So, too, with discursive expressive 'tools'. Wittgenstein's expressive pluralism (language as a motley) certainly involves endorsement of the anti-descriptivism Sellars epitomizes by saying

> [O]nce the tautology 'The world is described by descriptive concepts' is freed from the idea that the business of all non-logical concepts is to describe, the way is clear to an *ungrudging* recognition that many expressions which empiricists have relegated to second-class citizenship in discourse are not *inferior*, just *different*. CDCM § 79.

But Sellars differs from Wittgenstein in characterizing at least a broad class of nondescriptive vocabularies as playing generically the *same* expressive role. They are broadly *metalinguistic* locutions expressing necessary features of the framework of discursive practices that make description (and—so—explanation) possible. Of this broad binary distinction of expressive roles, with ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary on one side and a whole range of apparently disparate vocabularies going into another class as "metalinguistic", there is, I think, no trace in Wittgenstein.[6]

The division of expressive roles that I am claiming for Sellars binds together modal, semantic, intentional, and ontological-categorial vocabulary in opposition to empirical-descriptive vocabularies traces back to Kant's idea of "pure concepts of the understanding," or categories, which play quite a different expressive role from that of ordinary empirical descriptive concepts. The expressive role of pure concepts is, roughly, to make explicit what is implicit in the use of ground-level concepts: the conditions under which alone it is possible to apply them, which is to say, use them to make judgments. Though very differently conceived, Kant's distinction is in turn rooted in the epistemological difference Hume notices and elaborates between ordinary empirical descriptive concepts and concepts expressing lawful causal-explanatory connections between them. Hume, of course, drew skeptical conclusions from the observation that claims formulated in terms of the latter sort of concept could not be justified by the same sort of means used to justify claims formulated in terms of empirical descriptive concepts.

[6] The best candidate might be the discussion of "hinge propositions" in *On Certainty*. But the point there is, I think, different. In any case, Wittgenstein does not *generalize* the particular expressive role he is considering to anything like the extent I am claiming Sellars does.

Kant, however, looks at Newton's formulation of the best empirical understanding of his day and sees that the newly introduced concepts of force and mass are not intelligible apart from the *laws* that relate them. If we give up the claim that F equals $m \times a$ then we do not mean force and mass, but are using some at least slightly different concepts. (Galileo's geometrical version of the (late medieval) observable concept of acceleration *is* antecedently intelligible). This leads Kant to two of his deepest and most characteristic metaconceptual innovations: thinking of statements of laws formulated using alethic modal concepts as making explicit rules for reasoning with ordinary empirical descriptive concepts, and understanding the contents of such concepts as articulated by those rules of reasoning with them.

This line of thought starts by revealing the *semantic* presuppositions of Hume's *epistemological* arguments. For Hume assumes that the contents of ordinary empirical descriptive concepts are intelligible antecedently to and independently of taking them to stand to one another in rule-governed inferential relations of the sort made explicit by modal concepts. Rejecting that semantic atomism then emerges as a way of denying the intelligibility of the predicament Hume professes to find himself in: understanding ordinary empirical descriptive concepts perfectly well, but getting no grip thereby on the laws expressed by subjunctively robust rules relating them. Even though Kant took it that Hume's skeptical epistemological argument rested on a semantic *mistake*, from his point of view Hume's investigation had nonetheless uncovered a crucial *semantic* difference between the expressive roles of different kinds of concepts. Once his attention had been directed to them, Kant set himself the task of explaining what was special about these *non*descriptive concepts.

Two features of Kant's account of the expressive role distinctive of the special class of concepts to which Hume had directed his attention are of particular importance for the story I am telling here. They are *categorial* concepts, and they are *pure* concepts. To say that they are 'categorial' in this context means that they make explicit aspects of the *form* of the conceptual as such. For Kant concepts are functions of judgment, that is, they are to be understood in terms of their role in judging. Categorial concepts express structural features of empirical descriptive judgments. What they make explicit is implicit in the capacity to make any judgments at all. This is what I meant when I said above that rather than describing how the world is, ***the expressive job of these concepts is to make explicit necessary features of the framework of discursive practices within which it***

is possible to describe how the world is. The paradigm here is the alethic modal concepts that articulate the subjunctively robust consequential relations among descriptive concepts.[7] It is those relations that make possible *explanations* of why one description applies because another does. That force *necessarily* equals the product of mass and acceleration means that one can *explain* the specific acceleration of a given mass by describing the force that was applied to it. (Of course, Kant also thinks that in articulating the structure of the judgeable as such, these concepts *thereby* articulate the structure of what is empirically *real*: the structure of *nature*, of the *objective world*. But this core thesis of his understanding of empirical realism within transcendental idealism is an optional additional claim, not entailed by the identification of a distinctive class of concepts as categories of the understanding.)

To say that these concepts are 'pure' is to say that they are available to concept-users (judgers = those who can understand, since for Kant the understanding is the faculty of judgment) *a priori*.[8] Since what they express is implicit in any and every use of concepts to make empirical judgments, there is no *particular* such concept one must have or judgment one must make in order to be able to deploy the pure concepts of the understanding. To say that judgers can grasp these pure concepts *a priori* is *not* to say that they are *immediate* in the Cartesian sense of nonrepresentational. Precisely not. The sort of self-consciousness (awareness of structural features of the discursive as such) they make possible is mediated by those pure concepts. What was right about the Cartesian idea of the immediacy of self-consciousness is rather that these mediating concepts are available to every thinker *a priori*. Their grasp does not require grasp or deployment of any *particular* ground-level empirical concepts, but is *implicit* in the grasp or deployment of *any* such concepts. The way I will eventually recommend that we think about this distinctive *a prioricity* is that in being able to deploy ordinary empirical descriptive concepts one already knows how to do everything one needs to know how to do in order to be able to deploy the concepts that play the expressive role characteristic of concepts Kant picks out as "categorial" (as well as some that he does not).

[7] Note that these concepts are *not* those Kant discusses under the heading of "Modality", but rather concern the hypothetical form of judgment.

[8] I take it that Kant always uses "*a priori*" and "*a posteriori*" as adverbs, modifying some some verb of cognition, paradigmatically "know".

3. Categories in Sellars

Sellars's development of Kant's idea of pure concepts of the understanding is articulated by two master ideas. First, his successor metaconception comprises concepts that are in some broad sense *metalinguistic*. In pursuing this line he follows Rudolph Carnap, who in addition to ground-level empirical descriptive vocabulary allowed metalinguistic vocabulary as also legitimate in formal languages regimented to be perspicuous. Such metalinguistic vocabulary allows the formulation of explicit rules governing the use of descriptive locutions. Ontologically classifying terms such as 'object', 'property', and 'proposition' are "quasi-syntactical" metavocabulary corresponding to overtly syntactical expressions in a proper metalanguage such as 'singular term', 'predicate', and 'declarative sentence'. They are used to formulate "L-rules", which specify the structure of the language in which empirical descriptions are to be expressed. Alethic modal vocabulary is used to formulate "P-rules", which specify rules for reasoning with particular empirically contentful descriptive vocabulary. Carnap's neo-Kantianism does not extend to embracing the metaconcept of categories, which he identifies with the excesses of transcendental idealism. But in the expressions Carnap classifies as overtly or covertly metalinguistic, Sellars sees the raw materials for a more thoroughly Kantian successor conception to the idea of pure categories of the understanding.

The second strand guiding Sellars's reconceptualization of Kantian categories is his *semantic inferentialist* approach to understanding the contents of descriptive concepts. Sellars picks up on Kant's rejection of the semantic atomism characteristic of both the British empiricism of Locke and Hume that Kant was reacting to and of the logical empiricism of Carnap that Sellars was reacting to.[9] The way he works out the anti-atomist lesson he learns from Kant is in terms of the essential contribution made to the contents of ordinary empirical descriptive concepts by the inferential connections among them appealed to in *explanations* of why some descriptions apply to something in terms of other descriptions that apply to it.

Although describing and explaining (predicting, retrodicting, understanding) are *distinguishable*, they are also, in an important sense, *inseparable*. It is only because the expressions in terms of which we describe

[9] "Another feature of the empiricist tradition is its 'logical atomism,' according to which every basic piece of empirical knowledge is logically independent of every other. Notice that this independence concerns not only *what* is known, but the *knowing* of it. The second dimension of this 'atomism' is of particular importance for understanding Kant's rejection of empiricism [...]" ("Towards a Theory of the Categories" § 16)

objects, even such basic expressions as words for perceptible characteristics of molar objects, locate these objects in a space of implications, that they describe at all, rather than merely label. The descriptive and explanatory resources of language advance hand in hand (CDCM § 108).

This is a rich and suggestive passage. It is worth unpacking the claims it contains. It is framed by a distinction between a weaker notion, *labeling*, and a *stronger* one, describing. By 'labeling' Sellars means discriminating, in the sense of responding differentially. A linguistic expression is used as a label if its *whole* use is specified by the *circumstances* under which it is applied—the *antecedents* of its application. We might distinguish between three kinds of labels, depending on how we think of these circumstances or antecedents. First, one could look at what stimuli as a matter of fact elicit or in fact have elicited the response that is being understood as the application of a label. Second, one could look *dispositionally*, at what stimuli *would* elicit the application of the label. Third, one could look at the circumstances in which the label is *appropriately* applied. What the three senses have in common is that they look only *up*stream, to the situations that have, would, or should prompt the use of the label. The first provides no constraint on future applications of the label—*que sera sera*—as familiar gerrymandering arguments about "going on in the same way" remind us. The second doesn't fund a notion of mistaken application. However one is disposed to apply the label is proper, as arguments summarized under the heading of "disjunctivitis" make clear. Only the third, normatively richer sense in which the semantics of a label consists in its circumstances of *appropriate* application (however the proprieties involved are understood) makes intelligible a notion of *mis*labeling.

Sellars wants to distinguish labeling in *all* of these senses from *describing*. The idea is that since labeling of any of these sorts looks only to the *circumstances* in which the label is, would be, or should be applied, expressions used with the semantics characteristic of labels address at most one of the two fundamental aspects of the use characteristic of descriptions. The rules for the use of labels tell us something about what is (or would be or should be) in effect so described, but say nothing at all about what it is described *as*. That, Sellars thinks, depends on the *consequences* of applying one description rather than another. The semantics of genuine descriptions must look downstream, as well as upstream. It is this additional feature of their use that distinguishes descriptions from labels. (Here one might quibble verbally with Sellars's using 'label' and 'description' to describe expressions whose semantics depends on only one or on both of

these dimensions of use. But it seems clear that a real semantic distinction is being marked.)

Making a further move, Sellars understands those consequences of application of descriptions as essentially involving *inferential* connections to other descriptive concepts. This is what he means by saying that what distinguishes descriptions from labels is their situation in a "space of implications." Paralleling the discussion of circumstances of application, we can think of these implications (consequences of application) as specifying what other descriptions do, would, or should *follow from* the application of the initial, perhaps responsively elicited, description. As he is thinking of things, a description (correctly) applies to a range of things (for descriptive concepts used observationally, including those that are appropriately non-inferentially differentially responded to by applying the concept), which are described *by* it. And it describes them *as* something from which a further set of descriptions (correctly) follows. Crucially, these further descriptions can themselves involve applications of descriptive concepts that also have *non*-inferential (observational) circumstances of application. Descriptive concepts that have *only* inferential circumstances of application he calls 'theoretical' concepts.

In the opening sentence of the passage Sellars includes *understanding* as one of the phenomena he takes to be intricated with *description* in the way *explaining* is. Understanding a descriptive concept requires being able to place it in the "space of implications," partly in virtue of which it has the content that it does. This is in general a kind of knowing *how* rather than a kind of knowing *that*: being able to distinguish in practice the circumstances and consequences of application of the concept, when it is appropriately applied and what follows from so applying it. Grasping a concept in this sense is not an all-or-none thing. The ornithologist knows her way around inferentially in the vicinity of terms such as 'icterid' and 'passerine' much better than I do. A consequence of this way of understanding understanding is that one cannot grasp one concept without grasping many. This is Sellars's way of developing Kant's anti-atomist semantic insight.

Taking a further step (undertaking a commitment not yet obviously entailed by the ones attributed so far), Sellars also thinks that the inferences articulating the consequences of concepts used descriptively must always include *subjunctively robust* inferences. That is, the inferences making up the "space of implications" in virtue of which descriptive concepts have not only potentially atomistic circumstances of application but also

non-atomistic relational consequences of application must extend to what other descriptions *would be* applicable if a given set of descriptions *were* applicable. For what Sellars means by 'explanation' is understanding the applicability of some descriptions as *explained by* the applicability of others according to just this kind of inference. This is, of course, just the sort of inferential connection that Hume's empiricist atomistic semantics for descriptive concepts, construing them as *labels*, could *not* underwrite. Sellars's conception of descriptions, as distinguished from labels, is his way of following out what he sees as Kant's anti-atomist semantic insight. *Modal* concepts make explicit these *necessary* inferential-consequential connections between descriptive concepts. They thereby perform the expressive role characteristic of Kantian categories: expressing essential features of the framework within which alone genuine description is possible.

All of this is meant to explicate what Sellars means by saying that "the descriptive and explanatory resources of language advance hand in hand." In addition to Kant's idea, Sellars here takes over Carnap's idea of understanding concepts whose paradigm is modal concepts as (in some sense) *metalinguistic*. The principal class of genuinely intelligible, nondefective nondescriptive vocabulary Carnap allows in *The Logical Syntax of Language* is syntactic metavocabulary and what he there calls "quasi-syntactic" vocabulary, which is covertly metalinguistic. For Sellars, the *rules* which modal vocabulary expresses are rules for deploying linguistic locutions. Their "rulishness" is their subjunctive robustness. Following out this line of thought, Sellars takes it that "grasp of a concept is mastery of the use of a word." He then understands the metalinguistic features in question in terms of rules of *inference*, whose paradigms are Carnap's L-rules and P-rules. His generic term for the inferences that articulate the contents of ordinary empirical descriptive concepts is "material inferences." The term is chosen to contrast with inferences that are 'formal' in the sense of depending on *logical* form. In another early essay he lays out the options he considers like this:

> [...] we have been led to distinguish the following six conceptions of the status of material rules of inference:
>
> (1) Material rules are as essential to meaning (and hence to language and thought) as formal rules, contributing to the architectural detail of its structure within the flying buttresses of logical form.

(2) While not essential to meaning, material rules of inference have an original authority not derived from formal rules, and play an indispensable role in our thinking on matters of fact.

(3) Same as (2) save that the acknowledgment of material rules of inference is held to be a dispensable feature of thought, at best a matter of convenience.

(4) Material rules of inference have a purely derivative authority, though they are genuinely rules of inference.

(5) The sentences which raise these puzzles about material rules of inference are merely abridged formulations of logically valid inferences. (Clearly the distinction between an inference and the formulation of an inference would have to be explored).

(6) Trains of thought which are said to be governed by "material rules of inference" are actually not inferences at all, but rather activated associations which mimic inference, concealing their intellectual nudity with stolen "therefores". PPPW pp. 265/317[10]

His own position is that an expression has conceptual content conferred on it by being caught up in, playing a certain role in, material inferences:

> [...] it is the first (or "rationalistic") alternative to which we are committed. According to it, material transformation rules determine the descriptive meaning of the expressions of a language within the framework provided by its logical transformation rules [...] In traditional language, the "content" of concepts as well as their logical "form" is determined by the rules of the Understanding. PPPW pp. 284/336

By "traditional language" here, he means Kantian language. The talk of "transformation rules" is, of course, Carnapian. In fact in this essay Sellars identifies his "material rules of inference" with Carnap's "P-rules." ('Determine' is—here, as generally—crucially ambiguous between 'constrain' and 'settle'—the difference corresponding to that between what I have elsewhere called 'weak'and 'strong' semantic inferentialism.)

[10] Sellars, "Inference and Meaning" PPPW pp. 265/317, reprinted in *In the Space of Reasons*.

As already indicated, the material inferential rules that in one or another of these senses "determine the descriptive meaning of expressions" are for Sellars just the subjunctively robust, hence explanation-supporting ones. As he puts the point in the title of a long essay, he construes "Concepts as Involving Laws, and Inconceivable without Them." This is his response to Quine's implicit challenge in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" to say what feature of their *use* distinguishes inferences determining conceptual contents from those that simply register matters of fact. Since empirical inquiry is generally required to determine what laws govern concepts such as copper, temperature, and mass, Sellars accepts the consequence that inquiry plays the role not only of determining facts but also of improving our conceptions—of teaching us more about the concepts that articulate those facts by teaching us more about what really follows from what—in a subjunctively robust, counter factual-supporting selse of "follows from."

On this way of understanding conceptual content, the *modal* concepts that express the lawfulness of connections among concepts and so underwrite subjunctively robust implications—concepts such as law, necessity, and what is expressed by the use of the subjunctive mood—have a different status from those of ordinary empirical descriptive concepts. Rather than in the first instance describing how the world is, they make explicit features of the framework that makes such description possible. Because they play this distinctive framework-explicating role, what they express must be implicitly understood by anyone who can deploy *any* ground-level descriptive concepts. As I would like to put the point, in knowing how to (being able to) use any ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary, each interlocutor thereby already knows how to do everything she needs to know how to do, in order to be able to deploy the modal locutions that register the subjunctive robustness of the inferences that in turn determine the content of the descriptive concepts that vocabulary expresses. This is what Kant's idea that the pure concepts of the understanding are knowable *a priori* becomes when transposed into Sellars's framework.

The two lines of thought that orient Sellars's treatment of alethic modality, namely semantic inferentialism and a metalinguistic understanding of the expressive role characteristic of modal locutions, are epitomized in an early formulation:

> I shall be interpreting our judgments to the effect that A causally necessitates B as the expression of a rule governing our use of the terms 'A' and 'B'. PPPW, p. 136/296, footnote 2

where the rule in question is understood as a rule licensing subjunctively robust inferences. I have been filling in the claim that this overall approach to modality deserves to count as a development of Kant's notion of categories, pure concepts of the understanding, as concepts that make explicit features of the discursive framework that makes empirical description possible. Sellars himself, however, does not discuss this aspect of his work under that heading. When he talks about categories he turns instead to his nominalism about abstract entities. The central text here is "Towards a Theory of the Categories" of 1970.[11] The story he tells there begins with Aristotle's notion of categories (though he waves his hands wistfully at a discussion of its origins in Plato's *Sophist* that he feels cannot shoehorn into the paper) as ontological *summa genera*. There he opposes an unobjectionable hierarchy

> Fido is a dachshund.
>
> Fido is a dog.
>
> Fido is a brute.
>
> Fido is an animal.
>
> Fido is a corporeal substance.
>
> Fido is a substance.

To a potentially problematic one

> X is a red.
>
> X is a color.
>
> X is a perceptual quality.
>
> X is a quality. TTC, § 10–11

The next decisive move in understanding the latter hierarchy he attributes to Ockham, whom he reads as transposing the discussion into a metalinguistic key. Ockham's strategy, he tells us, is to understand

[11] In *Experience and Theory,* edited by L. Foster and J.W. Swanson (University of Massachusets Press, 1970), pp. 55–78. Reprinted in *Essays in Philosophy and its History* (D. Reidel, 1974).

> (A) Man is a species.

as

> (B) ·Man· is a sortal mental term. TTC, § 16.

while construing mental items as "analogous to linguistic expressions in overt speech."

This sketch sets up the transition to what Sellars makes of Kant's understanding of categories:

> What all this amounts to is that to apply Ockham's strategy to the theory of categories is to construe categories as classifications of conceptual items. This becomes, in Kant's hands, the idea that categories are the most generic functional classifications of the elements of judgments. TTC, § 22.

At the end of this development from Aristotle through Ockham to Kant, he concludes

> [I]nstead of being *summa genera* of entities which are objects 'in the world,' [...] categories are *summa genera* of conceptual items. TTC, § 23.

The account he goes on to expound in this essay, as well as in his other expositions of his nominalism about terms for qualities or properties, construes such terms metalinguistically, as referring to the inferential roles of the base-level concepts as used in empirical descriptions. I explain how I understand the view and the arguments on this topic in Chapter Seven of *From Empiricism to Expressivism:* "Sellars's Metalinguistic Expressive Nominalism." Without going further into that intricate view here, the point I want to make is that although Sellars does not say so, the metaconceptual role he here explicitly puts forward as a successor-concept to Kant's notion of category is generically the same as that I have argued he takes alethic modal locutions to play. It is this capacious conception I want to build upon and develop further.

4. Categories Today

The general conception of pure categorial concepts that I have been attributing to Sellars, based on the commonalities visible in his treatment

of alethic modal vocabulary and of abstract ontological vocabulary, develops Kant's idea by treating some vocabularies (and the concepts they express) as "covertly metalinguistic." This Sellarsian conception represents his development of Carnap's classification of some expressions as "quasi-syntactic." The underlying insight is that some important kinds of vocabularies that are not strictly or evidently metalinguistic are used not (only) to describe things, but in ways that (also) depend on the use of *other* vocabularies—paradigmatically, empirical descriptive ones.

The lessons I draw from the strengths and weaknesses of Sellars's successor-conception of the "pure concepts of the Understanding" are four-fold. That is, I think he is pointing towards an expressive role characteristic of some concepts, and the vocabularies expressing them, that has four distinctive features.

First, these concepts express what I will call "pragmatically mediated semantic relations" between vocabularies.

Second, these concepts play the expressive role of *making explicit* essential features of the use of some other vocabulary.

Third, the proper use of these concepts can be systematically *elaborated from* the use of that other vocabulary.

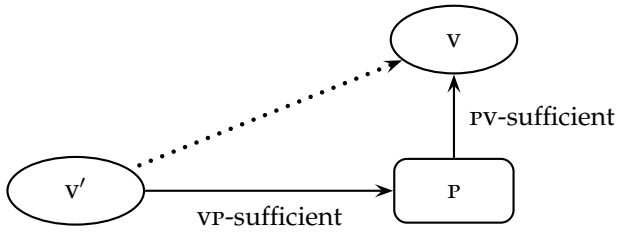
Fourth, the features of vocabulary(concept)-use they explicate are *universal*: they are features of any and every autonomous discursive practice.

I think there are concepts that play this distinctive four-fold expressive role, and that a good thing to mean today by the term "category" is metaconcepts that do so.

Carnap and Tarski introduced the expression "metalanguage" for languages that let one talk about languages, with the paradigmatic examples being syntactic and semantic metalanguages. In his earliest writings, Sellars also talks about "pragmatic metalanguages," meaning languages for talking about the *use* of expressions—rather than the syntactic or semantic properties of expressions. These were to be the languages in which we conduct what he called "pure pragmatics." During and after Sellars's most important work in the the *anni mirabiles* of 1954–63, however (possibly influenced by Carnap), he shifts to using the expression "semantics" to cover the essentially the same ground. I think that this was a step backward, and that it is one of the obstacles that prevented him from getting clear about the sense in which he wanted to claim that such locutions as

alethic modal vocabulary and singular terms purporting to refer to universals ("circularity") and their kinds ("property") are "covertly metalinguistic." One vocabulary serving as a *pragmatic metavocabulary* for another is the most basic kind of pragmatically mediated semantic relation between vocabularies. It deserves to be called such because the *semantics* of the pragmatic metavocabulary depends on the *use* of the vocabulary for which it is a pragmatic metavocabulary. The relation itself is aptly called a "semantic" relation in the special case where one vocabulary is sufficient to specify practices or abilities whose exercise is sufficient to confer on another vocabulary the meanings that it expresses.

We could represent such a semantic relation, mediated by the practices of using the second vocabulary that the first vocabulary specifies, like this:[12]

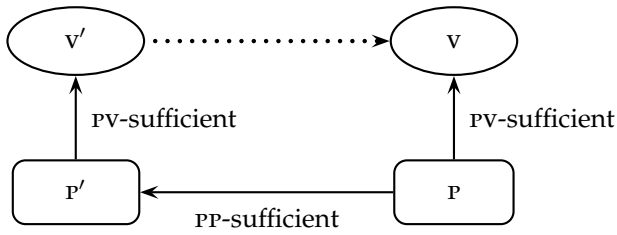


The pragmatically mediated semantic relation between vocabularies V′ and V, indicated by the dashed arrow, obtains when vocabulary V′ is expressively sufficient to *specify* practices-or-abilities P (that semantic fact about V′ with respect to P is here called "VP-sufficiency") that are sufficient to *deploy* the vocabulary V with the meanings that it expresses when so used. In asserting that this relation between vocabularies obtains, one is claiming that if all the sentences in V′ used to specify the practices-or-abilities P are true of P, then anyone engaging in those practices or exercising those abilities as specified in V′ is using the expressions of V with their proper meanings. This semantic relation between what is expressible in the two vocabularies is mediated by the practices P that the first specifies and which are the use of the second. This particular pragmatically mediated semantic relation holds when the vocabulary V′ allows one to *say* what one must *do* in order to *say* what can be said in the vocabulary V. In that sense V′ makes *explicit* (sayable, claimable) the

[12] I introduce, develop, and apply these "meaning-use diagrams" in *Between Saying and Doing: Towards an Analytic Pragmatism* [Oxford University Press, 2008].

practices-or-abilities *implicit* in using v. This is the explicative relation I mention as the second component of the complex expressive role that I am offering as a candidate for a contemporary successor-(meta)concept to Kant's (meta)concept of category. There are other pragmatically mediated semantic relations besides being a pragmatic metavocabulary in this sense, and others are involved in the categorial expressive role. The result will still fall under the general rubric that is the first condition: being a pragmatically mediated semantic relation.

One such further pragmatically mediated semantic relations between vocabularies holds when the practices PV-sufficient for deploying one vocabulary, though not themselves PV-sufficient for deploying a second one, can be systematically elaborated into such practices. That is, in being able to deploy the first vocabulary, one already knows how to do everything one needs to know how to do, in principle, to deploy the second. But those abilities must be suitably recruited and recombined. The paradigm here is *algorithmic* elaboration of one set of abilities into another. Thus, in the sense I am after, the capacities to do multiplication and subtraction are algorithmically elaborable into the capacity to do long division. *All* you need to learn how to do is to put together what you already know how to do in the right way—a way that can be specified by an algorithm. The diagram for this sort of pragmatically mediated semantic relation between vocabularies is:



The dotted arrow indicates the semantic relation between vocabularies v′ and v. It is the relation that holds when all the relations indicated by solid arrows hold—that is, when the practices-or-abilities sufficient to deploy vocabulary v can be elaborated into practices sufficient to deploy vocabulary v′. In this case, the semantic relation in question is mediated by two sets of practices-or-abilities: those sufficient to deploy the two vocabularies.

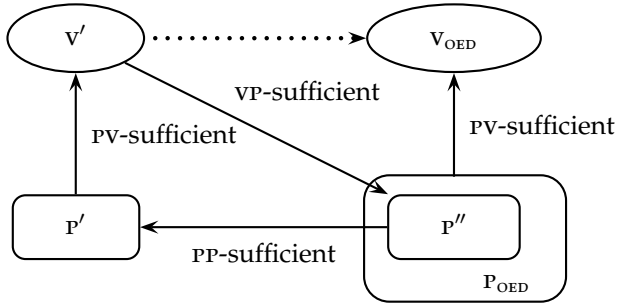
A concrete example of vocabularies standing in this pragmatically mediated semantic relation, I claim, is that of *conditionals* in relation to ordinary empirical descriptive (OED) vocabulary. For using such OED vocabulary, I claim (following Sellars following Kant), requires distinguishing in practice between materially good inferences involving descriptive predicates and ones that are not materially good. One need not be either infallible or omniscient in this regard, but unless one makes *some* such distinction, one cannot count as deploying the OED vocabulary in question. But in being able practically to distinguish (however fallibly and incompletely) between materially good and materially bad inferences, one knows how to do everything one needs to know how to do, in principle, to deploy conditionals. For conditionals can be introduced by recruiting those abilities in connection with the use of sentences formed from the old vocabulary by using the new vocabulary. On the side of circumstances of application (assertibility conditions), one must acknowledge commitment to the conditional $p \to q$ just in case one takes the inference from p to q to be a materially good one. And on the side of consequences of application, if one acknowledges commitment to the conditional $p \to q$, then one must take the inference from p to q to be a materially good one. These rules constitute an algorithm for elaborating the ability to distinguish materially good from materially bad inference using OED vocabulary (or any other vocabulary, for that matter) into the ability appropriately to use conditionals formed from that vocabulary: to distinguish when such conditionals are assertible, and what the consequences of their assertibility is.

My idea for a successor-concept to what Sellars (with hints from Carnap) made of Kant's metaconception of pure concepts of the Understanding is that they must play *both* of these expressive roles, stand in *both* sorts of pragmatically mediated semantic relations to another vocabulary. It must be possible to *elaborate* their use from the use of the index vocabulary, and they must *explicate* the use of that index vocabulary. Speaking more loosely, we can say that such concepts are both *elaborated from* and *explicative of* the use of other concepts—in short that they are el-ex, or just LX with respect to the index vocabulary.

The fourth condition I imposed above is that the concepts in question must be *universally* LX, by which I mean that they must be LX for every autonomous discursive practice (ADP)—every language game one could play though one played no other. That is, the practices from which their use can be elaborated and of which their use is explicative must be essential to talking or thinking at all. This universality would distinguish categorial

concepts, in the sense being specified, from metaconcepts that were elaborated from and explicative of only some parasitic fragment of discourse—culinary, nautical, or theological vocabulary, for instance. I take it that any autonomous discursive practice must include the use of ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary. If so, being LX for OED vocabulary would suffice for being *universally* LX, LX for every ADP.

Putting all these conditions together yields the following diagram of the pragmatically mediated semantic relation between vocabularies that obtains when vocabulary V′ plays the expressive role of being universally LX by being elaboratable from and explicative of practices necessary for the deployment of ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary:



The fact that the rounded rectangle labeled P″, representing the practices from which vocabulary V′ is elaborated and of which it is explicative, appears inside the rounded rectangle representing practices sufficient to deploy ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary indicates that the practices P″ are a necessary part of the practices sufficient to deploy OED vocabulary, but need not comprise all such practices. Thus, distinguishing materially good from materially bad inferences involving them is necessary for deploying ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary (rather than mere labels), but there is a lot more involved in doing so—using such vocabulary observationally, for instance. Different categorial metaconcepts can be LX for different essential features of the use of empirical descriptive vocabulary. Thus alethic modal vocabulary explicates the subjunctive robustness of the inferences explicated by conditionals. "Quasi-syntactic" abstract ontological vocabulary such as 'property' and 'proposition' explicate structural features of descriptive sentences.

Diagramming the expressive role of being LX for practices necessary to deploy OED vocabulary provides an analysis that breaks down the claim

that some vocabulary plays a categorial role into its component sub-claims. To show that alethic modal vocabulary, for instance, stands in this pragmatically mediated semantic relation to ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary one must show that there are some practices-or-abilities (in this case, to reason subjunctively or counterfactually) that are 1) a necessary component of practices-or-abilities that are 2) (PV)sufficient to deploy OED vocabulary, 3) from which one can elaborate practices-or-abilities that are 4) (PV)sufficient to deploy vocabulary (alethic modal vocabulary) 5) that is (VP)sufficient to explicate or specify the original practices-or-abilities. Although there is by design considerable elasticity in the concepts vocabulary, practices-or-abilities, and the various sufficiency and necessity relations between them, the fine structure of the distinctive expressive role in question is clearly specified.

What credentials does that expressive role have to pick out a worthy successor metaconcept to what Sellars made of Kant's categories or pure concepts of the Understanding? At the beginning of my story I introduced the idea behind the Kantian categories as the idea that besides the concepts whose principal use is in giving empirical descriptions and explanations, there are concepts whose principal use is in making explicit features of the framework that makes empirical description and explanation possible. The expressive task characteristic of concepts of this latter class is to articulate what Kant called the "transcendental conditions of experience." The concepts expressed by vocabularies that are LX for empirical descriptive vocabulary perform this defining task of concepts that are categories. As explicative of practices necessary for deploying vocabularies performing the complex expressive task of description and explanation (distinguishable only in the context of their complementary relations within a pragmatic and semantic context that necessarily involves both), this kind of vocabulary makes it possible to *say* what practitioners must be able to *do* in order to describe and explain how things empirically are. They do this by providing a pragmatic metavocabulary for describing and explaining. This is a central feature (the 'X' in 'LX') of the complex pragmatically mediated semantic relation between categorial metaconcepts and ordinary empirical descriptive vocabulary.

One feature of the concepts performing this explicative function that Kant emphasizes is that they are "*pure* concepts of the Understanding." (I take it that the "of" should be understood as expressing both the subjective and objective genitives—as in "Critique of Pure Reason." These concepts both belong to the Understanding and address it, being both

discursive and metaconceptual.) To say that they are pure concepts is to say that they are graspable *a priori*.[13] The feature of the LX model that corresponds to the a prioricity of Kant's categories is that the use of LX metaconcepts can be elaborated from that of the empirical descriptive vocabularies for which they are LX. As I have put the point, in knowing how to deploy OED vocabulary, one already knows how to do everything one needs to know how to do to deploy vocabulary that is LX for it—such as alethic modal vocabulary, conditionals, and ontological classificatory vocabulary. If we take it, as per Sellars, that grasp of a concept is mastery of the use of a word, then one need not *actually* grasp concepts that are LX for descriptive vocabulary in order to deploy descriptive vocabulary. But in effect, *all* one is missing is the words for them. The circumstances and consequences of application of LX concepts can be formulated by rules that appeal only to abilities one already has in virtue of being able to use OED vocabulary. (Think of the sample rules for conditionals sketched above.) In that sense, the LX concepts are *implicit in* the descriptive concepts. It is not that one must or could grasp these concepts *before* deploying descriptive concepts. It is rather that nothing more is required to grasp them than is required to deploy descriptive concepts, and there are no particular descriptive concepts one must be able to deploy, nor any particular descriptive claims that one must endorse, in order to possess abilities sufficient to deploy the universally LX metaconcepts.

The class of concepts that are arguably universally LX (LX for every autonomous discursive practice because LX for OED vocabulary) overlaps Kant's categories in important ways—most notably in the alethic modal concepts that make explicit subjunctively robust consequential relations among descriptive concepts. But the two do not simply coincide. In *Between Saying and Doing* I argue that besides modal vocabulary, logical vocabulary, indexical and demonstrative vocabulary, normative vocabulary, and semantic and intentional vocabulary all should be thought of as LX for OED vocabulary. In spite of this extensional divergence, the fact that vocabulary that is LX for descriptive vocabulary in general principle shares with Kant's categories the two crucial features of being explicative of such vocabulary and being graspable *a priori* makes the idea of universally LX metaconcepts a worthy successor to Kant's breakthrough idea. The fact that Sellars's own development of this idea of Kant's takes such important steps in this direction convinces me that his version of the categories was a progressive step, and a Good Idea.

[13] Kant does admit also impure *a priori* principles.

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From Pragmatist Anti-Metaphysics to Non-Ideal Epistemology?

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1. Introduction: a personal note

I believe I first met Bjørn at the beginning of the Fall term of 1998: I was a Master's student at the University of Oslo and Bjørn was a visiting professor on leave from his regular position at Simon Fraser University in Canada. But I already knew about him, of course: after all, he was a former student from the Oslo department who had since gone on to make a name for himself in the contemporary philosophical landscape. I had already taken out his book on Davidson from the library, and had copied every page, every chapter, on the second-hand photocopier that my roommate had recently purchased and kept in our flat. I think it would be fair to say, I was already a fan.

There is an old saying that one should never meet one's heroes. But meeting Bjørn in person did not disappoint. Everyone who has met him knows that he is exceptionally charismatic. But they may also know that he is unfailingly kind, generous, attentive, and supportive. As a student, I was lucky enough to be able to follow, I think, two of his courses that year: one on pragmatism, another on Gadamer's hermeneutics. I can't remember what I wrote for my term papers, but I suppose it was sufficiently competent that, when time came around for him to pack up and return to Canada, he approached me and said that if I were interested, he would be happy to supervise my Master's thesis from a distance. Naturally, I was thrilled by the idea, and gladly accepted the offer.[1]

[1] I mention this because in the meantime, Bjørn is back at University of Oslo while I am a Professor at Simon Fraser University, teaching many of the same classes that I imagine he taught when he was here.

So began an incredibly rewarding relationship stretching to this day, during which Bjørn has served variously as supervisor, mentor, co-author, career counsellor, life coach, colleague, and finally—I would like to think—as a friend. I don't think there's any other academic mentor who has meant more to me personally and professionally than Bjørn, both in giving shape and direction to my own philosophical efforts but also in helping me gain a sense of the sort of Philosopher-person I should aspire to be, in particular, in terms of one's interactions with students and colleagues. I am immensely thankful to him for this. And so I was very happy to accept this invitation to pay homage to Bjørn and to put some thought into the question of how his philosophical contributions have shaped and inspired my own.

2. Bjørn's "golden period"

From the mid 90s and well into the 2000s, Bjørn published a remarkable series of papers. These papers helped consolidate my pre-existing philosophical preoccupations but also introduced me to new topics and perspectives. In addition, they showed me the way to a certain kind of constructive and forward-looking way of doing philosophy that appealed to me enormously and that I aspired to emulate in my own work.

In terms of presentation, however, these papers often seemed quite modest at first glance: they were often framed as commentaries on the works of older contemporaries—Rorty, Davidson, Gadamer, Dennett, in particular—offering constructive re-readings and friendly amendments along the way.[2]

Nonetheless, it was clear to me even then that their modest presentation belied their potential philosophical significance. In particular, they seemed to show how certain arguments, positions, ways of thinking, could be illuminating well beyond the debates in which these arguments were initially proffered. (Many of these papers were published in volumes where the target authors also provided responses: it was always clear from these responses that the authors in question, like me, found that Bjørn's unassuming commentary had revealed to them aspects and dimensions of their own thinking that they themselves had not yet fully realized. For instance, Davidson writes, in response to "The Significance of Charity" (Ramberg, 1999), that "this is the kind of criticism that makes doing

[2] A matter of "regional pixel adjustment," as he memorably puts it in Ramberg, 1997, p. 459.

philosophy worth the trouble [...]. [Ramberg] has shown me a better way to put together some of the strands in my own thinking, and gently suggested what I would do well to leave out" (Davidson, 1999, p. 619). A similarly effusive note is struck by Rorty, in response to "Post-Ontological Philosophy of Mind" (Ramberg, 2000): "Most of my responses in this volume are, at least to some extent, rebuttals. But in the case of Bjørn Ramberg's paper, I find myself not only agreeing with it, but also very much enlightened by it" (Rorty, 2000, p. 370).[3]

Perhaps due to my educational background at the University of Oslo, I was particularly impressed with Bjørn's willingness to engage productively with philosophical issues spanning what was then known as the "analytic-continental divide."[4] While Bjørn's philosophical outlook seemed solidly grounded in analytic philosophy (though certainly tending toward a kind of "naturalism," more about which later), it would have been hard to emerge from a philosophical education at the University of Oslo—its curriculum shaped in no small part by the legacy of Dagfinn Føllesdal—without feeling that at least *some* of the questions typically associated with the works of, say, Edmumd Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, or Hans-Georg Gadamer—questions about human socio-historical situatedness and cognitive finitude—were questions worthy of serious philosophical consideration.

Bjørn's papers from this era seemed to me just the ticket for an aspiring philosopher in my predicament. They ask serious questions—not simply critical questions, but probing and constructive questions—about how we can best integrate these humanistic insights and perspectives into the starker and leaner vocabulary of analytic philosophy. They take for granted that these are philosophical concerns worthy of serious consideration, no matter what one's philosophical starting point or preferred methodology. But they are not simply trying to graft one perspective onto the other or to point out similarities between competing philosophical traditions, unlike much of superficially similar work from that era, which seemed content to simply list a number of commonalities between the Analytic and Continental approaches and leave it at that. By contrast,

[3] Subsequently, he concedes that "Ramberg has persuaded me to abandon two doctrines which I have been preaching for years: that the notion of 'getting things right' must be abandoned and that 'true of' and 'refers to' are not word-world relations" (Rorty, 2000, p. 375). Anyone who knows Rorty's work from this period will know that these are hardly peripheral points in his overall philosophical worldview.

[4] Apparent already in Ramberg, 1988 and Ramberg, 1989, chs. 9–10

Bjørn seemed to me to be probing for actual transcending insight, a true *Horizontverschmelzung*.[5]

These papers range across a variety of topics, but I take it that their central concern is to articulate a viable picture of human agency and its place in the natural world.[6] But I don't think I'm overreaching in assuming that they were also animated by the idea that facts about human historicity and social embeddedness really shouldn't be considered alien to this more naturalistic approach: rather, a distinctive feature of the human situation is that our sociality is, as it were, part of our nature.

From the outset, though, it was clear that the works of Richard Rorty held a special place for Bjørn. The inspiration from Rorty was both substantive and methodological. Substantively, Rorty had already in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Rorty, 1979) broached the ambition of bringing a "hermeneutic" perspective to bear on historical trends and developments in philosophy. Methodologically, Rorty proposed that "pragmatism" was the appropriate antidote to some of the counter-productive tendencies on display in modern analytic philosophy: i.e., its tendency to insulate itself and to prefer inquiry into the highly technical questions that supposedly constitute the domain of "proper philosophy." On Rorty's perspective, these questions are unrecognizable to people outside the discipline. They may well also turn out to be "pseudo-questions" that don't really permit satisfactory answers at all, however much we might admire the technical acumen of the various proposed solutions. Far from the "perennial questions" that philosophers like to think of themselves as occupied with, these problems—the mind–body problem, the problem of knowledge, etc.—may simply be artifacts of particular, historically situated philosophical framing.

Substantively, I have always thought Bjørn's body of work during this period constituted a considerable advance on Rorty's. Methodologically, however, I must admit that even back then, it was never entirely clear to me that what declaring oneself a pragmatist was supposed to amount to. In what follows, I will try to elaborate on both of these.

While Rorty's early work was certainly ground-breaking and inspirational, his subsequent efforts seemed to me to remain programmatic at best. After *Mirror*, Rorty rarely seemed motivated to engage in the "dirty

[5] Gadamer, 1960. See, for instance, Ramberg, 2003, for warnings against "easy assimilations" of the two perspectives.

[6] Bjørn would later amend his thinking to also include a pre-occupation with non-human agency. This was also very influential on me. On this, see, e.g., Ramberg, 2005.

work" of digging into texts, situating perspectives in ongoing research, fully articulating what we might draw from each to paint the kind of integrated picture of human agency that we—so-called "pragmatists"—might aspire to. Bjørn's papers, by contrast, did all of that in spades: moreover, its manner was always that of deep, constructive engagement, rather different from the sort of sloganeering that Rorty's work occasionally devolved into.

A central thread running throughout much of this period in Bjørn's work is the question of how we can aspire to a broadly "naturalistic" account of human agency without going by way of the sort of metaphysical trappings to ineluctably lead to questions about reductionism or eliminativism. This was an issue of contention between Bjørn's two primary philosophical lodestars during this period, Davidson and Rorty. As is well known, Davidson had argued that the kinds of explanations we offer when we talk about people's beliefs, desires, intentions, and so on, are irreducible to the kinds of explanations that we offer when we talk in terms of physical events.[7] Nor can there be any strict generalizations that span the two "vocabularies," the mental and the physical. So while we can remain committed to some form of ontological monism—minds and bodies are not two sorts of things—the internal logic of the way that we think and talk about these categories remains irreducibly distinct.

While deeply appreciative of many strands of Davidson's thinking, Rorty repeatedly expressed reservations about this distinction. At issue is not whether the mental might turn out to be reducible to the physical after all, but rather why Davidson remained so peculiarly committed to the vocabulary of the mental in the first place. On Rorty's view, we should, as naturalistically inclined pragmatists, remain open to the possibility that our category of the mental is just another one of those philosophical fictions that we may eventually learn to live without.

Bjørn's attempt to navigate and negotiate these disputes (in particular Ramberg, 1999; 2000) are, I think, deeply illuminating pieces of philosophy. In essence, he proposes that we should grant the following point to Rorty: while the basic argumentative strategy that Davidson has developed certainly *applies* to the relationship between the mental and the physical, it may also turn out to apply more widely, for instance to the relationship between evolutionary biology and "the physical." In this sense, Rorty is right that the "mental" is not particularly special. As Bjørn summarizes

[7] See, in particular, Davidson, 1970.

the point: "The quality of being nomologically irreducible to physics is not a particularly distinguished or distinguishing property" (1999, p. 604).

Bjørn urges Davidson to take this point to heart: one of Davidson's "great achievements," he argues, is to have "shown us how to dissociate reduction and ontology, thereby greatly reducing the philosophical significance of either pursuit. It would be a pity [...] if this liberation were confined to our talk of the propositional attitudes. Not with respect to the mental, nor any other vocabulary, is there a special, philosophical task which consists in tracing its conceptual relations to an ideal basic science, for then to pronounce upon its ontological legitimacy" (1999, p. 608).

Nonetheless, he likewise cautions Rorty against thinking that this shows that he was right all along that the mental is not "special" or in any noteworthy sense, a "fundamental" category. As I understand him, what Bjørn has in mind here is the sense in which Rorty's pragmatism remains caught up—very much despite itself—in a recognizably metaphysical way of thinking about what it would take for a vocabulary to be "fundamental" in this sense:[8] if it doesn't point us toward ontologically distinctive categories, then it is not particularly "special."

Against this, Bjørn presses, persuasively as I see it, for a naturalistic perspective on which the specialness of the mental vocabulary is due to facts about us, not facts about "the world" as seen from some more metaphysically austere point of view: quite simply, humans "are built to be sensitive to the sort of pattern that norm-tracking agency-predicates reveal." Even as scientific inquiry probes ever deeper into the cognitive and neurological basis of this form of agency-attribution, the vocabulary of agency "is not one we could choose to lose."[9] This is a good thing, surmises Bjørn, and I agree: "Given the evident value of sensitivity to these patterns, perhaps we should, in a Humean spirit, be thankful that nature has not left it up to us to decide whether or not to preserve it" (1999, p. 615).

I am particularly taken with one strand of argument in support of this view of the irreducibility of the mental. Fundamentally, what gives content and structure to our thoughts in the first place is a causal triangle

[8] Perhaps a hangover from his early days gleefully espousing a type of eliminativism: see Rorty, 1965; 1970.

[9] See also Ramberg, 2000, p. 362: "The norms of agency [...] are not norms that we can hold up before ourselves or others as directives or guides to behavior. *That* we generally conform to them is what makes us language-users, and so thinkers and knowers. *Whether* in general to conform to them is not a question of subjective choice at all." Differently put, perhaps: these are constitutive norms, not guidance-norms.

that connects us, the world, and other minds.[10] What I like about this is that it attempts to locate a place for intersubjectivity—or more broadly, sociality—into our "natural" cognitive design. Some of the arguments in support of this view are clearly speculative, as they must be. But they are nonetheless very suggestive, and, I think, in large part borne out by subsequent research into cognitive psychology. There is no point in our cognitive development where, by way of some kind of intellectual feat, we individually come to realize that there are "other minds" out there similar to our own. To be sure, there are various developmental milestones along which we come to deepen our understanding of these other minds.[11] But from very early stages of development, it is clear that our conception of an objective world is one that already has other minds, other agents, in it. Bjørn writes: "The basis of knowledge, any form of knowledge, whether of self, others, or the shared world, is not a community of *minds,* in the sense of mutual knowledge of neighboring belief-systems ... Rather, it is a *community* of minds; that is, a plurality of creatures engaged in the project of describing their world and interpreting each other's descriptions of it" (2000, p. 361–2).

I draw two deep inspirations from this way of thinking. First, we should feel no pressure to "validate" the vocabulary of agency in terms of some more "fundamental" metaphysical picture of the world, specifically a picture of the world that might not have a special place for human beings (or other sentient creatures) in it at all. What validates the mental vocabulary are simply facts about human nature. Second, we must recognize that human sociality is part of human nature: in other words, there are no "minds" without "other minds"; a baseline of social responsiveness is embedded in our picture of "the world" from the start. Bjørn's "naturalism," then, is divorced from any vestige of metaphysics: we are fully invited to view these various explanatory vocabularies as "artifices of the bio-evolutionary and, eventually, cultural history of natural creatures with aims befitting their natures" (2001, p. 233).

I find this form of relaxed, anti-metaphysical naturalism tremendously appealing and indeed inspiring. But what does it have to do with "pragmatism"? I take it the answer will primarily point to pragmatism's instrumental value in helping "breaking the spell" of the kind of metaphysical framing that questions of human agency (as a locus of subjective experience) had apparently become tangled up in at the time. Pragmatism, at

[10] See, in particular, Ramberg, 2001, drawing on Davidson, 1991.
[11] See Begby, 2023a.

least as Rorty tells the story, does not set up to offer new answers to the old questions of whether human subjectivity and human cognitive capacities are "reducible" (in this or that sense) to some more "fundamental" physical descriptions of the world. To the contrary, the assumption that these are fundamental questions is just an artifact of a particular metaphysical cast of mind: it's a byway that philosophers might—and will—get trapped in, once their preferred philosophical methodology becomes sufficiently insular and divorced from what goes on in other areas of inquiry and from questions that concern human lived experience. Pragmatism counsels us to simply move past these questions, suppressing our educationally inculcated impulses to think that "progress" in philosophy cannot be made until we have been given satisfactory answers to these "perennial questions."

I like the overall arc of this narrative. It was certainly hugely influential on the early parts of my own philosophical career. But even at that time, I had significant concerns about the invocation of "pragmatism" (particularly in the guise of "American pragmatism," i.e., Peirce, Dewey, and James to make the point). The more I read about these figures, the more pragmatism seemed to create its own set of distinctively theory-engendered philosophical problems (perhaps even pseudo-problems), and that perhaps "pragmatism" was, in this sense, really not fundamentally better than the metaphysically-tinged theories that it was meant to challenge. (In particular, I have never had any time for the endemic debates about what the "true" form of pragmatism is, the Peircean, the Deweyan, or the Jamesian: one would be hard pressed to find anything less "edifying," as Rorty might say, anything less indicative of a "pragmatic mindset," than self-declared pragmatist philosophers debating what should be the fundamental philosophical commitments of "Pragmatism".)[12]

On the other hand, "being right about Pragmatism" never seemed to be particularly high on Bjørn's philosophical agenda. And rightly so: neither methodologically nor substantively do his central philosophical concerns seem intrinsically or particularly indebted to Pragmatism as such, as contrasted, say, with that older tradition of science-inspired philosophical humanism that connects figures like David Hume, Thomas Reid, Auguste Comte, and John Stuart Mill (though plausibly *also* the American pragmatists).[13]

[12] Though see Andersen and Mitchell, eds. 2023, for a recent and constructive attempt to revive a "pragmatist metaphysics" in the context of philosophy of science.

[13] Cf. Begby, 2014.

Accordingly, I consoled myself (as I suspect did Bjørn) with the idea that there was a workable sense of "pragmatism" on which pragmatism was not to be thought of as a superior "theory" or "philosophical methodology," but simply as an outlook that ranked the urgency philosophical questions in terms of their ability to speak, in some broad and admittedly vague sense, to the kinds of problems that we, as human beings, take ourselves to be preoccupied with at a particular time, and moreover, which encouraged philosophers to give consideration to the widest possible range of source-materials to guide their inquiries. This would be a kind of outlook that permitted us to brush aside concerns, say, about how explanations of worldly events in terms of beliefs, desires, and intentions ultimately differ from explanations articulated in the standard vocabulary of natural science. We would be permitted to brush them aside not because we could claim to *know* that these questions were ultimately ill-grounded. Instead, "pragmatism" gave us the courage to resist the supposition that these should be the *first* questions on the philosopher's docket, and that we had no right to engage in any other questions until we had answered them.

But even as I have eventually found some manner of peace with the "Pragmatism-wars," I admit that there's a certain sense of loss of context when revisiting these discussions now. For even this kind of minimal engagement with metaphysical questions about mind, meaning, and agency in the natural order now strikes me as a bit quaint. While Bjørn's papers had a huge impact on the early to middle stages of my philosophical career, I admit that these framing questions have barely even crossed my mind since I found my own philosophical footing. It seems, then (at least from my own perhaps provincial point of view), that the philosophical landscape has changed in important ways: the kind of outlook that Bjørn's views were defined in opposition to—e.g., various kinds of physicalism and reductionism—are just not central to the way that current philosophical inquiry is carried out anymore. Now of course, this is good news: something to celebrate rather than to mourn. But no one, least of all someone like Bjørn, should ever think that these developments have come about because professional philosophers were finally convinced by the strength of the arguments for pragmatist anti-metaphysics. Instead, I would like to think that they came about because more philosophers started *doing*—rather than just *talking about doing*—the kind of inspirational work in question: i.e., work that takes up questions of central human concern, but addresses them in an eclectic and inclusive manner, not

overly concerned with whether what they are doing is "really philosophy" (let alone whether it is "pragmatism").[14]

As noted, these are happy developments. But even so, it seems fair to ask, given this loss of context, is Bjørn's work from this period relevant anymore? Or is it more like the ladder we threw away to get to where we are now? I think it remains relevant, and I believe I can certainly trace its influence in my own current work.

3. From pragmatist anti-metaphysics to non-ideal epistemology

In the last decade or so, I've devoted most of my philosophical efforts to epistemology. In particular, I've been exploring questions about human information-gathering and information-processing through the lens of developments in social epistemology (branching into situated epistemology, standpoint epistemology, etc.), also drawing inspirations from psychology, sociology, and cognitive science. Most relevantly, perhaps, I've come to develop an approach to these issues which I have broached in terms of "non-ideal epistemology," or more recently, "epistemology for finite minds."[15]

Now, epistemology was never a particularly central concern in Bjørn's writings, however much it might have come up in passing. Growing up as a philosopher, epistemology was never my central concern either. When I was in graduate school, the default framing for epistemology was still the Gettier-problem, along with more recent developments centered on concepts such as "safety" and "sensitivity," all with its standard suite of increasingly esoteric examples and counterexamples. The influence of Timothy Williamson's contrary "externalist" perspective—on which the concept of knowledge is primitive and irreducible, so that we don't even have to answer the question of what needs to be added to "justified true belief" to have knowledge—was just starting to be felt.[16] Neither seemed to me to be very interesting: the reason they didn't seem interesting is precisely that they struck me as tending toward insularity. As the philosophical analyses on offer became more sophisticated, they also became more esoteric, more divorced not just from broader worldly concerns but also from the rest of philosophy, and from the rest of scientific inquiry. The ap-

[14] One particularly important such figure is, of course, Daniel Dennett. See, e.g., Dennett, 1991, of which Bjørn was an early and avid reader.

[15] Begby, 2021*b*; Begby, 2023b.

[16] Williamson, 2000.

pearance of rigour was generally bought and paid for by distinctive kinds of idealizations, which invariably rendered the resulting analyses not particularly representative of the kinds of epistemic challenges that most of us are confronted with in our daily lives. The pragmatist leanings I had inherited from Bjørn counselled me to stay far away from these areas.

Shortly after I took up my current position at SFU, I was assigned to teach an undergraduate epistemology course. In preparing for this course, I was thrilled to discover a slew of more recent developments centering on social epistemology, relating to questions about testimony, trust, communication, about peer disagreement, and about the interrelation between the social status of "knower" and prestige hierarchies in society at large. This seemed to me to provide a much more interesting and relevant template for epistemology, connecting not only with other areas of philosophy, but also with sociology, psychology, linguistics and biology, as well as with social and political issues in the broader world. And so I was suddenly motivated to try to find my own way in this emerging field of study.

Under this guise, I believe epistemology has emerged from the doldrums of a theoretical framing which separated it from other, potentially relevant areas of concern, along with the metaphysical trappings that inevitably arise from that framing: what is knowledge *really*? Does knowledge confer distinct normative privileges from "mere" justified true belief? etc.

Instead, epistemology can now be seen as aspiring to provide a potentially integrating account of human agency at large: after all, it ties together questions of what we do to provide ourselves with information, how we process this information, how this processing feeds into decision making and action, how it is communicated to others in social learning and shared deliberation, etc.

I soon got into thinking that there was a systematic outlook worth articulating here. "Non-ideal epistemology" was already a coinage that had been floating around in the literature, but its moorings seemed to me unclear. (In particular, invocations of "non-ideal theory" in the broad vicinity of epistemology—often influenced by the pioneering work of Charles Mills—were highly politicized and seemed to be framed primarily as a criticism of the sort of "ideal theory" outlook famously espoused by John Rawls. To be clear, I was perfectly happy to think that epistemological theorizing should eventually also serve as input to an account of political agency (cf. Begby, 2022; forthcoming; in progress). But I also thought that many of the idealizations distinctively at play in epistemology were

of broader concern than that: they were the kinds of idealizations that would hamper *any* account of agency long before we would get to the political level.)

What I tried to do, then, was to articulate the rudiments of a systematic account, starting from the recognition of epistemology as a normative inquiry, of how giving proper due to human cognitive and situational constraints should shape the approach we take to questions pertaining to information-gathering and information-processing. I proposed to call these, respectively, "endogenous" and "exogenous non-ideality": the former, roughly speaking, denotes the relatively stable limitations to the inherent information processing capacities of the human mind, as we know it; the latter, the highly contingent and fluctuating limitations to the information that is available to us at a particular time, given the social and historical situation we happen to find ourselves in (Begby, 2021*b*). Both are fundamental constraints on human epistemic agency, and in fact, on any agency at all. By introducing idealizations that fail to reflect these constraints, traditional epistemology has needlessly set itself adrift from any connections it might have to, for instance, cognitive science, developmental psychology, or sociology. In doing so, it has effectively *made it the case* that the kinds of questions philosophers concern themselves with will be *esoteric questions*, of no apparent relevance outside our discipline.

Looking back while preparing this essay, it now dawns on me that my distinction between "endogenous" and "exogenous" non-ideality was really an attempt to tease apart the two major perspectives on human agency that I had first started thinking about after reading Bjørn's work, namely the biological-naturalistic perspective and the socio-historical perspective. But not only that: I now also recognize the fundamental importance of an idea that resonates throughout Bjørn's work. From one point of view, it is certainly natural to describe these (as I did above) as *constraints* on epistemic agency. But from another point of view, it seems more relevant to describe them as *enablers*. In brief: these facts constrain our theoretical accounts of human epistemic agency. But with respect to the epistemic activities that we are trying to theorize about, they are clearly enablers. Differently put, while our natural cognitive capacities and our socio-historical setting are inevitably limited, they nonetheless offer us rich interfaces with the world, essentially providing the parameters of our worldly embodiment and context, and thereby defining human agency as we know it.

One way to ease into this perspective is to start by considering what an "ideal epistemology" might even amount to. Traditional epistemology was never entirely transparent about its idealizations, but it was always clear that it was imposing idealizing assumptions from the start. In particular, whenever it was recognized that actual human epistemic agents are often biased or inattentive, it was immediately assumed that these tendencies should not be reflected in our best theories. From the point of view of ideal epistemology, this just means that their performance is decidedly sub-standard from a normative point of view: we're entitled to expect more from them, even if we recognize that most people fall short of these standards. (This is not a problem, they argue, but rather intrinsic to any form of normative theory: after all, we don't usually take it to be a problem for philosophical accounts of morality that people often act in violation of moral norms, whether due to ignorance or weak motivation.)

But what if some of the cognitive patterns that manifest from a certain idealized point of view as bias or inattention are really something else? To see how this might be the case, we can try to imagine what a "fully idealized" epistemology might look like. Going down this path quickly reveals, I believe, that the notion of a "fully idealized epistemology" cannot even be given a coherent description. Epistemic norms are norms that are supposed to govern inference from evidence. But inference from evidence is inherently a "risky strategy," epistemically speaking: that is, it ineluctably carries with it a non-zero chance of ending up with false beliefs.[17]

By contrast, at the limits of idealization, we might imagine something like Leibniz's omniscient God. The problem is that in virtue of being omniscient, Leibniz's God is just not in the business of drawing inferences from evidence at all. And so, by definition, norms governing the transition from evidence to belief just don't apply to the case. In short, relying on *evidence* to form *beliefs* is, inherently, something that only a non-ideal agent would think to do. And so, any form of normative, evidence-based epistemology, will have to recognize that it is already a non-ideal epistemology.[18]

[17] Obviously, I'm not enamoured by the claim—taken to be axiomatic in contemporary "knowledge-first" approaches to epistemology—that one's evidence, properly understood, is simply what one knows, and so that there is no risk of running into "false evidence." To my mind, this is just another idealization, now masquerading as a metaphysical insight. Moreover, it doesn't do anything to solve our problem, which now simply transposes to the question of how epistemic agents can know whether what they have is evidence (as opposed to something that merely looks like evidence).

[18] For more detailed elaborations on these arguments, see Begby, 2021b; 2024.

If this is right, then we cannot really approach the central questions of epistemology without curtailing our idealizations in important ways. This is not to say that idealizations have *no* role to play in normative epistemology. Rather, it amounts to asking, which idealizations are the right ones (Ramberg, 2004)? Again, we'd struggle to find any clear recognition, let alone a sustained discussion of these points in the traditional literature. But surely it matters that what we are doing is *human* epistemology, and not, say, chimpanzee epistemology or Universal Turing Machine epistemology. The fact that we are doing human epistemology might seem obvious (it certainly does to me), but its repercussions are rarely recognized in the literature. Because if we are, then the normative picture that we are striving to articulate must in some important sense be relativized to a realistic (or if you will, "naturalistic") picture of distinctively human cognitive capacities. After all, human beings are information processing systems operating in real-time. They display distinctive limitations on short- and long-term memory, on perceptual and attentional capacities, etc. This is what I call "endogenous non-ideality." I think it imposes real constraints on our best account of epistemic normativity: it means we're no longer free to just assume that subjects have virtually unlimited capacities to absorb, process, store, and retrieve facts about their environment. For example, a subject faced with a multiple object tracking task cannot be faulted, epistemically speaking, for failing to note that a dot that started out in the upper left quadrant of the screen ended up in the upper right quadrant (even though all the evidence they needed to complete the task was in some relevant sense "right there" on the screen, plainly within their visual field). The task itself is designed precisely to demonstrate the limits of the human attentional capacities. More generally, much of what gets routinely classified as "bias" or "neglect" in the epistemological literature may turn out to be expressions of the kind of cognitive economizing we should expect to see at work in limited ideal agents.

To repeat: as a normative science, there's clearly a role for idealizations in epistemology. But the idealizations in question must be relativized to what we independently know about the upper limits of human cognitive capacities. There's still ample room to criticize people whose prejudices or intellectual laziness leads them to disregard readily available evidence. But there's no room for criticizing people for not being able to process *all* the evidence, or for failing to recognize evidential relations far beyond anyone's computational horizon.

Similar considerations apply to what I call the "exogenous" dimension of non-ideal epistemology. Social epistemology is borne from the recognition that human epistemic agency is deeply socialized from the earliest stages of cognitive development. This puts human beings at a tremendous advantage over members of other species: quite simply, the range of facts that we are capable of knowing—facts about history, about geography, about the cosmos, even intimate biographical facts about ourselves, such as where and when we were born or who are parents are—are facts that we can only know via our relations to other people. (Epistemologists call this "knowledge by testimony."[19])

But the flipside of this tremendous cognitive advantage is a distinctive kind of vulnerability. There's an ineliminable element of trust built into our cognitive make-up from the start. We would *like* to think that our trust is rational, and in some way it is: we might not have a choice *whether* to trust, but we have some manner of discretion on the question of *whom* to trust. But on the other hand, by the time the critical capacities required to make these kinds of choices are properly developed, we are already so thoroughly socialized into a particular epistemic community that it will be virtually impossible for us to affect the kind of "critical distancing" that an ideal choice-situation requires (Begby, 2013; Cf. Nguyen, 2020).

This forces the recognition that while *in general*, our socio-epistemic embeddedness is a tremendous cognitive boon, some of us might nonetheless have the comparative misfortune of being born into communities where misinformation or prejudice predominates. For people in such situations, it will be exceedingly difficult—maybe even impossible—to find the epistemic resources to "move beyond", by asking pointed, rationally motivated questions about why we all think like this, why certain assumptions are taken for granted, why the hypothesis-space takes this form rather than that. We can grant that there *is* a rational requirement to recognize one's fallibility and to ask such questions. But at the same time, we recognize that critical reason is a limited resource and remains fundamentally constrained by the materials that it's given to work with. Quite simply, we cannot but evaluate new evidence except in light of what we already presume to know. And what we must presume to know is deeply constrained by our socio-epistemic relations to others, whoever they may be, and the quality of the information that their testimony provides.[20]

[19] For a classic statement, see Hume, 1748. For an even more probing account, which might also be the first to tap into a realistic picture of human cognitive development, see Reid, 1764; 1785.

[20] On this see, Begby, 2021*a*.

One way to summarize the argument for non-ideal epistemology is this: we can certainly imagine an information-processing system with greater processing abilities than our own; but we cannot imagine a physically embodied real-time-operating information-processing system with *no* intrinsic performance limitations. Therefore, we will have to curtail our idealizations at some point: so why not just curtail them to fit a realistic picture of human cognitive capacities from the start? Similarly, we can certainly imagine an information society with a more expansive collective cognitive horizon, a flatter authority structure, and fewer incentives for using information/disinformation as a tool of deception or manipulation. But at the same time, we could hardly imagine an information-society with *no* limitations to its collective cognitive horizon and no institutionally sanctioned distinction between experts and non-experts, etc. Again, however much philosophy is naturally (and reasonably) prone toward idealization, we are going to have to recognize limitations somewhere. And these limitations will have to constrain any sensible, or if you will, pragmatist, account of epistemic rationality.

4. Whither pragmatism?

I'm not at all surprised to rediscover the influence of Bjørn's philosophy in many of these arguments. Nor am I surprised to recognize themes from thinkers like Rorty, and farther afield, Gadamer, both of which I also likely absorbed via Bjørn, either directly or indirectly.

Are these "pragmatist" themes? My default response to these kinds of questions has always been a shrug of the shoulders: does it matter? Pragmatism has a history of entangling itself in disputes about what "pragmatism" really commits one to. My general outlook has always been to think there are few things less "pragmatist" than engaging in such disputes.

But perhaps a more probing response is available. I think of epistemology as a normative discipline, centrally focused on human cognition. I *do* think (and I'm probably in a relative minority among contemporary epistemologists here) that the correct account of epistemic norms will require human cognitive agents to engage in trade-off reasoning determining what information, sought along what lines of inquiry, might be most relevant to them at any given point. The reason is simply that any pursuit of truth or knowledge in inquiry imposes opportunity-costs which draws epistemic resources away from the pursuit of truth or knowledge along other lines of inquiry. When it comes to evidence, non-ideal agents really

can't "have it all," and so, we need to be choosy. This choice-situation is always going to involve an element of risk. But clearly there is better or worse advice one can offer to someone in this situation. My advice is to choose to conduct such inquiries as might maximize the expected epistemic value of the information we would stand to gain. Differently put, we should seek the most consequential (or "relevant") information we could reasonably hope to have.[21]

I don't think this should be particularly controversial. But one consequence is immediately notable: candidate epistemic norms which counsel us simply to gather the most amount of knowledge or the most amount of truths that we can are simply barking up the wrong tree. Perhaps it's true in some abstract sense that our epistemic endeavors should be guided by "truth" or "knowledge": but we don't satisfy that norm by simply adding truths to our knowledge-base one by one, where we can find them. We have finite minds and cannot possess all the truths. Some truths are comparatively epistemically inconsequential. So we need to be resource-conscious and selective about which truths we pursue. I think this is the correct view to take whether we are considering scientific inquiry, policy-making, or mundane everyday epistemology at the individual level.

Is this a form of pragmatism? We might, perhaps, think of it as a kind of "ground-level pragmatism," one that directly seeks to influence how we conduct our inquiries. But as such, it seems rather different from the more explicitly "meta-philosophical pragmatism" that was advocated by Rorty and taken over by Bjørn. Meta-philosophical pragmatism is a position on philosophy. What I have called ground-level pragmatism is a position on inquiry more generally.

But of course, this neat distinction crumbles as soon as we recognize that philosophy is, in an important and recognizable sense, just another form of inquiry. As such, I would not be averse to thinking about meta-philosophical pragmatism simply as ground-level pragmatism applied to philosophy, understood as a form of inquiry. In fact, that would be a highly pleasing result.

But even so, it's not entirely clear to me how this all relates to the distinctively "American pragmatism" that so enamored Rorty. Instead, I find it just as natural here to seek inspiration in a range of philosophers whose contributions pre-date American pragmatism by a significant margin. Now, to be clear, I think Peirce, Dewey, and James are *also* inspirations

[21] Begby, 2023b.

here. But if we think of them as bringing about an entirely novel chapter in the history of philosophy, we will be led down the path of asking what their distinctive methodological and doctrinal contributions were. And so, we will almost inevitably come to read them against the specific historical context they operated in—particularly, perhaps, the transition from late Hegelian idealism to the early stages of positivist empiricism and beyond. In that context, it seems reasonable to ask, for instance, what is "the pragmatist theory of truth?" And before we know it, we will be ensnared in distinctive, but to my mind, very "un-pragmatic" doctrinal questions that essentially reveal pragmatism as just another "philosophical theory." By contrast, if we think about the contributions of American pragmatism in a slightly larger historical context, as just one chapter in a longer trajectory of a distinctive kind of broadly inquisitive, cautiously optimistic, science-inspired philosophical humanism, then things will look quite different. Accordingly, I'd rather like to think of pragmatism as an attitude that rebels against the increasing insularity of professionalized, institutionalized philosophy, and which maintains that philosophers should feel free—indeed encouraged—to have their inquiries range as widely as possible, never being overly concerned about whether either the product or the process is particularly "philosophical."

At this point in history, we have a thoroughly institutionalized conception of philosophy. Philosophy is done by professionally trained philosophers, working in specialized Departments of Philosophy. We routinely distinguish between Philosophy and other "humanistic disciplines," such as History, Literature, or Gender Studies. We further distinguish these humanistic disciplines from "science." We sometimes wonder whether the "social sciences," so-called, really are sciences or only humanistic disciplines trying to pass themselves off as sciences, thereby hoping to draw some of the prestige that this designation holds in contemporary academia and public life.

If this is what Philosophy *is*, then it stands to reason that philosophers should engage in "meta-philosophy": they should aspire to draw a boundary around the "proper domain of philosophy" and be prepared to have something to say about the unique methodologies that we deploy to investigate questions falling within that domain. Part of what makes this reasonable is of course administrative: if Philosophy is to control its own budget, request new faculty-lines, make a distinctive contribution to the undergraduate curriculum, and so on, then it's hardly too much to ask

that philosophers have something concrete to say about what makes "philosophy" different from any other discipline.

These developments are perfectly understandable. And conceivably, it's been a good thing for philosophy at large. There are probably more "philosophers" now than there has ever been, publishing more "philosophy" in accredited "philosophy journals" than ever before. On the other hand, a large part of our professional pride no doubt comes from our long tradition—unlike these new upstart disciplines, philosophy can trace its roots back to the dawn of written culture. But at the same time, we tend to forget that the great philosophers of the past were scarcely "philosophers" in the current sense of the word. Nor did their contributions to philosophy in any clear sense conform to a particular methodology or constrain itself to particular subject matters or to considering only a certain kind of evidence. Obviously, this is not to say that they were necessarily something else instead—say, "scientists." Instead, I take it that they were distinctively engaged in a kind of opportunistic, problem-oriented form of inquiry that would cast its net as widely as practically feasible, so as to work on any possibly relevant source materials and reason along any pathway that might generate a persuasive train of thought toward some conclusion. In brief: their type of inquiry pre-date what we now think about as the distinction between science and philosophy, and, I would like to think, was better off for it.

On this sort of thinking, calling someone like Aristotle, or Descartes, or Leibniz a philosopher *but also* a scientist seems like a recipe for misunderstanding their work. Their contributions to what we now recognize as philosophy and what we now recognize as science were arguably much more integrated than that: these were not insights emerging from a compartmentalized mind, now engaged in this form of inquiry, now in another. Instead, their best work embodies, in an important sense, an integrated philosophico-scientific outlook on the world. Closer to our time, none of Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, Hume, Wolff, Smith, or Reid (to mention but a few) were professional philosophers: some of them were employed in the University sector, but none of them in a Department of Philosophy. Moreover, while they were also making important contributions to philosophy, they were concurrently engaged in important reflection on other issues, be it medicine, politics, economics, history, or theology. I don't think anyone should read their "philosophical" works today and imagine that these are the products of a mind particularly pre-occupied with questions like, "is this philosophy?" or "am I doing it right?"

I'm taken with the story that the first "great philosopher" in our canonical timeline who actually held an appointment as "Professor of Philosophy" would have been Kant. So it's perhaps no surprise that this appointment broadly coincides with Kant's sudden obsession with legislating the proper domain of philosophy and with outlining a distinctive methodology fit to answer those questions, namely the *kritische Methode* now familiar from the *Critique of Pure Reason*. While few of us would look to Kant's methodology as guiding their philosophical inquiries today, many of us nonetheless maintain an implicit conception of philosophy as a distinctive domain of inquiry, guided by a distinctive set of methodologies. (Though of course, when time comes around for us to fill in the dreaded "methodology" section of a grant proposal, we often discover that we have very little to say about what this methodology is.) Nevertheless, I think it's this self-conception which also leads us to think that, as professional philosophers, we must "stay in our lanes," which prompts us to police others' work by asking, "so, how is this philosophy?" etc.

Moreover, I believe this is the conception of philosophy that leads to the kind of insularity that "pragmatists" like Rorty and Bjørn were concerned with. They were correctly pointing out that as philosophers become increasingly pre-occupied with their status as "philosophers," the more insular our "philosophical problems" become, and the more these problems will tend toward intractability: they will be intractable, not—as we might like to think—because they are orders of magnitude more complex than the questions that occupy researchers in otherwise comparable disciplines. Rather, they are intractable simply because they have lost their grounding: as a result of drawing a bright circle around "the proper domain of philosophy" we have severed the connections that gave urgency and direction to our inquiries in the first place. We may have saved our budgets and our tenure-lines, but we are at risk of losing our way as philosophers. We will certainly have lost our life-giving connection to the tradition of reflection that gave our discipline its name.

What I make of pragmatism today, and which I like to think I've absorbed from Bjørn—by reading, by discussion, by example—comes to this: philosophy is at its best when it is not particularly preoccupied with its own status, but rather taps into the longer arc of its proud and unique tradition so as to engage open-mindedly and opportunistically with any form of inquiry that comes within its purview or that might conceivably generate a question of philosophical interest. And judging by the span of that tradition, this is a very wide range of questions indeed. If philoso-

phers have anything distinctive to contribute in modern academia, it's not by way of the unique methodology we deploy or the doctrinal insights we have painstakingly chiselled out over the years. To the contrary, it's due to our consistent refusal to be fettered by any restrictive methodology and our continued insistence that all questions are potentially philosophical questions.

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Pragmatism, Truth, and Naturalism: Revisiting the Price-Rorty debate

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Introduction

Richard Rorty and Huw Price, two giants of contemporary pragmatism, share many core commitments but also put these to use in quite different ways. The—or at least a—starting point for both is a rejection of *representationalism*—roughly, as Rorty famously articulated it, the idea that we should understand our cognitive practices on the model of the mind or language *mirroring* nature or mind-independent reality (Rorty, 1979). Somewhat less roughly speaking, and particularly in Price's version, representationalism is the idea that truth and other semantic notions like reference are to be understood as substantial, explanatorily significant relations between bits of language and / or thought and things in the world (Price, 2011; 2013). Rorty expressed his own rejection of representationalism by saying there are only causal not semantic relations between language and the world and that our aim should be, as Dewey put it, to cope with reality, not to copy it. The idea that reality in itself is to be articulated by the mechanistic science that emerged in seventeenth century rather than theology served a useful emancipatory purpose in history, but the ultimate goal of the Enlightenment should be to free ourselves from *all* non-human standards for what we are entitled to say and thereby do (Rorty, 1999). In this way, truth itself for Rorty becomes an outmoded or at least uninteresting notion, reducing to a kind of compliment we pay to statements we agree with, though also sometimes a reminder—in its *cautionary* function—that we may change our minds in meetings with future audiences (Rorty, 1986).

Rorty further sees pragmatism as an anti-philosophical or at least anti-theoretical movement. Once one gets rid of the mirroring metaphor, the central constructive projects of modern philosophy—of understanding how our knowledge can be grounded in sensation and/or reason, and how the world must be in order that we should be able thus to know it—simply lapse, as, if in a slightly more roundabout way, do those of classical analytic philosophy with its 'linguistic turn' towards conceptual analysis. Rorty devoted less time to spelling out exactly how these arguments are meant to go, appealing rather to ideas in his favourite anti-representationalist analytic philosophers like Quine, Sellars and Davidson, in keeping with a more general pessimism about the point of philosophical argument.[1] His remit is to change not just our conception of knowledge, meaning and truth, but our whole conception of what philosophy and academic activity is and is good for. Philosophers, at their best, should be seen more like poets, offering stirring new visions in the furtherance of emancipatory and humanitarian aims.

Price, though a committed anti-representationalist, has not followed Rorty in this respect. For him, systematic theoretical philosophy survives in something like the Quinean mode, as an activity and inquiry continuous with science.[2] Representationalism on his picture is a view that, while often taken for granted in various so-called 'naturalistic' philosophical enquires, is in fact suspect from precisely a scientific perspective. This is the core of Price's critique of what he calls *object* naturalism (Price, 2004). In recent decades, many philosophers, partly in light of the failures of traditional philosophy that Rorty charts, have sought to ask seemingly more tractable questions about what things like consciousness, value, meaning, causation and so on are in the physical or natural world—reality as conceived and described by science—and debated various possible replies. For Price these questions are essentially asking what these terms *refer* to in the scientific world, or what the statements they figure in are *made true by* in this world. However, this representationalist model cannot itself be coherently justified within the naturalistic world view, argues Price (here providing arguments echoing those Hilary Putnam famously gave for re-

[1] In Knowles (2018) I question the stability of Rorty's anti-theoretical stance given his reliance on these seemingly theory-heavy philosophical figures.

[2] Though insofar as he does not see our different discourses as all scientific there may also be room within these for some kind of systematic but non-scientific enquiry, something that I think one might even call 'metaphysics' (see Knowles, 2023, ch. 7, and Knowles, 2025). (Thanks to Josh Gert for alerting me to this point in the current context).

jecting what he called 'metaphysical realism'; see Putnam, 1977, again Price, 2004, and for a comparison of Price's view with Putnam, Price, 1998). Nevertheless, a substantive and even strongly scientific kind of naturalism survives for Price: *subject* naturalism. On this line, our enquiries as naturalist philosophers should concern explaining why and how we *use* the various bits of language philosophers traditionally have found problematic, seeking a theory that itself takes as its point of departure a conception of ourselves as natural beings in a natural world. Though somewhat different kinds of explanatory theory may be suitable for different kinds of discourses, this will often appeal to genealogy and function. Moreover, this is the *only* substantive account of vocabularies available, representation having been rejected as a quantity suited for theoretical purposes. Price calls the resulting view *global expressivism* (also *global* pragmatism, see Price, 2011; 2013), indicating thereby both its debt to classical *local* expressivisms that have focussed on the function of, say, moral and modal talk (see Blackburn, 1993), and that it nevertheless distances itself from the idea that such accounts enunciate a contrast to any more genuinely cognitive or representational discourses. Metaphysical and ontological questions are, in turn, not answered within global expressivism, but deflated along with the semantic terms themselves (see e.g. Price, 1992).

Now Rorty himself expressed sympathy with subject naturalism and related it to his own Deweyean, Darwin-inspired kind of naturalism (Rorty, 2007). One might also think that Price could be seen as a Rortian 'edifying' philosopher in putting forward the novel ideas of subject naturalism and global expressivism, and that Rorty in any case was never a direct opponent of Quine's naturalistic conception of philosophy itself (that is, as opposed to how Quine used it as a defence of physicalism). Seen in this light, the differences between Rorty and Price might seem minimal, or at least mainly ones of focus rather than substance.

However, they did as a matter of plain fact disagree on at least one central issue: how the notion of truth should be understood. Rorty's line is that though truth has a distinctive conceptual profile, rendering attempts to reduce it to justification or usefulness futile, it is not a norm or goal of inquiry, for any genuine attempt to say what is true will be simultaneously an attempt to justify our beliefs (Rorty, 1995). For Price, by contrast, truth is as a matter of sheer sociological fact a distinct norm within our cognitive practices, one that applies even when requirements of sincerity and justification are met (Price, 2003, cf. Price, 2006). Rorty was not convinced of these arguments for such a 'third' truth norm for

reasons he laid out in a letter to Price and that led to an exchange on the issue (published as Rorty and Price, 2010).

In this paper I want to revisit this debate, partly in the light of commentary on it due to David Macarthur (2020) and Michael Bacon (2012). My aim is both to clarify what is most fundamentally at stake here and also relate it to contemporary pragmatism's self-understanding as a naturalistic philosophy. Rorty's correspondence with Price involves or at least suggests two rather different responses to him. Macarthur and Bacon can be seen as running with one of these to argue that Rorty already has the resources to make sense of the phenomena Price's third norm is meant to explain. However, as I see things, the dialectical situation is not quite so simple. Firstly, these authors neglect to comment on an important part of Price's argument for his view revolving around the phenomenon of so-called *no-fault disagreements*. Moreover, their defence of Rorty depends on viewing him as the philosopher who conceded the need for the amendments to his view that were urged upon him by Bjørn Ramberg (2000). In his response to Ramberg, who builds on Davidson's argument for the necessity of a triangulation relationship between two speakers and the world in understanding human communication (Davidson, 1991), Rorty (2000) came to acknowledge (*inter alia*) a distinctive relation of 'getting it right' between our language and the world, conceived as a semantic and not purely causal relation.

In previous work (Knowles, 2013) I argued that Rorty need not have made this concession, and indeed should not have done insofar as Davidson's ideas conflict with central naturalistic commitments of Rorty's pragmatist position. In the current paper, I will not be taking a stand on precisely this issue, but I will be insisting that it is at least not clear that Rorty should have conceded what he did to Ramberg. Moreover, if we understand him as not doing so, the response to Price offered to him by Bacon and Macarthur is not readily available. The other of the two responses to Price remains, and is more in accord as I see things with Rorty's pre-Ramberg position; it is also one which, however else it fares, addresses the no-fault disagreement argument. I think spelling all this out—which will be the task of the first of two main sections of this paper—is important for understanding properly the dialectic of Price's dispute with Rorty, as well as what is more deeply at stake for pragmatism in it.

In the second section I will go on to suggest that in any case Price's argument for a third norm faces an objection that leads to a what I see as a dilemma for Price's position. The objection has been levelled by

Paul Showler (2021), building in turn on Paul Redding's critique of Price's subject naturalism (Redding, 2010). It concerns the reflective stability of Price's subject naturalistic explanations of our various cognitive practices, in the sense of whether our knowledge of these explanations would undermine our commitment to the cognitive practices themselves—in the case of the third norm, a commitment to censure one another when we disagree and thus 'seek out the truth' (as Price claims we do). Building on Showler, and *pace* Price's contrary opinion, I propose that the answer here—at least in the case of the third norm—is that it would, a result which in effect reduces Price's account to something much closer to Rorty's take on the significance of disagreement. Price could offer a response to this argument by way of giving a fuller characterization of the norm's function, but I will argue that the only way of doing this that also blocks the argument would require us to see this function in terms our capacity to track the truth in our natural environments. However, this looks like it will require us to accept a kind of *bifurcation* (Kraut, 1990) in our discourses: a distinction between those that are answerable to the real world out there and those that are not so. This is typically characteristic of local forms of expressivism (or pragmatism), but it is something that Price has resolutely sought to avoid and would seem to run against at least the spirit of his anti-representationalism.

The upshot, as I see things, is that anti-representationalist pragmatists face a stark choice between, on the one hand, a fairly hard-nosed form of their view that is, though more consistently naturalistic, perhaps dubiously coherent; and, on the other, a more liberal version that whilst able to accommodate the idea of truth as a norm and thereby explain assertion is enmeshed in a kind of argumentation that chimes less well with the ideas a thoroughgoingly naturalistic philosophy. Price's proposed middle-way—of accepting a truth norm that is nevertheless fully naturalistically explicable—is not, at least clearly, available. I will not be seeking to resolve the general issue about how naturalistic or normative pragmatism should be, but will in conclusion relate what I have said to some other recent contributions to the debate about pragmatism and naturalism.

1. Is truth a norm of enquiry?

For Rorty, a good pragmatist holds that differences in theory that make no difference in practice should be done away with in philosophy. In his paper 'Is truth a goal of inquiry?' he seeks to use this principle to argue

for a negative reply to this question—truth is not a distinct aim from that of justification, or at least for pragmatists should not be regarded as such. The paper was conceived in the first instance as critical review of Crispin Wright's *Truth and Objectivity* (Wright, 1991) but extends to a more general discussion of the realism-anti-realism debate of the 1970s and 1980s (as pursued by Michael Dummett, John McDowell and others) and how Rorty sees Davidson's approach to truth as having undermined the significance of that. Though there is a lot of detailed discussion, Rorty's main argumentative ploy is that the distinction between truth and justification, while one we can be brought to recognize in the sense that we can understand that achieving one is not necessarily achieving the other (as Wright correctly argues), is not one that we can make *use* of when we go about forming beliefs. Any episode of belief-formation, properly so called, must also be an episode of justifying the belief. For as Davidson pointed out, and Rorty also sees as following from Sellars' animadversions against the idea of givenness, 'nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief' (Davidson, 1986, 126). There is no getting at the truth directly through experience or intellectual insight. Thus, we should drop the idea that truth is a goal of enquiry, a line that also Davidson concurred in insofar as this is meant as kind of requirement distinct from that of justifying our beliefs (Davidson, 2005, 6).

There is no doubt much that Wright and the other thinkers Rorty discusses would have to say about the arguments and presuppositions of this paper. Huw Price in 'Truth as convenient friction' (Price, 2003) takes the less conventional line of contesting Rorty's claim on its own turf, as it were. Thus Price grants Rorty his pragmatist principle: a distinct norm should not simply derive from a distinction we can carve out in theoretical space but should actually guide and be operative in our behaviour. However, *pace* Rorty, Price claims that a truth norm does make precisely such a difference in our practice. His famous thought experiment aimed at showing this concerns an imaginary tribe of 'Mo'ans' ('merely opinionated asserters') who obey a *norm of sincerity* and a *norm of personal justification* in their assertions but not one of truth. For the Mo'ans, saying something you don't believe or that you have good reason to reject is an appropriate reason for censure. However, if you fulfil these requirements, no further objection is raised. Price then points out how different the Mo'ans are from us. For example, if you have good reasons, as you see things, to say that NATO has threatened Russia's legitimate sphere of influence, and I have, as I see things, good reasons to think it has not, we do not merely

shrug and go our separate ways. At the very least we feel that the other is mistaken, wrong—that they precisely have, as we say, a *false belief* and which is thus, and just insofar, defective. Hence, argues Price, there is evidently in general a third norm in play when we assert things—a truth norm. Moreover though this norm applies as a default it can in some contexts be waived. If you think strawberry ice-cream is best and I think chocolate ice-cream is, then our beliefs cannot both be true, but we tend to think there is nothing *wrong* with either view. The existence of such *no-fault disagreements* is for Price a kind of exception that proves the rule that the truth norm enunciates.

However, and importantly for Price, we can say all this without seeing the third norm as concerning anything other than a deflationary notion of truth—that is, without seeing truth as a substantial property constituted by correspondence, coherence, ideal justification or anything else. What Rorty and other deflationists (such as Paul Horwich and Simon Blackburn, see Price, 2006) miss is that this does not preclude truth talk having a distinctive function in our lives, which is precisely to make us alive to disagreements of the above kind and spur us to try to resolve them and thereby make collective rational progress.

Rorty himself replied to Price's argument, offering as I understand him two different kinds of response (Rorty and Price, 2010, 253–5). In his initial correspondence, he suggests that the difference between fault-involving and no-fault disagreements boils down to the difference between the discussion having implications for cooperative action or not doing so. If the matter is, say, one on whose resolution our sending weapons to Ukraine or not will depend, we will engage in further debate if we disagree. On the other hand, if the disagreement concerns which variety of ice-cream is best, we won't—unless (Rorty adds, to underline his point) the producers suddenly decide they will henceforth only be making one kind (ibid., 253). Price retorts that this response does not draw the distinction in our practices where we in fact draw it, failing for example to explain philosophical exchanges or indeed disagreements about *whether* an opinion matters for cooperative success or not (ibid., 254). Rorty then in his follow-up changes tack, questioning the coherency of the Mo'an thought experiment and appealing to the social nature of language and justification urged for by thinkers like Wittgenstein, Brandom and Davidson to argue that justification is always social from the get-go. Price replies to this that the *near* incoherence of the thought experiment was precisely his point: the third norm is so ubiquitous and endemic to our epistemic practices that they are

as good as unrecognizable without them (ibid., 257). He also goes on to question whether the idea of what Rorty calls 'retail' norms (ibid., 256)—piecemeal prescriptions aimed at coordinating the 'noises we make'—is enough to do justice to the idea that what we are doing is making *assertions* at all, without the idea of an overarching truth norm (ibid., 257). It is also worth adding, as Price does in the original paper (Price, 2003, 175), that even if community wide standards are standardly necessary to achieve justification, there is still the possibility of challenging these standards, as has repeatedly been done in the history of thought. Given doing that makes sense to us, the idea of a third norm again seems vindicated.

Rorty does not offer any further reply at this point, but Michael Bacon and David Macarthur have sought to rebut Price on his behalf, building on Rorty's idea of justification as essentially communal and hence the Mo'an though experiment as being incoherent (Macarthur, 2020, Bacon, 2012). Macarthur further argues that Rorty has a dynamic conception of justification, allowing even for communal norms or their deliverances to be challenged. As he puts it: 'A person who meets the norms of communal warranted assertibility within a particular community is, contrary to Price's criticism, put under immediate normative pressure to adjust or change his or her views in light of better information and argument and more critically robust methods of inquiry' (Macarthur op. cit., § 13). Insofar as Price assumes a static conception of communal justification, he thus misses his mark. Bacon (op. cit.) makes similar points, arguing that on a proper understanding of Rorty, Price's arguments amount to a distinction without a difference. In support of this he quotes (ibid., 239) Rorty's remark that 'many (praiseworthy and blameworthy) social movements and intellectual revolutions get started by people making unwarranted assertions' (Rorty, 1998a, 50)—that is, assertions not justified by the norms of the time.

Do these responses effectively silence Price's critique? I want in a moment to bring attention to what I see them as presupposing by way of their interpretation of Rorty. But before that it is significant to note that they do not address Price's argument for the third norm from the existence of no-fault disagreements. Such disagreements are clearly social in that we communicate them to one another and discuss them to an extent, but they do not trigger censure via the truth norm—at least, that is how Price understands them, thus inferring that such exceptions prove the rule that a distinct norm is generally in play. Accepting Price's description of the situation, it is not clear how Rorty, understood along Bacon and Macarthur's

lines, would accommodate this point. Of course, Bacon and Macarthur might reject the idea of no-fault disagreements as such, saying they do involve censure or else that they perhaps are not really genuine expressions of opinion at all. I won't go into that issue here. However it is I think important for a full understanding of what is at stake in the current context to register this lacuna, not least in light of the fact that Rorty's first reply takes the idea of no-fault disagreement seriously.

What understanding of Rorty's position is it that Bacon's and Macarthur responses presuppose? They take their defence as showing that Price is *clearly* wrong in his critique of Rorty, indeed, that there is really nothing at stake between them. This is not something Rorty himself seems to think, his disagreement with Price notwithstanding. Why this difference? I think the explanation is that they are understanding Rorty's view to be the version of this as it was revised in response to Bjørn Ramberg's Davidson-inspired critique of him (Ramberg op. cit.). In his reply to Ramberg (Rorty, 2000), Rorty acknowledged the existence of non-causal relations between language and the world—relations of 'getting it right'—as part of a structure that Davidson argues is a necessary backdrop of all communication and that involves a *triangulation* between interpreter, interpretee and world (see Davidson, 1991, cf. other papers in Davidson, 2001). I will presently present this exchange more fully and also explain why I think it is a presupposition of Bacon and Macarthur, but first I just want to underline that both these authors do clearly seem to take for granted this reading of Rorty. Thus Macarthur tells us that 'Rorty follows Davidson in holding that the concept of truth is part of a package-deal of concepts including belief and meaning that is required to make sense of the idea of rational agents rationally responsive to both their natural-causal and social-linguistic environments' (§ 5). Bacon similarly tells us that Rorty

> came to amend his position in a way which would seem to bring him into line with new pragmatists. In a sympathetic commentary on Rorty, Bjørn Ramberg argues that it is quite consistent to deny that sentences try to describe the world as it is in itself while affirming that sentences try correctly to describe particular objects and events. [...] Rorty came to agree with new pragmatists that the point of inquiry is to get things—snow, particles, deities—right. Bacon, 2012

'New pragmatists' is a term Cheryl Misak coined to refer to pragmatists who think that though truth and justification have to be understood in relation to our practices, these practices themselves involve the idea of answerability to objective truth, contrary to Rorty's 'neo-pragmatism', at least as he originally conceived this (see Misak, 2007a). Ramberg's Davidson-inspired pragmatism is clearly, it would seem, a form of new pragmatism.

All that said, I think it is still less than wholly clear that Rorty *should* have made the concessions he did in response to Ramberg. I will not be taking a stand either way on this question here, but what I do want to insist on is that it was a genuine change of mind and hence that there are two clearly distinguishable versions of Rorty 'out there' so to speak. Moreover, seeing this is essential to understanding Rorty's debate with Price about the third norm, in my view.

To appreciate all this a little better, I will now give a slightly more detailed recap of Ramberg's article and Rorty's response to this. This has as its backdrop Davidson's arguments about the status of intentional psychology, i.e. the psychology of belief, desire and action. Davidson famously argued for a form of physicalism or monism about such mental states and events, but also for a non-reductive such form (Davidson, 1970). For intentional explanations are governed by what he called a *constitutive ideal of rationality*, hence rendering these 'anomalous', i.e. in an important sense non-law like and in any case irreducible to laws of fundamental science. Further, this non-reductive character is importantly distinct from that of (other) special sciences, like biology and geology, insofar as the latter are only contingently irreducible (Davidson, 1987). Rorty, on the other hand, his admiration for Davidson notwithstanding, rejects—or did, pre-Ramberg, reject—any asymmetry between intentional and scientific descriptions on the grounds that it corresponds to Quine's distinction between (mere) underdetermination and indeterminacy, an idea that itself depends on accepting that physics has a kind of priority in delineating what is real (Rorty, 1998b; 1972). However, Ramberg argues that even once we reject the underdetermination/indeterminacy distinction, or at least its metaphysical significance (as Davidson himself came to do, Ramberg convincingly argues), this still allows space for thinking that intentional descriptions are in some way special. And here Ramberg's line, following Davidson's later ideas about triangulation as a precondition of communication, is that intentional descriptions—the *vocabulary of agency* as he puts it—concern the very *presuppositions of talking about anything*. Furthermore,

the vocabulary of agency makes ineliminable appeal to the idea of objective truth. Our situation is not fundamentally Cartesian: we do not first and foremost know our own subjective minds and work outwards from there; rather our knowledge of the world and that of other minds come along in a package together with knowledge of our own minds (Davidson, 1991). Rorty thus should, but also can, consistently with his rejection of substantial epistemology and metaphysics and representationalism, appropriate Davidson fully within his pragmatism, though must thereby also accept that the idea of objective truth, of 'getting it right' is inexorably involved in the vocabulary that makes it so much as possible to make assertions.

Now Rorty as noted accepts this critique of his views in his reply to Ramberg. As he is eager to point out, doing so does not entail an enormous concession, for what we get right (or wrong) are only particular things like snow, tables and foreign policies, not the 'world' or 'reality in itself'. Even so, truth as such has to be acknowledged as an eliminable and irreducible part of our basic mode of engaging in conversation with one another.

If one accepts this amendment to Rorty's view, there is in my view much plausibility in Bacon's and Macarthur's claim that Price's objection against it fails to stick—at least, putting aside the question of no-fault disagreements. If our aim in belief formation, though rightly classed as usefulness, solidarity or justification by Rorty, is also simultaneously that of 'getting it right', then we can clearly always ask of any belief or description we offer whether it *does* get things right, i.e. whether it is true—where this is thus understood as an aim of belief, if not an aim it makes sense to aim at independently of justification. With this idea in place we seem to have all we could want by way of explaining what makes those who say things inconsistent with what we do at fault in our eyes, for they will then be not living up to the aim of getting things right.

However, I think we also need to consider the non-amended version of Rorty. As already noted, I have previously argued that it is not as clear as many have assumed that Rorty should have made the concessions he made to Ramberg (Knowles, 2013). That piece was framed as a reply to Carl Sachs' use of Ramberg's paper and Rorty's response to this to motivate the idea that Rorty moved from a *non-reductive physicalist* (or *non-reductive naturalist*) picture, in which the idea of there being one discourse that trumps all others is jettisoned, to a *pragmatic naturalism*, which affords the vocabulary of agency a kind of transcendental priority,

albeit of a 'non-foundational' sort (Sachs, 2009). My basic point against Sachs was that there is surely something non-naturalistic about a philosophy that admits *any* kind of transcendental priority to a certain kind of description, whether this status is conceived foundationalistically or otherwise. I also argued it conflicted with the Darwinist aspects of Rorty's naturalism: the vocabulary of agency, though normative, also provides explanations of what would seem to be (and at least for Davidson are) something quintessentially human insofar as we are the only real believers, since we are the only language-users (Davidson, 1984); and if these explanations then differ essentially from those we apply to animals' behaviour, this conflicts with the idea that we are continuous with them. I also argued that Davidson's reasoning underlying the transcendental necessity of triangulation for thought and meaningful talk is not, in any case, as probative as many have taken it to be.

I am not concerned with the last set of arguments here, but the first two are relevant in relation to our current focus. Rorty's appropriation of Davidson was I think always infused with a sense of deliberate misunderstanding, precisely in order to emphasise his co-opting of Davidson to his own 'edifying' ends. That he should take over what looks like an undiluted bit of *a priori* transcendental philosophy, as Davidson seemed to see his triangulation argument, looks on the face of it to be out of kilter with this approach. More significantly, I think it is clear from much else that Rorty wrote that his views on truth are and are meant to be much less systematic and unified than Davidson's, suggesting that there is an identifiable position distinct from that which, under pressure from Ramberg, he later came to endorse. What Rorty especially liked in Davidson, apart from his anti-representationalist rejection of the idea of scheme-content dualism, was his eschewal of the idea that there could or should be a *theory* of truth. However, he did not take over Davidson's idea that truth provides a kind of universal key to understanding many of the central problems of contemporary philosophy. The word 'truth' has precisely no core meaning or explanatory function, rather it has several *different*, irreconcilable uses for Rorty—endorsing, disquotational and cautionary ones (Rorty, 1986). Rorty tells us it is 'weird' and 'pointless' to say that a statement can be true for you and false for me simply in virtue of the different uses we make of them; so we should not say that truth *reduces* to usefulness, as William James (perhaps) did (Rorty, 1998a, 2). But this just shows that truth, like the monotheistic conception of God, is so formal and unitary as to be uninteresting (ibid., 3). It also pertinent to stress here

Rorty's deep opposition to epistemology and thus, indeed, to the very idea of justification as traditionally understood. Although much of what he says about truth not being a goal of enquiry revolves around a contrast with what he calls 'justification', it is important that he does not see this concept, as precisely many philosophers would, as having essential connections to truth. His basic line on justification seems to be rather a form of Jamesian pragmatism, i.e. one on which practical usefulness is what is at stake in any actual discussion of what to think, and the basis of the various 'retail norms' we obey in various different contexts. There are no *general* 'marks of truth', let alone an algorithm for getting at it. Truth for Rorty is a property we attribute *after the fact*: that of finding a certain way of thinking or describing propitious. And even though we can say of a belief that, though justified, it might not be true,—as if it were somehow falling short of a natural *telos*—the more fundamental point, I take it, is just the fundamental *contingency* of our various historically situated takes on things (Rorty, 1989). I see all this as being not just consistent with but also conducive to remaining with what Sachs calls 'non-reductive physicalism', Rorty's initial form of naturalism, which in no way trades in the idea of a special form of philosophical or transcendental condition, and moreover is concerned to see us as continuous with the rest of nature.

Of course, in light of his response to Ramberg, Rorty might also backtrack on some of the above ideas. But my point here is just that, whether this transition overall was called for or not, it was precisely that—a shift (even acknowledging that it is not one that affects the underlying commitment to anti-representationalism). Moreover, as I read the exchange he has with Price, Rorty is still fairly firmly in his more austere, Jamesian frame of mind when he is writing this, at least in the first correspondence and indeed also to a large extent—the references to Wittgenstein, Brandom and Davidson notwithstanding—in the second. The dialectical situation that both seem to accept is that Price's points against Rorty bring out points of weaknesses in the latter's view that need to be addressed if it is to be upheld. Price thinks acknowledging the third norm is the most stream-lined way for a pragmatist like Rorty to do this. To go Davidsonean in the way Ramberg sketches may in the wider scheme of things be an even better line for pragmatists to take, but it also removes us quite radically from the dialectical framework of the Price-Rorty exchange—yielding the result, as Macarthur and Bacon see it, that Price's argument simply 'misses its target' (Macarthur op. cit., § 13).

Given these clarifications, we can now I believe make more meaningful headway in assessing how successful Price's arguments for the third norm actually are. As I have hopefully now made clear, I think that, if we assume a version of Rorty modified in line with his concessions to Ramberg, then there is little in what Price says that could amount to any objection to him (at least, again, putting the issue of no-default disagreement to one side). But what if we keep to Rorty's original view? Here, his first line of resistance, the idea of fault being attributed only when cooperative action is at stake, in fact strikes me as having more going for it than Price sees. After all, we humans think and reflect about many things and argue about them only sometimes when we disagree. Sometimes these arguments are very seriously and doggedly pursued, sometimes much less so. The dismissive remark '*Whatever*...' may often end a discussion when the participants feel pursuing it is not worth the candle. It is probably true as Price says that such practical usefulness is not always a requirement for serious engagements as we actually pursue these, but of course for a progressive pragmatist like Rorty—who I take precisely is seeking to change things—that would not be a strong objection.

It is also worth pointing out that Price's point that we can have disputes about *whether* a dispute has implications for practical cooperation—whether this is *true*—is not clearly a weighty objection given a backdrop of a more general pragmatism about truth and enquiry. Price's idea is reminiscent of one of Bertrand Russell's original objections to James' pragmatist theory of truth: that it is often hard to *know* whether a belief is useful, indeed, often harder than just knowing whether it is true or not (Russell, 1910, 74). This objection at least suggests, one might think, that since we will have to know whether a belief is useful, we will have to know whether it is *true* that it is useful, thereby introducing a vicious circularity into the pragmatist account of truth. A similar objection could presumably be raised against Rorty insofar as he often claims we can never know whether a belief is true but only whether it is useful or justified; for how can we know the latter without knowing the *truth* about a belief's status as useful and/or justified? I take it however that an answer, for both James and Rorty, can build on Cheryl Misak's point that the pragmatist is not really concerned to deny the idea of truth as 'correspondence to the facts', but rather, having pointed out its practical impotence, to trace the implications of using the truth concept in practical contexts (Misak, 2007b). This implies that the evaluation of our doxastic and cognitive practices must most fundamentally be conceived in terms of the practical spin-off of these

things—possibly on the whole and in the long run, but at least *not* in terms of the question of whether some belief is *really* useful, i.e. whether it is *true* that it is useful, in some absolute sense. Thus this pragmatist can again say that to the extent we can raise a question whose resolution seems to makes no difference to practice, we should simply let it lie.

Price might still think that the truth norm marks such a robust distinction in our actual practices that it needs to be acknowledged. He might also think Rorty is bending over backwards to protect his account from what is in essence meant as a friendly amendment—one that is least meant to be fully compatible with *both* his Deweyean Darwin-inspired naturalism and his anti-representationalism. Somewhat more offensively, Price might also argue that Rorty in any case will struggle to make sense of assertion without it.

Whether Price's account itself is adequate in this last regard is in my view not totally obvious, in light of what I will say in the next section, but I will not be commenting upon this further in the sequel. Summing up for now, it is probably fair to say that Price's account at least captures the phenomenon *as they stand* better than at least the pre-Rambergian time-slice of Rorty does, and that this latter figure would have to be somewhat revisionary about what we take it to be rational to debate. In the next section however I will argue that Price's account faces a strong, independent objection, given the kind of explanation the third norms is meant to have on his subject naturalist view, and given also he wants to remain faithful to his anti-representationalism. His middle-way for a naturalistic pragmatism is thus not clearly available.

2. Why Price's view of truth should be rejected by anti-representationalists

Price's subject naturalism is, as we have seen, a scientific project that aims, not to vindicate our practices, but to explain them as natural responses of a natural creature in a natural world. At the same time, the practices themselves are not meant to be threatened by these explanations, for semantic notions of truth and reference do not relate us to the world outside language and thought, but apply insofar as we make recognizable moves within the 'game of giving and asking for reasons', as Robert Brandom puts it (Brandom, 1998). From the perspective of the practices themselves, as it were—the internal perspective, in Carnap's sense (see Price, 2009)—we are making claims about things and their properties and debating their

correctness, whether it is ethics, art history or quantum mechanics we are engaged in. Moreover, given the rejection of representationalism, there is no perspective from which we can or at least need to say that what we are doing in any of these cases fails to latch onto 'how things really are'.[3]

Of course, science itself, including that involved in doing subject naturalism, is also one of (or a set of) our practices and thus something we can be or become aware of as giving explanations of our other vocabularies. Does or would having this awareness raise any problems for Price's programme? Some have thought so, in particular Paul Showler (op. cit.), who builds on ideas due to Paul Redding (op. cit.). The basic thought is that if all philosophy can do is to tell us that our cognitive responses of various kinds—our judgements, in the sense of *what* we judge—are in some way a function of how *we* are and not just of how *things* are, this will tend to undermine our faith in these responses and our conviction that we are, or even can be, getting things right—making true assertions—at all. Price is aware of this kind of worry—he calls it *dialogical nihilsm*—and has responded that even one apprised of the naturalistic basis underlying our cognitive practices will not be able to desist from engaging in them even if they felt so-inclined insofar as they are so central to our way of living (2003, 187 ff.; cf. Price, 1996, § 13). We could no more stop caring about truth than we could about food or sex upon finding out that we are not responding to any properties of 'desirability' out there in the world (Price, 2003, 187). But Price also suggests that even if such knowledge could destabilize our practices this would not be a reason to think his account false, but only for 'keeping the conclusion quiet' (ibid.).

He goes on (p. 188 f.) to consider a related worry that one might have with his view on truth that carries over in an instructive way to explanations for particular discourses, such as ethics. This is that his line entails a kind of fictionalism (about variously truth, value or whatever) which itself might seem to be destabilizing of our practices. And here he simply points out that his view is not a form of fictionalism. Subject naturalism—or perhaps we should rather the stress the overall position of global expressivism—does not *deny* the existence of anything we are pretheoretially committed to or suggest our talk is *dis*connected from what it is meant to be about. Naturalistic explanations for Price do not, in particular, amount to any kind of *debunking* of our practices, as others have averred (typically in relation to ethics, see e.g. Street, 2006). In virtue

[3] For more on how I understand the 'can' versus 'need' issue and its significance, see Knowles (2023, ch. 2.2).

of the overall deflationary attitude to the semantic notions, this kind of dialectic is simply not joined.

Is Price's view of truth and his overall subject naturalist programme then not after all vulnerable to Showler's and Redding's critique? In my view, things are not quite so straightforward. To start with, I believe that when it comes to the question of why we discuss and debate things at all, which is what Price's truth norm is meant to explain, the impact of thinking in subject naturalistic terms is importantly different from what it is in relation to explaining particular discourses. In the former case the phenomenon in question is the domain-general one of our making claims, disagreeing with one another and (we hope or assume) making progress by trying to show our opponents are mistaken or accepting the force of better argument ourselves. Price's subject naturalist explanation here is that we do this is because of a natural tendency to regard opinions contrary to our own, regardless of their justificatory status, as being at fault. How is this different from a subject naturalistic account—an expressivist account, let us say for concreteness, albeit in the 'globalist' sense—of ethical talk? This may, I take, to a certain extent, give an answer to why we go in for talking ethically, in terms of what adaptive (biological or cultural) function it serves. However, given that we do so talk and think, it does not, and is not intended to explain our ethical *existence* or *being*, so to speak: it does not explain the world of moral value that we encounter in virtue of our being a certain kind of creature in a certain kind of natural environment. Price here talks of different discourses bringing with them different 'i-worlds' ('i' for internal) (Price, 2013, 56). Like the projections of a holographic data projector, these are not to be thought of as projected onto a preexisting natural 'screen', but spring into being in thin air, as it were, along with our talking the relevant talk (Price, 2011, 29). Even the world of science—what Price calls the 'e-world'—is at root just the i-world of science, not the metaphysical basis for everything else (Price, 2013, 55). By contrast, in relation to the third norm it seems a functionalist account of this—the account of why we behave in accord with it—will be, at least potentially, explanatorily exhaustive of what there is to say about the relevant phenomenon here. To think and make claims and argue is not something that characterises any particular world or way of 'being in the world' but is just a functional feature of all creatures capable of rational activity. As I argued above, on Price's behalf, an expressivistic account of ethics does not threaten (say) ethical commitment and assertion, because it does not engage with the *world* of ethics, given global expressivism. By

contrast, it is very unclear how the naturalistic account of the third norm could do anything other than engage with our discursive practices *understood just as such*, for these do not bring any *particular* i-world with them.[4] And so the question plausibly can arise here, as it cannot in relation to particular domains of discourse, as to whether knowledge of the functional explanation that Price envisages of this norm could undermine our faith that seeking the truth is *quite generally* an important thing to do.

Now Price might still protest here that even if that faith were undermined on gaining this knowledge, it would and could not dislodge the disposition itself: we would still continue to debate with those we disagree with (as we noted above). However, as Showler retorts (op. cit., 4323), it is not clear that this is in fact correct. It seems, by contrast, quite conceivable that a person might begin to doubt that there is, say, any ethical or political truth—perhaps because there seem to be so many different and irresolvable disagreements about these things. Couldn't then their knowledge that we are spurred to engage with people who disagree with us only because of some natural tendency to do so potentially lead this person to give up on such debate, and the idea that there is any truth to be discovered here, entirely? Indeed, as we have seen through the phenomena of no-fault disagreement, Price himself allows that there are areas where we do not engage in debate even though we do hold contrary opinions. If this accepted, is it not at least highly conceivable that losing faith in the normativity we pretheoretically take to motivate the resolution of disagreements would impact on our tendency to engage in such resolution in quite different kinds of cases? We should also bear in mind Rorty's point here that when cooperative action depends on it, we will any case need to coordinate 'the noises' we make to one another. So even if our knowledge of the basis of the truth norm were to lead us to doubt its applicability in many areas, this would thus not lead to complete dialogical nihilism. (This of course in turn suggests that the light between Price and Rorty on these matters may not after all be very great, as Bacon and Macarthur also argue, though understood now as applying to the pre-Ramberg Rorty.)

Now as we saw above, Price also thinks that, even though dialogical nihilism is not a practical threat, even if it were, this would not undermine his theory about the origin of the third norm, but only give us a

[4] Price also talks of the 'i-world' in the Wittgensteinean sense as 'everything that is the case', but this is not some kind of real totality for him insofar as he rejects metaphysical realism.

reason for keeping it secret. However, without further ado it is difficult to assess the import of this remark. Price implies that abiding by the norm is good for us in conducing us to debate and argument, but he never in fact makes it totally clear why this is a good thing or indeed can be on his view. An obvious thought for many, I take it, when they first encounter Price's line, is that the third norm has some kind of biological or perhaps culturally adaptive function: we disagree with those with contrary opinions because doing so in the past has had some kind of favourable upshot and thus been selected for. Price tells us little about what this 'upshot' might be other than helping himself to the pre-theoretical idea of 'cognitive progress'. However, I think an anti-representationalist—one who does not see cognitive practices as converging on the nature of a single 'reality'—needs to say at least a little more by way of what they understand by this notion.

A more concrete way of thinking about the function in question that evolutionary psychologists have discussed recently is in terms of its social utility. Thus according to Dan Sperber and Hugo Mercier, the primary function of argument and debate is not to get at the truth or make better decisions but to persuade our conspecifics of the correctness of our own views (Sperber and Mercier, 2018). Now if that were correct, then perhaps the kind of reflective knowledge of the origins of the truth norm that Showler thinks would undermine our practices could rather uphold our tendency to try to convince others who disagree with us, for we would understand that we ourselves had something to benefit from it, say, in terms of social prestige. However, I think this is in fact rather doubtful. As Cesare Cozzo (2011) has argued in another critique of Price, our pretheoretical understanding of argument acknowledges a clear distinction between persuasion and rational conviction—between what Cozzo calls epistemicially virtuous and non-virtuous modes of argument (such as coercing or even threatening people into agreement with you). If Price's norm has its evolutionary ground most fundamentally in the latter kind of activity, it is not all clear that faith in our epistemic practices as we pretheoretically think of them could survive our getting to know this.

Here we are of course entering complex territory, both conceptual and empirical. Some might argue that the very distinction between virtuous and non-virtuous argumentation needs to be rethought from a perspective that looks at our social activities from an evolutionary perspective. It seems at least clear from what we are beginning to understand about this perspective that what we might think of as our 'epistemic responsiveness

to our environment' will be mediated by complex, interacting systems of norms in the highly social kind of organism we humans are. However, we do not need to go into further details here, for I think we in any case have enough to see the contours of dilemma for Price.

His characterisation of the third norm can either prescind from any account of how it puts us in epistemic touch with our environment (possibly characterising the function in non-epistemic terms), or not so prescind. On the one hand, taking the former case, we must face, I maintain—and as Showler argues—the problem of understanding how knowledge of the origin of such a norm could avoid having undermining effects on our truth-seeking practices, as we pretheoretically understand these (cf. Cozzo's point). On the other hand, taking the latter case, to the extent the characterisation of the third norm goes into how it puts us epistemically in touch with our environments, though it may then become reflectively stable, it becomes difficult, or at best unclear, to see how this can be made compatible with anti-representationalism. For in this case it will be hard to see how the ultimate aim of belief formation—as steered by the third norm, made reflectively stable through our knowledge of the function of this—could avoid being answerability to precisely *those* truths: *truths about our natural environments*. And if that is the case then it seems we will backsliding into precisely a kind of bifurcation between different kinds of truth, or at least different kinds of belief: those that represent how things are and those that though perhaps purporting to do this in fact do not. And saying this is surely to opt out of anti-representationalism and global expressivism.

One might perhaps object here that it was never part of Price's view that all the truth-evaluable or truth-apt assertions we make are 'answerable' to anything other than themselves, as it were, at least insofar as they are sincere and have some kind of rationale from the perspective of the person making them. This is precisely what assertions in no-fault disagreements show, one might say. So if the same thing ends up having to be said about assertions about non-naturlistic domains like value, beauty, modalilty and so on, then that too doesn't indicate any divergence from anti-representationalism—for their *semantics* can still be essentially the same as that of claims about the natural world (i.e. a deflationary one).

I am not quite sure how to answer this but I am quite sure that it is desperate. I have been concerned in this paper, to an extent at least, to do some justice to the phenomenon of no-fault disagreements. However, though I am inclined to think many of our disagreements are ones where

we do not impute fault, I am not so sure that I have any clear way of understanding why this so that is not either classically expressivist (i.e. *emotivist* or similar)—or else Rortian, that is, framed in terms of them not mattering to cooperative action. Appealing just to their failure to generate disagreement, as Price does, seems too flimsy a basis for putting theoretical weight on them. What does seem clear, given Showler is right anyway, is that discovering our discussions about the putative truth of various propositions is driven by something other than a tendency to find out how these would answer to what they are about would surely undermine our faith that we are really involved in epistemic practices in relation to them; and also, that if we discovered it was driven by a tendency to find out about only certain kinds of truth, then we would reasonably conclude that these are what epistemic activity should really be concerned with.

Perhaps this is not *strictu dictu* in tension with anti-representationalism. But it does look like a view on which a much stronger kind of naturalism than that which Price wants to acknowledge would be vindicated: a kind of object naturalism similar to Quine's, on which talk of anything that is non-physical or non-extensional is at best a kind of 'second grade system' (Quine, 1969, 24). This kind of view is indeed compatible with anti-representationalism (Quine was himself a deflationist; see Knowles, 2017 for more general discussion of the logical compatibility of object naturalism and anti-representationalism). But much of the point of global expressivism I take it lies in its capacity to make this kind of physicalist view seem unmotivated (Knowles, 2023, ch. 2.2). If it instead ends up endorsing a view like Quine's, that would seem like a serious drawback.

In sum, then, I think Showler's objection sticks: Price fails to justify the idea that the third, truth norm could survive reflectively incorporation into our practices—at least, he fails as long as he wants to uphold his anti-representationalism and/or global expressivism. His view either seems to collapse into that of Rorty's first response to him, on which disagreements where fault is attributed are those where collaborative action is at stake, or else must leave behind much of what motivates the wider project of global expressivism (if not anti-representationalism itself).

Conclusion

One important aim of this paper has been to revisit the Price-Rorty debate about truth and offer what I think is some necessary clarification of the di-

alectical situation between them in light of recent commentary on Rorty's view (including his own). In the course of this, and especially through the arguments of section 2, I hope to have shown that anti-representationalist pragmatists face a stark choice between a more and less committedly naturalist form of their view. As noted in the Introduction, this is between a fairly hard-nosed naturalism that is perhaps however only dubiously coherent, and a more liberal naturalism that whilst able to accommodate more straightforwardly the ideas of truth as a norm and assertion is less faithful to a thoroughgoingly naturalistic picture. Price's proposal involving a subject naturalistic explanation of a third, truth norm, while promising a *media res* that combines the best of both, seems not to be available without relapsing into representationalism or at least departing from much of what makes global expressivism attractive.

Other contemporary pragmatists are alive to these sorts of issues. Thus Joshua Gert has recently argued, *contra* most famously Brandom, that a more austere form of pragmatism that eschews primitive normative notions as part of its theoretical tool-kit is not only viable but, from the perspective of (neo-)pragmatism itself a preferable version of the programme (Gert, 2024). He takes himself here to be defending Price's view which also involves, as we have seen, a kind of scientific naturalism albeit of a non-metaphysical variety. On the other side of the divide, we find, in addition to Brandom, thinkers like Lionel Shapiro (see e.g. Shapiro, 2022) as well as David Macarthur (2014), who have both argued that Price's global expressivism should or indeed must embrace a form of liberal naturalism. I do not have much more to offer by way of direct contribution to the debate here, but in light of what I have argued in this paper it is important, I believe, to appreciate that exactly *Price's* way of understanding how our cognitive practices are meant to be fully explicable from a thoroughgoingly naturalistic point of view is not an attractive one for the neo-pragmatist. Whether this also spells the death knell for other ways one might do this, such as that developed by Gert, remains an open question. It also remains an open question whether the project of global expressivism itself presupposes something like the idea of a distinctive truth norm for our discourses—however exactly we explain the existence and status of this—or whether the project can also be given sense to within Rorty's more austerely Jamesian way of understanding truth, assertion and epistemic norms. But these must be questions for subsequent work.[5]

[5] I would like to thank Josh Gert, Henrik Rydenfelt, Brendan Hogan, William Bondi Knowles and Yvonne Huetter-Almerigi for response to and feedback on this paper.

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Reclaiming Pluralism from the Truth Pluralist

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This paper argues against alethic pluralism about truth: it argues against the idea that there are different concepts of truth for different kinds of beliefs and argues for a unified pragmatist account of truth. This unified account of truth captures a sensible pluralism about the kinds of beliefs that are truth-apt and suggests that we try to wrest the label *pluralism* from the alethic truth pluralist. The roots of this unified account of truth are pragmatist: they are traceable to the work of C. S. Peirce and F. P. Ramsey.

Introduction

Bjørn Ramberg has been concerned with truth and pragmatism for most of his career. He once earned a rare and major concession from Richard Rorty:

> [i]t was a mistake on my part to go from criticism of attempts to define truth as accurate representation of the intrinsic nature of reality to a denial that true statements get things right, [and granting Davidson's point that] most of our beliefs about anything [...] must be true of that thing—[we] must get that thing right. Rorty (2000, 374; cf. Ramberg, 2000)

One has beliefs about many things—for instance, I believe there is a desk in front of me here and now; that all humans are mortal; that consuming arsenic will make you ill; and that women ought to be able to choose to abort an early and unwanted pregnancy. What it is to get those things (singular empirical things; unrestricted general facts; causes; oughts) right looks different in each case. It has seemed to some that we need distinct concepts of truth to deal with these various kinds of things. In this paper, I will argue that we need only one concept of truth: the pragmatist concept.

Bjørn and I have been talking about truth since the late 1980s, when we were both young faculty members at Queen's University in Kingston, Canada. It was lovely to find another pragmatist in my first job, even if we did not agree on precisely what kind of pragmatism was best. I offer this paper as a continuation of our conversation.

Three Ways of Being a Pluralist about Truth

There are (at least) three ways contemporary philosophers think about truth's being plural. The first is to adopt a bare deflationism, on which a plurality of sentences (any well-formed sentence) can be slotted into the truth schema: *'p' is true iff p*.[1] The second is alethic pluralism, which asserts that there are different kinds of truths, which get right different kinds of properties. Cory Pederson and Crispin Wright adopt this second kind of pluralism:

> what property makes propositions true may vary across domains, or from subject matter to subject matter. Corresponding with reality might be the alethically potent property—the property that can make propositions true—when it comes to discourse about ordinary, concrete objects. On the other hand, cohering with the axioms of Peano arithmetic and being endorsed most widely might be the relevant properties for discourse about respectively arithmetic and the goodness of consumer goods. Pederson and Wright, 2013, 2

This kind of alethic pluralist thinks that in science, truth is correspondence, in logic or mathematics it is coherence with axioms, and in ethics

[1] See Misak (2015) for the argument that it does not do justice to the functions of our concept of truth.

and comedy it is superassertibility (the belief is justified by our own standards and its justification would survive any scrutiny of its descent and any additions and improvements to the information).[2] There are different concepts of truth, each holding for a different domain of discourse: "truth may consist in different things in different [...] areas: in the instantiation of one concept in one area, and in that of a different concept in another" (Wright, 1999, 228).

The third route, which I shall propose, is to offer a substantial, pragmatist conception of truth on which there are many different kinds of candidates for truth. There is just one answer to the question *What is meant by the truth?*, while there is a range of different ways of assessing what is true or methods for inquiring into what is true in particular discourses. This is a unified conception of truth that nonetheless captures the insight of pluralism about truth, the insight that different kinds of true belief are true for different kinds of reasons.

In calling the pragmatist account of truth a kind of pluralism, I am pulling against the framing of the debate as one which asks

> whether truth is one or many [...] is there only one property in virtue of which propositions can be true, or are there several? The truth monist holds the former view, while the truth pluralist adheres to the latter Pederson and Wright ,2013, 2

I want to reclaim the label pluralism and have it apply to a theory of truth that says there is one property of truth, in virtue of which many kinds of propositions can be true. Some might argue that what I offer is not truth pluralism proper. They might argue that only alethic pluralism is genuine pluralism about truth. But this would be a kind of linguistic imperialism or an assertion of a trademark on the term 'pluralism'. The kind of position I put forward in this paper is best characterized as a kind of pluralism, for it shows us how we can aim at truth in a plurality of contexts.

Indeed, my kind of pragmatist should not need to wrestle the term 'pluralism' from the truth pluralist since I argue that the truth pluralist is wrong about truth, wrong about its very nature. They have mistakenly seen truth as plural, when they should have recognized that it is our practices of securing truth that are many. I show this by locating the centrality of the concept of truth within the interconnected nexus of belief and

[2] See Wright (1992) for the superassertibility argument.

action. There is one concept of (objective) truth and it is worked out in various ways across practices and subject-matters.[3]

The Problems with Alethic Pluralism

There are three significant problems with alethic pluralism, which make it untenable. The first, which I shall set out bluntly, is that it is methodologically cumbersome at best, spurious at worst, to multiply kinds of concepts (kinds of concepts of truth) to deal with problems on the ground (problems about how we aim at truth in various domains of inquiry).

The second is that the alethic pluralist has to give an account of the properties in virtue of which propositions can be true. An elaborate metaphysics is required—a world consisting of concrete, abstract, general, causal, mathematical, ethical, and conditional properties.[4] One challenge here is that some of these properties, such as the ethical, causal, and mathematical, are odd or 'queer' to use John Mackie's word.[5] Another is that, again, the pluralist is multiplying properties (not concepts this time), when, as I shall argue below, there is no need to do that.

The third problem with alethic pluralism is that it is open to the challenge that only one kind of truth is real truth and the other supposed kinds of truth are something else. Lynch (2013), for instance (along with Wright), takes truth to be, in one domain, correspondence, in another superwarrantability, and in another coherence. Correspondence to objects is truth only in discourse about concrete objects and parts of science, whereas a different kind of truth is required for mathematics, ethics, and so on. This position will always be open to the challenge that correspondence truth is real truth and some other predicate (warrant, acceptability, rationality, superwarrantability) is not truth and this lesser thing is what is appropriate for other domains. That is, once we drop the conception of truth *per se* in favour of truth in this or that domain of discourse, the challenge is that so-called truth in some discourses looks less robust than truth in other discourses. Once we have correspondence in the mix, superwarrantability and coherence simply look like the best we can do (short of truth). While Wright and Lynch's idea is that there is more than one way for a proposition to be true, their challenger will say that there is more

[3] I thank Rob Sinclair for this way of framing my position.

[4] See Edwards (2018) for a pluralist account of truth with this kind of complex metaphysics.

[5] See Mackie (1977).

than one way for a proposition to be *warranted*, and only one way for a proposition to be *true*.

If we adopt pragmatism about truth, we can get what the alethic pluralist wants (beliefs about mathematics, ethics, and so on can be true), without the baggage of alethic pluralism.

Unified Pluralism vs. Monism: The Case of Wittgenstein and Ramsey

My approach will be to examine the reasoning, pro and con, of one instance of the debate in the history of analytic philosophy—that between Wittgenstein and Ramsey in the 1920s—and to argue that Ramsey's unified pragmatist pluralist conception of truth is much better than Wittgenstein's monist theory. Not only will this give us an understanding of part of the history of the quest for pluralism about truth (always a good thing for the philosopher to have), but it will deliver a unified conception of truth which is expansive enough so as to not to preclude, from the outset at least, beliefs about ethics, causes, numbers, and so on. The most promising unified approach, I suggest, is that taken by a certain kind of pragmatist, a lineage I identify as arising from C.S. Peirce, continuing with Frank Ramsey, and manifested today in my own work and that of David Wiggins. On this approach, we do not say there are different concepts of truth (and try, impossibly, to work out a metaphysics for them). Rather, we focus on what it is for a belief to be as good as it could be.

In the 1922 *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein set out a metaphysics on which truth is that which corresponds to the facts. Language, like a picture, represents that objects are a certain way. All meaningful propositions can be reduced to elementary propositions which assert the existence of particular states of affairs, and these propositions are true if the world is as they say it is. If a proposition is to assert a fact, there must be something identical or shared in the picture and the depicted, and what is shared is a logical form. A picture is "an image of reality" or "a model of reality"; it agrees with reality or not. (Wittgenstein, 1922, 4.01, 2.12). And that reality is constituted by mind-independent objects and relations between them.

Not much is meaningful, or a candidate for truth, on this picture. What can be expressed in the primary language are the natural sciences. General statements, such as scientific and causal hypotheses (*All humans are mortal*; *Arsenic is poisonous*) talk about all instances past, present, and

future. They go beyond actual objects in the world, and so cannot be expressed in the elementary or primary language. Wittgenstein tried to treat the general quantifier as depending "*palpably* on that of the elementary propositions", so that a generalization is an infinite conjunction of its instances.[6] To say that All humans are mortal is to say that Bertrand Russell is mortal, and G. E. Moore is mortal, and on and on. To take causes to be anything more would be "superstition" (Wittgenstein, 1922, 5.1361). Ethics and aesthetics most certainly are not expressible in the primary language. Wittgenstein treated them in a special way, asserting that they were somehow higher than what could be said in the primary language. He saw that his own sentences in the *Tractatus* were philosophical—another kind of sentence which cannot mirror the world of objects—and he advised the reader to think of his philosophical sentences as a ladder, to be kicked out from under the readers' feet once they had climbed up it to see that philosophy was meaningless.

Wittgenstein eventually gave up on the metaphysical project of the *Tractatus*, having been battered by the objections of his young translator, Frank Ramsey. One of Ramsey's objections, in quip form, was "What we can't say, we can't say, and we can't whistle it either" (Ramsey, 1929a [1991], 146). He put the point more carefully as well. He argued that the fact that unrestricted or open generalizations such as *All humans are mortal* and *Arsenic is poisonous* cannot be captured in Wittgenstein's elementary language is a fatal flaw, as we cannot do without generalizations in science or in the rest of life.

Ramsey also argued that Wittgenstein's moves about ethics, aesthetics, and philosophical propositions were illicit. We cannot say that ethical and aesthetic statements are nonsense, but that they are somehow a higher kind of belief than those of the elementary sort. Wittgenstein cannot treat philosophical statements as nonsense yet employ his own philosophical statements in order to reach that conclusion. Ramsey said, again putting a good argument in a quip: "What we can't do, we can't do, and it's no good trying" (Galavotti, 1991, 51). We must avoid the "absurd position" of the child in the following dialogue:

[6] Wittgenstein (1922, 4.411). He said some other things as well—that scientific laws are like meshes applied to a surface, giving them form and that signs are rule-governed projections of possible situations (Wittgenstein, 1922, 6.341; 6.35 3.5). But it is unclear how a mesh or rule can be expressed in the primary language of the *Tractatus*—how they might be broken down so as to hook up to simple objects in the world.

—"Say breakfast."

—"Can't."

—"What can't you say?"

—"Can't say breakfast." Ramsey, 1919b [1991], 6

Again, he put his point more carefully: if "the chief proposition of philosophy is that philosophy is nonsense", then "we must then take seriously that it is nonsense, and not pretend, as Wittgenstein does, that it is important nonsense!" (ASP/FPR.1983.01: 006-02-03). His conclusion was that "we cannot be satisfied with a theory that deals only with elementary propositions" (Ramsey, 1923, 469). Ramsey thought that the logical positivism of Schlick and Carnap suffered from the same flaws. In Gilbert Ryle's snappy phrase, the logical positivists' mantra of "either science or nonsense" "had too few 'ors' in it" (Ryle, 1970, 10). We need a conception of meaning and truth that is more pluralist, so that captures, in one way or another, science with its generalizations and causes, philosophy, ethics, and anything else that seems to aspire to truth, and distinguishes them in a principled way from genuine nonsense.

Wittgenstein eventually felt the force of Ramsey's arguments. He admitted that his greatest mistake in the *Tractatus* was to treat open generalizations as infinite conjunctions. He became what we call the later Wittgenstein, capitulating to Ramsey's insistence that philosophy should be focused on meaning as use and the primacy of practice.[7]

Ramsey didn't simply explode Wittgenstein's metaphysics. He offered an account of belief and truth that could take seriously the plurality of kinds of belief. He had noted, straight after reading the manuscript that would become the *Tractatus*, that if we adopt Wittgenstein's picture theory, we "incidentally" solve the problem of truth: "if a thought or proposition token 'p' says p, then it is called true if p, and false if $\neg p$" (Ramsey, 1923, 469). Ramsey is thus often taken to be the founder of the disquotationalist or redundancy theory of truth, on which to assert that '"p" is true' is simply to assert p itself: "'It is true that Caesar was murdered' means no more than that Caesar was murdered" (Ramsey, 1927 [1991], 38).

But this was never Ramsey's resting point. One of his signature moves was to set out the deflationary definition of truth so he could go on and make a more important pragmatist point about truth. Every time he set

[7] See Misak (2016; 2020) for a full accounting of how Ramsey is a pragmatist and how he influenced Wittgenstein.

out the deflationary definition, Ramsey immediately followed it by saying that once we have laid out the matter in this way, the problem of truth doesn't disappear. In fact, we are just getting started. Ramsey prefaced his deflationary remarks by saying that he should briefly discuss truth "before we proceed further with the analysis of judgment", and he finished his discussions by concluding that "if we have analysed judgment we have solved the problem of truth" (Ramsey, 1927 [1991], 39). That is, the deflationary move must be followed by an examination of belief, judgement, and assertion, which will provide us with a complete theory of truth. Simon Blackburn puts my reading of Ramsey nicely: Ramsey's "famous dismissal of the idea that there is a separate problem of truth is but a prelude to his hurling himself at problems of meaning and assertion".[8] In doing that more difficult work—in analysing the relationship between truth, belief, and action—Ramsey delivered a unified but pluralist account of belief and truth.

He argued that we should do philosophy in a "realistic" way, keeping it connected with our practices and with what is important to us as human beings (Ramsey, 1929a [1991], 160). Being realistic is being pragmatist, the "essence" of which is that "the meaning of a sentence is to be defined by reference to the actions to which asserting it would lead, or, more vaguely still, by its possible causes and effects" (1927 [1991], 51). With respect to the meaning of belief and truth, Ramsey thought that it is not possible to understand the "truth or falsity of thoughts without considering the effects they have on our acting either directly or indirectly through dispositional beliefs" (1929c [1991], 101). A belief is a habit of action and we can assess such habits by whether or not they lead to successful action. For instance, what it is to believe that all humans are mortal is: "Partly to say so, partly to believe in regard to any x that turns up that if he is a man he is mortal" (1929a: [1991], 148). The belief—the open generalization—"consists" in being disposed to enunciate *All men are mortal* and being disposed or to treat every human you meet as mortal. The belief "expresses an inference we are at any time prepared to make" (1929a [1991], 146). Generalizations, causal hypotheses and inductive conclusions are "rules for judging" or rules with which we meet the future or rules we "trust" (1929a [1991], 151).[9]

[8] `https://316am.site123.me/articles/strawson-evans-the-usefulness-of-slipping-to-the-propositional?c=flickering-shadows-truth-in-16mm-edited-by-huw-price`

[9] The question of whether Ramsey took beliefs to be truth-bearers is thorny. I read him as a global pragmatist who says that a belief-habit is a "cognitive attitude" that differs from the cognitive attitude of believing *that p* is true (Ramsey, 1929a [1991], 146). It is the cognitive

One of Ramsey's most fruitful points is that there are many different kinds of action: that found in scientific contexts, ethical contexts, and much more. Once we see that, we can see how a diversity of beliefs can aim at truth. He considered another tricky kind of belief which we think we can evaluate but which doesn't sit well within any kind of representationalist metaphysical picture—conditionals, including counterfactual conditionals. How do we fit 'if p had happened, q would have happened' into such a metaphysics? On Ramsey's view, even a counterfactual conditional can be a cognitive, evaluable, attitude. He considered a man who doesn't eat a certain cake, because he thinks that were he to eat it, he would be made ill. He argued that we have different "degrees of expectation" as to the outcome, and in disputing about the proper degree of expectation we can "introduce any fact we know, whether he did or could know it". If the man knew that I carefully baked the cake with the finest ingredients, that I'm an excellent baker, that I know he has no food allergies or aversions, and that I bear no ill will toward him, we might judge that he is irrational in maintaining his worry about the cake. If all these things hold, but he doesn't know them, then we might merely judge him mistaken. The fact that we can "dispute with him or condemn him" requires explanation, which is unavailable to those who think of conditionals in terms of strict logic, as opposed to human logic (1929a [1991], 154–55). In a now-famous footnote, Ramsey suggested that when someone evaluates a conditional 'if p, then q' they are hypothetically adding the antecedent p to their stock of knowledge and then seeing if q would also be in their stock of knowledge. Robert Stalnaker (1968) proposed a theory of truth conditions for counterfactuals on the basis of that footnote. What is now known as the Ramsey Test for Conditionals is a method for determining whether we should believe a conditional. We add p, hypothetically, to our given body of belief. If the acceptance of p leads to a contradiction within that body of belief, we make adjustments, as minor as possible, within the existing body of belief in order to restore consistency. Then we ask whether q is acceptable in the revised body of belief. This is another payoff for Ramsey's theory of belief and truth in terms of habits of action: we have a way of understanding how conditionals and counterfactual conditionals might be true or false.

Ramsey was explicit about his theory being pragmatist. It was built on the work of the founder of pragmatism, C. S. Peirce, who argued that a true belief is a habit of action that would be "indefeasible"—no matter

attitude of accepting a rule with which to meet the future—a kind of knowing how. See Misak (2025) and Holton and Price (2003) for a competing expressivist reading.

how much further we were to investigate and debate, it would not be overturned by recalcitrant experience and argument (Peirce, 5.569).We aim at beliefs that would be unshakable or would be forever stable—we aim at getting the best beliefs we can.

One important feature of Peirce's version of pragmatism is that propositional attitudes aimed at truth must be answerable to something—to experience or to the facts as they present themselves to us. Peirce set himself against James who tended to say that truth is what works or satisfies one here and how. Peirce's thought that "if Truth consists in satisfaction, it cannot be any actual satisfaction, but must be the satisfaction which would ultimately be found if the inquiry were pushed to its ultimate and indefeasible issue" (Peirce, 6. 485). If you discover that a belief "is determined by any circumstance extraneous to the facts", you "will from that moment not merely admit in words that that belief is doubtful, but will experience a real doubt of it, so that it ceases to be a belief" (Peirce W 3, 253; 1877). One of "the essentials of belief, without which it would not *be* belief" is that if "the facts remain lamentable" or speak against your belief, it is thrown into doubt. Of course, not everyone keeps their beliefs responsive to facts, and even those who try don't always succeed. Moreover, we may be wrong about what is in fact successful, indeed, confused about it, since assessing successful action is difficult and complex. The point is that, if we are to see our beliefs as aiming at truth, we commit ourselves to keeping our beliefs responsive to the way things are, to consistency with our other confirmed beliefs, etc.[10]

Ramsey followed Peirce on this point as well. In the book he was writing when he died, he argued as follows. The pragmatist account of belief holds that "To say a man believes in hell means, according to the pragmatists that he avoids doing those things which would result in his being thrown into hell". That is the pragmatist account of belief content that Ramsey accepts. He goes on: "Such conduct will be useful to the man if it really saves him from hell, but if there is no such place it will be a mere waste of opportunities for enjoyment" (Ramsey, 1929c [1991], 91). The belief in hell had better attend to the object of the belief—whether there is really is a hell—otherwise it will not turn out to be successful.

[10] Peirce was holist who argued that even mathematics is connected to experience in the requisite way. We expect certain things to be the case if mathematical beliefs are true or false. Not only might we have practical bridge-building kinds of expectations with respect to applied mathematics, but also hypotheses in pure mathematics have consequences. They have consequences in diagrammatic contexts. When we manipulate diagrams, we can find ourselves surprised.

Ramsey noted that, while he hadn't used the word 'correspondence', those so inclined will latch onto his requirement that "A belief is true if and only if there is a way it says things are and they are thus" and mistake his view for a correspondence theory. (Ramsey, 1929c [1991], 19). But "this talk of correspondence, though legitimate and convenient for some purposes, gives [...] not an analysis of truth but a cumbrous periphrasis, which it is misleading to take for an analysis" (Ramsey, 1929c [1991], 19). If we are to have a complete analysis of truth, we need to ask what is it for a belief to be a belief *that p.* "Only when we know the structure of belief can we say what type of correspondence it is that unites true belief and facts". Once we've set out the deflationary "truism", we must look for a complete account of "the kind of merit in a belief to which we refer in calling it true" (Ramsey, 1929c [1991], 19). This won't be an analysis of truth in the Wittgensteinian or Russellian sense, where we break the concept down to its logical constituents. It will be a pragmatist analysis, where we draw out all the aspects of the truth predicate, all the kinds of merit in belief that can make a belief true.

Ramsey's book (eventually published in the form of three incomplete drafts with the title *On Truth*) was also going to consider whether statements of ethics and aesthetics are beliefs that can be evaluated as true or false. That is, Ramsey's account of truth, which had already taken in general propositions and counterfactuals, was going to extend to ethics and aesthetics. Ramsey saw that beliefs about values might well be oriented towards, or assessible in terms of, the way things are.[11] He left it open in the book manuscript whether ethical beliefs have a determinate enough kind of merit so that we can judge them as true or not. That seems right. Only those under the grip of an absolutist ethics, such as a religious dogma or effective altruism, think that it's obvious that all or most ethical judgements admit of truth.

Notice that there is no need, on Ramsey's account, to try to give an impossible metaphysics which strains to account for judgments such as the causal, general, philosophical, or ethical. That was Wittgenstein's problem and it is a problem for today's alethic pluralist. Ramsey avoided it by saying that, sure, a true belief corresponds to the facts, but we cannot

[11] Ramsey engaged in considerable ethical deliberation—about equality of income, intergenerational justice, and socialist politics. (See Misak, 2020). Bringing ethics under the scope of truth makes Ramsey closer to Peirce's immediate successor in American pragmatism, C.I. Lewis. For while I have argued (Misak, 2000) that Peirce's account of truth provides the resources for thinking of ethical judgments as aiming at truth, although he himself did not think that his account of truth was suited for practical ethical problems

specify that any further than to say that correspondence is the type—"or types, since [it] may be different with different forms of belief"—of relation between thinking that such-and-such is the case and such-and-such's actually being the case (Ramsey, 1929c [1991], 11) This is the pragmatist advantage. Peirce and Ramsey can gesture at the way things are without delivering a metaphysics of how things are in this or that domain. What they offer is a set of ways of assessing beliefs and if they are assessible, they are truth apt. The line the pragmatist attempts to walk is a fine one. But staying on it is the difference between an undifferentiated account of truth that allows us to think of truth as applying to a wide range of beliefs and resorting, as the alethic pluralist does, to an differentiated concept of truth. I think the former is worth pursuing.

Ramsey could have confined the word *truth* to the strict domain of the *Tractatus* and called reliable beliefs in the secondary domain correct, or right, or assertible. But he didn't do that. He used the word *truth* to mark the aim of all propositions, and argued that each science must answer for its own "domain" the question "what is true?" Notice that he said *what is true* rather than *what is truth*. There is one concept of truth and each kind of inquiry must sort out what counts as true in that domain. He thought that "the whole purpose of argument is to arrive at truth" (1929c [1991], 84). What it is to aim at truth in various domains will differ, but truth is indefeasible belief or habits that would always serve us well.

New Pluralist Pragmatism

David Wiggins and I have each been putting forward pragmatist conceptions of truth which allow for ethical judgments to be true. Our views are rooted in Peirce and more recently, mine in Ramsey, further modernized by being set against current trends towards disquotationalism. Let me make the argument in Wiggins's terms, as it appears in papers such as "Truth, and Truth as Predicated of Moral Judgments," "Reflections on Inquiry and Truth Arising from Peirce's Method for the Fixation of Belief," and the revised "Marks of Truth: An Indefinibilist cum Normative View".[12] Wiggins argues that the idea of bare disquotation is not the key to anything. Like all pragmatists, he thinks that a theory of truth must show how and why assertions aim at truth. If we are to understand the concept of truth, we should place truth in its conceptual neighbourhood and

[12] For my own contributions, in addition to the current offering, see, for instance, Misak (1991, 2015, and 2016)

seek to establish within that neighbourhood something like the Fregean "marks" of the concept: if all *F*s are *G*s, then *G* is a mark of *F*. Wiggins offers the following as the marks of truth:

1) Truth is a primary dimension of assessment for beliefs;

2) If *p* is true, then it will, under favourable circumstances, command convergence, the best explanation of which will turn upon the actual truth of *p*;

3) In order to interpret *x* as the belief it is, there must be something distinct from *x*, namely how thing have to be for *x* to succeed in its aim to be correct;

4) Every true belief is true in virtue of something;

5) the conjunction of any true beliefs is true

Wiggins (1987 [1991], 152).[13]

Wiggins gets marks 2 and 3 from Peirce. Propositional attitudes aimed at truth (as opposed to mental states such as wishful thinking and idle supposition) see themselves "on pain of extinction" as not extraneous to the facts or as "answerable to something" (Wiggins, 1987 [1991], 344). The kind of convergence that is a mark of truth is not "a mere intersubjectivity or chorus of agreement [...] If the convergence in the belief that item *t* is *F* is to be relevant to truth [...] then what put that belief there and holds it there has to be nothing more and nothing less than the fact that the item *t* really *is F*" (Wiggins, 1987 [1991], 150–51). What is the best explanation of my belief that SARS-CoV-2 was rare in Lethbridge Alberta on July 10, 2020 and what is the best explanation of the convergence of my belief with that of others? If the best explanation of why I arrived at my belief is that SARS-CoV-2 was indeed rare at that time and place, then the belief is oriented towards truth. If not—if I arrived at it only because I wanted to travel there to see my parents—then it was something like wishful thinking.

The first thing to notice about this approach is that it does not try to define truth in terms of a single property being necessary and sufficient for explaining why all true propositions are true, whatever they happen

[13] While Mark 4 might seem to be a return to truth-makers, Wiggins, like Peirce and Ramsey mean something weaker than the claim that every truth is made true by a distinct fact. Every truth is true in virtue of the way things are and there can be a way things are with respect to what is right or wrong, causal or a mere association, and so on.

to be about. Hence it is on the surface not open to what Lynch calls the "scope problem"—the inability to go beyond the scope of the paradigm examples for which the concept of truth is suited (Lynch, 2004). This was part of Ramsey's objection to Wittgenstein—the picture theory of the *Tractatus* made truth terribly limited in scope. On a pragmatist account such as mine, Ramsey's, Peirce's, and Wiggins', where we are not seeking an analytic definition of truth, but the various marks of truth, it turns out that truth's scope is extended. In setting out the characteristics of true judgments, we happen not to close off questions about what kinds of judgments might admit of truth and falsity. We don't adopt a heavy-handed metaphysics that says that truth is that which corresponds to the facts, and facts are constituted by mind-independent objects and relations between them. That approach expels from the outset, as we have seen, ethical, general, and other kinds of judgments from the orbit of truth. As Wittgenstein (and the Vienna Circle) eventually saw, this approach rules out, or at least requires an explanation as to why they aren't ruled out, a host of seemingly important discourses—those about causal and lawlike hypotheses, open generalisations, counterfactual conditionals, as well as philosophy itself.

The second thing to notice about this kind of pragmatist theory of truth is that it does not say that truth is a different thing in different cases—one thing for chemistry, another for ethics, another for philosophy. Truth is marked out by a set of characteristics and satisfying that set of characteristics, in the way that is appropriate to the kind of belief, is what it is for any kind of belief to be true. The pragmatist account of truth is unified, not scattered. We can say something general about truth, while retaining the ability to say particular things about different sorts of belief.

The third advantage of the unified pragmatist account of truth is that it explains our feeling that many statements in some domains of inquiry are *not* truth-apt. In ethics, for instance, there is much indeterminacy. Some ethical quandaries might be unresolvable. But others might admit of truth or falsity. If I have $ 1 000 to give to charity, it may be that there is no truth of the matter whether I should support Oxfam, the local foodbank, or Doctors Without Borders. Effective altruists would disagree here, for their extreme brand of utilitarianism gives a strict account of truth and evidence for ethics, such that we must maximize utility and give to the likes of the mosquito net charities, which will save the most lives. The pragmatist, with the more expansive notion of truth as that which will best meet the future, can bring into the picture one's own characteristics

and aims, for it is Cheryl Misak who is meeting the future with her belief that she should give her $1 000 to one or another charity. I can do the right thing by supporting what is most pertinent, what is lit up, for me. Here we might have an instance of a disjunctive statement being true: It is right for Cheryl Misak to give her $1 000 to Oxfam, to the local foodbank, or to Doctors Without Borders, but not right for her to give it to a local or international white supremacist organization.

Many ethical judgements can be seen as truth apt on this account. The best explanation of my belief that it was cruel, racist, and reprehensible of the Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin to kneel on George Floyd's neck until he died is that it was in fact cruel, racist, and reprehensible. The fact that others, such as the police union, might see the act otherwise does not make the matter relative and unsuitable for a truth value. There is disagreement, but the question is whether we will reach a point where, as Wiggins puts it, "there is nothing else to *think*" (Wiggins, 1987 [1991], 348). That involves taking into account all the available evidence, scrutinizing the motives for people making various claims, and deliberating about the matter. If the upshot of this inquiry is that there is nothing else to think, then that is the kind of convergence which is a mark of truth. Sometimes, as in this instance, a judge will weigh in, but that needn't be the case.

There is much more to be said about how the pragmatist account of truth plays out in ethics, but I hope I have given a flavour of the promise it holds in this domain. It makes sense of our aiming at truth in ethics. It does not commit us into an impossible metaphysics which says that there are ethical facts in the world. It allows for indeterminacy. A further advantage is that it allows us to criticize those who ignore or denigrate the experience of others. They show themselves to not be engaged in the search for truth, for that search is to get a belief that best stands up to experience. This is why the question about my charitable giving has false answers. It is wrong for me to give my $1 000 to the neo-Nazi party, for the neo-Nazi has adopted a method that ignores the fact that the future will not go well for many if their policies are adopted.[14]

It is important to note that we find persistent disagreement in other domains of inquiry as well as in ethics. We find them with counterfactual conditionals. 'Had Boris Johnson imposed vaccine mandates and not lifted mask requirements in the spring of 2022, fewer people would have contracted COVID-19' is a counterfactual that we can assess as true. 'Had Boris Johnson not missed five Cobra meetings in the spring of 2020, fewer

[14] See Misak (2000) for the extended pragmatist argument about ethics.

people would have contracted COVID-19' is a counterfactual that is probably too complex to assess as true or false. Too many unknowns need to be known. Perhaps if Johnson had attended those meetings, public health measures would have been put in place at an even slower pace and more people would have contracted COVID-19. Perhaps the opposite.

There is disagreement even about whether the earth is round. The question for the pragmatist of the sort I have been commending is whether the explanations of the competing beliefs are answerable to something. The answer is *yes*. The explanation of the belief that the earth is flat has to do with conspiracy theories and politics, whereas the explanation of the belief that the earth is round has to do with a great diversity of empirical evidence. The flat earthers fix their beliefs in a manner extraneous to the evidence and our best understanding of facts, and hence their beliefs don't work well. They cannot get on a round-the world flight without a great deal of cognitive dissonance. They cannot explain why Polaris appears high in the sky in northern latitudes and low (or completely disappears) in the sky in southern latitudes. They will also have a difficult time explaining why the moon appears flipped upside down from one hemisphere to the other. These are the ways we assess the truth or falsity of their claims.

I hope I have said enough to show that the branch of pragmatist pluralism about truth I have been proposing is a powerful account of truth. It makes room for a vast range of beliefs, including singular perceptual judgments, causal generalizations, ethical judgments, and counterfactual conditionals. It does not commit us to a bizarre ontology in which there are concrete objects, causes, goods, and counterfactual facts existing in the world. Once we view truth as a habit of action that would forever serve us well, and once we view serving us well along all its dimensions, we get a pluralism about truths without the pain of having to invent a world full of mysterious objects or to postulate different truth properties.[15]

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Growth, Education and Cosmopolitan Identity: Some Deweyan Reflections

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> Whenever philosophy has been taken seriously, it has always been assumed that it signified achieving a wisdom which would influence the conduct of life. John Dewey

1. Introduction: Ramberg's Challenge

This essay is offered as an attempt to respond to a specific worry Ramberg has raised over the point, purpose and value of philosophy. He invites us to consider the following set of concerns: "What sustains the idea of philosophy as a subject and a discipline? What supports a claim that philosophy be recognized and funded as a worthy intellectual project, to be commended to *bildung*-aspiring young adults? What, in short, is philosophy good for as a *public endeavor*?" (2018, 309–10). This line of questioning is further examined within the complex metaphilosophical dialectic offered by pragmatists of various stripes, where Ramberg confronts his central concern over balancing the undermining power of radical critique with the continuing need for relevance and authority within philosophical practice. Here, I wish to retreat to the prior set of concerns listed above over the value of philosophy, what I will call Ramberg's challenge.

For what it's worth my answer to such questions is as follows. Starting with a core commitment of the classical type of pragmatism I favor, namely, its emphasis on the central connection between thought, evaluation and action, I quickly infer that it is this that drives its practical func-

tion.[1] Knowing is for the sake of doing, as they say. This results in an ineluctable bond between the philosophical and the existential, between attempts to judge what is good, worthwhile or helpful and the lived struggles we confront in a rapidly changing world. Pragmatist thought is then committed to what I have elsewhere called a central "moral imperative", involving the central task of locating and promoting both theoretical and practical goods in order to improve human moral life (2016). So, a general answer to Ramberg's challenge is relatively straightforward. Philosophy's value is to be found in its ability to address this moral imperative. But, as good pragmatists, we might want this further demonstrated in practice, by showing how philosophical reflection informs what we do, where this very doing addresses a human moral problem. What follows is then a brief attempt to describe the main outlines of how philosophy when conceived along the pragmatist lines I have briefly sketched addresses a real lived problem.

The first section lays out the main problem concerning the forging of a cosmopolitan identity by balancing the possible conflicts and tensions between the familiar and the foreign. Second two provides a conceptual platform for addressing these difficulties by discussing central features of John Dewey's view of the self and their bearing on personal identity. The concluding section applies these ideas to a real case drawn from my own personal experience as a teacher of philosophy. The main conclusion is that a proper understanding of Dewey's notions of self, interest and moral growth help to alleviate the conflicts inherent in the cosmopolitan stance. Here we can then locate one instance of the value of philosophy as it emerges from the pursuit of the moral imperative found in pragmatism.

2. Cosmopolitanism and its Problems

We can usefully begin with a brief description of the cosmopolitan orientation or stance and a brief survey of some of its challenges. Hansen offers the following useful definition of this stance, when he explains that "a cosmopolitan outlook[...] fuses reflective openness to the world with reflective loyalty to local roots, traditions, and practices" (2009, 126). This stance acknowledges the existence of difference between individuals and cultures, with a further 'reflective openness' signaling an awareness and responsiveness to this difference. There are obviously different possible

[1] This core commitment is developed in various ways in the work of James 1907, Dewey 1920 and C.I. Lewis 1946.

ways to approach diversity and difference. We can reject it through exclusion or attempts at assimilation. Or we can accept it, learn from it, and ultimately find a way to live with it. This cosmopolitan stance as a reflective openness then further exemplifies what has been described as a philosophical pluralism, one that is seen as characteristic of pragmatism and American philosophy more generally. This pluralism, Campos further explains "means the principled embracing and nurturing of difference in philosophical ideals, moral values, religious beliefs and political and economic arrangements among peoples who co-exist and cooperate" (2018, 109). For the pragmatists, including John Dewey, this pluralist perspective is grounded in the diversity of human experience. Our diverse experiences generate conflicts and problems, both personal and interpersonal, requiring reflection for their attempted solution. As I then interpret the cosmopolitan perspective, the reflective openness of the cosmopolitan stance is closely affiliated with the philosophical pluralism of pragmatist thought, and its view of philosophy as addressing the problems of daily life.

Hansen's definition of cosmopolitanism further emphasizes a reflective loyalty to the local—a sense of home, of belonging, where this is found in the familiar places and people that shape our basic identity. This reflective commitment to the familiar could involve a culture, town, region, language or practice, vocation, or career. This, it is claimed, is a necessary element of the cosmopolitan outlook. My interpretation of this idea is that this loyalty provides a relatively stable basis, starting point or framework from which we encounter diversity and difference. We are not simply thrown into a world of difference and asked to find our way from scratch. Rather, we approach difference as individuals with a culture, language, and identity that we were initiated into from the start. We cannot ignore or completely forget the cultural background that we bring to our engagement with diversity. This, of course, influences the way we encounter diversity, but the key point here is that a genuine cosmopolitan view requires an openness to difference from within our own attachment to the familiar, local surroundings that made us who we are.

Hansen notes some of the difficulties in combining these two suggested elements of the cosmopolitan stance. I want to elaborate somewhat on these difficulties, especially those found in the reflective loyalty to the local dimension just mentioned. Consider an example: leaving your home country to work abroad. We can distinguish at least three elements within such experiences. Is has a first emotional, felt quality, involves a further

second set of connections or reactions to new people and surroundings, and lastly, a third element involving the direction of your life, in terms of overall aims and goals.[2] Think briefly about this last element concerning the overarching ends of one's life. Your situation is now one of working abroad in a foreign country, where you increasingly see your life in terms of your work as a teacher in this new and unfamiliar environment. How do you achieve a balance in terms of your current goals? Possible questions that may require reflection: do I share the same aims for education that my students seem to have? As a foreigner, do I share the same general view of what society should look like, and the place of education in that society? If not, how should I engage with it, through confrontation, or conformity? Notice how this balance can be seen in terms of the definition of cosmopolitanism given above. How do I now bring together my reflective openness to the difference I now face with a corresponding loyalty to the familiar? We are confronted with the need to form a balanced stance with regard to my own life aims and the aims of the community I find myself in.[3]

There is a further difficulty that is relevant here. How does living and working aboard impact the loyalty to the local? Once you have the experience of living in other places and cultures, there is the opportunity to reflect on one's roots, in a new way, perhaps in a more critical light. This loyalty to the local can be hard to sustain. It can, of course, change, as we move beyond our cultural roots. This can result in you understanding these roots differently than before. Perhaps, you are now inclined to reject them in part or remain firm in your commitment to them. Further questions may flood in: What if embracing diversity causes you to see your home in negative ways, resulting in a loss of loyalty to the local and familiar? Can we remain loyal, how should we do so? How do you recover the standpoint needed to achieve cosmopolitan balance? This process can be complicated, as it requires achieving a balance between such loyalty and the openness to difference that is also part of the cosmopolitan view. Call this needed balance your 'cosmopolitan identity'. If we characterize education broadly, as Dewey would, then education is basic to achieving the required balance.

[2] For more on this Peircean tripartite analysis of personality and its application to immigrant experience, see Campos, 2011.

[3] For further examples from immigrant experience and their attempt to achieve a balanced stance, see Campos, 2011; 2018.

Most of us are familiar with the challenges faced by being open to difference. However, there is the additional worry I am highlighting here, concerning our prior commitments to the local cultural tradition and customs that have influenced us. What happens when these come into contact with new circumstances, cultures and values. You may find yourself stuck between two poles, as it were, not able to full identity with your new surroundings and yet unhappy with aspects of your familiar cultural background. Faced with this sort of dilemma, how should we proceed? In order to attempt to answer such questions, let us turn to relevant details concerning Dewey's view of the moral self, interest and growth. Dewey's view provides us with some useful tools for coming to grips with the needed personal balance needed with the cosmopolitan stance; for helping us create and sustain what I have called a 'cosmopolitan identity'.

3. Dewey on the Self, Interest and Growth

In order to address these issues we need to begin with a brief survey of the interconnection between Dewey's conception of the self, habit, interest and growth.[4] In part II of the 1932 *Ethics*, Dewey argues that there is an identity between self and act, where this means, in part, that our actions constitute and make the self. This identity of self and its actions is based on his view of habits and interests. Through our actions we create the self, where this further means that such actions strengthen or weaken aspects of our habits or dispositions to act. By acting in specific ways, we reinforce those tendencies that make us the kind of person who acts in such ways. Someone who is often late becomes that kind of person, an unpunctual individual, as we might say. Dewey goes so far as to claim that our habits constitute the self. Here, he means much more than the tendency to repeat prior actions:

> [...] habit reaches even more significantly down into the very structure of the self; it signifies a building up and solidifying of certain desires; an increased sensitiveness and responsiveness to certain stimuli, a confirmed or an impaired capacity to attend to and think about certain things. Habit covers in other words the very make-up of desire, intent choice, disposition which gives an act its voluntary quality. LW, 171

[4] For further details concerning the interconnections between these elements of Dewey's moral philosophy see Levine, 2021.

Our habits shape our personal tendencies so that our acts form a distinctive pattern that we call a person or self. We are thus given the following general picture concerning the formation of the self: the self is created through feedback loops between habit, immediate perception and reflection, where we are motivated to act through dispositions influenced by what we have learnt from the consequences of past experiences and actions.[5] Motives to act in certain way are further tied to the central idea of interest: "Any concrete case of the union of the self in action with an object and end is called an interest[. . .] An interest is, in short, the dominant direction of activity, and in this activity desire is united with an object to be furthered in a decisive choice" (LW 290). An interest is here defined as the union of self and object in action: "Interest means the active or moving *identity* of the self with a certain object" (1916, 336). If someone is interested in poetry, for example, they will have the tendency to pursue opportunities to read, listen to, discuss and perhaps write poetry. Interest here represents a motivated engagement with poetry. These 'objects' are part of, internal as we might say, to this interest in poetry. If you do not seek out such objects, then an interest in poetry is not displayed or manifested in your actions, and so it is not a genuine interest for you.

Our interests or interest is, then, to use a common philosophical distinction, both objective and subjective. It is objective because it results in the realization of dispositions or tendencies to act towards specific objects. However, it is also subjective because these objects would not be objects of interest if we were unmoved by them. Here, Dewey presents personhood and interest as coextensive. My personhood, or personal identity is continually being formed, created through activities I participate in and through the specific way in which I participate. Interest as referring to that specific form of engagement that is definitive of your personhood, in terms of your aims as a person. Dewey gives an example of the Doctor continuing to help the sick within the context of a plague, or pandemic. His life, who he is, is found in that work, and it is interest that explains his commitment in the face of danger. Having an interest then requires the relevant impulses and desires, as these are more fundamentally internalized within our habits as tendencies to respond to objects or sets of objects:

> [. . .] when we say that a man is moved by kindness, or mercy, or cruelty, or malice. These things are not independent pow-

[5] For more on this point see Levine, 2021, 140–2.

> ers which stir to action. They are designations of the kind of active union or integration which exists between the self and a class of objects. It is the man himself in his very self which is malicious or kindly, and these adjectives signify that the self is so constituted as to act in certain ways towards certain objects.
>
> LW 7, 291

Lastly, we can briefly see how this is further connected to the central ideas of growth and freedom. The view of self, briefly sketched above relies on the familiar difference between a higher and lower self. However, for Dewey this difference points to a self-satisfied self with its actions brought about by its existing habits, as contrasted with a self that is attempting to change, to grow. Moving from a fixed, unchanging self to a more dynamic self, is a growing, expansive, more liberated self, which is engaged with new demands and opportunities, thereby remaking the self. In order to further develop the capacity to enjoy and possibly create poetry, abilities that through a process of refinement becomes an interest, requires being open to new experiences, where this would include new relations with others, mentors, teachers, friends etc. To isolate oneself from such relations, is to limit this process of discovery, and to stunt one's growth. To form a varied, yet relatively cohesive self, requires that one enable one's interests, and the groups, relationships that encourage such interests to communicate as fully as possible.

> The kind of self which is formed through action which is faithful to relations with others will be a fuller and broader self than one which is cultivated in isolation from or in opposition to the purposes and needs of others. In contrast, the kind of self which results from generous breadth of interest may be said alone to constitute a development and fulfillment of self, while the other way of life stunts and starves selfhood by cutting it off from the connections necessary to its growth.
>
> LW 7, 302, quoted in Levine, 2021, 151

We can sum up this account of personhood, by noting that "the self is not something ready-made but something in continuous formation through choice of action", where our identity is forged through developing motives to act, which are definitive of self through the establishment of interest (1916, 336).

4. Concluding Applications

Our key concern now focuses on the question of precisely how these features of Dewey's view help with the problems sketched above. Recall the central example: your new life as a teacher in a foreign country invites deep questions concerning your ability to achieve the needed balance between your loyalty to the familiar and the openness to diversity you now face. Let me begin with two preliminary points concerning Dewey's method. First, Dewey does not think that philosophy alone offers solutions to these problems, to the problems of daily living as we might say. The point is to provide resources for thinking through the problem for ourselves. In explaining his conception of philosophy, he tells us that: "Its value lies not in furnishing solutions (which can be achieved only in action) but in defining difficulties and suggesting methods for dealing with them" (1916, 313). Secondly, what I have said about how Dewey's view may help depends on a certain philosophical conviction presupposed by Dewey. The idea as I understand it goes something like this. If we can change the way we think about a specific problem or issue, change the way we conceive of it, then we will be in a position to better cope with this problem, perhaps even changing the conditions that generate the problem, thereby making positive changes. Philosophy provides no guarantees, but, the hope, or working faith, as he sometimes calls it, is in the power of positive change through reflection.

I suggest we read Dewey's view of the self as precisely an attempt to suggest methods for addressing the cosmopolitan challenges I sketched at the outset from this general philosophical perspective. By placing the attempt to arrive at a cosmopolitan identity within Dewey's framework of the self, we can provide a much needed sharper formulation of the basic problem. The issue now can be seen as one of determining our interest in the face of conflicts between locating ourselves within our newfound diversity, while remaining relevantly connected to the familiar and local. We saw that a cosmopolitan identity requires a balanced stance between our engagement with diversity and attachment to the familiar. This can now be seen as involving the cultivation of those interests required of the new self you are becoming as you deal with new experiences.

As we saw, the problem pushes us to confront both the new and the old, asking us to rethink our attitudes and interest towards them. In terms of addressing our problems with the familiar, where this may involve a partial rejection of our past cultural interests, we struggle from the loss

of the familiar cultural background needed for confronting our newfound diversity. In general, however, the solution to this issue is straightforward. In such cases, what we need is to establish new local, familiar interests, by exploiting our new contacts with diversity. In the process, we may be able to locate a new source, or reinterpretation of what is familiar to us from within the diversity we now experience.

This can be seen by adding some further details to the general examples already sketched above. By appealing to the Deweyan view of selfhood as a process, we can view the case of the teacher working in a new country, as involving a personal identity that is a work in progress being formed through conscious choice. Realizing this helps us to see that part of his or her ongoing education now includes dealing with new aims as a teacher. Imagine the situation being one of teaching philosophy in an international liberal arts setting. There may be a general question concerning whether one can do this in an educational setting that may not be historically open to the idea of liberal arts education as you understand it. In addition, when faced with this challenge, you may come to realize a conflict with the familiar, in this case, you prior experience as a teacher and philosopher, where this includes your own more local philosophical education. The new global setting you find yourself in, the international liberal arts program, highlights the one-sided nature of your own philosophical background and education. Furthermore, this one-sidedness has only become explicit within your new found context of diversity. By confronting the international diversity that is basic to your new educational setting, you begin to recognize how ill-suited your own personal, cultural and philosophical background is to that setting. Regaining a sense of balance is then to be sought through a renewed appreciation for one's interest in philosophy in terms of your familiar, local career. Being a student of philosophy and then teacher is a central element of this past familiar background, but retaining this element of your identity requires change, where this requires an expansion of what is understood as philosophy, or concerning what is taken as central to the study of philosophy. Such education now needs to be seen in more global terms, as a global approach to the study of philosophy or what is called global philosophy. In this case, a loyalty to the local and familiar has been transformed through a reflective openness to difference, the result being a new identity that is at once more cosmopolitan while maintaining a renewed loyalty to one's initial culture, philosophical background. Dewey's view of the self as a process, where growth is tied to interest, has played a key role in achieving this

cosmopolitan identity. Here philosophical reflection has been applied to a real, lived problem concerning one's identity under new global conditions. Philosophy conceived along the Deweyan pragmatist lines sketched here proves its worth, not, it should be noted, by solving this problem, but rather by providing reflective resources that aid us its reformulating in ways that enable improved judgment concerning how to live.[6]

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PART II

DAVIDSON AND RORTY

On the Road with Rorty, Davidson, and Ramberg

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1. Encounters with Rorty

In a recent piece, Bjørn Ramberg remembers Rorty as a generous philosophical mentor (Ramberg, 2022). I was envious. Rorty would have been high on my wish list, if I'd been the mentorable type.

As it is, I met Rorty only three times. The last was just a few weeks before his death, in 2007. Brandom repeated his Locke Lectures in Prague, over two days, and I was a commentator. Brandom told me how moved he was that Rorty, gravely ill, had insisted on being there.

The first two meetings were in Australia, in July 1999. Rorty was visiting ANU's Humanities Research Centre. We met first in Melbourne, at the annual conference of the Australasian Association of Philosophy. I gave the Presidential Address that year, and Rorty an evening keynote, 'Some Doubts about the Idea of "Philosophical Method"'. I can't recall the precise doubts in question, but I remember my sense of the Q&A—Rorty handling a large and rather hostile audience like a shambling grandmaster, playing several games simultaneously.

The title of my lecture, 'Location, Location, Location', was a nod to the location of the conference itself. In Melbourne it is said, not always in jest, that we Sydneysiders care about nothing but real estate and harbour views. I was indulging this stereotype, for my local hosts. The play must have seemed parochial as well as feeble to Rorty, but he was generous about the talk.

Despite Rorty's seal of approval, the lecture never made it into print. A few years ago I put a copy online (Price, 1999; hereafter LLL), to cite

in another piece. When Yvonne Huetter-Almerigi and Robert Sinclair approached me about contributing to the present volume, we soon triangulated, as it were, on the proposal that LLL be the basis of it. Huetter-Almerigi had shown me work of hers, relating my views to Davidson's famous triangulation argument. That got me thinking about the relevance of Davidson's externalism to the conclusions of LLL. It became clear that those issues had links not only to LLL, but also to Ramberg's work on Davidson and Rorty.

Some of these connections also link to my second encounter with Rorty in 1999. A few days after the Melbourne conference, ANU hosted a workshop with Rorty. I presented the original version of 'Truth as Convenient Friction' (Price, 2003; hereafter TCF). This piece takes up Rorty's objections to Crispin Wright's views on the normativity of truth (Rorty, 1995). Rorty begins that paper with a pragmatist maxim:

> Pragmatists think that if something makes no difference to practice, it should make no difference to philosophy. This conviction makes them suspicious of the distinction between justification and truth, for that distinction makes no difference to my decisions about what to do. Rorty, 1995, 19

He argues that Wright's view falls foul of this principle. In response, drawing on proposals in earlier work (Price, 1983; 1988; 1998a), I argued that a norm of truth distinct from justification actually makes a huge behavioural difference:

> What [...] [such a] norm provides [...] is the automatic and quite unconscious sense of engagement in common purpose that distinguishes assertoric dialogue from a mere roll call of individual opinion. Truth is the grit that makes our individual opinions engage with one another. Truth puts the cogs in cognition, at least in its public manifestations. TCF, 165

About this paper, Rorty gave me comments at more than one point. An exchange based on those remarks was published as (Rorty and Price, 2010). Rorty invokes Davidson against a key move in my argument; and this point, too, has links to Ramberg's work on Davidson and Rorty.

In the light of these various connections, the present piece is constructed like this. Its two supporting axles are LLL and TCF, the two pieces I first presented in 1999, with Rorty in the room. Riding on these wheels is

a cluster of issues from the work of Davidson, Rorty, and Ramberg. Since most of these concerns turn on the sense in which language is necessarily a *social* activity, it seems appropriate to think of the vehicle as a Volkswagen. (If we make it a Beetle, we can put Wittgenstein in the driver's seat.)

I'll begin with the more obscure of the two axles, namely LLL. Section 2 reproduces LLL as originally written, with a few tweaks to references and footnotes. Section 3 is then in three parts. § 3.1 begins with an objection to my conclusions in LLL, based on some of Davidson's remarks about externalism and triangulation. I don't claim that Davidson would endorse this objection. On the contrary, as we'll see in § 3.2, it is clear that he would not—and partly for reasons that Ramberg emphasises, in criticising Rorty's interpretation of Davidson. Those reasons link in turn to Rorty's invocation of Davidson, in response to TCF. As I'll explain, I think this invocation backfires for Rorty, supporting the main claim of my paper.

I realised recently that in responding to Rorty on this point, I could have appealed to Bernard Williams's (2002) characterization of 'imaginary genealogy'. For this, Williams's model is Edward Craig's genealogy of the concept of knowledge (Craig, 1990). Yet, citing Davidson, Williams declines to seek what TCF claims to offer, a genealogy of truth itself. In § 3.3 I'll argue that TCF thus has lessons for Williams and Davidson, as well as for Rorty. By this roundabout route, our bespoke VW reaches a familiar destination. I conclude that all of its famous passengers have something to learn from Cambridge pragmatism (Misak, 2016; Price, 2017).

2. Location, Location, Location

2.1 Linguistic imprisonment

It is a platitude in philosophy these days that we can't describe or theorise about the world from outside language. Let's call this the doctrine of *linguistic imprisonment* (being ready to plead irony, if necessary, if the confinement turns out to be less of a restriction than the penal metaphor suggests—if the prison turns out to be "false").

Partly because it is a platitude, this doctrine has a status in contemporary philosophy analogous to that of the existence of medium sized dry goods. All sides lay claim to commonsense, and argue that their opponents fail to do it justice. For example, metaphysical realists claim that idealists mistake the commonsense doctrine of linguistic imprisonment for the absurd view that language somehow "constructs" or gives rise to the world. For their part, idealists object that it is these same realists

who fail to respect the doctrine, by taking seriously issues which in fact it disallows—issues about the "real" reference of terms, for example, where this is taken in a sense which could only make sense from "outside" language. Roughly speaking, then, the charges are that idealists overestimate and metaphysical realists underestimate the significance of our "imprisonment" in language.

My sympathies are more with the idealists in this exchange. In this paper, however, my concerns are both more basic and somewhat tangential. I want to clarify the nature of our "confinement" in language, but I also want to defend the possibility of a kind of "imprisonment" which even my idealist allies are inclined to overlook: roughly, the possibility that the prison is multicellular—it contains many distinct cells, to some subset of which we may be confined.

But how much are we constrained by the prison of language? In one sense, surely, not at all—or no more than by our usual ability to do the impossible. (This is at least one sense in which language may be said to be a "false" prison.) However, this reassuring thought seems a little too swift. One disturbing thing about linguistic confinement is surely that it threatens us with unavoidable anthropocentricity, or relativity, or perspectivalism—with the inability to escape from a viewpoint which is in some sense "localised" to ourselves. This threat doesn't seem significantly less disturbing—to those disturbed by it at all—in the light of the conclusion that it is a matter of necessity.

It might be argued, as in effect by Davidson (1974), that the same considerations which show that the prison is false also show that the idea that it is local or relative is incoherent—that the very idea of *alternative* locations is a mistake. However, I don't think this quite meets the concern. The disturbing contingency need not be couched in terms of alternative viewpoints, at least in the sense which Davidson takes to be problematic. Thus, suppose we were to discover that our possession of certain groups of concepts depends on contingent features of our biological circumstances. In other words, we find ourselves saying: "If we had been different in *these* ways, we would not have had *that* group of concepts; we would not have been able to say the things we say with *those* concepts." This may still seem to make language unacceptably "local", even if for Davidsonian reasons we don't want to acknowledge that the creatures we would then have been would be language users at all, in the interpretative sense (according to which what counts as language is what can be interpreted from where we stand).

The concern here might seem relatively trivial. We are finite creatures, of limited cognitive capacities. As such, presumably, we can't talk about everything. Some things are off-limits to us on complexity grounds alone, perhaps. Why should it surprise or disturb us that had we been differently constructed—simpler or more complex, say—we would not then have talked about some of the things we do talk about, or would have talked about some things we don't in fact talk about? In some cases, surely, we would have talked about the same things but in different ways—the same objects, under different modes of presentation. Again, what should be surprising or disturbing about *that?*

In my view, these attempts to render imprisonment non-threatening tend themselves to rely on a violation of the doctrine. In effect, they tend illicitly to take for granted a viewpoint external to our systems of concepts, from which it can meaningfully be said that our concepts refer to this or that subset of the domain of things in the world, or that this concept and that refer to the same objects in this domain. Later in the paper (see § 2.7 and § 3.1), I want to ask what remains of this reference-based "externalising" attempt to render imprisonment non-threatening, if we avoid an illicit violation of the doctrine. Initially, however, I want to make a case for taking linguistic contingency seriously—for regarding it as the basis of a non-trivial kind of linguistic imprisonment. For the present, then, I'll regard these referential externalist ways of down-playing the significance of linguistic contingency as off-limits.

Initially, I want to focus on the relationship between two things: on the one side, certain bits of language—concepts, or terms; on the other side, contingent features of language users on which the use of those bits of language depend. (I'll call these features of language users the *contingent grounds* of the use in question.)[1] I want to do three main things:

(i) to distinguish two different ways of thinking about this relationship between concepts and their contingent grounds;

(ii) to point out that one way of thinking about it makes imprisonment more serious than the other way does; and

(iii) to argue that the more serious kind of relationship is unavoidable—it is an empirical question how much it affects us, but we can't avoid it altogether.

[1] In recent work (Price, 2017; 2023b) I use the term 'pragmatic grounds'.

2.2 Two distinctions

I need a couple of preliminary distinctions. These turn on two issues we can raise about our own linguistic practice.

Is linguistic competency hardware-specific?

In principle, perhaps, we might be "universal" linguists, capable of "running" or using any language at all. If so, then in so far as the language we actually run is special or distinctive, its distinctiveness is not necessitated by our physical circumstances. (It may be appropriate in virtue of our physical circumstances to talk about one thing rather than another, but it would be physically possible for us to do otherwise.) Alternatively, we might be running a language which is "hardware-specific" in various ways. Of course, these distinctions may cut differently at different linguistic levels—our language is obviously hardware-specific in certain phonetic respects, but might perhaps be hardware-independent in conceptual respects. I am interested in the conceptual level. Are our concepts hardware-dependent or hardware-independent? And if they are hardware-dependent *in us*, to what extent is this a feature of the concepts themselves, and to what extent does it merely reflect limitations in us, so that a "universal" linguist could run them without special hardware? (For present purposes I want to ignore hardware restrictions which are simply a matter of processing power. I'm also happy to be vague about what counts as hardware. The crucial thing is that it is not the sort of thing that we are free to change, by means available to normal speakers.)

Are concepts functionally homogeneous?

Is there significant functional "modularity" or "inhomogeneity" among our concepts? Is there any (non-obvious) sense in which they do different jobs, or serve different functions in our lives? Obviously we use different concepts to talk about different kinds of things, and it isn't controversial that we may use such concepts for different purposes, in virtue of differences between the things talked about. As I've argued elsewhere (e.g., Price, 1997), the less obvious and more interesting possibility is there might be cases in which the proper order of explanation goes the other way—cases in which we need to appeal to differences in the function of the *talk,* in order to explain apparent differences between the things talked *about*. (For example: the possibility that we might need to appeal to the distinctive function of normative concepts in our lives, in order to explain

the differences, as they appear to us, between normative facts and non-normative facts. The motto of this approach is that function might explain phenomenology.)

Why does this question matter? Because it provides a potential non-hardware-specific sense in which we might turn out to be "isolated" or "located" by contingencies related to our use of language. Think of different conceptual modules, or language games, as like distinct programs. Now suppose that although we were "universal" linguistic machines, capable of running any possible program (given enough time and memory), we couldn't run all possible programs at the same time. This would provide a concrete sense in which our conceptual standpoint was inevitably "located", in some contingent way.

Here's an analogy. Imagine a race of sporting all-rounders, capable of excelling in any game at all—Australians in the 1950s, perhaps. Obviously, not even such superbeings could participate in all sports at once. With one or two exceptions, the rules of the various games are simply incompatible with multitasking.

Of course, another possibility is that functional modularity might be associated with hardware dependence. In that sense, it would not be a matter of choice which programs we ran. (Think of dolphins, who might be excellent at water polo, but useless at cricket.) But in principle language might be modular at the conceptual level without any corresponding modularity at a hardware level—a universal linguistic engine might simply go in for "multitasking", running several programs at once, with different functions.[2]

Thus the two distinctions are independent, giving us a four-fold table of possibilities (see Table 1, next page). I am interested in the possibility that our own linguistic practice belongs in the fourth cell in this table, and in the philosophical consequences of this possibility. That cell seems to represent a more serious kind of imprisonment than the other three options. On the one hand, if language is functionally homogeneous then this excludes at least one kind of "locality" or "confinement"—that which would flow from the fact that actually we run some possible modules but not others. While on the other hand, if language is "all in software", then

[2] This distinction might become blurred if we softened the notion of hardware, and recognised that functions found in use in language are likely to have extralinguistic significance—in interesting cases there is likely to be a biological reason why we are running a particular program, and this might well amount to a hardware-dependency, broadly construed, even if the same wetware has the capacity to do other things.

any modularity is "non-vicious"—in principle, any speaker *could* run any module, even if not all at once. But the combination of multi-functionalism and hardware-dependence seems to leave us especially trapped. That's what makes the fourth option particularly interesting.

Table 1	Hardware-independent	Hardware-dependent
Functionally homogeneous	1	2
Functionally inhomogeneous	3	4

In my view, it is an empirical issue whether our own constitution and the nature of language puts us in Cell 4. However, in order to show both that this is a genuine empirical possibility, and that it has interesting philosophical consequences, it is necessary to block two philosophical counterattacks. One of these counterattacks claims to establish *a priori* that we are not in Cell 4. It argues that it is always possible to interpret the *content* of concepts in a way which renders them non-hardware-dependent and unifunctional. The other counterattack claims to mitigate the philosophical consequences which would follow if we were in Cell 4. It argues that even if our concepts were hardware-dependent and modular, this would have no important consequences for metaphysics: it is the view mentioned earlier, that what matters is not the concepts or modes of presentation, but the world to which they refer, and that plurality and hardware-dependence in the former tells us nothing interesting about the latter.

This second counterattack is the "externalist" strategy I mentioned above (§ 2.1). As I said there, I think that its appeal rests in part on a failure to take seriously the imprisonment constraint. Later in the paper (see § 2.7 and § 3.1), I want to ask what remains of this strategy if that mistake is avoided.

For the moment, then, I want to focus on the first counterattack. In particular, I want to clarify the relationship between concepts and the contingent features of speakers on which they depend, so as to show that the relationship cannot be treated entirely as a matter of content. In my view, as I said, it is ultimately an empirical issue whether we should put ourselves in Cell 4. But to show that there is such an empirical issue, we need to do some philosophy.[3]

[3] To be more specific, I am interested in this possibility with respect to what we usually think of as the descriptive or representational uses of language. It isn't controversial that

2.3 Two views of grounding [4]

How should we think of the relationship between a declarative utterance and the contingent grounds on which its key concepts depend? Take an example such as colour concepts. What is the relationship between an utterance such as "That's red", and what goes on in our visual system when we are presented with a ripe tomato? We can contrast two broad classes of answers to this question (see Price, 1991 for further discussion).

Keep the contingent grounds in the background

On this view, the proper place to mention the grounds is in a "use-condition"—a description of what typically or properly occurs in a speaker *when* such an utterance is made. The central idea is associationist: proper or normal uses "co-vary" with these conditions in the grounds. On this view, then, speakers acquire a habit of saying "That's red" *when* certain circumstances obtain in themselves; but they don't use this expression to say *that* these conditions obtain. Other familiar examples of this kind of view include Humean expressivist account of concepts such as causation, value, and probability, where the contingent grounds are psychological states of various kinds: habits or expectations, desires, and credences, respectively.

Of course, many aspects of such an account remain to be specified. What uses count, is the account descriptive or normative, and so on. However, for present purposes what matters is simply the contrast between this "use-based" way of theorising about the relationship between concepts and their contingent grounds, and an alternative approach.

Put the grounds in the foreground

On this alternative view, some mention of the grounds needs to be made in a fully explicit account of the *content* of the utterances in question—they are an aspect of what the speaker is talking *about*. In the colour case, for example, two representative versions of this view are (a) the subjectivist account, according to which "That's red" *reports* the occurrence of a particular state in the speaker's visual system; and (b) the dispositionalist account, according to which "That's red" reports the existence of a

language has multiple functions of other kinds, and some of these may well be hardware-dependent.

[4] In 1999 there was less risk than there is today that this might be taken to refer to what is now known as metaphysical grounding. As the context makes clear, I mean something very different: a relation between utterances, or linguistic items of some other kind, and contingent features of speakers on which their use depends.

disposition on the part of an external object to produce such states in the visual system. Either way, the grounds themselves—the states of the visual system—are regarded as an aspect of what the utterance is *about*.

Again, the Humean examples are helpful. Think of the familiar contrast between expressivism about value, probability or causation, on the one hand, and subjectivism (or "self-descriptivism"), on the other. The subjectivist says that utterances of these kinds are in part *about* the speaker's psychological states.

Again, there are further issues that remain to be clarified. Of particular importance for our purposes is an issue concerning the notion of content invoked by such an account. Should we think of it "internally" or "externally"? If a concept is in part "about" its contingent grounds, is this to be thought of as a conceptual truth, accessible in principle to the average competent speaker? Or is it a kind of referential fact, accessible (at best) only *a posteriori*?

Eliding this last issue for now, the relevance of the distinction between backgrounding and foregrounding views is that the latter count against Cell 4. If the grounds are "out in the open" in this way—part of what is *talked about* (in some sense) when concepts of the class in question are used—then their use need not be restricted to creatures who possess the relevant attributes themselves. We can't use concepts whose use *requires* possession of an attribute we don't have, but there seems no difficulty in talking *about* attributes which we don't possess. (At rate, any remaining difficulties seem to be of one of two kinds: either merely epistemological, rather than something more basic; or dependent on the fact that the foregrounded reference to grounds is in part indexical, and therefore inaccessible to other speakers for that reason. I'll set aside the latter possibility for the purposes of this piece.)

Thus foregrounding seems to challenge the possibility of hardware-dependence. It also challenges modularity, I think, for again, the supposedly distinct modules come to be treated as sub specialties of psychology, broadly construed. They simply describe different aspects of ourselves, or our relations to the world.

At first sight, the distinction between these two views may seem clear enough. But what *precisely* is the issue? The first thing to note is that the disagreement is not a simple choice between alternatives. In effect, the use-conditional account is the default position. Both sides agree that utterances of "That's red" co-vary (more or less) with occurrences of certain grounding states (and more generally with various states of the environ-

ment). All this "sideways-on" information about the use of the concepts in question is common ground, pretty much. (There may be some differences about how we should individuate concepts, for example.) There are lots of hard issues about which patterns are theoretically interesting, but these are issues for everybody. The real disagreement is about whether this common core provides the *whole* story about the relationship between the utterances and their contingent grounds; or whether, on the contrary, it is appropriate to say something *extra*—appropriate *also* to refer to the grounds in an account of the content, or truth conditions, of the utterances concerned (in either an internalist or an externalist sense)

This makes the dialectic non-symmetric. There is an important sense in which the supporter of the foregrounding view needs to make the running. *Inter alia,* she needs to convince us that the semantic notion (content, truth conditions, reference, or whatever) bears this kind of theoretical weight.

What *are* we asking when we ask whether an utterance has truth conditions, and if so what these truth conditions are; or when we ask what the content of assertion is? We tend to take for granted that the questions themselves are well-defined, even if the answers may be controversial in many cases. In my view, this confidence is misplaced. I've always been impressed by a remark of Dummett's on this issue, in his paper 'Truth' from 1959. "At one time", says Dummett—referring, as to a long-gone philosophical era, to a period which must then have been six or seven years in the past—

> it was usual to say that we do not call ethical statements 'true' or 'false', and from this many consequences for ethics were held to flow. But the question is not whether these words are in practice applied to ethical statements, but whether, if they were so applied, the point of doing so would be the same as the point of applying them to statements of other kinds [...]
>
> Dummett, 1959, 3

In some ways, the question of what is at issue in such debates has not progressed greatly since 1959, I think. Without suggesting that its authors are especially at fault—in one respect, quite the contrary—I want to mention a piece by Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit (Jackson and Pettit, 1998). Apart from illustrating how it continues to be taken for granted that the issue is in good standing, this paper is useful for my purposes in a couple of ways. For one thing, Jackson and Pettit challenge—rightly, in my view—a popular opinion as to how the issue is to be decided. For another,

they offer an alternative argument on the side of cognitivism. Although flawed, this argument fails in a useful way, a way which exposes one of the fundamental flaws of the foregrounding strategy.

2.4 A problem for expressivism?

Jackson and Pettit's target is expressivism (about ethical judgements, say). They invoke a Lockean principle to argue, in effect, that expressivism is always "trumped" by subjectivism—that is, by the view that moral claims *report* the very attitudes which the expressivist takes such claims to *express*. The argument goes like this:

(i) Following Locke, we recognise that words are voluntary conventional signs; natural languages are not innate.

(ii) To learn a convention, we must know what it is. If the expressivist is right, for example, we must know that the convention is that one say "X is good" when one approves of X (or "X is red" when one experiences a certain visual state when confronted by X, and so on). In other words, one must know that one's *saying* will be taken as an indication that one has the state concerned.

(iii) Hence, in effect, such a conventional "saying" reports the presence of the corresponding attitude; it conveys this information to other members of one's speech community.

As Jackson and Pettit note, however, there is an obvious objection to this argument:

> Expressivists, and philosophers in general, often rightly distinguish expressing what you believe from reporting what you believe. The sentence 'Snow is white', uttered in the right context, expresses your belief that snow is white, and is true iff snow is white. It does not report your belief. If you want to report your belief that snow is white, you need to use the sentence 'I believe that snow is white' (if you are speaking English), and this sentence is true iff you have the belief.
>
> Expressivists often suggest that we can apply this distinction to other psychological states, including especially the 'ethical' attitudes, and that when we do, we get the account they need of the sense in which ethical sentences express attitudes.

> They observe that we can distinguish the doctrine that 'X is right' reports a certain pro-attitude to X, from the doctrine that it expresses that pro-attitude to X. The first view is subjectivism; the second, they claim, is expressivism. They may argue, then, that the availability of this distinction shows that there has to be something wrong with the argument from Locke. There has to be a sense of 'express' which ensures that 'X is right', and the like, express attitudes without reporting them and without having truth conditions.
>
> Jackson and Pettit, 1998, 244–45

The objection seems a strong one, and yet Jackson and Pettit think that it fails:

> The trouble for expressivists is that, although there is an important difference between reporting and expressing a belief, it is plausibly a difference in what is reported. It is not a difference between reporting something and not reporting at all. When you express your belief that snow is white by producing, in the right context, the sentence 'Snow is white', you are not avoiding the business of reporting altogether. You are not reporting the fact that you believe that snow is white but you are reporting the content of that belief; you are reporting that snow is white. This is how the sentence gets to be true iff the belief is true.
>
> If we take the distinction as drawn for beliefs, then, and apply it to attitudes, we do not get a result that can help expressivists. What we get is that 'X is right' expresses a certain pro-attitude iff 'X is right' reports the content of the attitude. And this is not at all what expressivists are after. First, it makes 'X is right' out to have truth conditions, namely, those of the content; and, second, it is very implausible in itself. The relevant content will [be] something like *that X happens*—for that is what we are favourably disposed towards, according to expressivists, when we assert that X is right—and that is very different from X being right (unfortunately).
>
> Jackson and Pettit, 1998, 245

However, this response relies on saddling the expressivist with a commitment which, while certainly implausible, is actually irrelevant to original objection. The original objection simply turns on the following point. Because we can express a belief without reporting that we hold that belief, the fact that words are "voluntary signs" for our psychological states cannot entail that in uttering those words we are *saying that* we hold the states in question. In other words, it does not entail that our own psychological state is part of the content of the utterances that express that state. So the general Lockean principle on which Jackson and Pettit rely is false—it must be, for it has this glaring counterexample. (Whether the fault is Locke's or Jackson and Pettit's need not concern us here.)

To rescue the argument, it is up to Jackson and Pettit to show us that the principle remains reliable in other cases—that there are no other relevant counterexamples. What they in fact show is merely that there are no counterexamples *which work in exactly the same way as the one we have been given*. This isn't controversial, but nor is it relevant. Nobody thought that the counterexamples the expressivist needs would work in exactly the same way. What maps over is simply the distinction between expressing and reporting an attitude, and Jackson and Pettit have done nothing to show that the expressivist is not entitled to that.

Here's an analogy. Suppose someone argues for theism from the premise that everything has a cause, suggesting that God is the cause of the universe as a whole. We point out that general principle is true, then God Himself has a cause—surely a *reductio* of the theist's position. Now imagine a theist who responds to this as follows: "I acknowledge (of course) that the principle that everything has a cause does not apply to God Himself—it doesn't apply to *Divine* things. But this is no use to my athiest opponent in establishing that wordly things might lack causes, for he doesn't want to say that wordly things might be Divine. (He doesn't want to allow that anything is Divine!) So my principle is safe in the cases that matter." This reply to the original objection works in the same way as Jackson and Pettit's reply, by attempting to saddle the opponent with the view that any other counterexample to the general principle at issue would have to have all the features of the one offered. In both cases, the onus is on the party seeking to rely on the generalisation to show us that it doesn't have other counterexamples. (As far as I can see, there is no way Jackson and Pettit could do that, short of coming up with an independent argument that expressivism is mistaken.)

2.5 Are there semantic facts?

Despite the untenability of Jackson and Pettit's main argument, the discussion is a useful one for my purposes. For one thing, it calls attention to the basic issue, which Jackson and Pettit do not themselves discuss: What precisely is at issue between them and their expressivist opponents. In what sense, if any, is it a determinate matter whether the expressivist or the subjectivist is right? As I noted earlier, the use-conditional approach is a fall back position, from which other people need to distinguish themselves. (This fall back position is not quite expressivism. Expressivists usually take for granted that there is a determinate and theoretically interesting sense in which the target sentences do not have truth conditions. The fall back position is neutral on this issue.)

In practice, one factor to which people often appeal is the ordinary use of the notions of truth and falsity to utterances of the class in question. For example, as Jackson and Pettit note, expressivists commonly argue that subjectivism has trouble making sense of the circumstances under which we are inclined to say that someone else's moral claim is "false". For example, if I say "Milosevic is a bad man", and you disagree, you don't seem to be challenging the claim that I disapprove of Milosevic. The argument doesn't seem to be about my psychological state. However, as Jackson and Pettit rightly point out, these appeals to usage are very far from conclusive. There is a lot of scope for "explaining away" apparent anomalies.

Of course, Jackson and Pettit make this point against the background of the assumption, shared with their assumed opponents, that there is a fact of the matter whether the disputed utterances have truth conditions at all, and if so what these truth conditions are. But their own point tends to undermine this assumption. In effect, they argue that the ordinary use of the expressions "P is true" and "P is false" does not settle the issue of what the truth conditions of P are (or whether it has them). But given the standard equivalences—of "P" with "P is true", and "Not-P" with "P is false"—it is very difficult to make this point at the semantically-ascended level without accepting it at the lower level as well. At that level—the level at which we say "P", rather than "P is true"—it amounts to the claim that the use of the utterance "P" doesn't make it a determinate matter what an utterance's truth conditions are (or that it has truth conditions at all). But if usage doesn't fix it, what else could do so? Why should we suppose that there is a matter of fact to be fixed?

2.6 The inevitability of backgrounding

I will come back to these issues below, for they connect with the issue of referential externalism, which I have so far deferred. For the moment, let's consider a counterargument, which will take us back to my main theme. It might be objected that if we didn't know what the issue *was* about possession of truth conditions, we couldn't have been so sure that ordinary assertions are *not* about the beliefs from which they stem; that the utterance "Snow is white" does *not* have the content "I believe that snow is white." Well, how did we know this? Did we simply rely on our intuitions that "snow is white" is not a self-description, not about our own psychological state? If so, then perhaps Jackson and Pettit should not have taken for granted that "Snow is white" is not (at least in part) a self-description. After all, we seem to have the same intuitions about the cases they do want us to treat as self-descriptions. (Imagine an expressivist about "white", for example.)[5]

In fact, we can do better than simply appealing to intuition. We can point out that the move to interpret all assertions in this self-referential way leads to a disastrous regress. The same general principle which tells us that "Snow is white" has content "I believe that snow is white" would tell us that the latter statement has content "I believe that I believe that snow is white"; and so on. Of course, none of the resulting iterating series of statements is unacceptable in itself. What is unacceptable is just that we should be forced to keep on going. If a principle implies that we do keep on going—even if only implicitly, in the sense that we commit ourselves implicitly to all these things, in asserting "Snow is white"—then that principle must be false.

This logical point shows us that something must be backgrounded—the relation between belief and assertion cannot be such that beliefs go into the foreground, into the content of the assertions concerned. This is helpful, from my point of view, but it doesn't establish that the same thing might be true in a more local way—that there might be particular backgrounding relationships between the use of particular concepts and the grounds on which they depend. To get to this more local conclusion, we need to appeal to considerations which are more empirical than logical.

[5] More to the point, why were Jackson and Pettit entitled to help themselves to the assumption that the truth conditions of 'snow is white' are that snow is white? Why not take this to be another case in which surface usage is misleading. Perhaps the 'real' truth conditions of 'snow is white' are conjunctive: 'snow is white and I believe that snow is white', for example.

One key point is the familiar observation that language acquisition cannot be entirely explicit—we can't learn everything by learning definitions. Some concepts have to be picked up on the fly—we simply have to acquire the right habits. We have to learn to align our linguistic dispositions with other aspects of our psychology, without ever being in a position to *say* or *conceptualise the thought* that that is what we are doing. In these basic cases, then, the relation between psychological grounds and the concepts themselves seems inevitably a backgrounding one. We do not acquire a concept which in part *concerns* our psychological state. To that extent, then, the Jackson and Pettit version of Locke must be mistaken.

But now externalism intrudes again, objecting that what we are *aware of* or *capable of conceptualising* is irrelevant. Our concepts may in part "pick out" something psychological, even if we ourselves are not aware that this is the case. Again, then, this is an appeal to the externalist strategy, which I have deferred several times. In the next section, I want to argue that externalism cannot be properly motivated, once linguistic imprisonment is disallowed. If externalism can be dismissed in this way, we will have the kind of conclusion I want. There must be local backgrounding in language, at the level of individual concepts. Which concepts? I don't know, but neither does anyone else. Are they hardware dependent, and/or modular? Again, we don't know, but my point is that these are empirical matters. My main purpose here has simply been to defend this space of empirical possibilities against a philosophical move which would close it off. Externalism is the remaining threat.

2.7 Externalism regained?

The basic externalist thought is something like this. Differently-imprisoned speakers might nevertheless be referring to the same things. Differently-grounded concepts may nevertheless "hook onto" the same world.

From what stance does the externalist speak? Not from outside language, on pain of violating imprisonment. So to the extent that we can be externalists, in the light of linguistic imprisonment, we must be able to do it from where we stand, *within* the systems of concepts we possess. Externalism must speak "from within" about the relations between language and the world.

Still, what is the problem with this? Isn't the use perspective already externalist in this sense? After all, it is about covariance patterns between linguistic items and non-linguistic items. If the externalist finds reference

relations (and the like) in those patterns, the use-theorist can hardly object. True, the resulting story is in one sense already a part of the use-theory. But mightn't this be like the sense in which chemistry is already a part of physics? In one sense it may be true, and yet chemistry is worth formulating independently.

But let's think more carefully about this project of finding the semantic relations within the covariance patterns, broadly construed. First, what is at stake when we make our choice—what constraints are there on which pattern we should count as the reference pattern, for example? Obviously, it is not supposed to be a stipulative exercise. We can't simply pick out part of the pattern and call it "reference"—the project begins with the assumption that there is a right answer (near enough). And the constraint is imposed by the ordinary use of the term "reference" (or by some properly specified theoretical use, if the notion we have in mind is not thought to be the folk notion). The constraint comes to this: the reference relation is whatever these uses of the term "reference" actually *refer to*. (This could be put in terms of a Ramsey sentence.)

Now the problem is obvious. In taking this *as* a constraint, we assume the very claim at issue, namely that there are determinate semantic facts. Without this assumption, the ordinary use of the semantic terms cannot be taken to "pick out" certain features of patterns of usage (or anything else, for that matter), except in the trivial ways specifiable from within: the term "reference relation" refers to the reference relation, and such like. In other words, the project assumes with respect to the semantic terms themselves the very issue which is contentious with respect to terms in general, namely, that there is some theoretically interesting sense in which reference and truth conditions are determinate.

In fact, even if we ignored the circularity at this point—i.e., its role in the description of the motivation of the externalist task—it would emerge again, at the level of any proposed solution. For in effect, the project is to decide what natural pattern the referential concept of "hooking on to" actually hooks on to—and this is simply an equation with too many variables. (This is essentially Putnam's argument, I think, though perhaps in a different dialectical context.[6]) So the externalist strategy is doubly circular, and provides no well-grounded escape from the threat of linguistic imprisonment.

[6] I discuss this comparison in (Price, 1998b), and the more general point in (Price, 2004).

2.8 Conclusion

I have argued that there must be local backgrounding in language, at the level of individual concepts. We don't know which concepts they are, except in generic terms: they are those that do not have an available analysis within the framework as it stands. It is essentially an empirical matter which concepts these are, even if one we can investigate to some extent by introspection. Likewise, it is an empirical matter whether they are hardware dependent or modular. As I said, my main aim here has been to defend this space of empirical possibilities against a philosophical move which would close it off.

All the same, I can't resist a bit of armchair biology. I think it is very likely that many concepts will turn out to be both hardware-dependent and modular, in interesting ways. Hardware-dependence seems by far the cheapest solution to the kinds of problems which confront emerging language users. The essential point is that there's no need to *represent* what everybody has in common. It is wasteful and counterproductive to represent what doesn't change. (If we all had rose-tinted corneas, for example, it would be pointless to qualify our colour judgments by saying that they were made from that rosy perspective—far cheaper to divide through by what we have in common.) So hardware-based commonalities are likely to be backgrounded, in general. We won't develop conceptual resources where they are not needed.

Moreover, given the wide variety of very different kinds of hardware commonalities, this source of hardware-dependence seems likely also to give rise to inhomogeneity, or modularity. There are many different ways in which we are all alike: in terms of each of our sensory modalities, our temporal experience, the fact that we are agents, and so on. If we are imagining a space of possible speakers, each of these aspects seems to be an independent dimension of variability (more or less). So if each is the background to some group of concepts, the resulting language is thereby modular. Roughly, each group of concepts has a function which reflects the peculiar needs of creatures whose hardware places them in a particular kind of relation to their environment.

Thus, I think that language is very likely to turn out to exhibit the kind of perspectival character associated with the fourth cell in the table mentioned earlier. If so, then linguistic imprisonment does represent a real constraint, in the sense described at the beginning. It implies that our conceptual viewpoint is inevitably a product of our physical circumstances. Had our circumstances been different, we would not have occupied this

viewpoint. Our viewpoint is inevitably "situated" in ways which depend on our physical circumstances. In this sense, then, there is no such thing as a view from nowhere—a viewpoint which is "unsituated" in these ways. In particular, we cannot hope to achieve such a viewpoint by simply being explicit about the subjectivities—by trying to render them all in conceptual content.

This is not to deny that we may be able to make changes of degree, by restricting ourselves for certain purposes to concepts which do not exhibit particular kinds of dependence. It may be sensible to keep humour out of metaphysics, for example. More seriously, as I've argued elsewhere, it may be sensible to keep our familiar embedded temporal perspective out of discussion of issues about the physics of time asymmetry—to try to address these issues from what I called a view from nowhen (Price, 1996). One very interesting question is how far this project of "sterilising" language for particular purposes can and should be taken. There is a tendency to think that if we followed this path to its endpoint, we would reach a genuinely non-perspectival language. This tendency calls for two loud cautions, I think.

First, if our goal is an ideal scientific language, then it is far from clear that less perspectivalism is always better. Suppose it turns out that our causal and modal concepts are grounded in an Humean manner on contingent features of our circumstances: the fact that we are agents and deliberators, perhaps. Does this mean that science would be better off without these concepts? An alternative possibility is that science is, inter alia, the kind of activity which is only possible from the perspective of agents and deliberators. If so, then we should embrace the perspectival character of scientific language, rather than trying to eliminate it.[7]

The second caution is that if the argument of this paper is correct, there is an important sense in which this idealising project is misconceived. Since there is no such thing as a language without backgrounding, there is no such ideal language to be reached. We can't reach a view from nowhere by subtraction, as it were—by trying to leave out just the perspectival bits. In the Sydney real estate terms which inspired my title, the analogy goes like this. In general, one improves one's harbour view by moving closer, or by moving higher. But neither strategy leads in the limit to the harbour view to trump all harbour views. In the limit, in both cases, we end up with no view at all.

[7] For more on these themes, see (Price, 2007; 2023b).

Should we find it disturbing that linguistic imprisonment confines us in this way—that it traps us in our physical embodiment, when we try to get on with the mundane but important work of saying how things are? It may be a matter of temperament. It doesn't bother me, but perhaps I'm abnormal. In contemporary philosophy the people most likely to be bothered by it are those who see it as a threat to their preferred form of realism. For such people, the point to be emphasised is that the conclusion itself results from taking seriously a mundane naturalistic view of ourselves.[8] Given linguistic imprisonment, it turns out that naturalism and perspectivalism go hand in hand.

3. Externalism, community, and objectivity: three points on the Davidsonian triangle

I now want to make three points, related to Davidson's triangulation argument and to my two pieces (LLL and TCF) from 1999. I'll begin by asking whether Davidson's version of externalism is a threat to the thesis of LLL. The answer turns out to be no, but there is enough in Davidson's formulation of triangulation to suggest a superficial case for the other side. I want to explain how LLL can respond, even though it is not Davidson's actual view.

Second, I'll note that Davidson's own objections to the version of externalism in question take us to aspects of his view that Ramberg has emphasised, against Rorty. It also takes us to Rorty's invocation of Davidson, against a central move in my TCF. As I'll explain, I think the point backfires for Rorty. I'll back up this response with some observations from Bernard Williams (2002) about 'imaginary genealogy'.

Williams himself declines to seek such a genealogy for truth itself, partly for reasons he finds in Davidson. For my third point, I'll argue that the genealogical approach to truth I advocate in TCF has much to offer to Davidsonians. It offers significant insights about truth, without violating Davidson's prohibition on analysis or reduction.

3.1 Is Davidson's triangulated externalism a threat to LLL?

For the first point, it will be helpful to have on the table a distinction between two distinct notions that tend to be lumped together, under 'representation' and related headings. I have proposed that we distinguish

[8] A *subject* naturalist view, as I came to call it (Price, 2004).

two 'nodes' in work on representation in philosophy, cognitive science, and related fields (see Price, 2011a; 2015, Price *et al* 2013).[9] Each of these nodes is itself a cluster of notions, in the sense that the defining features of the node can themselves be developed in a number of different ways. Bracketing the latter diversity, my proposal is that we see the nodes themselves as distinct notions, rather than different aspects of the same single concept of representation.

The first node, *e-representation,* involves a world-tracking conception of representation. This is familiar in biological cases, often in association with the idea that the function of evolved representations is to co-vary with some (typically) *external* environmental condition. There are also non-biological examples, of course: the barometer reading and air pressure, and so on. What unites such cases is that some feature of the representing system is (in some sense) intended to vary in parallel with some feature of its environment, exploiting some causal mechanism.

E-representation thus emphasises the *system–world* links. The second node, *i-representation*, gives priority to *internal* connections between one representation (such as a word) and another. By this criterion, a token counts as a representation in virtue of its position in some sort of cognitive, inferential or functional architecture—its links, within a network, to other items of the same general kind. The notion is flexible enough to accommodate several different kinds of network: causal–functional, inferential, even computational. It might also be social, not internal to any single speaker. The sense of 'internal' that matters involves looking to the network, not to the world. The important thing is that the notion be divorced from any external notion of representation, thought of as a system–world relation.

These two notions of representation may have different uses, for various theoretical purposes. By the time we get to human language, from simpler forms of biological representation, in either sense, there may be no useful external notion *of a semantic kind*—no useful general notion of a relationship that words and sentences bear to the external world, that we might identify with truth and reference. The impression that there are such external relations can be regarded as a kind of trick of language—e.g., a misunderstanding of disquotational platitudes. We can hold this without rejecting the internal notion—without thinking that there is no interesting sense in which mental and linguistic representations can be

[9] (Gibbard, 2015) and my response in (Price, 2023a) may also be helpful.

characterised and identified in terms of their roles in networks of various kinds.

Some critics are unhappy with my ecumenical use of the label 'representation', in drawing this distinction. They agree with me that there is such a distinction, but insist that only one of my two categories really deserves to be called representation. However, such critics disagree amongst themselves: some say that e-representation is the real thing, others i-representation. A third group responds that any genuine representation would need both faces, agrees that these are different things, and concludes that there are no representations at all.[10] I take all of these reactions to confirm my main point. Terms such as 'representation' are used in a variety of ways in philosophy and related fields, and we need to be careful, lest we talk past each other.

As noted, e-representation is often a causally-grounded notion. Organisms, human or otherwise, use such representations to coordinate with, or *track,* relevant features of their (usually) external environments. And causation makes this possible. When things are working as they should, e-representations are *effects* of the environmental conditions they have evolved to track.[11]

Such a view is externalist in an obvious sense. It invites us to identify the content of internal states with the external circumstances they function to track. Applied to linguistic e-representations, then, it seems to challenge the 'located' view of language described above. Doesn't causality reach outside our linguistic prisons?

It may seem easy to read this as a Davidsonian objection. Davidson certainly says that he is an externalist, and his crucial notion of *triangulation* invokes easy talk of causation and the world.

> [E]ach of two people is reacting differentially to sensory stimuli streaming in from a certain direction. Projecting the incoming lines outward, the common cause is at their intersection. If the two people now note each other's reactions (in the case of language, verbal reactions), each can correlate these observed reactions with his or her stimuli <u>from the world</u>. A common cause has been determined. The triangle which gives content to thought and speech is complete. But it takes two to triangulate. Davidson, 1991, 213, underlining added

[10] It would be easy to read Davidson (1990) as an example.

[11] Millikan (1989; 2009) provides a famous example of such a view.

The last sentence here alludes to the most important reason why Davidson is *not* an e-representational externalist, in my sense. We'll come to that, but first to some more direct objections to any attempt to use triangulation as the basis of an externalist challenge to the view of LLL.

Davidson's triangulating creatures are similarly 'located', in my sense, in that they have similar sensory and perceptual responses to their environment. Think of such responses, on the part of any single individual, as the manifestation of dispositions to respond to the passing scene in certain ways. Triangulation requires that two individuals have similar dispositions. Crudely, then, what they are triangulating *on* is something like the world *as perceived by a creature with such dispositions.* The dispositions in question count as a location, or contingent ground, in my sense. We don't put them into the foreground, into the account of content given to us by triangulation, but there is no pretending that they are not there, unpinning the story.

Davidson is himself explicit about the need for similarity, on the part of the creatures doing the triangulation:

> [F]or starters we learn words for what we preverbally discriminated; we learn from creatures very like ourselves, and could not learn from creatures very unlike ourselves.
>
> Davidson, 2001d, 15

This is especially clear when we get to values. For all his talk of causation, Davidson's world is not the e-representationalist's natural world.

> Gauging the thoughts of others requires that I live in the same world with them, sharing many reactions to its major features, including its values. Davidson, 1991, 220

If we wanted to reinforce this point further, then, picking up on remarks in § 2.8, we could appeal to the perspectival character of the notion of causation itself—a notion that plays such a fundamental role in Davidson's picture (and about which, as about truth, he is anti-reductionist; see, e.g., Davidson, 1996, 20–21).

In conclusion, Davidson himself is not an e-representational externalist. As I have said, we'll come to an additional reason for this assessment in a moment. But the points here show that an e-representational caricature of

Davidson, put together from the most suitable fragments of his writings on triangulation, would not be much of a threat to the conclusions of LLL.[12]

3.2 Davidson's social externalism and Rorty's objection to TCF

We don't need to dig very deep to find Davidson's own reasons to dismiss an e-representational interpretation of his externalism. As he puts it himself:

> There are two major species of externalism: *social externalism*, which maintains that the contents of our thoughts depend, in one way or another, on interaction with other thinkers; and *perceptual externalism*, which holds that there is a necessary connection between the contents of certain thoughts and the features of the world that makes them true. Davidson, 2001, 4

Davidson's own externalism is the social variety, as he makes clear.

Even Rorty doesn't always understand how deeply this commitment runs in Davidson, as Ramberg points out. Ramberg comments on Rorty's interpretation of the following remark from Davidson's 'Three Varieties of Knowledge':

> A community of minds is the basis of knowledge; it provides the measure of all things. It makes no sense to question the adequacy of this measure, or to seek a more ultimate standard. Davidson, 1991, 218

Discussing Rorty's interpretation of this remark, and its surrounding context, Ramberg concludes like this.

[12] Rorty himself makes a similar point about Davidson in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.*

> Correspondence, for Davidson, is a relation which has no ontological preferences—it can tie any sort of word to any sort of thing. This neutrality is an expression of the fact that, in a Davidsonian view, nature has no preferred way of being represented, and thus no interest in a canonical notation. Nor can nature be corresponded to better or worse, save in the simple sense that we can have more or fewer true beliefs. Rorty, 1979, 300

Functional pluralists may raise an eyebrow or two at the use of 'nature' here (as we would to 'the world' in the same position). Otherwise, Rorty's point meshes well with the one I am making above.

> This [...] suggests to me that Rorty gets the emphasis wrong when he glosses Davidson's point that a "community of minds is the basis of knowledge" as the claim that "knowing our way around the community of beliefs is the *basis* of the rest of our knowledge." [Rorty, 1999, 587] And it is because he gets the emphasis wrong in this way that he ends up with a construal of Davidson's key point in "Three Varieties of Knowledge" that is in tension with other pragmatic Davidsonian theses. In fact, Davidson is not holding one particular kind of knowledge up as the basis for other kinds; as Rorty sees and argues, the thought that any kind of knowledge is in that sense *basic* is quite at odds with the general thrust of Davidson's paper—indeed with his antirepresentationalism in general. The basis of knowledge, any form of knowledge, whether of self, others, or the shared world, is not a community of *minds,* in the sense of mutual knowledge of neighboring belief-systems, as Rorty here takes it to be. Rather, it is a *community* of minds; that is, a plurality of creatures engaged in the project of describing their world and interpreting each other's descriptions of it. This suggestion entails no priority of one kind of knowledge of the sort that Rorty's reading suggests, but emphasizes the intersubjective nature of *all* knowledge.
>
> Ramberg, 2000, 361–62

There is some irony, for me, in Rorty's failure to appreciate the depth of Davidson's reliance on community. For it is just this aspect of Davidson's views that Rorty invoked in his objections to TCF. There, as in an earlier piece (Price, 1998a), I proceed by distinguishing the conversational norm I take to be associated with truth and falsity from two other norms: *sincerity* and *warranted assertibility*. Truth is thus my 'third norm', and the focus of the paper is on what this third norm adds to our conversational practice—on the question how things would be different if we didn't have it.

As an aid to answering this question, I imagine a speech community who don't have the third norm, but who nevertheless use speech acts to give voice to their opinions. I call such speech acts 'merely opinionated assertions', or MOAS, and imagine them used by a community called the Mo'ans. As I point out, it is easy to get to something like MOAS in our own

linguistic practices, by using devices to cancel the third norm: 'My own opinion is that P'; 'Mine is that not-P.'[13]

I was aware, of course, that it is doubtful whether the Mo'ans are a realistic possibility. But I felt that these doubts did not invalidate their use as a kind of thought experiment. Rorty focussed on this point, in the comments later published in (Rorty and Price, 2010).

> Price asks us to imagine a community in which there are no attempts at intersubjective justification, but in which its members nevertheless express "the kind of behavioral dispositions which we would characterize as beliefs [...] by means of a speech act we might call the *merely-opinionated assertion* (MOA, for short)" [Price, 2003, 172]. He admits that one might doubt the possibility of such a community: perhaps, he says, "a truth-like norm is essential to any practice which deserves to be called linguistic" [Price, 2003, 168, n. 8]. But he thinks this possibility irrelevant to his thought experiment.
>
> It seems relevant to me. I doubt that we can tell a plausible story about a Mo'an community. In particular, I do not see why a radical interpreter would construe as *assertions* the noises made by organisms that never attempt to correct one another's behavioral dispositions—never try to get others to make the same noise they do. I would advance arguments familiar from Wittgenstein, Davidson, and Brandom to urge that there must be social cooperation on projects of shared interest before language can get very far off the ground. One cannot justify by own lights if one does not know what it is to justify by the lights of others. Price's "chatter of disengaged monologues" [Price, 2003, 166] is possible only as an enclave within a culture in which there is lots of engaged dialogue.
>
> Rorty and Price, 2010, 255

To me, this response seemed to count in my favour. In TCF I had argued, against Rorty's objection to Wright, that the third norm makes a very big behavioural difference. As I put it: 'It gives disagreement its immediate normative character, a character on which dialogue depends, and a character which no lesser norm could provide' (TCF, 164). Here, Rorty seemed

[13] In Wright's (2021) terms, then, the Mo'ans are speakers who don't, or no longer, have the device of putting their opinions into a public realm.

to be conceding that point, in objecting that the Mo'an's washed-out substitute for dialogue was simply impossible. Responding to Rorty, I put the point like this.

> For my purposes, what mattered about the Mo'ans was that by seeing what their linguistic practice would lack, we see what truth adds to our own. What's missing for the Mo'ans—what the third norm provides for us—is (as I put it) "the automatic and quite unconscious sense of engagement in common purpose that distinguishes assertoric dialogue from a mere roll call of individual opinion." Let's agree, with Rorty, that when we consider the Mo'ans in the light of "arguments familiar from Wittgenstein, Davidson, and Brandom," we realize that there can be no such community. Removing that sense of engagement amounts to removing anything that might count as an assertion, or indeed as an expression of opinion, in the full-blown sense of the term. This is no reason to forget the lesson we learnt by trying to imagine the Mo'ans—on the contrary, as in many cases, the point of the thought experiment lies *precisely* in the fact that it leads us, in thought, to an impossible destination. (The lesson lies in the nature of the impossibility.)
>
> Rorty and Price, 2010, 257

This reply to Rorty was written around 2008, in response to comments that Rorty had provided in 2005. I now realise that had I read Bernard Williams's *Truth and Truthfulness* (Williams, 2002) at that point, I could have put my response in his terms. As its subtitle says, Williams's book is an essay in philosophical genealogy. Williams offers a genealogy of what he calls *truthfulness*—roughly, the fact that humans in normal communities have a tendency to *value* truth. This is not a genealogy *of truth itself*, and we will come to that point shortly. Williams invokes Davidson, in setting aside such a project.

For the moment, what's relevant is the way in which Williams characterises his approach. He draws on that of his former Cambridge colleague, Edward Craig, in *Knowledge and the State of Nature* (Craig, 1990). Under the heading 'How Can Fictions Help?', Williams describes Craig's account like this.

> Craig's example, like my own State of Nature story, is an example of what I shall call an "imaginary genealogy"—"imaginary,"

> because [. . .] there are also historically true genealogies. Imaginary genealogies typically suggest that a phenomenon can usefully be treated as functional which is not obviously so. Moreover, they resemble a larger class of explanations (including those given by natural selection theory) in explaining the functional in terms of the non-functional or, perhaps, in terms of the more primitively functional. The power of imaginary genealogies lies in introducing the idea of function where you would not necessarily expect it, and explaining in more primitive terms what the function is. Williams, 2002, 32

It is this characterisation that I could have cited in my response to Rorty.

What does Williams mean by 'function' here? He introduces the term for the first time in the preceding paragraph, at the beginning of his discussion of Craig's example.

> [Craig's] State of Nature gives an explanation, but what it explains, the concept of knowledge, does not look as though it had been designed. On the contrary: before the story, one may well never have asked what the function of the concept is, and that is part of the point. Craig's story answers, in its fictional terms, the question "Why should we have a concept such as the concept of knowledge?" and, by answering it, suggests the question itself. What the question introduces is the notion of function, and that step itself does some of the work. If one sees the concept of knowledge as having a function—in particular, a function in relation to very basic needs—this in itself helps one to see why it has the features it has, and can discourage one from less fruitful approaches. Williams, 2002, 31–32

To my eyes, this gloss looks very congenial. It is what I had in mind in *Facts and the Function of Truth* (Price, 1988) and other pieces. But, unlike Williams and Davidson, I wanted to take this stance with respect to truth itself. (I was interested in the 'point' of truth, in the sense I took from the remark of Dummett I quoted in § 2.3 above.) The last issue I want to put on the table is why Davidson never seems attracted to such a genealogical approach. So far as I can see, he never has genealogy on his radar, whether about truth or any of the other notions he regards as similarly basic. Let's approach this question via Williams, who certainly does have genealogy in view—very much so—but appeals to Davidson in resisting it in the case of truth.

3.3 Williams, Davidson, and the Function of Truth

Williams emphasises that he is seeking to explain *human concerns with truth,* not truth per se. He makes dismissive remarks about the possibility of making truth itself the focus.

> The inquiry is, then, into human concerns with the truth. A basic form of that concern lies in the virtues of truth. [...] One thing I shall not consider [...] is the history *of the concept of truth,* because I do not believe that there is any such history. The concept of truth itself—that is to say, the quite basic role that truth plays in relation to language, meaning, and belief—is not culturally various, but always and everywhere the same. [...] There are indeed scholarly books that describe themselves as histories of the concept of truth, but they typically describe conceptions, varying over time, of belief-formation, or of knowledge, or of the metaphysical structure of the world. Often, they are histories of philosophical theories of the truth. [...] The present point is that philosophical theories of truth [...] quite certainly have a history, whereas the concept of truth itself does not. Williams, 2002, 61–62

These are surprising claims for a genealogist. There's a trivial sense in which the concept of truth has a history, because, like all our concepts, our pre-linguistic ancestors did not possess it. In the light of this, the claim that truth is 'always and everywhere the same' seems cavalier. How could we know, if we're ignoring that part of the history?

Why does Williams take such an uncompromising stance on these issues? He says that he is following Davidson's lead.

> What about truth itself? If we are going to say that beliefs and assertions [...] aim to be true, or, as the State of Nature story has assumed, that it is a good idea [...] that they should be true, should we not say something about what it is for them to be true?
>
> We should say something, but not very much. In particular, we should resist any demand for a *definition* of truth, principally because truth belongs to a ramifying set of connected notions, such as meaning, reference, belief, and so on, and we are better employed in exploring the relations between these notions than in trying to treat one or some of them as the basis

> of the others. It is also true that if any of these notions has a claim to be more basic and perspicuous than the others, it is likely to be truth itself. As Davidson has put it:
>
> > [W]e cannot hope to underpin [the concept of truth] with something more transparent or easier to grasp. Truth is, as G. E. Moore, Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege maintained, and Alfred Tarski proved, an indefinable concept. This does not mean we can say nothing revealing about it: we can, by relating it to other concepts like belief, desire, cause and action. Nor does the indefinability of truth imply that the concept is mysterious, ambiguous, or untrustworthy [Davidson, 1996, 21].
>
> Williams, 2002, 63

Two comments about this. First, the genealogist is not interested in *definition* in any case. How is it relevant to the possibility of a genealogy of truth that a different project, one that the genealogist has in any case rejected, is impossible? Second, while truth may indeed be part of a package, it would be absurd to suggest that the package as whole does not have a history. Our ancestors didn't always play the game of giving and asking for reasons, of course.

In the paragraph preceding the one from which Williams quotes, Davidson puts his point more generally.

> For the most part, the concepts philosophers single out for attention, like truth, knowledge, belief, action, cause, the good and the right, are the most elementary concepts we have, concepts without which (I am inclined to say) we would have no concepts at all. Why then should we expect to be able to reduce these concepts definitionally to other concepts that are simpler, clearer, and more basic? We should accept the fact that what makes these concepts so important must also foreclose on the possibility of finding a foundation for them that reaches deeper into bedrock. Davidson, 1996, 20–21

In the case of knowledge, Williams does not seem to regard Davidson's prohibition on reductive definition as an obstacle to Craig's genealogy. Why should truth be different?

Turning to Davidson himself, it is easy to read his presentations of the triangulation argument as proto-State of Nature stories, in Craig's sense. Consider this version from 'Seeing Through Language', for example.

> The sharing of responses to stimuli found similar allows an interpersonal element to emerge: creatures that share responses can correlate each other's responses with what they are responses to. Person A responds to person B's responses to situations both A and B find similar. A triangle is thus set up, the three corners being A, B, and the objects, events, or situations to which they mutually respond. This elaborate, but commonplace, triangular interaction between creatures and a shared environment does not require thought or language; it occurs with great frequency among animals that neither think nor talk. Birds and fish do it as well as monkeys, elephants, and whales. Davidson, 1997, 140

So far, this sounds very much like an account of the State of Nature of our pre-linguistic ancestors. Davidson continues like this:

> What more is there to linguistic communication and developed thought? The answer is, I think, two things that depend on the basic triangle, and emerge from it. The first is the concept of error, that is, appreciation of the distinction between belief and truth. The interactions of the triangle do not in themselves automatically generate this appreciation, as we see from the example of simple animals, but the triangle does make room for the concept of error (and hence of truth) in situations in which the correlation of reactions that have been repeatedly shared can be seen by the sharers to break down; one creature reacts in a way previously associated by both creatures with a certain sort of situation, but the other does not. This may simply alert the non-reactor to an unnoticed danger or opportunity, but if the anticipated danger or opportunity fails to materialize, a place exists for the notion of a mistake. We, looking on, will judge that the first creature erred. The creatures themselves are also in a position to come to the same conclusion. If they do, they have grasped the concept of objective truth.)
>
> With the second, final, step, we move in a circle, for we grasp the concept of truth only when we can communicate

> the contents—the propositional contents—of the shared experience, and this requires language. The primitive triangle, constituted by two (and typically more than two) creatures reacting in concert to features of the world and to each other's reactions, thus provides the framework in which thought and language can evolve. Neither thought nor language, according to this account, can come first, for each requires the other. This presents no puzzle about priorities: the abilities to speak, perceive, and think develop together, gradually. We perceive the world through language, that is, through having language.
>
> Davidson, 1997, 140–141

Read from Craig's genealogical perspective, this suggests some questions. Why do we have these concepts of truth and error? What new job do they do, in a State of Nature of this kind?

Davidson often emphasises that the concepts of truth and error don't emerge automatically from the triangular arrangement.

> Here is my thesis: an interconnected triangle such as this (two lionesses, one gazelle) constitutes a necessary condition for the existence of conceptualization, thought, and language. It makes possible objective belief and the other propositional attitudes. [...] The simple model I have described does not, to be sure, suggest where the norm lies when the creatures differ in their responses [...] The point is not to identify the norm, but to make sense of there being a norm, and this has been done if we can point to the difference between the preponderance of cases where the creatures respond alike and the deviant cases where they diverge. Davidson, 2001d, 9

Very well, but instead of asking 'where the norm lies'—whatever Davidson means by that—let's ask the genealogist's questions. What difference does it make to *invent* a norm of this kind? And what did our ancestors need to *do*, to 'institute'[14] and sustain it?

Later in the same paper Davidson continues like this:

> We must remember, of course, that if going on in the right way means only going on as the teacher does, this is not enough in itself to constitute mastery of word or concept; there remains

[14] To borrow a term from Brandom.

> the grasp of truth conditions, the awareness of the possibility of error. Nor will punishing or correcting what the teacher sees as error suffice, for the same reason. We can say that in the potential gap between how the learner goes on and how the teacher goes on there is room to introduce the idea of error, not only in the mind of the teacher, for we are assuming it is *there*, but also in the mind of the learner. But how that room gets filled is probably beyond our powers to tell. Our failure to provide an analysis of the concept of error or, as we could as well say, of the concept of objectivity [...] does not mean there is something hopelessly mysterious about these concepts; it only reflects the fact that intentional phenomena cannot be reduced to something simpler or different. Nor does our failure mean that true grasp of concepts as opposed to mere following of routines does not reveal itself in behavior. What we cannot do is say, in non-intentional terms, in what the difference consists. Davidson, 2001d, 17

Again, my suggestion is that Davidson is looking in the wrong place. Let's grant that there is no informative *reduction* of the norms of truth and error to something 'simpler or different'. That doesn't prevent us from asking what proto-speakers need to *do*, in order to establish such a norm in their practice. I propose that what they need to do, most basically, is adopt the practice of *commending* or *criticising* fellow speakers with whom they agree or disagree, respectively. In other words, most basically, they need to treat disagreement as a sign of *fault*, on another speaker's part.

More needs to be said, of course. What is the proto-linguistic practice within which such a practice of blame and praise could develop?[15] And what does disagreement mean, if it not to be explained, circularly, as recognition that another speaker has said something *false*, by one's own lights. These are good questions, but Davidson's own elaboration of triangulation provides some of the answers, as we have seen.[16] Note that praise and blame themselves do not need to be invented, at this point in the story. As communal creatures, we surely had social carrots and sticks already. The task was simply to put them to use in a new way.

Why should Davidson object to such an approach? This is what he says about his own methodology, in 'The Folly of Trying to Define Truth'.

[15] Here the work of Dorit Bar-On (2013, 2016), on the continuities between animal communication and human language, would be a good place to start.

[16] I discussed some of these issues about disagreement in (Price, 1990).

> I want to describe what I take to be a fairly radical alternative to the theories I have been discussing and (with unseemly haste) dismissing. What I stress here is the *methodology* I think is required rather than the more detailed account I have given elsewhere. The methodology can be characterized on the negative side by saying it offers no definition of the concept of truth, nor any quasi-definitional clause, axiom schema, or other brief substitute for a definition. The positive proposal is to attempt to trace the connections between the concept of truth and the human attitudes and acts that give it body.
>
> Davidson, 1996, 35

The approach I have suggested certainly agrees with Davidson 'on the negative side'. It agrees on the positive side, too, in a sense. It is certainly proposing 'connections between the concept of truth and the human attitudes and acts that give it body'. Yet it is doing this in a vocabulary that Davidson does not appear to have in his repertoire.

A cheeky suggestion would be that Davidson was a product of the wrong Cambridge, at the wrong time, somehow falling between the pragmatist pillars in each. He was no stranger to Ramsey, of course. He coined the term 'Ramsey effect' (1999, 32), for the discovery that Ramsey already solved the problem to which one has just devoted so much thought. Yet he seems to have missed Ramsey's brand of pragmatic genealogy, which throws such useful though non-reductive light on concepts such as truth, probability and causation—in other words, on some of the very concepts that Davidson lists as 'so important [that we] must [...] foreclose on the possibility of finding a foundation for them that reaches deeper into bedrock' (1996, 20–21).

This question about Davidson's apparent blindness to genealogy deserves a more thorough treatment than I can give it here. Writers who know Davidson better than me might be able to reach deeper into his own bedrock, to throw some light on the matter. But for the moment, concerning truth, I conclude that Davidson, like Rorty and Williams himself, could have benefitted from a deeper immersion in Ramsey's Cambridge pragmatism.

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Remnants of Representationalism: Rorty as Refined by Ramberg

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A remarkable philosophical shift within the pragmatist tradition occurred 25 years ago as a result of an exchange between Bjørn Ramberg and Richard Rorty. In several articles, Rorty had raised the suspicion that Donald Davidson, despite his anti-representationalist commitments, remains tethered to representationalism by privileging certain vocabularies as of particular philosophical interest and attaching particular significance to the concept of truth. In his paper "Post-ontological Philosophy of Mind: Rorty versus Davidson", Ramberg (2000) addresses these concerns. Ramberg not only defends Davidson's position but also the relevance of the vocabulary of intentionality. Davidson's anomalous monism serves to underwrite the distinctiveness of this vocabulary of agency, as Ramberg also refers to it, situating it as needful in understanding ourselves as agents and countering reductive tendencies. In his response to this paper, Rorty reorients his stance on truth and on the philosophical interest in vocabularies considerably, concluding that he was mistaken to take his criticism of representationalism to imply a denial of the view that true statements get things right.[1]

In the following, I examine the resulting position, Rorty's anti-representationalism as shaped by Ramberg's friendly criticism. Ramberg introduces a distinction between vocabularies—defined primarily by the purposes they serve—and the claims or theories articulated within those vo-

[1] Rorty's shift has confounded some of his readers to the extent they have argued he was prepared to relinquish his anti-representationalist views (see Huetter-Almerigi, 2020 for discussion of some examples).

cabularies. I argue that taking this vocabulary/theory distinction to its extremes leads to Rorty's revised stance, ultimately revealing the untenability of the distinction itself. The philosophical interest in the vocabulary of agency is to be sought elsewhere. I suggest that the real significance of that vocabulary lies in its normative dimension highlighted by Rorty's discussion. Beyond explaining intentional actions, the normative dimension of the vocabulary of agency enables us to detect certain causal patterns of our experience, something that Ramberg's discussion also appears to suggest, even if only in passing. These patterns were central to the classical pragmatists, who proposed an empirical and experimental approach to normative inquiry. This possibility, I argue, has been obscured by lingering elements of representationalism in Rorty's thought—specifically, the contention that if normative vocabulary is geared toward empirical inquiry, it loses its distinctiveness.

Two concerns with Davidson

In a number of papers, Rorty had raised two central concerns regarding Davidson's philosophy. First, he questioned why Davidson accords special significance to the concept of truth, rather than interpreting it as merely an empirical theory of truth-conditions in a language that predicts regularities in speakers' behaviour. Second, Rorty critiqued the position of particular interest Davidson gives to intentional vocabulary, descriptions that invoke intentionality or rationality in explaining human behaviour. According to Rorty, Davidson's anti-reductionist arguments about intentional vocabulary in particular remain, as Ramberg puts it, "a hangover from the days of ontology" (Ramberg, 2000, 367). If, as anti-representationalists hold, "adequacy to the world" cannot explain the success or failure of discursive practices (Ramberg, ibid., 354), then the vocabulary of intentionality is of no particular philosophical interest. More broadly, reductive efforts across different vocabularies hold little philosophical significance. Rorty attributed both concerns to Davidson's lingering adherence to representationalist commitments, in particular, Quine's "invidious distinction" between indeterminacy and underdetermination, a contrast that, Rorty argued, Davidson's critique of the notion of truth as a relation between words and the world and his rejection of the primacy of physicalist vocabulary should have dispelled.

Ramberg responds to Rorty's concerns by focusing primarily on the second issue, reframing Davidson's position in terms of choice between

different vocabularies. He first argues that Rorty mislocates the source of Davidson's reticence about the vocabulary of agency. Nevertheless, secondly, Ramberg acknowledges that even correcting this mislocation does little to alleviate Rorty's broader worry—that there is no particular philosophical interest in the intentional vocabulary or, more generally, in examining reductive attempts between vocabularies. Ramberg contends, however, that Rorty overlooks a reason Davidson finds the vocabulary of intentionality distinctive. This oversight opens the way to a third theme: a pragmatist vision of where the philosophical interest in vocabularies may lie, particularly in relation to intentional vocabulary.

To begin with the first topic, Rorty had long criticised Quine's distinction as rooted in Quine's privileging of physicalist vocabulary, arguing that the indeterminacy of translation is merely an instance of the underdetermination of theories by observational evidence. Ramberg, however, argues that Davidson uses the same terminology when pointing to a different distinction, one that he then recasts in terms of vocabularies rather than ontological commitments. On Ramberg's account, underdetermination is what we could call an intra-vocabulary matter, where "within some vocabulary, two theories may comport equally well with the statements that capture some body of what we regard as relevant evidence" (Ramberg, ibid., 361). Indeterminacy, by contrast, is an inter-vocabulary phenomenon that obtains "when we settle on a theory within one vocabulary" so that "this will not necessarily mandate a choice of theory in another, even though we want to say that we are, in the two vocabularies, in some sense talking about the same things or events" (Ramberg, ibid., 361). In other words, indeterminacy obtains when two vocabularies are used to discuss the same subject matter and are nevertheless irreducible to one another. To these conditions, we might wish to add a third: that this predicament is not taken to imply that either vocabulary is mistaken—for example, in the context of the "mental", we need not side with either physicalism or psychicalism. Recast in this way, Davidson's distinction can be made without appealing to representational privilege of any vocabulary.

However, Ramberg argues, Rorty's main concern remains unaddressed. Conditions of indeterminacy do not, by themselves, render any particular vocabulary of philosophical interest. Indeed, Ramberg argues, Davidson later maintains that vocabularies of different physical sciences may enter into conditions of indeterminacy with respect to the vocabulary of physics: "Davidson grants that the relevant kind of law—that is, the strict kind—is no more likely to link special sciences to physics than it is to link psy-

chology to physics" (Ramberg, ibid., 362). However, Ramberg argues that the vocabulary of intentionality is a point of philosophical interest as the vocabulary of *agency*. Its distinctiveness lies not merely in its inclusion of norms embodied in the predicates of agency. It lies in "the particular way in which the normative element gives structure to the vocabulary" (Ramberg, ibid., 362). The vocabulary of agency highlights the normative similarities sought when describing creatures as agents: "To say what it is a language user does, we invoke normative notions", notions which "perform their function by depicting us as error-makers, and thus also knowers of some truths, and hence also capable, by producing new descriptions, of modifying our causal dispositions" (Ramberg, ibid., 364). In this way, the vocabulary of agency is required for us to identify ourselves and one another as describing anything, for describing "is an ability we have only because it is possible for others to see us as in general conforming to the norms that the predicates of agency embody" (Ramberg, ibid., 362). This is why, Ramberg explains, Davidson places such importance on the concept of truth despite his anti-representationalism. Rather than providing a predictive model for speaker behaviour, the vocabulary of agency makes Davidson's principle of charity indispensable for language users, establishing the ideal interpreter's theory of behaviour as a theory of truth—or, Ramberg suggests, "perhaps of error" (Ramberg, ibid., 362). Namely, it is the concept of error that "marks our ability to get our noises and (the rest of the) world prized locally apart to a sufficient extent to allow for intentionality, for there being meaning and mind, that is to say, for there being a point to treating some things as thinkers, with a point of view on the world" (Ramberg, ibid., 363).

Nevertheless, this remains insufficient to demonstrate that there is anything of philosophical interest in a particular vocabulary, even one as distinctive as that of agency. Ramberg notes that the conception of philosophical interest Rorty "sometimes works with" implies that "there is nothing which would be of philosophical interest in particular" (Ramberg, ibid., 365). However, Ramberg suggests that Rorty's "areductivist" stance, which removes the "success or failure of the reduction of one vocabulary to another of all ontological significance" (Ramberg, ibid., 365), does not entail that the failure reductive efforts are devoid of philosophical interest. Rather, different vocabularies serve as ways of "bringing salience to different causal patterns in the world, patterns with which we engage" (Ramberg, ibid., 363). Moreover, vocabularies can be evaluated based on their capacity to serve various human purposes and interests

that provide "the ultimate terms of any evaluation" (Ramberg, ibid., 365). The vocabulary of agency serves as a case in point:

> What links special sciences together, if anything does, into a single contrastive entity with respect to the vocabulary of agency, is not an alleged reducibility of any bona fide natural science to a purely structural vocabulary (basic science, ideal physics, what have you). Rather it is a certain homogeneity of interest; that it can be characterized in terms of a purely predictive aspect. [...] With agency-vocabulary, by contrast, we are characterizing a domain of kinds of objects (language-users) with a vocabulary not just geared toward prediction of the behavior of that kind. Or perhaps we should rather say that the predictive interests that are expressed in the dynamics of agency-vocabulary are of a very peculiar sort—they turn on our revealing the kinds of traits that allow us to recognize ourselves in what we are talking about, and to bring to bear all those complicated considerations that we gesture at with the moral notion of a person. Ramberg, 2000, 366

The vocabulary of agency serves an important purpose, Ramberg argues, by being "designed to keep us from trying to pursue the purposes for which we use it with vocabularies built for prediction and control of manipulable objects" (Ramberg, ibid., 367). It leaves us better off, Ramberg proposes, in the sense of "politically more free", by resisting the "steady spread of dehumanizing, homogenizing management of human existence that is the real threat of scientism" (Ramberg, ibid., 367).

Ramberg, building on Davidson, opens a pathway that Rorty not only appreciates but pursues. To begin with the second concern, Ramberg, Rorty contends, has shown how the vocabulary of agency is of particular note:

> There are many descriptive vocabularies (many "ways of bringing salience to different causal patterns in the world," as Ramberg puts it) and many different communities of language-users, but we must always both pick some such pattern and belong to some such community. We cannot stop prescribing, and just describe, because the describing counts as describing only if rule-governed, only if conducted by people who talk about each other in the vocabulary of agency.
>
> Rorty, 2000, 372

Despite agreement over this general point, however, we may note two significant differences between Ramberg's arguments and their restatement by Rorty who aspires to "strengthen them rather than weaken them" (Rorty, ibid., 370). Firstly, while Ramberg suggested that the vocabulary of agency is needful for the purpose of recognising ourselves and one another as describing anything, Rorty maintains that the vocabulary of agency "is privileged, not by irreducibility, but by inescapability" (Rorty, ibid., 373). Secondly, Ramberg focuses on the vocabulary of intentionality, or as he terms it toward the end of his discussion, the vocabulary of agency. By contrast, Rorty shifts the discussion from "the descriptive vocabulary of intentionality" to the "prescriptive vocabulary of normativity" (Rorty, ibid., 373). In Rorty's rendering, it seems the vocabulary of normativity may be applicable on creatures describable in the vocabulary of intentionality, in line with the distinction he proposes between the (intentional) concept of a mind and the (moral or normative) concept of a person.[2]

Turning to the first issue, the renewed relevance of the vocabulary of agency prompts Rorty to articulate what appears, at first glance, to be a significant revision of his position: a realisation that he has relinquished the concept of truth, giving it away to the representationalists. "It was a mistake on my part to go from criticism of attempts to define truth as accurate representation of the intrinsic nature of reality to a denial that true statements get things right" (Rorty, ibid., 374), Rorty now claims, elaborating further on the implications of this shift: "*What is true in pragmatism is that what you talk about depends not on what is real but on what it pays you to talk about. What is true in realism is that most of what you talk about you get right*" (Rorty, ibid., 374, emphasis in the original). Nevertheless, Rorty carefully distinguishes his revised stance from a return to representationalism. Qualifying the ramifications of this change of heart, Rorty argues that he can still "maintain that there is no such thing as the search for truth, as distinct from the search for happiness" (Rorty, ibid., 376).

> "Happiness," in the relevant sense, means "getting more of the things we keep developing new descriptive vocabularies in or-

[2] However, we can detect some wavering in Rorty's view. At points, he suggests that the mastery of the vocabulary of normativity is a prerequisite for deploying a descriptive vocabulary: "We could not deploy the descriptive vocabulary unless we could also deploy the normative one" (Rorty,ibid., 372). Ramberg's point appears subtler. He suggests that recognising someone as *using* a descriptive vocabulary requires the vocabulary of agency, but this does not preclude the possibility of creatures using descriptive vocabularies without themselves mastering philosophical logic, or the intricacies of Davidson's notion of coherence, and consequently without recognising themselves in these terms.

> der to get." [...] Intellectual progress is not progress toward better and better representations of what is out there. It is not a matter of separating apparent patterns from real patterns. It is, in Ramberg's terms, finding more and more useful ways of "bringing salience to different causal patterns in the world." No such pattern (for instance, the pattern made salient by positron-talk as opposed to the pattern made salient by Zeus-talk) is more "real" than any other such pattern. Utility for human happiness is all that distinguishes them.
>
> Rorty 2000, 376

Invidious distinctions

Rorty's position represents a striking shift, both as a modification of his philosophical stance and as a response to Ramberg's amicable critique. The resulting vision, however, warrants critical consideration. Ramberg's criticism relies on a distinction between vocabularies—distinguished primarily by the purposes they fulfil—and the claims or theories articulated within those vocabularies. Taking this vocabulary/theory distinction to its extremes leads to Rorty's revised stance: much of what we say is broadly correct, though an alternative vocabulary might serve us better. The implications of this extreme version of the distinction ultimately reveal its untenability.

The overall reasons this distinction ultimately fails are tied to what Quine called the first dogma of empiricism. The vocabulary/theory distinction is not identical to the analytic/synthetic distinction. In different vocabularies, we may expect Ramberg and Rorty to agree, there is no sharp divide between matters resolved through conceptual or linguistic analysis and others that cannot be so resolved. However, the two distinctions share a common vulnerability. Just like the first dogma, the vocabulary/theory distinction relies on a separation of "pragmatic" considerations, which guide vocabulary choice, from the empirical considerations that influence theory choice. This recalls Quine's critique of C. I. Lewis and Rudolf Carnap in the closing lines of *Two Dogmas*:

> Carnap, Lewis, and others take a pragmatic stand on the question of choosing between language forms, scientific frameworks; but their pragmatism leaves off at the imagined boundary between the analytic and the synthetic. In repudiating

> such a boundary I espouse a more thorough pragmatism. Each man is given a scientific heritage plus a continuing barrage of sensory stimulation; and the considerations which guide him in warping his scientific heritage to fit his continuing sensory promptings are, where rational, pragmatic. Quine, 1951, 43

In this instance, Quine's position is perfectly in line with that of the classics of the pragmatist tradition. Peirce, James and Dewey made no attempt to separate empirical and pragmatic questions but, rather, sought to elucidate the former through the latter. "Pragmatic" considerations concerning how effectively our theories allow us to navigate experience are to be seen as an indicator of truth. However, these considerations are inseparable from considerations of predictive success. Realising that such success varies significantly across different fields—and much to the irritation of many of their readers—James and Dewey framed their ideas in somewhat vague and flexible terms. This was a deliberate effort, as James makes clear, for example in his discussion on truth and "satisfaction":

> Ordinary epistemology contents itself with the vague statement that the ideas must 'correspond' or 'agree'; the pragmatist insists on being more concrete, and asks what such 'agreement' may mean in detail. He finds first that the ideas must point to or lead towards that reality and no other, and then that the pointings and leadings must yield satisfaction as their result. So far the pragmatist is hardly less abstract than the ordinary slouchy epistemologist; but as he defines himself farther, he grows more concrete. James, 1909, 191

The classical pragmatists' view of the "pragmatic" threatens the possibility of neatly distinguishing between choices between vocabularies and theories, or separating inter-vocabulary issues from intra-vocabulary affairs.[3] Quine's remark on precisely the kind of Zeus-talk that Rorty invokes puts the point succinctly enough:

> Let me interject that for my part I do, qua lay physicist, believe in physical objects and not in Homer's gods; and I consider it

[3] These vague formulations are not intended to imply that is simply "what works", as the critics of pragmatism have misrepresented this stance (see Rydenfelt 2021). James contributed to this misconception by engaging in definitional debates with Russell, even titling his 1909 collection *The Meaning of Truth*. But by such "meaning", he meant the "pragmatist" interpretation in terms of our practices of inquiry.

> a scientific error to believe otherwise. But in point of epistemological footing the physical objects and the gods differ only in degree and not in kind. Both sorts of entities enter our conception only as cultural posits. The myth of physical objects is epistemologically superior to most in that it has proved more efficacious than other myths as a device for working a manageable structure into the flux of experience. Quine, 1951, 41

"Pragmatic" assessment, it turns out, is nothing other than the kind of broadly empirical assessment of vocabularies, in terms of whether the causal chains they highlight are ultimately useful. The vocabulary/theory distinction is yet another invidious one.

To frame these points differently, it seems we have come full circle. The positivist programme began with a scrutiny of the privileged vocabulary of our time: that of physical science, archetypically physics. Philosophers then sought to understand what this meant ontologically—how this vocabulary, as opposed to others, managed to represent Reality. Ultimately it became abundantly clear that no non-circular case could be made. Indeed, according to anti-representationalists of Rorty's and Ramberg's stripe, there is *nothing* of philosophical interest to say about how vocabularies connect to reality. This realisation evokes the image of the anti-representationalist philosopher as a quietist, or at best a therapist sitting silently in their chair while their client on the sofa—another philosopher, or perhaps someone exposed to Descartes at an impressionable age—arrives at the same conclusions.

But it emerges that vocabularies serve various purposes and respond to distinct human needs. The task of philosophy may be one of redescription, the invention of new vocabularies. This vision casts the philosopher as a liberal poet—a figure well exemplified by the literary ingenuity of Rorty and Ramberg—who steps in when scientism tightens its grip on cherished concepts, or (what is often the same condition) when discursive transformation becomes necessary to combat cruelty and oppression. With Ramberg's aid, however, Rorty is sprinting towards the end of the poetic road. Ramberg introduces the notion of a pragmatic assessment of vocabularies to underscore this renewed philosophical interest in discursive interventions. However, the pragmatic assessment of vocabularies in terms of whether the causal chains they foreground are ultimately useful, as suggested here, is not neatly separable from the broadly empirical assessment of theories. Moreover, if vocabularies with predictive

success emerge as useful in achieving human happiness—more efficacious than our "other myths"—we easily find ourselves back where we started: a kind of scientism, or at least a strong preference for the hugely successful vocabularies of the physical sciences.

The normative and philosophical interests

Ramberg draws from Davidson's anomalous monism to argue for the pragmatic needfulness of engaging with the vocabulary of agency. Does the collapse of the vocabulary/theory distinction mean that the vocabulary of agency is devoid of philosophical interest? Not necessarily. However, it suggests that the focus on having the vocabulary at our disposal in the first place is, in itself, a misleading way of assessing its relevance. For a vocabulary to hold philosophical interest, it must trace a causal pattern that is salient, as Ramberg nicely puts it, with respect to our "ability to reprogram our causal dispositions through salience-alteration" (Ramberg, 2000, 363). The relevance of a vocabulary is not merely its availability but rather the causal patterns it enables us to trace, in turn leading to action and differing outcomes. The question then becomes: what are these causal patterns?

There is, of course, a causal pattern that, in Davidson's view, the vocabulary of agency uniquely illuminates. It is the causal pattern between the "mental" or intentional states and ensuing events or changes in our physical environment. Because of the anomalism of the mental, this pattern is not governed by strict laws; the vocabulary that traces it remains irreducible to those of physical sciences. Instead, tracing the patterns highlighted by the vocabulary of agency requires an assumption of rationality—a notion Davidson attempts to articulate through his concept of truth and the principle of charity.

However, these Davidsonian starting points fix our attention to the dual descriptions of a single event—such as cases of "mental-physical" causation—that are irreducible to one another, that is, indeterminate in the sense Ramberg outlines. This focus draws our attention from *other* salient causal patterns marked by the vocabulary of agency. Rorty's substantial shift from intentionality to the normative dimension of this vocabulary could be used as a stepping stone toward an alternative perspective, one that concentrates on the content of claims made in the normative vocabulary of agency—couched in terms such as "good", "evil", "right" and "wrong"—and the causal patterns that they aspire to highlight.

Indeed, Ramberg hints at such an alternative picture of the relevance of the vocabulary of agency. Three elements of such a picture emerge from the lengthy quotation already discussed. First, Ramberg (ibid., 366) observes that Davidson's later views imply no expectation that the vocabulary of physical sciences could be reduced to a "purely structural vocabulary" of "basic science" or "ideal physics, what have you". Second, describing the contrast between the vocabulary of agency with those of the physical sciences, Ramberg notes that "perhaps we should rather say that the predictive interests that are expressed in the dynamics of agency-vocabulary are of a very peculiar sort". This opens the possibility that the vocabulary of agency, too, might engage in prediction, albeit of a "peculiar" nature. Third, Ramberg hints at linking such predictions to the kinds of considerations we "gesture at with the moral notion of a person".

Taking these suggestions further enables us to develop an alternative perspective on the causal patterns traced by the claims made in the normative vocabulary, beginning with the third element, the moral notion of a person. Consider an individual who is utterly insensitive to cruelty and its consequences, indifferent even when directly witnessing its results. Such a person may still possess rights—remain a person in the moral sense. However, they could no longer be seen as capable of making moral commitments. Similar considerations apply to coherence, truth, and other normative concepts that guide how we make sense of others. These notions shape our understanding of the moral person or the logical person—despite the fact that our assessment of ourselves and others always takes place from our own, fallible perspective. However, when we describe others through the moral concept of a person—one who is both responsible for their actions and a bearer of both rights and duties—we not only assume that their intentional actions are governed by coherence and so on. We also imply that they are *sensitive* to certain patterns in our experience.

Such considerations did not escape the early pragmatist thinkers, who proposed an empirical approach to normative inquiry. They rejected both an *a priori* approach to ethics and the reduction of normativity to the descriptive issues within social sciences, psychology or similar fields. While acknowledging the distinctiveness of the questions and problems addressed by normative and descriptive inquiries, they argued that both could be approached through the same scientific methodology. Peirce envisioned such inquiry as encompassing a triad of normative sciences, logic, ethics, and aesthetics. Dewey, particularly in his writings from the 1920s

and 1930s on ethics, logic, epistemology and the philosophy of science, offered perhaps the most thorough articulation of an empirical and experimental approach to ethics. He proposed that values could be revised and ethical norms empirically confirmed by examining their observable consequences. Dewey's vision suggests that claims made in the normative vocabulary can be transformed into a topic of experimental inquiry characterised with an interest in prediction—focusing on the predictive interests peculiar to that vocabulary as gestured at by the second element that emerges in Ramberg's discussion.

The details of these proposals need not concern us here.[4] Instead, more pressing is the absence of this vision from the trajectory of pragmatist thought as it moves from Quine to Davidson and from Rorty to Ramberg. Three explanations suggest themselves. First, the omission stems from one of Quine's (at least one-time) commitments, articulated in *Epistemology Naturalized* (1969): that questions of normativity belong within psychology, conceived as a branch of the natural sciences. Second, although Rorty rejects Quine's vision, he—largely following Ramberg—accepts another assumption: that normative vocabulary ought not be invested with the predictive ambitions central to the physical sciences. Davidson (1995) had explored the idea of a "science of rationality" concerned with the description, prediction, and explanation of intentional actions and associated attitudes—intention, belief, desire, linguistic meaning. This might well explain why Rorty decides to frame his discussion as one on the normative vocabulary instead of the vocabulary of intentionality to shield the normative vocabulary from predictive use and thus from becoming an instrument of control. By implicitly distinguishing it from the vocabulary of intentionality, Rorty succeeds in bringing the normative vocabulary into focus; however, he—along with Ramberg—remains entangled in the worry that its predictive use would reduce it to a tool of control. What remains unexplored, however, is how this concern might lose its grip if we shift focus from what such vocabulary reveals about human conduct to the features of life, experience, and world that terms like "good" and "wrong" bring salience to.

Finally, the third explanation are the remnants of representationalism which continue to obscure the potential of such a shift, despite how it is prefigured by the classics of the pragmatist tradition: we may *learn* how the issues we address with normative vocabulary can be transformed into topics of scientific—empirical, even experimental—inquiry without first having to ascertain, by way of Ontology, that the relevant "facts" obtain,

[4] For those details, see Rydenfelt (2023a; 2023b; 2025).

or confirm, in terms defined by Epistemology, that they can be traced by empirical means.

Conclusion

Rorty's concern was that Davidson remains mired in the representationalist view in finding the vocabulary of intentionality and the notion of truth of particular philosophical interest. Alleviating these concerns, Ramberg argues that the vocabulary of agency and the notion of truth occupy a special place for Davidson because of the way in which they enable us to recognise ourselves and others as creatures able to make the kind of commitments required for counting as "describing" anything. Moreover, the vocabulary of agency remains of philosophical interest as it resists attempts to understand human life and action in terms of prediction and control.

In Rorty's hands, Ramberg's proposal evolves into a distinction between vocabularies and theories—another distinction that, I have argued, proves invidious. The philosophical interest in the vocabulary of agency arises not merely because we prefer to use it to describe ourselves but because of the salience of the causal patterns it may trace. In the end, it is not our type of talk but the truths that our vocabularies may enable us to trace that should set us free. Rather than concentrating on explaining events through the vocabulary of intentionality, we should—as suggested by Ramberg's concept of the moral person and Rorty's shift to discussing the normative vocabulary—focus on the causal patterns of salience that normative claims and notions enable us to trace. The classical pragmatists embraced this perspective naturally; Ramberg also anticipates it in his analysis of Davidson's later work, which rejects the presumption that the vocabularies of the physical sciences are reducible to that of a basic science. However, Davidson—in Ramberg's portrayal—and Rorty are not inclined to explore this possibility. This reluctance, I have argued, arises from lingering representationalist assumptions—particularly the contention that normative vocabulary is not to be directed toward prediction, lest it lose its distinctiveness and risk becoming an instrument of control and oppression. This outcome can be avoided, however, by embracing a more thorough pragmatism.[5]

[5] I'm heavily indebted to Yvonne Huetter-Almerigi, Jonathan Knowles, Robert Kraut, Sami Pihlström and Robert Sinclair for comments and discussions. This research has

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Triangulation and Ethics: Accord or Discord?

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Foreword

I am very happy for the opportunity to honor Bjørn Ramberg to whom I am deeply indebted for our many years of inspiring friendship, collaboration, and conversation, and for the encouragement and stimulus provided by his texts.

The gist of this essay is an attempt to understand whether Donald Davidson's triangulation thesis—the main purpose of which is epistemological—is wide enough to comprise an understanding of ethics. The question is pressing, since Davidson seemed to hold that ethics is a fundamental issue in philosophy,[1] although his writings rarely, if ever, concern ethics. However, he discusses themes *related* to ethics, such as Plato's late philosophy in his book about Plato's dialogue *Philebus* (Davidson 1990), his discussions of self-deception and weakness of the will, and his concern with the philosophy of Baruch de Spinoza, which connects also with Kantian and Hegelian themes (Davidson 1999). Some essays deal more explicitly with meta-ethical themes, such as "Expressing evaluations" (1984), "The interpersonal comparison of values" (1986) and "The objectivity of values" (1994).

Triangulation

Let me first briefly recapture the essence of the triangulation thesis. In its primitive form, it says that only creatures that correlate their responses

[1] Cf. Pascal Engel, 2017

to a shared observation of an object in their world, are able to locate and individuate the object. In its more sophisticated form, it says that only someone who interacts linguistically with other persons and the world they share, correlating their responses to the same feature of the environment, can have language and objective thought.[2] Davidson developed this conception into a dynamic understanding of language and linguistic communication, which has been central in his work over the last twenty years of his life. In this essay, I take a particular interest in his late philosophy, after he broke with a representationalist worldview, emancipating also from the limitations of analytic philosophy.[3]

This is also the background for Davidson's radical and controversial essay "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (1986), where he discards the traditional philosophical notion of what a language is. He remarks that when we deal with other people, we are constantly interpreting their behavior, revising our interpretations in light of our attempts to make sense of it, and attributing beliefs to them. We must give up the idea of understanding language as an entity, with a defined, shared structure language-users acquire and apply to cases. Linguistic meaning is what a speaker produces here and now. The radical interpreter must dynamically construe what a speaker is doing, rather than untangling a fixed structure that the speaker possesses. She must continually modify her truth-theories, according to circumstance and context, which Davidson describes as employing an on-going dynamic between "prior" and "passing" theories.[4] More recently, Peter Ludlow has argued that we commonly *modulate* the meaning of words and sentences in all kinds of conversations. We tend to build what Ludlow calls "micro-languages" on the fly, where we openly debate how we should modulate the meaning of our words and sentences.[5] Accordingly, a theory of truth-theoretical semantics for natural languages "can never be more than an idealized static model."[6]

[2] Cf. Davidson, 1997, 128. Thus, also animals and babies are able to triangulate (cf. the study of babies in Tomasello, 2009). Some animals cooperate intentionally to catch prey, e.g. orcas and African wild dogs.

[3] A forerunner to the concept of triangulation was the concept of *charity*, applied as an essential constraint on the construal of meaning by radical interpretation. Originally, Davidson called the principle of charity a principle of rational accommodation, which meant that an interpreter should opt for maximizing agreement between her and the speaker.

[4] Davidson, 1986/2005, 101, ff.

[5] Ludlow 2014. For an overview of the development of the philosophy of language in modern times, see Michael Losonsky 2006.

[6] Ramberg, 2015, 13. A related dynamism in the understanding of language and linguistic understanding can be traced back at least to Wittgenstein's late philosophy, in particular *Philosophical Investigations* (PI).

The question persists though: is there room for ethics in a *dynamic* triangulation figure, even if there are few traces of ethics in Davidson's writings? Robert H. Myers and Claudine Verheggen 2016 appear to think so when they argue that for Davidson, the constraints on interpretation—that our beliefs are by and large true and about an objective reality—entail that there are also objective standards to which our desires and evaluative judgments are answerable,[7] although there is a measure of indeterminacy in our communication about them.[8]

An ontological and social-dynamic figure

Following this question, an appropriate reference to begin with is Jeff Malpas 2011.[9] He argues convincingly for the idea that the triangulation figure is ontological, which has bearing on the question whether ethics may be encompassed by it.

The three ideas that lie at the heart of triangulation, both in topographic surveying and in philosophical employment are, according to Malpas, *process*, *relationality* and *surface*[10], which designate a process of ongoing interaction between speakers, and between speakers and the world. This dynamic process is constitutive of the content of the speakers' communication—what in the world they are speaking about—and so, according to Malpas, it is only through the relational interaction between speakers and world, that speakers come to be speakers, and behavior comes to be action. These features of triangulation constitute it as not only an epistemological, but an ontological thesis; "it concerns the very *being* of content".[11]

Malpas underlines the transcendental character of triangulation by drawing connections to Kant and particularly Hegel: "there can be no

[7] Cf. Ch. 6 in Myers and Verheggen, 2016 and Davidson's articles from the early eighties on his unified theory of meaning and action, which were generalized to embrace desires and values. (Davidson, 1984 and 1995.)

[8] Cf. also Lillehammer, 2007, and Carol Rovane on relativism, e.g., Rovane, 2004.

[9] Amoretti and Preyer, 2011, 257–79.

[10] Malpas, 2011, 259–60.

[11] Malpas, 2011, 263. He affirms that triangulation therefore does not merely operate *upon* content, it is what *establishes* content. This claim is contested, though, e.g., Dostal, 2011. Malpas counters the criticism by referring to Davidson's commitment to what Malpas acknowledges as a set of ontological claims, "about, for instance, the nature of mind, meaning, belief and knowledge", and further that Davidson's project has a *transcendental* character, which is a mode of ontological inquiry, transforming "the conception of what ontology might be" (Malpas, 268, n10).

doubt that Hegel's conception of the inter-related character of self, other and world, has not only exerted a powerful effect on the history of modern philosophical thought, but that it is also an account which, in certain key aspects, can be seen to be mirrored in Davidsonian triangulation."[12]

Thus, we may conclude that Malpas—one of the foremost Davidson-interpreters—recommends that we conceive of triangulation as a transcendental condition for what content is for sapient creatures, as expressed in their linguistic communication. It is not only an epistemological bedrock for what we may have knowledge about; it is an ontological bedrock in the sense that without it the idea of content would be senseless.

This makes the question of ethics even more pertinent: does the ontological status of triangulation allow us to include an understanding of ethics in the triangulative landscape? There is nothing in Davidson's arguments of the fundamental role of triangulation that concerns whether there is a role also for ethics as part of it. But there is neither anything there that denies that there is such a role. His thoughts are concentrated on the epistemic consequences of triangulation. There is no speculation about ethics in Malpas' account either.

Let me then turn to the essay Bjørn Ramberg and I wrote about triangulation in the same volume as Malpas. Here we looked at how we could understand the triangulation thesis if we viewed it from the perspective of Robert B. Brandom's inferentialism.[13]

Our perspective was to locate what we called a *Radical Davidson* in the triangulative crossing lines between such a position, Brandomian inferentialism, and a conservative rendering of Davidson. This connects with the emphasis on construing the conceptual as a dynamic interaction.[14] Our thought was that we simply cannot capture how creatures communicate successfully, relying on their environment in doing so, through merely delineating a causal pattern in non-intentional terms.

Thus, Bjørn and I moved our attention to the *social* aspect of triangulation, which is present from the beginning of our lives. When Davidson says that a child not yet into thought and speech, could not know by itself what in the environment it was responding to, it should not be taken as pertaining to the causal stream of stimuli hitting its senses, but as a claim to the effect that the child will not pay attention to a table or a chair in its vicinity, as long as they do not play any role in the child's

[12] Malpas, op. cit. 273.
[13] Fergestad and Ramberg, 2011.
[14] Cf. Fergestad and Ramberg, 2011, 223.

social world. The child has to *learn*—through learning to speak—what to respond to, and how to respond. And our responses as sapient creatures to environmental stimuli, once we *have* learnt to speak, for example classifying something as an object, must, according to Brandom, be stated and assessed in the space of reasons, i.e., in linguistic, inferential, discursive practice, as a *commitment* that can serve as and be in need of reasons.[15] Someone's response to an external impression becomes conceptual content only when it is given the normative authority that the inferential discourse confers on it.

This view, we found, chimes better with Davidson's triangulation *examples* than it does with his general account. But Davidson underlines more clearly than Brandom that the socio-dynamic learning practices of triangulation are corporeal and not merely discursive, i.e., they include corporeal items, such as tables, soaps, etc. in the world of a child who is learning to convert the *sounds* 'table,' 'soap,' etc. into the *words* 'table', 'soap', etc.[16] This takes us to the essence of Brandom's conception, namely that for this transition to happen, i.e., for sounds to become words and for actions to become right or wrong for a child, it must incarnate, as it were, the fundamental *normative* character of intentionality.[17] And then, when the child gradually takes on the capability of acting normatively it has become *committed*, both to reason, typically the proprieties of discourse, and to acting morally right, not forgetting, though, that it is only up to the learning child itself to *undertake* the commitments to those normative proprieties it has learnt to acknowledge.[18]

Thus, through triangulating Conservative Davidson with Brandom to uncover Radical Davidson, we are taught to acknowledge the fundamental *normative* character of triangulation. It is not surprising. Even Conservative Davidson underlines that "the concepts we use to explain and de-

[15] Cf. Brandom, 1994, 430.

[16] Brandom too acknowledges that our "reliable differential responsive dispositions" to sensory impressions embody "corporeal" or "lumpy" items," as the result of causal processes by means of which impressions of these "items" are fed through our senses and into our linguistic, inferential processes, in the form of what he calls "non-inferential reports". E.g. Brandom, 1994, 332–33,

[17] Fergestad and Ramberg, 2011, pp. 245–46. Davidson claims that once we are into intentionality we are not able to retrace the transition from non-intentionality to intentionality, where the base line of triangulation is strengthened to the point where it "becomes as thick as language" Cf. Davidson, 1999, 731.

[18] The distinction between *acknowledging* a commitment and *undertaking* the commitment is essential to Brandom, while Davidson does not seem to pay attention to it.

scribe thought, speech, and action, are *irreducibly normative*."[19] And since he included "concepts we use to explain and describe *action*" we should assume that their "irreducibly normative character" also applies to ethical concepts, since action and behavior are just what ethical concepts are about.

To bring more substance to this assumption, let us ask what we experience and what we think when we (as interlocutors) observe an action about which we correspond in judging it to be immoral. First, our reaction to the immoral action is *spontaneous*. It is not like we first observe the action and then, when reflecting on it, add an evaluative characterization to what we have already observed. The action is already constituted for us as 'action'. The evaluative character is an integral, inseparable part of our first reaction. The action is immediately and spontaneously constituted for us as an *immoral* action.

How have we learnt that? It is obviously part of what we learn when a parent or teacher *sanctions* our responses to actions when we are children. To be trained into a culture means, not least, to be trained to take such reactions to heart and learn from them. The sanctioning does not distinguish between the action as a neutral, psychological event on the one hand, and its moral or immoral character on the other; we *immediately* praise the child for reacting rightly, e.g., condemning a father who beats his child. Or—we "punish" the child for reacting wrongly, e.g., for accepting the beating, say, by alleging that the child "deserved the beating."

Such kinds of sanctioning initiate us into the conceptual world and culture we belong to, as the moral beings we become. Thus, the initiation is not merely about how the world becomes an epistemologically conceptual world to us; it also becomes a *morally* conceptual world to us, a world in which we are trained to gradually become autonomous creatures who are able to separate a good deed from an evil one, a good thought from an evil one or good behavior from evil behavior.[20] And in cases such as abortion, immigration, euthanasia, or calibration of judicial punishment of young criminals, we are trained to spontaneously acknowledge that the thought, idea or deed in question exposes a moral *dilemma*, although

[19] Davidson, 1999a, 460. Davidson's insistence about this claim is approved by most commentators, e.g., Kriegel, 2010, 185: "One of the most enduring elements of Davidson's legacy is the idea that intentionality is inherently normative."

[20] "Autonomous" is the key word here. It is our Kantian heritage that our distinguishing mark, as rational, sapient creatures of a civilized society, is that we are trained to make *autonomous* judgments and decisions.

it is a challenge to reach an agreement on what a good solution to the dilemma is.

The conclusion is that the *normative* aspects of the training and initiating process are just as fundamental as the epistemological ones. Learning to act and speak morally implies that we acquire the capacity and commitment to *judge* actions and behaviors on a normative scale; our own actions as well as actions performed by others.

Triangulation and ethics

However, there are still important moments to be clarified, and that introduces the second part of this essay.

First, when someone has been initiated into the culture of her community, she has, as indicated earlier, learnt to make assessments and judge deeds and thoughts as good or evil, and to use words, sentences, and concepts correctly about the act or the thought in ways that correlate with other interlocutors. This might be conceived of as indicating that our use of moral-conceptual rules is guided by social-linguistic conventions. However, conventionalism does not explain how word meaning is constituted.[21] Rather, we must understand our use of words and terms in light of the dynamism of linguistic practices, and not as guided by fixed linguistic structures such as conventionalism. We constantly modulate and moderate our use of words and our language games, in accord with Davidson in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" as well as Ludlow in *Living Words*.[22]

Next, what does it do to the triangulating interlocutors when the object, i.e., "the world" they triangulate with, is another intentional being, a person, who performed her action for a reason and is able to tell that reason in language. For the conceptual understanding to form properly, her response must be *integrated* into the interlocutors' discourse about the action.

[21] I do not engage in the Davidson–Dummett debate here regarding whether knowledge of linguistic conventions is essential to interpretive success. The Dummettian idea is that prior knowledge of conventions of linguistic usage plays a significant role in communication. We know something about the conventions with which our words are used, and Dummett alleges that this prior knowledge plays a significant practical role in interpreting them. In the face of this commonplace wisdom, Davidson insisted that such knowledge is neither necessary nor sufficient for communication, cf. Donald Davidson, 1984a and 1994 (e.g., p. 3), Michael Dummett, 1986, Bjørn Ramberg, 1988, and Lepore and Ludwig, 2007.

[22] Davidson, 1986/2005, Ludlow, 2014.

There are many situations where this is not the case. We may face creatures that apparently act intentionally but are still beyond reach for mutual understanding. If we observe a male lion that has become the dominating male in a herd of lions and then kills the cubs of the former dominant male, we human beings may react morally to it and agree that it is dreadful. But we also know that the lion's world and life form is so different from ours that the idea of conferring our moral reaction on to the lion is absurd. We cannot know what it is to understand the lion's intentions, wherefore we replace them with our own beliefs and emotions, which might well be the result of triangulative exercises with other humans observing and communicating about why the lion acts like it does.[23] This is obvious when it comes to understanding lions and other animals that appear to act intentionally. But could a similar situation occur in encounters with other human beings? As already mentioned, it seems that Davidson accepts that possibility, i.e., that we—human beings of contemporary Western civilizations—may fail in attempts to understand human beings from "alien" cultures simply because their life forms are too different from ours.[24]

Triangulating with a child might occupy a middle position here, in the sense that when we train a child by sanctioning its utterances, we teach it to acquire *our* conceptual world. Once the child has got it, it loses its

[23] Cf. the famous quote from Wittgenstein's PI, section 2 p. 190 ; "If a lion could talk, we could not understand him." We might say the same about other animals whose behavior appears intentional, such as when a pack of orcas cooperate to "wave-wash" a seal away from a large ice floe on which it has taken refuge. The act is obviously intentional, but we still have no access to what the orcas think and communicate to coordinate their effort. Any kind of explanation we would like to give would be an explanation from *our* point of view.

[24] Cf. Daniel L. Everett, 2009, where he attempts to show that the language of the Piraha people in the Amazon jungle in Brazil is so different from the language he, an American missionary and his American family spoke, that it could not be translated directly. This led him to argue that Noam Chomsky's theory of a universal grammar could not be correct, an allegation that has been much contested, not least by Chomsky himself.
Cf. also the so-called Sapir–Whorf hypothesis—also known as the Theory of Linguistic Relativity—which states that "the grammatical and verbal structure of our language [...] determines how we perceive the world and thus our thoughts" (quote: simplypsychology.org). The hypothesis was originally not presented as a hypothesis at all by its presumed originators, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, and it is still contested. Sapir and Whorf found that the Hopi language had few nouns for describing things, but many verbs and words that describe movement. To them, this was as an indication of a limited presence of objects in the Hopi life world, while they thought there must be far more cases of movement. Source: Thomas Hylland Eriksen, 2024, p. 180.

access to how it experienced the world before the transition. The child has become one of us.

In our essay, Bjørn and I conceived Radical Davidson's triangulation figure as a social-dynamic figure established to say something about how the world becomes *our* world through basic forms of responsive, communicative behaviors—speech acts—between speakers who correlate their responses to their perceptions of the world. But it changes the game, as indicated, if the "feature" or "object" one responds to, is the actions of another intentional creature, i.e., a human being. Then, we cannot treat the situation as a "normal" triangulative situation, where two (or more) interlocutors triangulate with a non-living "object," since the "object" understands her behavior and actions in a way she can express linguistically. What she says may differ from what the observing interlocutors think that they see. They need to pay attention, not least because she says it from a 1st person perspective. And they simply cannot ignore her utterances in their own mutual interpretation and communication about how she behaves and acts because what she says is more important. If they neglect doing this, they risk fending off an understanding that was not included in their own interpretation of the observed person's actions, and which might have changed their conceptual understanding of those actions.

The next moment I will consider is more fundamental: since triangulation initiates us into the world as a conceptual world, epistemologically and morally, and is basically about concept constitution, do we need moral and ethical *concepts* and *words* to be able to talk about or judge moral actions, behaviors, thoughts or ways of living? Must a moral discourse contain moral predicates or terms, for us to be able to identify it as moral?

Here, it is relevant to refer to a controversy in contemporary philosophy, particularly among interpreters of Wittgenstein. Sabina Lovibond (1983) argues that ethics needs linguistic categories that are recognizably moral, and that reflect an interest in the presence and distribution of the properties those predicates denote. Cora Diamond (1996) on the contrary argues that what makes a stretch of discourse moral is not the presence of moral predicates or terms within it; it is a matter of *use*.[25] She refers to stories we recognize as deeply moral, but which apply no moral predicates or concepts, such as Laura Ingall Wilders' *The Long Winter*, Primo Levi's *If This is a Man*, John Prebble's *The Highland Clearances*, and Leo Tolstoy's *Hadji Murat*. These stories, Diamond argues, organize a

[25] Diamond, 1996, 243–44

way of thinking and attending to particular situations and decisions that display a moral orientation to life: "Anything made of the resources of ordinary language may be brought in such a relation to our lives and actions and understanding of the world that we might speak of the thinking involved in that connection as "moral". There is no limit to be set." If a sentence or a word has a moral character, it arises not through its content but from its use on particular occasions.[26] Philosophers supporting this view claim that we need to "expand our inventory of forms of moral thought",[27] and that we cannot "demarcate the legitimate subject-matter of moral philosophy by identifying certain obviously moral concepts or words, examining the ways in which they are used."[28] In other words, discourses can be about morality regardless of which words and terms they apply.

In this Wittgensteinian perspective, ethics has no subject matter of its own body of truths.[29] Stephen Mulhall invokes Charles L. Stevenson, Stanley Cavell, and Alastair MacIntyre in claiming that there can be no such thing as meta-ethics. There is simply "no way to characterize the subject matter of moral philosophy that will not itself give expression to one's own ethical interests and concerns." We cannot coherently think of moral philosophy "as an ethically neutral enterprise [...] so characteristic of analytic moral philosophy in the first half of the twentieth century (and beyond)."[30] On this background, we should not think of moral philosophy as a separate sector of human existence or of philosophy, on the model of philosophy of language or philosophy of the mind.

The foregoing reflections have brought this essay's theme—on whether Davidson's triangulation figure allows an account of ethics—from a narrow priority on Davidson's philosophy to a wider field in which philosophers like Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Stephen Mulhall, Edward Harcourt, and Alice Crary occupy central roles—with Wittgenstein looming in the background. Rather than considering ethics and moral philosophy as one branch of philosophy in parallel with others, we must think of it

[26] Diamond, op. cit. 248

[27] Alice Crary, 2007, 1. Edward Harcourt, 2019 takes an analogous position: "Long stretches of ordinary speech can be ethically inflected—can manifest the operation of an ethical sensibility—without containing *any* specialized vocabulary, thick or thin ..." Harcourt, 2019, 50, author's italics.

[28] Harcourt ibid. See also Stephen Mulhall, 2002, 304.

[29] Cf. Diamond, 2000, 153

[30] Mulhall, 2002, 303

in line with how Wittgenstein conceived of it, as a *pervasive* dimension of life rather than a distinguishable region of it.

How does it now relate to Davidson and the question of whether triangulation can be seen as a universal figure also covering ethics? On the one hand, triangulation is universal in the sense that any human experience, knowledge or moral attitude is unthinkable without some form of experiential evidence and the discourses we sapient creatures have about it. Thought without experience is deceptive like a chimera; all our training and initiation into our culture and our world as children, and thus all we can know or have attitudes towards, results from encounters with the world, be it as some neutral object or as other creatures.[31] On the other hand, the universality of triangulation as such may blind us to the enormous differences and versatility in actual language use, which is why Davidson's triangulation *examples* appear to be closer to accommodating that versatility than does his general account.

Wittgenstein admitted that even he, in the *Tractatus,* had not taken the consequence of the versatility and dynamism of language. He developed a critical stance to most traditional philosophy, for its attempts to say something *about* language *within* language and not appreciate that the "meta-concepts" of philosophical theory are ordinary words, regardless of how lofty they might appear. It is simply a misapplication of ordinary words when they are used to state philosophical positions, as if they are somehow at a higher, metaphysical level than other words. There are, on Wittgenstein's view, no principles, theories, or rules which have a "higher" status than other linguistic expressions, or which constitute some "foundational requirements" we should meet if we want to utter a true sentence, or to express true knowledge, or to justify what right or good action is. Of course, there are principles and rules in our languages, but their linguistic *roles* are not a question of requirements that our linguistic performances should meet from *outside* language. Their roles in our language games depend on how the games unfold and which interests we play out when playing them.[32]

[31] This shows another deep connection between Davidson and Kant, in the sense that it brings to light why Kant's three main works are titled *critiques*, respectively of pure reason, of practical reason, and of judgment. In all of these he wanted to show how reason is limited by our encounters with the world, as long as reason's purpose is to deal with and understand the world.

[32] Cf. Cora Diamond's Wittgensteinian critique of metaphysics in the second Introduction to her *The Realistic Spirit*, as "the laying down of a requirement", even in cases where the

Wittgenstein questioned the prevalent idea that there must be something common to all that is denoted by a concept, for example the concept of 'games.' Instead, he argues that if one looks at all the cases of use, "you will not see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that"[33] Instead of constructing philosophical theories, Wittgenstein time and again encouraged us to *look and see*. He affirms that the result of examining words with a many-faceted use is that "we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail,"[34] and he can think of no better expression to characterize their connections than "family resemblances", thus introducing a notion as important and wide-reaching as that of "language games." These and related concepts are not intended as theoretical concepts, on which Wittgenstein might have tried to build a semantic theory. Rather, we should see them as attempts to elucidate our language *use*, to help us see the enormous variation in how we use words and concepts, which is why he wants us to look at the use of a word when we want to understand its meaning. What is difficult then is to recognize that what lies before us *is* the ground, instead of pursuing the "illusory image of a greater depth [...] Our disease", he says, "is one of wanting to explain,".[35]

When it comes to ethics, Stephen Mulhall and John McDowell endorse this perspective. Mulhall: "[...] any commitment to the need of moral theorizing would lead us to impose consistency and uniformity in the landscape of our moral lives, [while] the Wittgensteinian expectation is rather that a careful description of our lives with moral words would [...] reveal a multiplicity or variety of moral grammars, and [...] this variety needs no justification or alteration."[36] McDowell: "If one attempted to reduce one's conception of what virtue requires to a set of rules, then, however subtle and thoughtful one was in drawing up the code, cases would inevitably turn up in which a mechanical application of the code would strike one as wrong—and not necessarily because one had changed one's mind. Rather, one's mind on the matter was not susceptible of capture in any universal formula."[37]

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requirement is internal to the character of language as language, such as in the *Tractatus*. Diamond, 1991, 19–20.

[33] Wittgenstein, PI, § 66, author's italics.

[34] Wittgenstein, PI, ibid.

[35] Wittgenstein, Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics, § VI.31.

[36] Stephen Mulhall, 2002, 295.

[37] John McDowell, 1998, 57–8.

The use of moral terms and concepts is so varied and manifold that we cannot identify anything that is common, say, to all the ways we use terms like 'care' or 'justice', which is why Wittgenstein suggests the idea of "family resemblances" as an alternative to the idea that there must be an identifiable common feature in all the ways we use those terms. Within ethics, so-called "thin" concepts,[38] such as good, bad, permissible or obligatory, come with a huge variety of uses, and are therefore typical family resemblance concepts.

In a Davidsonian perspective, triangulation is required for understanding how we come to learn the correct use of a word or term, but although its purpose is not to tell or explain *what* correct use is, a fissure appears to open here, between the idea that triangulation gradually teaches us *the* correct use of a word, on the one hand, and the huge *variety* of correct ways of using family resemblance words, on the other. Triangulation shows that we learn the use of words by corresponding with others in how we use them, once we agree on what in the world we are using a word about. But when the word can be used to speak of a host of different things, as in family resemblance words, is it still compatible with the triangulation figure? Will the figure hold when the same word is applicable to many diverse experiential cases?

I will answer these questions by addressing three further issues:

1. The triangulation figure is about concept constitution: two or more interlocutors correlate their responses to whatever object they perceive at the crossing lines of the triangle, and the correlation primarily involves a discourse between the interlocutors *about* what they perceive. Through that discourse they normally reinforce the constitution of the concept that describes the perceived object. Or, in a few instances they may invent a new, relevant concept.[39] But when the *same* term is used for a *manifold* of objects, events, actions, processes, etc. of great variety, such as the concept of 'games', which Wittgenstein uses as example in the PI[40] or the ethical concepts of 'justice' or 'care', can we still rely on the triangulative figure to explain all these uses? Is it possible that we may triangulate all the pertinent "objects" with just one and the same term? Yes, that might be possible, but if so, it strongly augments the Brandomian, social-dynamic perspective Bjørn and I applied to trian-

[38] Cf. Bernard Williams, 1985.

[39] For example, in cases of new scientific discoveries, such as the concepts of quasars, black holes, dark matter or dark energy.

[40] Wittgenstein, PI §66 ff.

gulation in the aforementioned essay. Because then, triangulation as a causal chain loses all significance. Learning the multiplicity and variety of uses that one broad, single term exhibits when one is a child—thinking of the relations between all those uses as family resemblances instead of one common feature—requires long-term training and careful sanctioning. Thus, we are entitled to assert that triangulation as it was originally conceived of by Davidson, is not completely wrong as a model of such training and learning, but neither may it be the optimal approach to understanding how the multiple and varied meaning of words and terms is constituted.

2. Ethics constitutes an even more difficult issue. For if we stick to Cora Diamond, Stephen Mulhall, Edward Harcourt, Alice Crary, and others who, based on Wittgenstein, show that the description of a moral action or a stretch of ethical reasoning does not need ethical words and concepts, we must ask, how do we then identify and describe the "object" we triangulate, say, a selfish action, a kind gesture, an evil thought, or an altruistic effort? What does it mean to correlate our responses to an action, a thought, an event, or else when there is no corresponding word or term to be applied that fixes the aboutness of the relation? Again, this does not mean that triangulation is superfluous. The stories and examples of moral content without moral terms, exemplified in Cora Diamond's reference to certain literary works, all demonstrate that the moral content emerges from human beings' encounters with the world, be it as a harsh winter or as a loved person you want to reach out to. So, there *is* a triangular relation here, but there is no particular word or term identifying the "object" of the encounter, so that the triangulating interlocutors appear not to be able to talk *about* it. Apparently. For we are in no way short of linguistic means in such situations. It is just that we do not need specific moral terms to speak of moral content; we are fully able to discuss it by using other words.[41]

3. We might come across situations in which the interlocutors and the person(s) they triangulate with are unable to correlate their responses

[41] This does not mean, of course, that there *exist* no words or terms or concepts for whatever moral issue that has called upon our attention. The argument is that we do not *need* any particular moral word or term to identify and speak of whatever moral content we engage in. Edward Harcourt argues that it will often make the situation easier if we know a term that is dedicated to describing the moral issue at stake (Harcourt, 2019, 51 ff.). It just isn't necessary.

into one shared response, not because their life worlds are too different, as with the Piraha people referred to earlier, but because their moral outlook is too wide apart. Cora Diamond addresses this issue in her essay "Truth in Ethics", where she discusses a disagreement between David Wiggins and Bernard Williams in which they use the difference between the pro- and anti-slavery movements as example:[42] "The pro-slavery and the anti-slavery people have very different systems of moral ideas, and to understand what is involved in their disagreement about slavery, it is not enough to see the heterogeneity of moral vocabulary—you have to see how their systems of moral ideas as a whole work against each other, despite sharing—in some sense sharing—such crucial notions as that of justice. They both *want* the concept of justice; they both take there to be something that is thinking well about justice in relation to slavery; they both want to make plain how they, as opposed to the people they disagree with, are thinking rightly about the justice of slavery"[43]. This leads to Diamond emphasizing that what we see here is not just disagreement where we acknowledge that the person with whom we disagree is a *thinking* person, which implies that we do understand her standpoint, although we do not agree. The dispute is not about arguments for versus arguments against slavery; it is an incompatible difference between the moral points of view at stake, where the one part does not acknowledge and respect the otherness of the other—her equal claim to be taken seriously as someone who is attempting to say something meaningful. The moral points of view between the pro- and the anti-slavery people are fundamentally *irreconcilable*.[44]

On the background of these three moments, must we concede that triangulation is not well suited to encompass ethics, since it, as a general, metaphysical figure, appears neither to be fitted to elucidate the huge variety of language use about ethical issues and dilemmas, nor the irreconcilability between conflicting moral viewpoints? Or should we rather say that triangulation as an ontological figure only requires that there must be an experiential basis for *any* use of language, pertaining to what we can know about the world, or to how we should live, behave, and act in it?

[42] David Wiggins, 1995 and Bernard Williams, 1995.

[43] Diamond, 2019, 163. Cf. also Diamond, 1991a, 291–308.

[44] It is tempting to allude to the current polarization between Democrats and Republicans in US politics and the polarization in other nations, although it none of them are linked to the content of this essay.

Conclusion 1

Obviously, triangulation is a figure that reminds us that our intentionality—our ability to learn to speak and thus being initiated into the world as conceptual—depends both on us being able to discourse with other language users and doing it by sharing our interaction with the world outside the mind of each one of us. So, as a general figure, triangulation has a purpose. But its generality is not well suited to grasp the great variety and multiplicity of language *use*, where one and the same word or term may have so many uses that we are not able to grapple with them in one effort. Neither is it well suited to explain why we may have irreconcilable viewpoints about the *same* encounter with the world, especially regarding normative issues, such as a moral action, a moral life, and moral thoughts, or about politics at national and international levels, or for that matter about the value of unspoilt nature.

A conclusion is thus that Wittgenstein, although he, as Davidson, did not write much about ethics, has demonstrated, with help from his interpreters, that *general*, theoretical accounts about language use, be they semantic or grammatic—and the triangulation thesis is a general thesis—lose out when confronted with linguistic practice when we look closely at the vastly multiple ways in which we use it.

Allow me a final caveat, in which I close the circle from Bjørn's and my 2011-essay and draw another parallel to Brandom, who, in an essay from 2019, "Some Strands of Wittgenstein's Normative Pragmatism and Some Strands of his Semantic Nihilism",[45] discusses Wittgenstein's reluctance to accept general theories about semantics and language use. Against, Brandom argues that we need in philosophy theoretical accounts of language use *in addition* to Wittgenstein's stern pragmatism.

The later Wittgenstein's conviction that we should give up the notion of meaning in favor of that of use, implies, according to Brandom, that it is unclear whether Wittgenstein regards semantics as a legitimate enterprise at all. Wittgenstein's reason is that everything philosophers need to understand discursive intentionality is available directly at the level of pragmatics, without the need to drill down theoretically to discern a deeper semantic level of explanation. Semantic theorizing will simply not improve our understanding of discursive practices. And like Quine, Wittgenstein thinks that we should give up the concept of meaning as an object of scientific theorizing about the use of linguistic expressions.

[45] Disputatio 8, no. 9, 2019, 1–29.

In Brandom's view, this amounts to a through–going semantic nihilism. He admits that he has long been skeptical about Wittgenstein's semantic skepticism, and has criticized him for not offering a systematic theory of the core work-day practices of using sentences and terms in asserting and referring, accounts of which he has offered in *Making It Explicit* and *Between Saying and Doing*, by developing rationalist, pragmatist semantic theories that he sees as falling under the Wittgenstein–inspired rubric of "use theories of meaning",[46] although distinguished from the more classical pragmatism he associates with Wittgenstein.

In the rest of the essay Brandom carefully and sympathetically assesses Wittgenstein's reasons for rejecting semantic theorizing. Rather than renouncing them, Brandom accepts that Wittgenstein's reasons are imperative, although they do not rule out, as Brandom sees it, the need for theoretical accounts. He endorses Wittgenstein's claim that we need not try to look beyond the way linguistic expressions are used and therefore can avoid the urge, common to many philosophers, to penetrate the linguistic surface in the belief that we can dig down to "an essence that is hidden from us."[47]

Brandom accepts that the notion of "family resemblances", which advices that the kinds into which linguistic practices and the vocabularies caught up in them are functionally sorted—in boxes labelled 'game', 'description', 'assertion', 'observation' and so on—does not admit specification in terms of underlying principles specifiable in other vocabularies. Semantics can proceed only by theoretically privileging some *non*-privileged aspects of the use of a vocabulary, generating philosophical puzzlement about the intelligibility of the rest. On this conception, says Brandom, the classical project of semantic theory is a disease that rests on a fundamental misunderstanding that can be alleviated only by replacing concern with meaning by concern with use. He acknowledges that there is real force to this diagnosis and accentuates the malleable character of linguistic practice—correspondent with Davidson in "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs"—the plasticity of which signifies that any established pattern of usage is regularly built on and transformed by novel contingencies arising from their usage, a necessary feature of the practices in which they are implicit.

[46] Cf. Brandom, 1994 and Brandom, 2008.

[47] Wittgenstein PI, § 92, Brandom, 2019, 13. In the same context, Brandom refers to other PI paragraphs: § 90, § 109, § 120, and § 594.

Still, Brandom presents two reasons for not completely agreeing with Wittgenstein: the first being that there is a need to try to regiment a normative theoretical vocabulary for a general characterization of the use of linguistic expressions. The second is to use inference rather than representation as the principal semantic meta-concept.[48] He suggests that his own version of pragmatics can be combined with Wittgenstein's, and he wants to give "systematic theoretical shape to [...] such broad categories of the use of linguistic expressions as asserting, inferring, describing, and referring". He thinks that "the perennial possibility of the eruption of new species need not disrupt the understanding we get of these activities by looking to core cases and providing local commentaries on those general models".[49]

Conclusion 2

Brandom's motivating hope and goal of taking a different theoretical path in *Between Saying and Doing*, is that the combination of a systematic deontic normative pragmatic theory, an inferentialist semantic theory, and an expressivist account of logical, semantic and intentional, modal, and normative vocabularies provides a much more flexible and capacious tool for making sense of the norms that implicitly govern our multifarious linguistic practices than the theories of its pioneering representationalist forebears. Thus, the conclusion Brandom draws from Wittgenstein's considerations and reminders is not that we need no philosophical theories about our discursive practice, but that we need more of them.

And the conclusion I want to draw, as the final remark of this essay, is that Davidson's theory of triangulation, although not capable of elucidating the full span of our multifarious linguistic practices, especially the span of our ethical language games, still is a theory that makes metalinguistic sense, as a theoretical expression of the fact that linguistic practice without encounters with the external world *outside* language, is senseless.

[48] Cf. Brandom, 2019, 24–25.
[49] Brandom op. cit. 22.

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Ramberg's hermeneutical reading of Davidson and Rorty and its implications for understanding Gadamer's hermeneutics

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Abstract

In several of his works Bjørn Torgrim Ramberg draws on Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics in interpreting Donald Davidson's and Richard Rorty's philosophies. Turning the focus back on Gadamer, I elaborate and discuss how Ramberg's hermeneutical readings of Davidson and Rorty have implications for how we understand Gadamer's hermeneutics and appreciate its relevance. I first consider Ramberg's comparison of Gadamer's concept 'the fore-conception of completeness' in *Truth and Method* (TM) and central concepts in Davidson's philosophical semantics. This comparison puts emphasis on considerations of truth in Gadamer's hermeneutics and suggests the need to see Gadamer's concept in connection with his account of hermeneutic 'openness' in TM. I then turn to Ramberg's use of Gadamer's concept of play in interpreting Davidson and Rorty, and I consider how Ramberg's explorative definition of 'discursive play' sheds light on Gadamer's account of hermeneutic openness and thus confirms the hermeneutical centrality of the concept of play. Finally, I engage some ethical aspects and concepts in Gadamer's work. By taking Ramberg's hermeneutical reading of Rorty's concept of solidarity as my point of departure, I use Rorty's concept as a lens in elaborating on what a tradition is in Gadamer's hermeneutics. Following the interpretations

of Georgia Warnke and Theodore George, I further compare and contrast Rorty's concept with the concept of solidarity which Gadamer introduces and uses in his later works. Noting its basis in Aristotle's practical philosophy, I suggest how Gadamer's concept of solidarity can be used to elaborate on his hermeneutics as presented in TM.

Introduction

Through several of his works Bjørn Torgrim Ramberg (2003, 2011, 2015) draws on perspectives and resources in Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics in interpreting the philosophical oeuvres of Donald Davidson and Richard Rorty. While Ramberg's hermeneutical approach to Davidson may be seen as a development of his earlier interpretation of Davidson (1989), it draws significantly on Rorty's interpretation of Davidson in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979). In the latter work, Rorty famously draws inspiration from Gadamer's hermeneutics in qualifying his own philosophical project as 'post-epistemological'. Since this project enlists Davidson's famous attack on 'the third dogma of empiricism', it serves as an important steppingstone for Ramberg's more ambitious hermeneutic reading of Davidson, as well as for his hermeneutic qualification of later phases of Rorty's philosophy. Supported also by a systematically oriented interpreter like John McDowell (1996), Ramberg (2003) carefully compares central concepts in Gadamer's hermeneutics and Davidson's semantics, while he later (2011; 2015) goes on to explore Davidson's and Rorty's philosophies in hermeneutical terms while discussing their philosophical perspectives on human linguistic agency. As I elaborate and discuss in this paper, Ramberg's comparisons and explorations have implications for how we understand Gadamer's hermeneutics and assess its relevance. Let me start, however, by briefly focusing on three facets of Ramberg's explorations.

First, Ramberg stresses the centrality of human communication in Davidson's semantics in ways that resonate with Gadamer's conception of interpretation as dialogue (*Gespräch*). Through the idea of *triangulation* Davidson accounts for intelligibility and meaning as something which is becoming made and shared by communicative agents as "a creative social act in particular circumstances and surroundings" (2015, 224). Davidson, as well as Gadamer, reconstructs normative requirements in communication and interpretation, and Ramberg (2003; 2015) explores systematic affinities between Davidson's 'radical interpretation' and 'principle

of charity', on the one hand, and Gadamer's hermeneutical principle of 'the fore-conception of completeness', on the other. For both philosophers, Ramberg points out, considerations of *truth* have a certain priority over considerations of *meaning*, and both take "understanding, as the unique achievement of language-users, to be possible only in so far as there are agents interacting in a common world" (2003, 219). My second point of focus concerns Ramberg's efforts to qualify Davidson's semantics in historicists terms. More specifically, Ramberg (2015) elaborates Davidson's principle of charity in terms of a "semantic historicism" which is informed by Rorty's interpretation of Davidson, as well as by Rorty's concept of solidarity. This 'semantic historicism' would be congenial to Gadamer's hermeneutics, Ramberg suggests, in seeing language users as bound together through their historical situatedness and finiteness and through their charitable, open and future-directed acts of interpretation and self-interpretation. Thirdly, through elaborating on Gadamer's notion of play, Ramberg (2011) seeks to complement what he takes to be a one-sided intellectualist conceptualization of linguistic agency in Davidson's philosophy due to his construction of the mental as "coextensive with rationality-constituted webs of propositional attitudes" (2011, 57). Hence, through his systematically oriented comparisons, Ramberg's hermeneutical approach aspires to forge a more balanced synthesis of perspectives on human linguistic agency.

I now turn the focus back on Gadamer and consider the implications of Ramberg's comparisons and explorations for understanding Gadamer's work and appreciating its relevance. I start below by considering the comparison of Gadamer's principle of 'the fore-conception of completeness', presented in the second part of *Truth and Method* (TM), and Davidson's 'radical interpretation' and 'principle of charity'. This comparison brings to light how Gadamer's 'fore-conception' concerns expectations of truth in the interpretation of historical texts, and how these expectations guide the interpretation of meaning. While Ramberg's comparison may shed light on ways in which considerations of truth play a role across the three parts of TM, I point out the need for a contextualized reading (already suggested by Ramberg) of 'the fore-conception of completeness' in the second part. Gadamer's 'fore-conception' could be seen to be elaborated and integrated in his account of the hermeneutic stance of 'openness' toward the end of the second part. While the latter account is based on an analogy between understanding the historical works of tradition in the humanities and understanding others through interpersonal communication, it is mo-

tivated partly as a critique of the adoption of natural science methods in the humanities and has as such lingering relevance in the philosophy of the human sciences. Moreover, since this hermeneutic stance necessitates intellectual displacement and critique of prejudices, Gadamer's account has been relevant for feminist philosophy of science (Alcoff, 1996; 2003; Freudenberger, 2003).

I next turn to Ramberg's (2011; 2015) explorations of Gadamer's notion of *play* in proposing hermeneutical interpretations of Davidson and Rorty. While Ramberg considers how Gadamer develops his notion of play in the first part of TM, which is devoted to an ontological investigation of art and our experience of art, he finds support in the scholarly literature for extending and exploring its applicability beyond our experience of art. As part of this exploration, he suggests a qualification and definition of what he chooses to call "discursive play" (2015, 227) and through which he considers normatively constraining, as well as enabling aspects of human linguistic agency. While observing that Ramberg's explorative definition may find support in Gadamer's own remark on '*language games* [*sprachliche Spiele*]' in the third part of TM, I consider how this definition could be applied in a further interpretation of Gadamer's account of the hermeneutic stance of 'openness' in part two of TM. As I endeavor to show, this application not only provides specifications and elaborations of Ramberg's explorative definition, but it may also suggest an interpretation of Gadamer's account of openness that would confirm the hermeneutic centrality of his notion of play and that can be supported by recent scholarly literature (Vilhauer, 2010; George, 2020).

In the concluding section I engage some ethical aspects and concepts in Gadamer's work by taking Ramberg's hermeneutically oriented use of Rorty's concept of solidarity as a point of departure. I start by exploring Gadamer's concept of tradition in TM through the lens of Rorty's concept of solidarity and by discussing whether a tradition in Gadamer's sense would be open to include cultural others. To complement and elaborate this discussion, I turn to Gadamer's work after TM and, more specifically, to Gadamer's own concept of solidarity. Through the interpretation of Georgia Warnke (2012) I consider significant ways in which Gadamer's concept of solidarity differs from that of Rorty. As Warnke shows, unlike Rorty's concept, Gadamer's concept does not turn on a common identity or on identification with others but does rather put emphasis on recognizing the otherness of others. Finally, given the continuity in Gadamer's work by his enduring engagement with Aristotle's practical philosophy, I

employ Theodore George's interpretation (2020) in suggesting how Gadamer's concept of solidarity could complement limitations ascribed to his earlier account of openness and how it bears on his account of the task of the humanities in TM.

The fore-conception of completeness and hermeneutic openness

While carefully noting differences in philosophical vocabularies and orientations, Ramberg's (2003) comparison of Gadamer's hermeneutic principle of 'the fore-conception of completeness' and Davidson's 'radical interpretation' has several merits for understanding Gadamer's hermeneutics. As Ramberg's comparison brings out, considerations of *truth* have a certain priority over considerations of *meaning* in Gadamer's hermeneutical principle. More specifically, Gadamer's 'fore-conception' concerns general expectations of truth in interpreting historical texts and ways in which these expectations guide the interpretation of meaning. Hence, for the interpreter of historical texts, "his understanding is [...] guided by the constant transcendent expectations of meaning that proceed from the relation to the truth of what is being said" (Gadamer, 2004, 294). The centrality of "the pre-conception of completeness", and hence, the concern for truth, in Gadamer's hermeneutics, is underscored by the fact that he presents the former as "a formal condition of all understanding" (2004, 294), and as an "implication" of the *hermeneutic circle* as an ontological structure in human understanding (2004, 294). Its hermeneutic centrality applies thus not only to part two of TM, which is devoted to the understanding of tradition and its historical works in the humanities. It also reflects on part one, where Gadamer inquires into the *truth* of art. It further resonates with his ontological considerations in part three of how language *discloses the world* for its users. Hence, Ramberg's comparison may help to distinguish Gadamer's hermeneutics more generally from hermeneutical philosophies or theories where considerations of *meaning(fulness)* or *subjectivity* are more dominating than considerations of *truth*.[1]

However, when read and considered in isolation from a wider textual context in part two of TM, 'the fore-conception of completeness' may inadvertently be rendered too abstract and disconnected from other topics that are developed in part two and that concern a complex set of related conditions for understanding the historical works of tradition. To achieve a

[1] As for one influential hermeneutical approach which emphasizes considerations of meaning and subjectivity, see Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009).

more contextualized reading already hinted at by Ramberg (2003) (as I return to below), we could therefore start by noting that 'the fore-conception of completeness' is described as a "prejudice" (Gadamer, 2004, 294) and as a prejudice extracted from a "commonality of fundamental, enabling prejudices" which interpreters belonging to a tradition would share (2004, 295). Yet when situated in a process of text interpretation, the interpreter cannot readily distinguish 'the fore-conception of completeness' from other 'enabling prejudices', let alone distinguish the shared fund of enabling prejudices from less helpful prejudices. Hence, Gadamer says,

> [t]he prejudices and fore-meanings that occupy the interpreter's consciousness are not at his free disposal. He cannot separate in advance the productive prejudices that enable understanding from the prejudices that hinder it and lead to misunderstandings. Rather, this separation must take place in the process of understanding itself, and hence hermeneutics must ask how that happens 2004, 295, original emph.

A clue to the hermeneutic analysis of how prejudices may become either questionable or recognized as productive, or how they may rather remain unrecognized, is given through Gadamer's critique of Friedrich Schleiermacher's romanticist hermeneutics in part two of TM.[2] In fact, Schleiermacher's hermeneutical principle of transposing oneself into the mental life of the author, allegedly to enable understanding "an author better than he understood himself" (2004, 295), is presented as an adversary of the 'fore-conception of completeness'. More generally, Gadamer thinks that not only Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, but the historical-critical methodology of 19th century historicism can be qualified by a certain naivety in failing to require interpreters to recognize their prejudices, and in presupposing that historical understanding can be secured by objective methods alone (or, as in Schleiermacher's case, by 'divination'). Hermeneutics therefore needs to analyze how this naivety can be exposed and how understanding can in fact be achieved in the humanities through recognizing and putting prejudices at risk.

An outline, at least, of the wanted analysis can be found as part of the more comprehensive inquiry entitled "Analysis of historically effected consciousness" in subsection 4.3 of part two, and in this outline Gadamer considers 'the hermeneutic experience' of the humanities researcher. More

[2] See sub-section 3.1.(A) (ii) in the second part of TM (2004, 183–95).

specifically, in this outlined analysis he classifies the 19th century historicist approach as one of two inferior modes of understanding in the humanities, and as only more appropriate than a *scientistic*[3] approach which adopts the methods of the sciences that aim for knowledge of laws and regularities in the natural world. Here, and as part of an analysis of 'historically effected consciousness', the historicist mode is criticized by Gadamer for not recognizing its *own* historicity and how the historical effects of the works of tradition condition the researcher's understanding through her prejudices.[4] This failing recognition blocks the opportunity for being addressed by the historical works and for having one's historically effected prejudices evoked. On the other hand, the scientistic mode is criticized for failing to realize, both epistemically and morally, that humans, texts and other artifacts, cannot be adequately understood by adopting natural science methods. Both modes, however, are criticized for presupposing that understanding can be achieved only through following the appropriate methods. And both these modes of understanding are contrasted with a superior mode which Gadamer qualifies as "openness" (2004, 355). *Openness* consists in the hermeneutic stance of allowing "tradition's claim to validity" and of "letting itself experience tradition and by keeping itself open to the truth claim encountered in it" (2004, 355). To become open to the *truth claims* in historical works, however, requires that 'the prejudice' or 'fore-conception of completeness' has been recognized along with other enabling and historically effected prejudices, and that this recognition has enabled the researcher to interpret the historical work as coherent in meaning through expecting its truth. For our task of understanding the second part of TM this would confirm the appropriateness of the proposed contextual reading of Gadamer's 'fore-conception'. Yet we should further note that Gadamer makes use of a certain *analogy*. To make the 'hermeneutic experience' of the humanities researcher more intelligible he makes an analogy between understanding the historical works of tradition in the humanities and our everyday experience of understanding another person ("the Thou" [2004, 352]) through interpersonal communication. Through this analogy, the hermeneutic stance of being open to the truth of tradition in the humanities is compared to "the I's experience of the Thou" and

[3] We note, however that in this context Gadamer does not use the German equivalent for the term "scientism" or "scientistic". Gadamer's concern is with the adoption of natural science methods within the humanities, as well as within the social sciences (see 2004, 352–53).

[4] See 2004, 354.

to the requirement "to experience the Thou truly as a Thou—i.e., not to overlook his claim but to let him really say something to us" (2004, 355). In this analogical sense, then, the understanding of the tradition in the humanities is 'dialogical'. One important point of the analogy is to compare the humanity researcher's *belonging* to the tradition with belonging to another person through one's relationship with her ("the Thou [...] is in relationship with us" [2004, 352]). In ways similar to how we understand ourselves as part of a personal relationship, the historically effected relationship of the humanities researcher to her tradition is crucial for her self-understanding and her openness to the truth of tradition.

The contextual reading outlined above of the 'fore-conception of completeness' is suggested already in Ramberg's interpretation (2003). Notably, he distinguishes Gadamer's approach to truth from that of Davidson by observing that the former concerns "the *experience* of truth" (2003, 226, my emph.) and by expounding the latter (yet without direct quote or reference): "the experience of truth here addressed is *communicative*; what is to be illuminated is the understanding of truth as *expressed* in a work or an utterance. The experience [Gadamer] seeks to capture is available in so far as we are *dialogically engaged*" (2003, 226, original emph.). Ramberg further notes that Gadamer's "phenomenological account of the communicative experience of truth [...] is directed against scientism" (2003, 226). Nevertheless, Ramberg's interpretation unfortunately misses the point of the *analogy* as such and of Gadamer's use of it in his critique of scientism. In his interpretation Ramberg assumes that Gadamer in TM criticizes scientism as a *global* doctrine or view.[5] Given this interpretation, he thinks that "what Gadamer has to say about scientism remains less than persuasive to many readers raised in the Anglo-American tradition" (2004, 233n14). Yet, as noted above, Gadamer's critique concerns more specifically research on humans, texts and other artifacts within the humanities. It is thus not a general criticism of applying methods designed to study laws and regularities in empirical domains in other sciences or fields of research, not even in parts of the social sciences.[6]

[5] Ramberg assumes that *scientism* in this context concerns the general view which takes "science as the final arbiter" (2003, 233–34n14).

[6] In the second part of TM Gadamer only briefly refers to "the social sciences" (2004, 352). Yet in the foreword to the second edition of TM he stresses that despite his concern concern with adopting natural science methods in the humanities this "*does not in the slightest prevent the methods of modern natural science from being applicable to the social world*. Possibly the growing rationalization of society and the scientific techniques of administering it are more characteristic of our age than the vast progress of modern science. The methodical spirit

Gadamer's critique of the tendency to adopt natural science methods within the humanities explicitly mentions the historical sources of this tendency back in "the eighteenth century" (2004, 353). The point of his critique, however, is to show how this tendency endures through the 19th and 20th century. In so far as the enduring and pervasive spread of these methods tends to suppress or exclude human self-interpreters (to use Charles Taylor's phrase) as sources of knowledge in the humanities, and also exclude historical texts and other artifacts as sources of self-understanding for the humanities researcher themselves and their fellow members of society, his criticism can be seen to have lingering relevance within the philosophy of the humanities. Moreover, given his *ethical* concern as to adopting natural science methods, his critique would bear on research ethics. Yet, it is not clear on Gadamer's account how the domain of research ethics itself should be understood and delineated. By focusing on parallels between research in the humanities and our ordinary communicative experience of and engagement with others, the analogical account of openness appeals to moral intuitions we may have both outside and inside the humanities. Moreover, if certain ways of conducting humanities research are both epistemically and morally wrong, such as *objectifying* other persons through adopting natural science methods,[7] it becomes hard to tell exactly where ethical concerns end and those that are epistemic start. Or perhaps we could rather say that Gadamer's hermeneutics deliberatively blurs the distinction between *ethically* good research and good research simpliciter.

The hermeneutic stance of openness involves recognizing and questioning prejudices that may obstruct or distort understanding. This hermeneutic point has been appreciated by feminist philosophers of science, such as Linda Martín Alcoff (1996; 2003). In comparing Gadamer's herme-

of science permeates everywhere. *Therefore I did not remotely intend to deny the necessity of methodical work within the human sciences* (*Geisteswissenschaften*)" (2004, xxvi, my emph.).

[7] Note how Gadamer qualifies this way of conducting humanities research by starting to characterize it as *epistemically* naïve or as having a "naive faith in method and in the objectivity that can be attained through it." (2004, 352). This approach is further characterized as a way of making a certain part of the tradition to which one belongs into an object: "Someone who understands tradition in this way *makes it an object* . . . " (2004, 352, my emph.). Gadamer discusses this act of making the tradition an object, however, trough the analogy with interpersonal communication and the *immoral* act of not recognizing the other as a person but rather using her as a means to one's own end (which "contradicts the moral definition of man" [2004, 352]) and not recognizing that one belongs to the other person through one's personal relationship with her ("the Thou is not an object but is in relationship with us" [2004, 352]).

neutic openness and Davidson's principle of charity Alcoff stresses the advantage of the former in requiring and enabling critique of our prejudices since "[Gadamer's] injunction to be open to the alterity of the Other can more effectively work to render our beliefs open to revision" (2003, 238). She even finds that Gadamer's approach "construes openness in a strikingly 'feminine' way, as a willing passivity and receptivity that will then allow the truth of alterity to appear" (2003, 239). Alcoff also suggests that the very category of understanding in Gadamer's hermeneutics invites appreciation of "[w]omen's traditional knowledge [...]: practical knowing or knowing how, non-propositional knowledge ..." (2003, 243). Moreover, the feminist philosopher Silja Freudenberger (2003) explores similar and other points of convergence between Gadamer's hermeneutics and feminist epistemology. She thus takes hermeneutical and feminist orientations to converge "[i]n the demand for a nonpatronizing and true recognition of others and their views", as well as in the consideration that "[t]he potential for differing voices is a function of the different starting points of the interpreters" (2003, 231–32). In summing up her exploration, she qualifies Gadamer's relevance by using the central term from Donna Haraway's classical article (1988): " 'Situated knowledges' are necessarily not in unison" (2003, 232).

Discursive play (or *sprachliche Spiele*)

In several works Ramberg (2011; 2015) engages Gadamer's notion of *play* (*Spiel*) in his hermeneutical interpretations of Davidson's and Rorty's philosophies. In TM Gadamer presents and uses this notion mainly, but not exclusively, in part one, which is devoted to our experience of art. Yet, Ramberg takes Gadamer's notion to be applicable and hermeneutically relevant beyond the task of understanding art, and he finds support for this view in the interpretations of Kristin Gjesdal (2009) and David Vessey (2012). More specifically, while attentive to how Gadamer uses the notion of play in analyzing the experience of art, Ramberg endeavors to extend its use to qualify and characterize what he prefers to call "*discursive* play" or "playing together in conversation" (2015, 227, my emph.). In fact, recent Gadamer scholarship would provide exegetic support for this approach. As observed by Theodore George (2020, 100–101), Gadamer reintroduces the notion of play in part tree of TM where he undertakes an ontological investigation of language as the universal medium of understanding. In the concluding section in part tree, Gadamer uses the

notion in making a remark about "*Language Games*" (2004, 484) or "*sprachliche Spiele*" (1990, 493 [GW1:463/464]) which suggests the centrality of the notion of play in his hermeneutics and for his very idea of what it is to achieve a joint understanding of something:

> The weight of the things we encounter in understanding plays itself out in a linguistic event, a play of words playing around and about what is meant. *Language games* exist where we, as learners—and when do we cease to be that?—rise to the understanding of the world. 2004, 483–84, original emph.

Returning to Ramberg's explorative efforts to qualify and define *discursive play*—which we may now interestingly compare to Gadamer's s*prachliche Spiele*—we note that he elaborates two general characterizations. On the one hand, in being engaged in discursive play one is subjected to normative constraints that are inherent in the play itself. Discursive play would thus involve "a kind of submission, a surrender of control of the individual subject to the norms inherent in a joint venture" (2015, 227). Here Ramberg refers to Gadamer's general remark in part one of TM that "all playing is a being-played" (2004, 106). On the other hand, discursive play would sustain and enable the development of individual agency and understanding through "a realization of the subject's freedom to be moved by reason, to be changed, to become more by understanding more" (2015, 227). In so far, Ramberg's characterization would accord with Gadamer's own brief description of *sprachliche Spiele* and of how "we, *as learners* [...] rise to the understanding of the world" (2004, 484, my emph.). Hence, Ramberg's explorative definition of *discursive play* as both normatively constraining, on the one hand, and as enabling and enhancing for individual participants, on the other, proves to be supported by Gadamer's own use of the notion of play in part one and three of TM.

Guided by the assumption that the notion of play is central to Gadamer's hermeneutics, I now venture to ask: could we use Ramberg's explorative definition of discursive play to suggest ways of interpreting parts or passages in TM where Gadamer does *not* explicitly use the notion of play? The prospect of a positive answer might seem promising in so far as recent scholarship (Vilhauer, 2010; George, 2020) has taken the applicability of the notion of play to extend to the main theme addressed in part two of TM, i.e., the understanding of tradition and its historical texts. Before I am prepared to offer an answer, however, I will in some detail

consider Ramberg's (2011) slightly earlier engagement with Gadamer's notion of play.

Although Ramberg does not here yet define discursive play, this earlier approach could still be seen to capture the two general (constraining/enabling) elements in Ramberg's later explorative definition. Yet, as we shall see, these elements are now formulated not as features of play itself but rather cast in terms of *abilities* that the *normative constraints* of play would require (or necessitate) and *abilities* or *capacities* that would be *enabled* and *developed* through participating in play. It is important to observe that this engagement with Gadamer's notion of play occurs in a context where Ramberg finds that the notion suggests more balanced or less rationalist perspectives on linguistic agency than those that can be derived from Davison's philosophy of language. The latter, he points out, treats "mind as coextensive with rationality-constituted webs of propositional attitudes" while "it buys irreducibility of the mental at the price of disconnecting mindedness from essentially embodied aspects of subjectivity" (2011, 57). To counteract and ameliorate this rationalist tendency, Ramberg mobilizes Gadamer's notion of play since it allows us to consider a certain basic sensitivity or responsiveness to norms and claims that are not propositional in form, as suggested also by "the experience of the work of art" (2011, 52). Extending the application of Gadamer's notion to cover linguistic activity, he argues that it is due to our linguistic nature and capacities that we can respond to claims not propositional in form, as well as to norms and claims that are propositionally structured. Hence, "it is [...] as linguistic beings we are capable also of accessing and being oriented by sources of normativity that are not propositionally presented" (2011, 52).

Moreover, Ramberg further suggests that this responsiveness in turn conditions and enables our reflective linguistic capacities to respond to claims that *are* propositionally structured.[8] He may thus be seen to sketch a simple map or topology of two interdependent levels of our linguistic agency: first, a kind of basic responsiveness to claims and norms in the (social) world that in turn forms a conditioning and enabling basis for our capacity to respond to claims with propositional form—and thus to partic-

[8] Note Ramberg's comment that "[i]t would also be wrong to think of this aspect of our subjectivity as in any sense cut off from reflective deliberation and propositional judgement. It is rather that as we bring to articulation and to reflective judgement possible standpoints with regard to some matter, we always find ourselves already having taken a basic stand" (2011, 52).

ipate in 'the game of giving and asking for reasons', to use Wilfrid Sellars' celebrated idiom. Notably, this simple two-level map or topology of our linguistic abilities reflects his two later defined (constraining/enabling) elements of discursive play in so far as the basic responsiveness would be required or necessitated by normative constraints of the discursive play, while the reflective linguistic capacities would be enabled or developed on the basis of this basic responsiveness.

Yet this map has little to say about *how* reflective capacities are enabled or developed within the discursive play itself. In addition, the two-level map fails to reflect the richer dimensions of enabled agency that are envisaged by Ramberg's definition: "a realization of the subject's freedom to be moved by reason, to be changed, to become more by understanding more" (2015, 227). On the other hand, as Ramberg rightly points out, Gadamer's use of the notion of play could suggest a certain evolutionary account of the basic responsiveness in the topology. The basic responsiveness and human play generally could thus be distinguished on the basis of more generic capacities for play among a range of animal species. Play, Ramberg suggests with Gadamer, could be seen to provide evidence for the "inter-species nature" of these capacities and for modes of "animal subjectivity" (2011, 55). Nevertheless, like the two-level map, this evolutionary account fails to tell us how abilities are enabled and required *within* discursive play itself as characterized by Ramberg's explorative definition.

Ramberg does, however, provide us with an interesting clue as to how we could elaborate his two-level map, as well as his later definition, and apply it to part two of TM even if this part contains no explicit mention of play. After having introduced Gadamer's use of the notion of play in part one of TM (and against the background of discussing Gadamer's concept of tradition in part two) Ramberg starts by qualifying the *responsiveness* required or necessitated by play. Notably, this qualification mentions the assumed enabling basis of responsiveness within play: "[t]he subjective ability at stake in play is 'responsiveness', and responsiveness must be based on 'recognition' " (2011, 51–52). Despite the fact that the term "recognition" is not used in a direct quote (and with no reference given for its use) Ramberg's use of this term may draw our attention to one particular subsection in part two of TM which is directly inspired by the *locus classicus* for using of this term in the philosophical literature important to Gadamer: Hegel's account of 'the struggle for recognition' in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. The sub-section in mind is, again, the sub-section (4.3.B) we have

discussed above and in which Gadamer uses the analogy between interpersonal communication ("the experience of the Thou" [2004, 352]) and the understanding of tradition in the humanities. As Gadamer makes clear, the three forms of interpersonal communication that correspond to the three modes of understanding in the humanities can be further qualified as three distinct forms of *recognition*.[9] Gadamer's Hegel-inspired qualification and analysis of these three forms may thus allow us to qualify the basic *responsiveness* required by discursive play as a responsiveness needed and enabled through responding to and raising claims of *recognition* in interpersonal communication. More generally, the normative constraints imposed on individual agents by discursive play could now be specified in terms of the "constant struggle for mutual recognition" that would qualify "all the relations in the lives of men" (2004, 353). The different forms of recognition analyzed by Gadamer provide means for distinguishing the various capacities for responsiveness that are enabled and required by discursive play. The third form of recognition, which is qualified as "openness" (2004, 355), and which consists in being open to the truth claim of the other person, would correspond to reflective linguistic capacities to respond to and assess claims with a propositional form. By contrast, the second form of recognition would correspond to the more basic form of responsiveness and would as such not typically require reflective linguistic capacities. This form, however, would be presupposed by the third form, and the responsiveness typical of the latter would require that of the former. The responsiveness of the second form would consist in sensitivity toward implicit as well as more explicit claims of the other, 'the Thou', to be recognized as a moral subject and person, and it would also consist in an ability to recognize "the otherness of the other" (2004, 354) and her unique individual ways of expressing her mind and emotions. This form of recognition could in turn be contrasted with Gadamer's first form which is defined by a failing recognition of the other as a moral subject and person, and which involves an *objectification* and *instrumentalization* of the other as means to one's own end. In the first

[9] Gadamer gives a Hegelian qualification of the dynamics of interpersonal relationships involved as "the dialectic of reciprocity that governs all I–Thou relationships" (2004, 353). More concretely, he elaborates this qualification in terms of the historicity of all relationships: "[t]he inner historicity of all the relations in the lives of men consists in the fact that there is a constant struggle for mutual recognition" (2004, 353). See also Theodore George's qualification of Gadamer's "three moral gradations of our hermeneutical recognition of another person" (2020, 107) and Axel Honneth's interpretation which considers Gadamer's three "forms of the experience of reciprocal recognition" (2003, 6).

form, the other is understood and responded to in ways similar to how we would respond to experiential objects in the natural world, and her future claims and actions are anticipated on the basis of generalizations from former experience of people's behavior.

Returning to Ramberg's explorative definition of discursive play, we observe that the third form of recognition, openness, would not only capture more developed reflexive linguistic capacities but also the richer dimensions of enabled agency characterized by Ramberg as "a realization of the subject's freedom to be moved by reason, to be changed, to become more by understanding more" (2015, 227). Being open to the claim of the other, Gadamer points out, "involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so" (2004, 355). It thus involves the self-reflective and potentially self-transformative process of putting one's prejudices at risk and making them questionable. Openness to the claim of the other enables an enduring or lifelong *learning process* hinted at in Gadamer's brief comment that *sprachliche Spiele* "exist where we, as learners—and when do we cease to be that?—rise to the understanding of the world" (2004, 483–84).

Hopefully, my interpretation so far may suggest how Ramberg's explorative definition of discursive play, as well as his remarks on responsive abilities required and enabled by play, could be specified in the light of Gadamer's Hegel-inspired analogy in the second part of TM. However, how does this extended application of Gadamer's notion of play help to give us a fresh look at the Hegel-inspired analogy as such, and thus add textual support for the hypothesis of the hermeneutic centrality of the notion of play in TM? Here I will only offer a brief reply by drawing on the interpretations of Monika Vilhauer (2010) and Theodore George (2020).

By reading Gadamer's analogy through the lens of *discursive play*, as well as through the Hegelian dialectical scheme underlying the analogy, we may become more attentive to the interconnectedness of the three forms of recognition distinguished through the analogy. Rather than seeing these forms as an outlined typology where the various types could be applied to social life relatively independently (like Weberian *ideal types*), we would stress their complementarity in mapping out trajectories of human understanding, learning and development. We have seen how Ramberg's explorative definition stresses processes of understanding and self-transformation enabled by discursive play, and how Gadamer's remark on s*prachliche Spiele* concerns an enduring or lifelong process of learning and understanding. Taking note of this, we read the Hegel-inspired analogy

as showing how different processes of mutual recognition that are carried by interpersonal communication and relationships may either stimulate or obstruct processes of learning and development. In distinguishing and exemplifying the second form of recognition, where the personhood and otherness of the other is recognized, but her claim to truth is overlooked, Gadamer refers to relationships embedded in care work, upbringing or education and how the more dominating party in these relationships would tend to "claim to understand the other person in advance" (2004, 354). Here the potential to learn and develop for the more dependent and vulnerable party would be limited or suppressed as long as the dominating party fails to realize *her own* dependence and belonging, and to understand that her possibilities to understand herself, the other and the world become limited, too, by overlooking the other's claim to truth. More generally, we may take the Hegel-inspired analogy to highlight conditions enabling or obstructing *mutual* learning and growth in various social contexts. Guided by Gadamer's notion of play, Monica Vilhauer has thus taken the analogy to show how "I–Thou relations [of *mutual respect* and *shared commitment*] ultimately provide for a process in which mutual human growth can occur" (2010, 76–7).

Theodore George has appealed to Gadamer's notion of play in suggesting another and more intriguing interpretation of Gadamer's forms of recognition. Like Ramberg (2011), George notes how Gadamer developed his notion of play by being "cognizant of research in animal behaviour that blurs received distinctions between human and animal" (2020, 101). To Gadamer, George points out, play has a significant place in the lives of both humans and non-human animals. Yet play in human lives is different due to "the definitively human hermeneutical experience of language" while "for animals [...] play takes shape without language as a form of free self-movement" (2020, 102). Nevertheless, George argues for extending the application of Gadamer's forms of recognition to the effect that we should "recognise our difference-in-continuity with animals" (2020, 89). George takes the major obstacle for this recognition of non-human animals to be our received prejudices about animals and ontological dichotomies that allegedly separate them from us. Yet through our experience of and engagement with animals, we could question and achieve a "hermeneutic displacement" of these prejudices (2020, 105). Through this kind of hermeneutic experience, George proposes, "we make ourselves available for an interaction with animals that respects difference and recognises our common belonging together with animals within a world, or, if not a

world, then at least the shared space opened by our respective participation in play" (2020, 89). Thus, at least, he thinks, "Gadamer's approach [...] allows the initial outlines of our hermeneutical responsibility toward animals to come into view" (2020, 104).

Hermeneutics and solidarity

In this concluding section I consider some ethical aspects and concepts in Gadamer's work by taking as my point of departure Ramberg's (2015) efforts to bring together Rorty's concept of solidarity and Gadamer's hermeneutic core concepts of dialogue and tradition. Ramberg (2015, 228) sees Rorty's concept of solidarity and his book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989) as a development of his earlier and hermeneutically inspired concept of conversation in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), even though the former book (1989) makes no mention of hermeneutics. Through qualifying Rorty's concept of solidarity in more explicit hermeneutic terms, Ramberg may in effect be seen to expose Gadamer's hermeneutic core concepts to Rorty's more ethically potent concept. On the one hand, he qualifies and elaborates Rorty's concept as a concept of "discursive" or "conversational solidarity" (2015, 227, 228), while stressing that the latter "is available only if one accepts the hermeneutic view of intelligibility as coming into being through dialogue" (2015, 229). In addition, he harmonizes Rorty's concept with Gadamer's concept of tradition by seeing tradition in Gadamer's sense as something its members are "dialogically working up" (2015, 228). On the other hand, and by taking the history of Rorty's concepts of conversation and solidarity into account, he suggests that the hermeneutic key term "dialogical" could in turn be re-qualified through Rorty's concept: "dialogical understanding is an achievement of solidarity" (2015, 228). We could take this as an invitation to consider the relevance of Rorty's concept of solidary for Gadamer's hermeneutics and for elaborating what a *tradition* is or could be seen to be. Let me first briefly present Rorty's concept.

The normative content and force of Rorty's concept of solidarity consists in the moral urge to incessantly see and include cultural others as 'one of us'. Hence, the important thing, according to Rorty, is "to keep trying to expand our sense of 'us' as far as we can, by noticing our similarities with people we up till now have tended to think of as 'they' rather than 'us' " (Rorty 1989, 196). He offers an historical example of how solidarity works by noting how people in Denmark and Italy during World War II

saved and hid Jewish neighbors away from the Nazi occupants through seeing their Jewish neighbor as 'one of us' (1989, 189–91). More generally, and most importantly, Rorty takes solidarity to be due to contingent historical circumstances and not based on recognition of an ahistorical common humanity.

If we apply Rorty's concept to a *tradition* in Gadamer's sense, it would mean that those belonging to the tradition, whether humanities researchers or lay members, have a responsibility to incessantly include cultural others through various sorts of communicative or interpretative encounters. When described in Gadamer's more phenomenological terms, we could perhaps see this as an ongoing process of a "fusion of horizons" (2004, 305). Yet does Gadamer's hermeneutics, whether in TM or later, have relevant *normative* conceptual resources to address this responsibility and thus accommodate Rorty's concept—or to even provide a counterpart to it?

In TM a relevant starting point would again be Gadamer's Hegel-inspired analogical account of *openness*, which, when spelled out normatively, consists in the imperative that we *should* be open to recognize the truth claim of the other, as well as her otherness. Yet, whereas the analogy is focused on the hermeneutic task of understanding *historical* others within *the same* tradition, we are now interested in the understanding of *contemporary* and *cultural* others belonging to *other* traditions than our own. On the face of it, this hermeneutic task seems to pose serious ethical challenges, as well as epistemic challenges, to Gadamer's hermeneutics, as interpreters have commented for a long time and as succinctly summed up by Georgia Warnke (2012, 7). Although Gadamer is emphatically aware that the 'mere' recognition of the otherness of the (contemporary) other is easily caught up in the dialectics of paternalism and domination, as his examples from care work, upbringing and education suggest (2004, 353–54), his imperative of openness to the claim of the (contemporary) other would seem to be best exemplified by what could be achieved only through close personal relationships, as Axel Honneth has argued (2003). However, to search for other resources in Gadamer's oeuvre that could possibly address this and related challenges we may consider some of his works after TM.

For our inquiry it is pertinent to note that in some of his later essays Gadamer himself introduces and uses a concept of solidarity while the concept of tradition fades away from his writings.[10] Like Rorty, Gadamer takes solidarity to be a genuinely historical phenomenon and not

[10] See Lawn, 2006, 106; Warnke, 2012, 7–8.

based on some ahistorical essence.[11] However, and as has been pointed out and discussed by Warnke (2012) and George (2020), Gadamer's concept of solidarity differs in several significantly ways from that of Rorty. First, Gadamer does not see solidarities as emerging in terms of a common identity or perceived similarities between people. On the contrary, his historical examples describe people with different identities as coming together when facing a threat or crisis that affects them all. From his own experience he thus speaks of how strangers living in big German cities sensed a new togetherness and was brought together under bomb attacks during World War II.[12] He further refers to how people facing and responding to the environmental crisis have come together in the environmental movement.[13] Particularly the latter example shows how solidarity on Gadamer's account does not depend on common ethnic, national or religious identities. The second contrast to Rorty's concept is that Gadamer takes bonds of solidarity to be *discovered*, rather than *created*. What is discovered is what Gadamer qualifies as 'a life together',[14] and yet this is a discovery which also discerns and allows for otherness. As Warnke (2012) observes, Gadamer develops his concept of solidarity from the concept of friendship in Aristotle's practical philosophy where friendship is qualified in ethical terms as a *virtue*. Gadamer takes from Aristotle's concept the idea that while friends have 'a life together' "they acknowledge and appreciate one another's distinctiveness", and "because of their difference they can help one another to come to new understandings of themselves" (Warnke, 2012, 9). Returning to modern times, Gadamer sees solidarities as emerging when 'a common life' is discovered under conditions of threat, even on a global scale, like in war, in facing the environmental crisis, or the threat of nuclear annihilation.[15] At the same time, Gadamer points out, solidarities may lead to discovery and recognition of the otherness of others which have been obscured under conditions of a modern anonymous mass society.[16] Warnke thus sums up how Gadamer's concept of solidarity differs from that of Rorty: "[t]he triple stress that Gadamer's account of solidarity puts on discovering a common life, allowing for difference, and overcoming anonymity departs in significant

[11] See Warnke, 2012, 10–12.
[12] Gadamer, 2000, 63.
[13] Gadamer, 2001, 80.
[14] Gadamer, 1999, 134. In another writing Gadamer uses the German expression "das Miteinander des Ganzen Lebens" (2000b, 62).
[15] See Gadamer, 1981, 85.
[16] Gadamer, 2000b, 57, 63.

ways from accounts such as Richard Rorty's that rely on possibilities for identification as their grounds" (2012, 10).[17] Yet could we interpret Gadamer's concept of solidarity as a continuation or a development of his hermeneutics in TM and can it at all be seen to address the limitations noted above concerning his account of hermeneutic openness? Turning now to George's interpretation, we could interpret Gadamer's emphasis on the *discovery* of solidarities to "suggest[] that solidarity concerns our mutual interpretive openness that first allows a shared world to become visible" (2020, 131). At the same time, the examples of solidarity above might also suggest that capacities for understanding and interpretation needed to establish bonds of solidarity would be *reactive* and exerted only under conditions of life-threatening events or crises. In so far, these capacities could be contrasted to those that would be enduringly conditioned and enabled by a *tradition* in the sense elaborated in TM. Nevertheless, as George points out, Gadamer does not only take account of solidarities that emerge in response to external threat or necessity. He also considers how the latter may in turn prepare and give occasion for "the free pursuit of what may [...] be called 'elective' solidarities" (2020, 138), as already the transnational environmental movement evolving in Gadamer's lifetime may suggest.[18]

Moreover, it is Gadamer's engagement with Aristotle's practical philosophy, both in and after TM, which gives us the best clue as to capacities for understanding that would be needed for discovering and engaging in 'elective solidarities'. In part two of *TM,* Gadamer elaborates how our historically mediated understanding of authoritative texts, norms or standards always needs to be applied in practical situations in our contemporary society. He further considers how an appropriate and responsible application of our understanding can be qualified through Aristotle's concept of practical wisdom or *phronesis*.[19] In this context of highlighting Aristotle's hermeneutical relevance, Gadamer considers how the moral self-knowledge which distinguishes *phronesis* requires friendship.[20] It is against this background in TM, George suggests, that we must interpret Gadamer's later development of the concept of solidarity through Aristo-

[17] See also George's critical comparison (2020, 130–31).

[18] See also Warnke's comment that "we can always discover additional circumstances, similar to environmental danger, in which we find that we are already at home with others in seeing the need for collective efforts" (2012, 12)

[19] Gadamer, 2004, 309–21.

[20] 2004, 319–20.

tle's concept of friendship.[21] For Gadamer after TM, the self-understanding and recognition of the other's otherness that is fostered through friendship enables the development of capacities for discovering and engaging in solidarities in the larger social world. Emphasizing the ethical significance of friendships, Gadamer "maintains that our responsibility to the other person is itself our *entreé* to the larger world of others in which both we ourselves and the other person participate" (George, 2020, 106). The capacities which need to be developed for engaging in 'elective solidarities' would include *phronesis* as a capacity for deliberating and deciding the right thing to do. And therefore

"the promotion and expansion of close, personal friendships within society is decisive because friends supplement our *phronesis*. Here, friendships help us not only to realise our private ends, but also and crucially to augment our ability to deliberate and decide about what to do in the larger world we share with others" (2020, 120).

Gadamer's later engagement with Aristotle's concept of friendship may give us pause to reconsider Axel Honneth's (2003) critical assessment of the limitations of Gadamer's Hegel-inspired account in TM of the "I–Thou-relationship", and hence his account of openness. Honneth finds Gadamer's account of recognition valid "only with respect to close personal relationships" (2003, 19). Yet, as George has pointed out, to Gadamer after TM our close friendship with and "responsibility to the other person is itself our *entreé* to the larger world of others in which both we ourselves and the other person participate." (2020, 106). So at least from the vantage point of Gadamer's later work, his earlier account of openness to the claim of the other may not have those limitations that are ascribed to it by Honneth.

Finally, we may note how Gadamer's concept of solidarity bears on the overarching topic of part two in TM: understanding and interpretation in the humanities. In an essay originally written in 1983 Gadamer (2000a) suggests that the humanities, and particularly, the *European* humanities, have a key role in discovering new solidarities and in recognizing the otherness of non-European traditions. Due to the global spread of an industrial civilization since the industrial revolution, the worldwide plurality of different traditions and cultures has been obscured.[22] Given the range of global tasks for future human co-existence on earth, he thinks that the

[21] See George's comment on the significance of Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* for Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics: 2020, 121.

[22] Gadamer, 2000a, 120–22, 126–27.

specific task of the humanities would be to disclose and study this plurality.[23] Yet in facing this plurality of traditions and cultural standards, the European humanities researcher should not, and could not, simply give up the validity standards she has inherited from her European scholarly and scientific tradition. Only through asserting and applying these standards, Gadamer claims, can she *know* and *recognize* the non-European other.[24] When read through the terminology developed in TM, this could be slightly elaborated: openness to the truth claim of the non-European other, as well as recognition of her otherness, is conditioned and enabled by asserting, and thereby putting at risk, one's own prejudices, prejudices that may prove enabling, as well as prejudices that may turn out to hinder understanding.

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[24] The larger textual context for this claim reads in German: "Wie es mit der Toleranz ist, daß sie auf einer inneren Stärke beruhen muß, so ist es auch mit der wissenschaftlichen Objektivität, die in den Geisteswissenschaften vorausgesetzt ist. Auch hier handelt es sich nicht um Selbstaufgabe und Selbstauslöschung zugunsten eines allgemeinen Geltenlassens, sondern *die Einsetzung des Eigenen für die Erkenntnis des Anderen und für die Anerkennung des Anderen*" (2000a, 126–27, my emph.).

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This, But Unironically: Unprofessional Thoughts after Rorty

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"Like philosophy, anti-philosophy is for the philosophers."
—Steven Shapin (2002)

In a well-known section of *Philosophical Investigations* (§ 309), Wittgenstein writes: "What is your aim in philosophy?—To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle" (Wittgenstein [1953] 1998). This is a striking image but not one whose immediate relation to either traditional or Wittgensteinian preoccupations in philosophy is obvious. This much is, perhaps, clear in the text. The principal fly bottles that Wittgenstein wishes to show flies the way out of are traditional philosophical problems. After all, he had just (in § 308) analogized a particular philosophical problem to a conjuring trick, and he had earlier analogized philosophical problems to getting "entangled in our own rules" (§ 125). Like the fly, the philosopher is beset with problems that amount to not knowing their "way about" (§ 123).[1]

Wittgenstein in these sentiments gives his own particular expression to a long-standing tradition of anti-philosophical philosophy that seeks to rescue philosophers and those under their influence from unsolvable problems of their own making. Anti-philosophical philosophies come in many varieties—scientific, commonsensical, pragmatic, analytic, ... When proponents of various deflationary philosophies come in contact with one another, there is often a contest to see who can be more anti-philosophically

[1] It is worth noting that Wittgenstein's goal is not to release the fly from the fly-bottle. He wishes only to show it the way out. Anyone who has tried to show a wasp the way out a window might argue for a revised goal here.

philosophical—an anti-metaphysical proponent of a semantic conception of truth might find themselves undercut by a proponent of a pragmatic account of truth, who in turn finds herself undercut by a disquotationalist, who then finds himself told that disquotationalism itself depends for its plausibility on the semantic theory of truth anyway. None of these philosophers believes in Truth or Correspondence Theory of Truth—the concepts we tilt at in philosophy are large enough to demand capital letters—but none are sure that their way of not believing in it is quite the most rigorously anti-philosophical.

This is as much as to say that when anti-philosophers meet one another, each thinks that the other is the fly and that any wall of mutual misunderstanding there is between them is part of a bottle enclosing the other. Each offers the other gestures of liberation; each is baffled that the other just stands there, gesturing back. Occasionally, one steps back to peruse their surroundings and wishes to proclaim to the other, "Far from being a fly-bottle, my house has many mansions. I shall go and prepare a place for you."

* * *

After such an exuberant opening, we reach the confessional moment. I have studied some philosophers who have deflationary, even anti-philosophical, tendencies for long decades. Whether they live in fly-bottles or houses with many mansions, I know my way about their philosophical work. But it is precisely because I know my way about that I find myself baffled when those philosophers are accused of various philosophical mistakes that I swear they do not make. When the way out of the fly-bottle starts from a place you swear they are not and offers a path that takes them close to where they already are, something has gone awry. A metaphilosophical problem has the form: "Until a minute ago, I thought I knew my way about."

Something like this bafflement is a characteristic philosophical experience, I would argue. The bafflement I have in mind is not complete lack of understanding but rather a sort of philosophical whiplash as one moves from paragraphs or sentences that seem not only reasonable but illuminating to paragraphs or sentences that allegedly follow in an argument or a train of thought that seem utterly out of place, non sequiturs that they make you wonder not just if you understood what you had read so far but whether you really understand logical consequence or the unity of thought.

Now, however common this philosophical experience may be, it is not only under-theorized but indeed under-expressed. There are good reasons for this. To give expression to this sort of experience violates the code of professional philosophy in at least two ways. First, it is contrary to professional philosophy to find any philosopher worthy of the name so puzzling.[2] Second, and more importantly, expressing this experience in print as part of your philosophical praxis is writing about something you admittedly (for that is the point) do not understand. This is very poor professional form—philosophy is hard enough when writing about what you understand; it is pretty much impossible to write usefully on philosophical matters you do not understand.

Here I shall undertake to exhibit this bad form. I shall here be if not proudly then at least firmly unprofessional in my philosophy.

* * *

Why might it be philosophically useful to do this? There is something useful in exploring the varieties of philosophical experience. That might be enough. But I think there is more than this. Confronting this sort of mismatch between philosophical sensibilities or this sense of not knowing your way about in reading a philosopher as they locate themselves with respect to philosophical projects that you understand very differently can help one interrogate one's own sensibilities; it might also lead that other philosopher or their advocates to try additional, different ways of inviting such puzzled philosophers into their philosophy. This is less a place for philosophical argumentation and more a place for philosophical invitation. Exploring this sort of philosophical mismatch can help us overcome the philosophy-is-argumentation bias so rife in academic philosophy. It can also bring philosophical pedagogy closer to the practices of written philosophical research.[3]

So far, the experience I have in mind has been very abstractly characterized. Let us now characterize it more exactly in a single case. In an

[2] From this it follows, that those who we find so puzzling are not worthy of being called philosophers. And then the experience I mention is not an experience internal to the community of philosophers but what happens when we travel to other intellectual lands and meet strange, unexpected people, often incorrectly called "philosophers" by others. In analytic parlance, "Continental philosopher" often no more designates a type of philosopher than "alleged criminal" designates a type of criminal.

[3] One does not introduce, say, Spinoza's philosophy by arguing for it. Indeed, in teaching it one might never argue for it.

essay warmly received by Richard Rorty, Bjørn Ramberg characterizes one aspect of Rorty's project as a rejection of "representationalism," which has a "grip on analytic philosophy" and consists of two assumptions:

> The first is the Kantian idea that knowledge, or thinking generally, must be understood in terms of some relation between what the world offers up to the thinker, on the one side, and on the other the active subjective capacities by which the thinker structures for cognitive use what the world provides. The second is the Platonic conviction that there must be some particular form of description of things, which, by virtue of its ability to accurately map, reflect, or otherwise latch onto just those kinds through which the world presents itself to would-be knowers, is the form in which any literally true—or cognitively significant, or ontologically ingenuous—statement must be couched. Ramberg, 2000, 351[4]

Now, I must admit to an intense feeling of philosophical vertigo here. I understand the sentences but they do not describe any philosophical reality I am familiar with. Here is a list of the most important things I do not understand:

First, it seems odd that analytic philosophy combines a Kantian and Platonic sentiment into its very "problem-defining assumptions" (Ramberg, 2000, 351). An initial problem is that the very Kantian move that is the first assumption of representationalism was, in Kant's own work, a rejection of Platonic accounts of a priori knowledge. The inability of any account of a priori knowledge to succeed if it begins from the mind needing to grasp a form that objects have entirely independently of how our minds grasp those objects is the starting point of Kant's Copernican revolution in philosophy. Transcendental idealism replaces Platonic idealism. Now, the second, allegedly Platonic, assumption is not exactly that objects have forms themselves independently of the mind but rather they have forms by which they "present" to the mind. But Kant rejects this also—there are forms of pure intuition but nothing is an object of knowledge for us simply by conforming to the forms of intuition—the manifold of intuition must be synthesized by the categories of the pure understanding to the unity of the object. Both a strict Platonist and a strict Kantian would reject the second assumption as stated, but it is an assumption, we are told, of the very broad project of analytic philosophy.

[4] For the warmth of Rorty's reception see Rorty, 2000, 370.

Now, let us set Herr Kant aside; what is Herr Kant is us, us analytic philosophers? This leads straight-away to my second set of bafflements. I find these assumptions hard to find in analytic philosophy. There are, I suppose, some Kantian philosophers in the articulated sense in analytic philosophy; there are some Platonist philosophers in the articulated sense in analytic philosophy. But there are also a lot of analytic philosophers who are neither. Which is as much as to say that within analytic philosophy as I understand it, there is a great deal of interest in knowledge and language but not always in knowledge or language as representational in the precise sense articulated by Ramberg.

Allow me an example not entirely at random. Rudolf Carnap began his philosophy in a very neo-Kantian manner. I do not merely admit this; I insist upon it. But the neo-Kantianism that he was influenced by had already traveled a far way from strict Kantianism and he took it so much further that he no longer saw his work as Kantian at all. A key moment in Carnap's sense that his philosophy was in no interesting sense Kantian was precisely when the last remnant of the transcendental mind left his philosophy. This happened when in his own reflections on the failure of the *Aufbau* project he decided that the problem was the ambiguity and vagueness of traditional epistemological vocabulary and rejected his own epistemological vocabulary of subjective experience and objective knowledge. In the formal mode of speech, there is no talk of the mind and its forms of knowledge; there is only talk of the logical forms of language. From 1934, at just the moment Carnap becomes the sort of philosopher who importantly influences the future course of analytic philosophy, Carnap very explicitly rejects Ramberg's Kantian assumption as stated. And he also rejects the Platonic assumption at the same time and for the same reason—there is no unique language that expresses how the world really is. There is an infinite plurality of languages that can be investigated for their logical consequences and potentially adopted for certain purposes.[5]

Now I am aware that Rorty from *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* onward argues that the move to a preoccupation with forms of the mind and with epistemology to linguistic forms and semantics or philosophy of language is not really a new philosophical project, when that project continued to be interested in, say, the recommendation of linguistic forms for empirical science or a concern with empirical meaningfulness (Rorty, 1979, pp. 259ff). But then we have a conundrum. Carnap argues that his project

[5] This is all too quickly stated but the arguments can be found in many of my publications, especially Richardson, 1996, 1997.

in 1934 is a new philosophical project and indeed the old project was confused and not viable while the new project is scientifically sound. Carnap seems entirely right about this. After the move to metalogic, to the formal mode of speech, and to logical pluralism, the epistemological point of the *Aufbau* project can no longer even be expressed and the logical presuppositions of the project have been set aside. A large scale metaphilosophical project that says that despite all this Carnap in 1928 and Carnap in 1934 is engaged in the same project seems to be operating at such a high level of abstraction that it does not and cannot illuminate either the details of the development of Carnap's thought or the way in which specifically his mature philosophical project came to inform analytic philosophical practice.

Now, if you wish to reject Carnap's project, that is your choice and I can only offer you my best wishes. But Rorty, it seems to me, wishes to do more than this—he wishes to expose the errors of Carnapian thinking, to locate the project in a large-scale set of projects aimed at a form of foundational epistemology, and to provide you, the reader, with the tools you need to escape such projects. And this is where my bafflement comes in. For in the diagnosis Carnap seems to be misplaced, the route out seems unavailable, and the desire to escape comes itself from a mistaken, indeed very uncharitably mistaken, account of Carnap's philosophical motives.

Poor, lost Carnap is bad enough, but this essay is actually about me, poor me. These are thoughts I have reading just the first three sentences of Ramberg's paper. Reflecting on them, I am aware of two things. First, there is a large literature by and about Rorty that I could work hard to understand to get a better sense of what is being claimed here and why. This I freely admit. I also admit to not feeling, however, particularly motivated to read it. This is because, second, in the cost-benefit analysis of academic life I cannot imagine that this is an efficient way for me to understand *what I want to understand* in the history of analytic philosophy and of philosophy of science. I don't feel much trapped inside my fly-bottle. It isn't so much that it is cozy here as that it is interesting here—far more interesting than it seems to be from the vantage point to which Rorty himself escaped.

I suspect that many philosophers have figures in their scholarly lives whose work they ought in principle be interested in and are, indeed, in fact, interested in, but into whose work they find it almost impossible to delve. Rorty is such a figure to me. His work is not wholly unintelligible and at times seems quite insightful. But the experience of reading it is so slow because there are so many things in it that seem strange—extremely

bold historical vision with a commensurate lack of attention to even some of the most salient aspects of the philosophical work whose history he wishes to explore, odd juxtapositions of work he finds either inspiring or incorrect, offhand remarks that border on or sometimes fully embrace being off putting.[6] His philosophical sensibility and mine have combined to make it impossible for me to engage seriously with his philosophy. This wouldn't really be a problem for anyone except perhaps me if it were not the case that I am philosophically interested in some of the things Rorty is doing—and I think many philosophers ought to be interested in Rorty's work—and I cannot help but think Rorty has muddled things up more than a little bit. That is, I find it impossible to discharge my professional obligations with respect to his work but I don't wish simply to leave it aside. Hence my need to treat him unprofessionally.

* * *

As I write this in the early weeks of the second Trump presidency, the example of a baffling and exasperating piece of Rortian philosophy that is most salient in my mind is his 1998 book, *Achieving Our Nation*. The book is currently celebrated for a passage in which Rorty, utilizing the work of Edward Luttwak, imagines that fascism might be the future state of America. Rorty (1998, 89–90) considers a situation of an American working class losing faith that anyone in the American political system is looking after their dwindling prospects or concerned for their interests. Then, he writes:

> Something will crack. The nonsuburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for—someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodern professors will no longer be calling the shots [...]. One thing that is very likely to happen is that the gains made in the past forty years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out. Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion [...]. All the

[6] Consider, on the last point, this strange claim (Rorty, 1998, 95): "The ubiquity of Foucauldian power is reminiscent of the ubiquity of Satan, and thus the ubiquity of original sin—the diabolical stain on every human soul." Why is it not reminiscent, instead, of the ubiquity of oxygen or of our fellow humans? It seems quintessentially American not only to read Foucault through the story of Genesis but to take God's side in doing so.

> resentments which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet. Rorty, 1998, 90

But for a few terms that now seem quaint (substitute "woke" for "postmodern") and a few missing equity-deserving groups now at the centre of attention (transgender people, most particularly) nearly all of this passage seems to have come to pass. If, however, you are looking in the book for any way out of the imagined situation you might find yourself, as I do, sadly disappointed. Rorty, by and large, joins with other leftish intellectuals in blaming the situation on leftish intellectuals. The main move of the argument is to argue that a reformist American left interested in using the means of politics to better the estate of the working classes was replaced in the aftermath of the 1960s by a cultural left, given to writing books and theorizing Otherness. This left, given its theoretical, philosophical proclivities—its adoption of a spectator rather than an activist stance—is eventually deemed incapable of being a "political Left" (Rorty, 1998, 104). Rorty calls for a reinvigorated reformist left, one that goes "back into the business of piecemeal reform within the framework of a market economy" (Rorty, 1998, 105).

It would be cheap—not inaccurate, but cheap—to criticize Rorty for writing a philosophical book decrying the philosophical books of the cultural left and calling for a return to piecemeal reforms while not proposing any such reforms. It would be less cheap and more philosophically telling perhaps to note how little Rorty seems to value the political aspect of what he calls the cultural left. He limits the political value of the cultural left to a reduction of sadism, which he of course indicates is no small thing. But he seems to fail to note that a cultural commitment to being less cruel to black people or gay people or women or trans people can be, indeed has been, a driver of piecemeal legislative reform. Thus, while he makes a long-term prediction of possible fascism in reaction to a cultural left, he fails to imagine, for example, the legalization of gay marriage. Indeed, but for one dismissive remark about Tony Kushner, gay activism, including the stunning successes of gay people to get treatments for AIDS approved by the US government, is, in a book published in 1998, wholly unmentioned. One wonders indeed if the Voting Rights Act or Title IX really count for Rorty as piecemeal reform, coming as they did from the civil rights and women's liberation movements. Or indeed whether

the whole of the regulatory state doesn't count because the reforms occur within already existing legislation.

There is a larger problem that I have with the diagnosis of the ills of the American left in the book, however. A clue to this problem is found in the famous passage we quoted above. Rorty's prediction is importantly wrong in one crucial way: despite continuing beliefs to the contrary, when fascism came to America, the population that led the change wasn't the "nonsuburban" population—that is, the urban working class people or indeed working class people more generally. The rise of Trumpism was not in the first instance a turning from the cultural left by working-class people who felt betrayed by the cultural left; it is a movement led by white middle-class men, and most especially middle to upper-middle class men without advanced education (Pew, 2024). These men seem less betrayed by the cultural left than challenged by it and angry at it. This suggests two things philosophically impoverished about the book: the discussion of the cultural left as ultimately not a political left seems entirely to misread just how controversial the image of a society with human rights for all and acceptance of racial, sexual, and gender minorities continues to be in the USA and, relatedly, a remarkable lack of curiosity about the images of America in various versions of right-wing politics.

On the latter issue, here is a remarkably bland passage that indicates to me the lacuna at the heart of the book:

> As long as our country has a politically active Right and a politically active Left, this argument will continue. It is at the heart of the nation's political life, but the Left is responsible for keeping it going. For the Right never thinks anything much needs to be changed: it thinks the country is basically in good shape, and may well have been in better shape in the past. It sees the Left's struggle for social justice as mere trouble-making, as utopian foolishness. Rorty, 1998, 14

In the era of Trump, this passage reads as astonishingly naïve: the American Right in the 2020s thinks pretty much everything needs to be changed. The Trumpian agenda is dismantling the government while reveling in the utter sadism of reversing gains in human rights. Far from being foolish trouble-makers, the Cultural Left, for Trumpists, have betrayed their country. But this understanding of the Left didn't come from nowhere—there is a clear throughline from Reaganism to Trumpism, from McCarthyism

to Trumpism, indeed from KuKluxKlanism to Trumpism. The deep historical anxiety of the American Right about the legacy of slavery and the treatment of Black people, about each new wave of immigrants, about gender relations, and so much more—all these things find no expression in Rorty's book. Rorty seems to believe that there is nothing interesting here. Rightism is, for Rorty, it seems, just complacency, ringed by nostalgia. All of which is to say, the historical framing of the book neglects how deeply different cultural visions have informed the American Left and Right since at least the rise of abolitionism.

Rorty's vision for achieving the promise of America is a vision of pride and hope. He draws inspiration from John Dewey and Walt Whitman in articulating this vision. He reminds us that the point of such visions is not description and thus the appropriate way to judge them is not through concerns with adequate representation or truth. We must, of course, accept this. Moreover, he says that the point of such visions is to "forge a moral identity" (Rorty, 1998, 13), indeed a national moral identity. Rorty also wishes to warn us off "sin" as a notion to use in such stories. Again, that seems reasonable. My counter-suggestion is that leaving aside the notion of "sin" should not blind us to the dangers of moral vice and that our stories of national identity should provide tactics and strategies to rise from vice into virtue. Hope and pride, I submit, are not sufficient.

So, let me sketch the beginnings of an alternative vision of America, one that like Rorty's looks for historical inspiration in the world of American philosophy, but one that is more alive to the institutional obstacles and moral vices to be overcome. In lieu of Dewey and Whitman, my choice of inspirations is Jane Addams and Horace Kallen, two towering figures of left politics and philosophy in the early twentieth century.

From Addams I take the sensibility that the situation in her time—an increasingly urban, immigrant, industrialized America—was a situation that required substantially new thinking, a new political philosophy, because the political philosophy embedded in America's founding documents and its immigration and naturalization practices was insufficient for the genuine problems and promises of the moment. Here is a characteristic quotation to this effect:

> Were we not in the midst of a certain intellectual dearth and apathy, of a skepticism in regard to the ideals of self-government

> which have ceased to charm men, we would see that we are testing our national life by a tradition too provincial and limited to meet its present motley and cosmopolitan character; that we lack mental energy, adequate knowledge, and a sense of the youth of the earth. The constant cry that American institutions are in danger betrays a spiritual waste, not due to our infidelity to national ideals, but arising from the fact that we fail to enlarge those ideals in accord with our faithful experience of life. Our political machinery devised for quite other conditions, has not been readjusted and adapted to the successive changes resulting from our development.
>
> Addams, 1906, 39–40

The principal concern Addams expresses about the eighteenth-century republican and agrarian ideals in the urban, industrialized, and immigrant America of the turn of the twentieth-century is a limitation on the proper roles of government. She accuses the American government of two main failures in this regard. First, new immigrants are admitted to the United States with some lofty language about the sanctity of citizenship and a few abstract rights such as the right to vote. But they are given very little else—in particular, they are given no skills or training in the intelligent use of those rights. Second, the republican limitation of government to protection of the citizenry is turned inward in American cities and becomes the use of militarized police in the governance of the urban population. This positive neglect and militarized policing leads to an immigrant community that is not up to the task of participating as desired in the political or social life of their new country. It was to the task of doing better by the immigrant community in the settlement houses of Chicago that Addams dedicated the greatest amount of her energy.

Nonetheless, Addams did not blandly talk about the immigrant community as "nonsuburban" nor did she configure them as they incipient threat to American democracy. On the contrary, the vibrancy and specificity of the immigrant community leaps off every page as she lists (Addams, 1906, 41) "Italian lazzaroni, the peasants from the Carpathian foothills, and the proscribed traders from Galatia," Irish, Germans, Russians, Poles, Lithuanians, Finns, Jews, and so on. More importantly, the interaction among these subcommunities of urban immigrants is for Addams the source of new ideals of governance:

> They are laying the simple and inevitable foundations for an international order as the foundations of tribal and national morality have already been laid. They are developing the only sort of patriotism consistent with the intermingling of the nations; for the citizens of a cosmopolitan quarter find an insuperable difficulty when they attempt to hem in their conception of patriotism either to the "old country" or to their adopted one. There arises the hope that when this newer patriotism becomes large enough, it will overcome arbitrary boundaries and soak up the notion of nationalism. Addams, 1906, 18–9

In Addams's vision it is precisely the cultural life of the cities of her time—the complicated relations of immigrant communities one to another, their economic stresses and opportunities under industrialization, their fractious relations with local government and law enforcement—that provide both the need for and the promise of reforming the American sense of governance. She finds her inspiration in the spontaneous working of immigrant neighbourhoods but also in the greater projects of sanitation, protection of children, disease control, and other social programs. This is less Rorty's imagined piecemeal federal legislative agenda than the hard, dedicated work of citizens and government from the civic to the international for the greater good.

Horace Kallen, writing in the wake of the First World War, reminds us that the political turn from legislative reform to culture was not a uniquely left phenomenon nor was it new in the 1960s. He writes:

> What this war did was to turn the anxiety about property into one about people. It now became people, qualities of race, heritage and attitude, not law, which was the menace to property and to the status it signified [...]. A widespread hysterical taking of stock began. Immigration, formerly more than welcomed as an economic boon, was now scrutinized as a eugenic menace. The stuff and form of the American being were reéxamined, not by visitors from abroad any longer, but by scared lodgers at home. Racial theories were promulgated descanting variously upon the magical superiority of the Nordic stock. In the decade 1914–1924 a succession of manifestos appeared, each painting a blacker and blacker picture, until finally, the faint new patterns of association generated by the

> industrial development of the United States were represented as an assault upon civilization. Kallen, 1924, 23–4

Which is to say that Kallen reminds us that the right-wing sadism of American culture has long had a political cast—and the very people to whom Addams looked on as the future of American democracy were, among the right, represented as its enemies. Kallen reminds us that the right does not wait for the left to carry politics forward and does not always seek simply to preserve the good of the present day. Kallen is writing specifically about both intellectuals and citizens who both projected a mythical past and offered a vision of the future, but one predicated upon resentments of the end of slavery and the defeat of the south, fear of immigrants, distaste for women's suffrage. This view is theorized and practiced by the Ku Klux Klan, which

> seeks social and intellectual conformity and economic and political rascality. Such an objective, brought in reflection down to its primary logical postulates and up to its ultimate social consequences, would eventuate in a philosophy of *Kultur*. Unopposed, it would render culture impossible in the United States. Kallen, 1924, 41

It is not against mere complacency and nostalgia that Kallen develops his own positive view, but upon a violent American cultural right that had then a very large impact on national life. His own vision—which he called "cultural pluralism"—not only is intellectually related to the project of Rorty's cultural left, but indeed is among its intellectual progenitors. Like Addams, Kallen finds the strength and promise of America in precisely the populations despised by the cultural right. Indeed Kallen stresses that his vision is of a social and cultural democracy borne from the variety within the American community:

> This democracy—in character and constitution social and intellectual rather than political—for its principle is, not one man one vote, but one temperament, one point of view, one vote—is that which is to-day at stake in the United States. It lies—as the history of the culture of any land makes amply clear—at the foundation of culture everywhere. It is the indispensable prerequisite to the existence and growth of culture in the United States. In manyness, variety, differentiation, lies the vitality

> of such oneness as they may compose. Cultural growth is founded upon Cultural Pluralism. Cultural Pluralism is possible only in a democratic society whose institutions encourage individuality in groups, in persons, in temperaments, whose program liberates these individualities and guides them into a fellowship of freedom and cooperation. The alternative before Americans is Kultur Klux Klan or Cultural Pluralism.
>
> Kallen, 1924, 43

Again, my points against Rorty are these: Addams and Kallen had a far more historically-informed and clear-eyed sense than did Rorty of where the antidemocratic tendency of the American people is located. They also saw that piecemeal legislative reform was insufficient for the political troubles of America—America needed to understand the source of its specific strength as a nation in its pluralism and in the mechanism by which pluralistic communities negotiated their complications. Addams argued strongly that this fact of American urban life required a new political philosophy and a rewrite of its very founding documents, while Kallen stressed that American unity was a choice between pluralism and active discrimination and sadism. Together, I submit, they give a better sense of the obstacles to achieving America and a more robust vision of an America worth achieving than one finds in Rorty.

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Having ventured out to America allow me to conclude by returning to philosophy. My deepest sense of unease with Rorty's positions stems from what we might call the practical lessons of the rejection of representationalism and the moral psychology of irony. In a passage of the book most relevant to professional philosophers, Rorty writes:

> We can still be old-fashioned reformist liberals even if, like Dewey, we give up the correspondence theory of truth and start treating moral and scientific beliefs as tools for achieving greater human happiness, rather than as representations of the intrinsic nature of reality. We can be this kind of liberal even after we turn our backs on Descartes, linguistify subjectivity, and see everything around us and within us as one more replaceable social construction. Rorty, 1998, 96

Reading this as an historian of analytic philosophy, I again find it strange not in the sense of a radical divergence from the tradition, but as a rather unremarkable stance within the tradition. Take again our friend Rudolf Carnap. He was perhaps not an old-fashioned liberal but more of a social democrat his whole life. He gave up the correspondence theory of truth and the idea of "representing the intrinsic nature of reality" as meaningless. He didn't endorse any form of Cartesian epistemological or metaphysical sentiments. What is the move to the formal mode of speech and to "protocol sentences" if not linguistically eliminating any appeal to subjectivity in philosophy? Carnap was not one to speak the language of "social construction" but given the practical nature of choice of language and the inner dependence of ontology on language choice, the general idea of social construction is not far from his views. He frequently spoke the language of "tools" or "instruments" in discussing scientific theories. (He wasn't big on talking about scientific beliefs; see the move to the formal mode of speech.) These were moves common to most logical empiricists and they all also thought these philosophical moves had no bearing on one's political commitments.

What is different about Rorty's position is the articulation and endorsement of the character of the liberal ironist. In a passage that is among the most cited in his work, Rorty introduces the "ironist" by listing three conditions the ironist fulfills:

> (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself.
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> Rorty, 1989, 173

Rorty's own attempt, I suppose, to distinguish this view from Carnap's comes in the next sentence: "Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old" (Rorty 1989, 73).

Carnap is often understood to offer a perspective of general syntax or semantics in which various language forms can be cast and then to offer arguments from within that language for the adoption of one or the other among them. But there are technical reasons why this does not work and Carnap appears to have been fully aware of those reasons. Instead, Carnap seems rather to believe that in any given dispute about the adoption of languages in principle the disputants might be about to find a metalanguage that they'd both be willing to speak for the purposes of mutually intelligibility.[7]

A better sense of Rorty's distance from Carnap and the other logical empiricists is to be found elsewhere, I submit. I find it in phrases like the above "radical and continuing doubts." Or when he goes on to say that ironists realize that "anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed" or when he says ironists are "never quite able to take themselves seriously" (Rorty, 1989, 73) because their language is subject to change and their lives are fragile. Some of these anxieties of the ironists seem fairly incoherent—what is the source of her radical doubts about her language if she has given up representationalism? Being uncertain whether your language is the best tool you could use to pursue your projects seems to be less in a position of doubt than of one of open-mindedness and experimentation. (One is tempted to say "pragmatism.") And, forgive me, but I cannot imagine a logical empiricist such as an Otto Neurath or a Hans Reichenbach pausing in their own positive philosophical efforts due to the knowledge that someone else with different values and different vocabulary redescribes their project as bad, mistaken, or silly. Nor can I imagine them not taking themselves seriously because language is changeable and life is fragile.

Indeed, on this last point Reichenbach was utterly insistent. Once we have given up any illusions that our philosophy is secured by the nature of reason or language, by the will of God or the fundamental nature of the universe, Reichenbach insists that all we have to count on is ourselves. The final lesson of his version of voluntarist noncognitivism in ethics is this:

> We try to pursue our own volitional ends, not with the fanaticism of the prophet of absolute truth, but with the firmness of the man who trusts his own will. We do not know whether we shall reach our aim. Like the problem of prediction of the future, the problem of moral

[7] This is, again, too quick. I have given more details in Richardson 2008, which is substantially endebted to Friedman 1999.

> action cannot be solved by the construction of rules that guarantee success. There are no such rules. Reichenbach, 1951, 301

Life is fragile, society can be remade, vocabularies change, and everything depends on us. Reichenbach finds no reason to fail to take yourself seriously because of merely possible doubts, the potential availability of better tools, the "humiliation" of redescription (Rorty, 1989, 92), or one's own fragility.

American society is currently being remade and, with it, so too is the whole world. Cruelty and sadism are ascendent; human rights are in retreat. I have argued here that what Rorty foresaw he foresaw through a glass darkly. In what he got wrong predictively, he failed to heed the warnings of classic American philosophers of the cultural left. In what lies ahead we cannot adopt the irony of philosophical liberalism. Those of us currently living the human comedy must take ourselves as seriously as our political enemies do. We must commit to the bit.

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Ramberg's Naturalized Rationalism

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Over the course of his career, Rorty supervised a number of PhD candidates who went on to distinguished academic careers, among them Barry Allen, Robert Brandom, Pablo Quintanilla, and Michael Williams, to name a few. Although Bjørn Ramberg did not complete his doctorate under Rorty's supervision, he nonetheless belongs on this list, and in his contribution to the *Springer Handbook on Rorty*, Ramberg offers an affectionate tribute to his mentor (Ramberg, 2023). I like to think of myself as standing in a similar relation. Although Bjørn was not my PhD supervisor—I was his postdoctoral fellow in Oslo—he has been my mentor in the fullest sense. From him I have learned what academic integrity means and what philosophical acumen and curiosity look like at their best. All this while remaining one of the kindest and most generous human beings I know, always more interested in what others have to say than in asserting his own position. Precisely because he has often refrained from pressing his views, this piece sets out to highlight a distinguished line of Ramberg's thought that, I believe, we should draw on in the future.

Each of those who passed through Rorty's intellectual orbit carried away something different from the encounter. For Ramberg, this took the form of a wholehearted embrace of contingency, coupled with a deep commitment to the dignity of our human projects. However, Rorty was not Bjørn's only main reference point; he shares this central role with Donald Davidson. In fact, Ramberg's first monograph is an introduction into Davidson's philosophy of language (Ramberg, 1989)—a reading that

also underlines a Rortyan line in Davidson.[1] His second 'monograph' is a long article from 2004 titled "Naturalizing Idealizations: Pragmatism and the Interpretivist Strategy" (Ramberg, 2004). In this piece, Ramberg sets out to fully synthesize Davidsonian rationalism with Rortyan naturalism. He carves out space for a strong (and, in fact, *ideal*) form of rationality, while showing that such rationalism is fully in the service of a naturalist vision, one that places us, as creatures embedded in our environment, at the very center of philosophical inquiry.

This chapter is a comment on this second work. In what follows, I will underline and elaborate on three main threads in Ramberg's piece: the consequences of Ramberg's view for ontology (1), his distinctive conception of rationality (2), and how these first two points account for his definition of philosophy as practice that seeks to investigate not merely the meaning of words, but the meaning of life (3).

All three aspects hang together and can be entered via Ramberg's distinctive appropriation and elaboration of Davidson's anomalous monism and Rorty's eliminative materialism. As Ramberg shows, both anomalous monism and eliminative materialism appear contentious when viewed through the traditional lens of a dualism between language and world, yet become coherent once Rorty's "vocabulary–vocabulary"[2] is fully embraced. Once this move has been taken, ontology dissolves into Davidson's "bland monism" (Ramberg, 2004, 13) and rationality is fully at the service of our creature-needs, where 'our' refers to concrete, finite creatures in concrete and determined environments, who come with this anomaly to be able to hold an infinity of potential projects and to change habits. I will say more on each of these notions and topics in what follows.

1. Post-ontological philosophy of language

Ramberg follows Brandom's characterization of Rorty's view of language in his essay in *Rorty and His Critics* (Brandom, 2000, Ramberg, 2004, 14). According to Brandom, where Kant and Carnap drew a line between meaning as a priori and belief as a posteriori, Quine's "Two Dogmas" dissolves this divide, replacing it with a "continuous dimension" (Brandom, 2000, 156), "For we simply do not see sharp differences between

[1] Bjørn once told me that some of the critics back in the days did not appreciate this line of the book. We are speaking of the height of the Davidson 'hype' in analytic philosophy. While the book contains many rigorously analytical sections, it is certainly Bjørn's ability to draw out existential questions within Davidson's work that truly sets his book apart.

[2] To use Brandom's felicitous coinage (Brandom, 2000).

changes of meaning and changes of belief of the sort that model predicts" (Brandom, 2000, 156). Rorty writes that "Quine's suggestion that the difference between a priori and empirical truth is merely that between the relatively difficult to give up and the relatively easy brings in its train the notion that there is no clear distinction to be drawn between questions of meaning and questions of fact" (Rorty, 1982, 5). Famously, Rorty endorses this dismissal of the language-theory-distinction in its most radical form.

However, how are we to speak of language and theory once the distinction between them has been abandoned? As Brandom explains, Rorty's metaphor of "vocabulary" functions as a "suggestion for a successor notion" (Brandom 2000, 157): a notion that subsumes both meaning and belief, language and theory, such that any change in meaning is always also a change in belief, and vice versa (Brandom, 2000, 157). Brandom further helpfully proposes—and Rorty explicitly adopts this suggestion (Rorty, 2000a)—a distinction between what he terms the "vocabulary–vocabulary" and particular vocabularies. The former serves as the successor notion for the highest-order language-theory package, insofar as it "replaces meaning–belief talk" (Brandom, 2000, 177). Particular vocabularies, by contrast, are the specific packages of meanings and beliefs through which we make sense of our lives and of particular practices.

For Brandom, Quine and Rorty go too far in this respect, effectively "overdoing" it (Brandom, 2000, 156), since Brandom continues to regard the distinction between belief and meaning as worth retaining. Ramberg, by contrast, pushes the argument further and insists that the distinction needs to be abandoned altogether, adding Davidson's insistence to let go of the scheme–content distinction to the list. For Ramberg,

> Brandom is absolutely right to suggest that for Rorty, a principle virtue of the 'vocabulary–vocabulary' [...] is that it provides a way of designating discursive bodies that completely incorporates Quine's dissolution of any principled distinction between semantical and empirical commitments, as well as Davidson's devastation of the thought that the idea of a conceptual scheme is a philosophically interesting or fruitful one.
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> Ramberg, 2004, 14

However, where Brandom sees a 'too much,' Ramberg sees a 'yes, please more'. According to Ramberg, what "motivates Rorty's use of the vocabulary is that it stills the ontological urge, the urge that leads us to engage in projects of ontological legitimation," in a way that "precludes any attempt

to restore an ontologically potent form of distinction between what we talk about and how we talk about it" (Ramberg, 2004, 14). As noted above, this distinction is dear to Brandom: he insists that our speech is *about* something and maintains that this aboutness of language must be reflected in our theoretical accounts of what language is and how it functions. Notoriously, Brandom has developed sophisticated strategies for weakening the referential import that comes with the very distinction between 'what we talk about' and 'how we talk about it.' (i.e. Brandom, 1994)

For Ramberg, instead, it is precisely the willingness to let go of the very possibility of a distinction between the "what" and the "how"—the full endorsement of the dismissal of the three dogmas—that makes Rorty philosophically compelling. However, what do our words 'mean', if language can't be sharply distinguished from the world it is 'about'? In my analysis, once one has abandoned the named distinctions—once one has shifted, that is, from dualism to triangulation[3]—, the focus shifts from a list of inventory to the coordination of action: calling a tree a "tree", then, functions as a shorthand for coordinating our behaviors within a space that materially contains objects we currently address as "trees," but there is nothing about *treeness* in itself that renders the label "tree" more adequate than any alternative. As Rorty puts it, the "antiessentialist has no doubt about trees and stars. But the fact of antecedent existence is of no use in giving sense to the question: 'What are trees and stars apart from their relations to other things—apart from our statements about them?' " (Rorty, 1999, 58)

In Ramberg, this Rortyan intuition is articulated as follows: "the point of any vocabulary can be explicated only relative to the specific goals, needs and interests of its users or potential users" (Ramberg, 2004, 14). I take this to mean something like the following: we developed tree-talk because we have certain needs (e.g. avoiding sunburn, staying warm in winter, securing food) and are engaged in practices (lighting fires, relaxing in the shadow, eating apples, building benches and houses) that are more smoothly coordinated if we possess a linguistic shorthand for addressing trees. Crucially, however, the emergence of the label "tree" cannot be disentangled from these needs, aims, purposes, and desires.[4]

[3] See on this my (Huetter-Almerigi, 2020).

[4] Matthieu Queloz, I suppose, would add "concerns" here (Queloz, 2025). The crucial point is that the Jamesian 'trail of the human serpent' runs through all of our words and concepts.

For Ramberg, "Once the question is allowed whether a vocabulary is *adequate* to the items it invokes" (Ramberg, 2004, 17), we are already headed down the wrong road. Of course, the matter we now call a 'tree' existed prior to our talking about it—but did it exist *as* a tree? Certainly not. The subatomic and atomic formations, its appearance as 'middle sized dry good', the trunk, the leaves, etc. were all there before we had labels for them. Yet none of this was there *as an entity of a specific kind* until it became apparent that it fulfilled some of our various and changing needs and was entangled with our projects in a way that made it necessary or convenient to introduce a label for it. As our needs and projects change, we will introduce other labels that better smooth our engagement with the world at that time, potentially then *not* addressing the very same number and conformation of atoms.

In my analysis, Ramberg makes an analogous move in his interpretation of Rorty's and Davidson's contributions to the mind–body-problem. For Ramberg, the "pragmatist takes the mind-body-problem to be real, but transient." (2004, 5) This parallels Brandom's claim that, for Rorty "The cartesian mind is real, but it is a contingent, optional product of our mutable social practices." (Brandom, 2011, 110) Both Ramberg and Brandom are here invoking Rorty's early eliminative materialism, which, according to Brandom, was "the first genuinely new answer to the mind–body-problem" (2000, 157) in a long time.

In his papers on the topic (Rorty, 2014c; 2014a), Rorty sets out to defend that the intuitive implausibility of eliminating sensation-talk (i.e., the mental vocabulary) "rests *solely* upon the fact that elimination of the referring use of 'sensation' from our language would be in the highest degree impractical" (Rorty, 2014c, 112-3).[5] As he notes in these early papers, at our current historical moment sensation-talk and the mental vocabulary are so deeply embedded in our practices that eliminating them would require a radical transformation of everyday life. However, nothing about this impracticability depends on the ontological givenness of the mental. This is precisely the point Ramberg takes up and develops.

The specificity of Ramberg's interpretation is most easily grasped when Brandom is used as a foil. As Brandom notes, in the papers under discussion Rorty embarks on an extended investigation of the relation between vocabularies and ontology—"a relation that the example of eliminative materialism had shown is far too complex to be captured by talk of a 'the-

[5] On Rorty's eliminative materialism see (Ramsey, 2020; Gascoigne, 2021; 2023; Huetter-Almerigi forthcoming).

oretical direction of fit,' according to which how things anyway objectively are has authority over what we should say about it." (Brandom, 2011, 110) Brandom then goes on to present his own reconstruction of Rorty, suggesting that Rorty was "looking at ontology through normative lenses" (Brandom, 2011, 110).

On Brandom's reading, Rorty's articles[6] on eliminative materialism provide the resources to distinguish between three kinds of entities: subjective, Cartesian kinds over which individuals hold incorrigible authority; social kinds over which communities exercise authority; and objective kinds, which exercise authority over our sayings insofar as speakers are responsible for describing them correctly. As Brandom puts it "The pragmatist takes it that the normative statuses that distinguish the three ontological categories—the structures of authority and responsibility characteristic of each—are themselves things that fall under the category of the social." (Brandom, 2011, 111) The crucial question, then, is what "social" means here. Given how Brandom sets the stage, it is certainly distinguished from 'physical/empirical' and from 'individual'. I will come back to this. For now, it is important to insist that, framed in this way, Brandom's three-sorted ontology and corresponding spheres of inquiry preserve precisely the distinctions that Rorty urges us to abandon.[7]

On Ramberg's reading, by contrast, once we have fully embraced the "vocabulary–vocabulary" approach, that is, once we have dismissed all distinctions stemming from the three dogmas, there is no longer any basis for distinguishing ontological spheres. Vocabularies are entitled by, and persist in virtue of, the purposes they serve, not by or qua the ontological types of objects they contain or the diverse authority-structures we attribute to them. In this respect, Ramberg, along with Rorty, endorses Quine's behaviorism, according to which "Language is a social art. In acquiring it we have to depend entirely on intersubjectively available cues as to what to say and when. Hence there is no justification for collocating lin-

[6] Brandom includes here Rorty's "Incorrigibility as a Mark of the Mental" (Rorty, 2014b) next to (Rorty, 2014c; 2014a). As I will explain shortly, this inclusion is indicative of the divergence between Brandom's and Ramberg's respective appropriations of the topic.

[7] To my ear, Brandom's reconstruction bears a closer affinity to Huw Price's subject naturalism than to Rorty's own position. That said, Rorty himself situates his view in the vicinity of Price (Rorty, 2007). I take this to be characteristic of one of Rorty's familiar rhetorical strategies, namely, the forging of philosophical alliances. Admittedly, Rorty's position is closer to Brandom's and Price's than to that of other pragmatists (or non-pragmatists). However, my concern here is with the fine-grained differences among these views. On my reading, Ramberg and Rorty diverge from Price and Brandom precisely in their attempt to articulate a mode of philosophizing wholly purged of the three dogmas.

guistic meanings, unless in terms of men's disposition to respond overtly to *socially* observable stimulations" (Quine, 2013, xix, my emphasis).

Note that the role played by the term "socially" here differs markedly from Brandom's use of "social" discussed above. In Brandom's case, the social sphere deliberates about where normative authority ought to be attributed. In Quine's case—or at least as Ramberg takes up this Quinean/Davidsonian strand—the appeal to "socially observable stimulations" signals indeterminacy. The issue is not where, or to whom, authority should be granted; rather, it concerns the uncertainty of meaning as such, across all possible contexts or domains of inquiry. We can *never* ultimately know what others mean by their words, and the only clues available to us are social cues, which take place in a material environment. If our interactions proceed smoothly after we have guessed what "gavagai" means, then, apparently, the native speaker and we meant something sufficiently similar to act upon or engage with gavagai together. And this, arguably, is all that can reasonably be expected of the category of meaning.

The point advanced by Quine and Ramberg concerns the permanent necessity, and indeed the inescapability, of interpretation with respect to meaning. Brandom's point, by contrast, concerns the attribution of normative authority and the inescapability of the deliberative practices constitutive of the game of giving and asking for reasons. This is a subtle but consequential difference. In the former case, the very category of meaning is at stake; the claim is fundamentally semantic. In the latter, what is at issue is whether our social practices succeed in rendering meaning explicit; the claim is ultimately epistemic. Accordingly, in the first case meaning is indeterminate, whereas in the second it appears to be merely underdetermined—underdetermined in virtue of our fallible human capacities or some other contingent rather than constitutive limitation that impedes the achievement of full determination.

The inescapability of interpretation—the constitutive infinitude of always-possible alternative translations (Quine, 2013, 23)—is what renders meaning indeterminate for Quine and Davidson, a credo that Ramberg ultimately persuaded Rorty to accept, despite Rorty's long-standing reluctance. He did so by showing that the indeterminacy of meaning (and, relatedly, the distinctive status of mental vocabulary) does not rest on the metaphysical difference between the mental and the physical (Ramberg, 2000; Rorty, 2000b). On Ramberg's view, meaning (and, by extension, the mind) is not ontologically special; rather, it is normatively inescapable (Ramberg, 2000, 362). On this account, whenever we encounter meaning,

we must presuppose that someone has attempted to make sense of something and to communicate that sense, whether to themselves or to others. That sense, however, is not something that can be grasped in the manner of a Fregean sense; instead, it is constituted in interaction and shaped by particular needs and interests within specific environments. Accordingly, Ramberg's picture of language is thoroughly contextualist and explicitly Nietzschean, insofar as "it denies that contextually determined meaning and belief refer back to any sort of coherently specifiable totality of ascription at all." (Ramberg, 2004, 31)

For Ramberg, much in line with the classical pragmatists, the notion of meaning is invoked when the coordination of action is at stake—whether with ourselves or with others—namely, when we are deciding what to do, or how to respond to and elaborate upon something that generates friction. As he puts it, "noises are speech only when situated in a general context of agency" (Ramberg, 2004, 9). This view does not exclude that we belief in an actual, material, causal interactions with a wide range of objects and phenomena; rather, it removes the need to inquire further into their ontological structure in the sense of their ultimate reality, when this means their Being independently of us. Certainly, contexts of agency involve objects or events with which to deal, but the way we linguistically deal with these objects or events cannot be disentangled from our local purposes and desires, nor can the individuation of objects at large be disentangled from the descriptions we give.

Going back to the interpretation of the mind–body-distinction, the salient point for Ramberg is the following:

> The pragmatist is not claiming to solve the mind–body problem, nor to dissolve it. Nor is the problem being diagnosed an illusory one [...]. It is a problem we will come to see as idle once we have developed better ways of conceiving ourselves and our relations to our surroundings, once we have developed, that is, better vocabularies. Ramberg, 2004, 5

This dovetails smoothly with Rorty's position. As Rorty argues in his papers on eliminative materialism, his view rules out any mapping of language-independent objects onto linguistic labels, since he endorses the Sellarsian claim that "there is no criterion for the adequacy of a bit of language to a bit of nonlinguistic awareness" (Rorty, 2014a, 205). This point applies *tout court* to all forms of awareness, including our purported inner

states.[8] Framed in the terms relevant here, it is the purposes served by a given way of talking that explain its adoption, rather than the ontological deep structure underlying the categories invoked by its central claims.

As Rorty illustrates through his Antipodean thought experiment in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, we can imagine persons who do not employ mentalistic vocabulary at all, and the question of whether "they in fact have minds" or not (Rorty, 1979, 74) is of interest only from within a dualist framework. On such a framework, language is taken to denote entities that exist as fixed items independently of language. Translation is then conceived as the activity of mapping different ways of talking about 'the same objects,' holding the 'objects' constant while only the words vary across languages. Once this manner of framing the issue is abandoned—because, following Quine and Daviddson, we cannot sharply distinguish which aspects of our discourse are linguistic and which are material—Rorty invites us to recognize that sensation-talk, like any other mode of discourse, rests "*solely*" on its deep entrenchment in our current practices (Rorty, 2014c, 112). Sensations are "real" insofar as they constitute a category we employ to navigate our present forms of life; yet this way of talking is potentially "transient," since there is nothing about the mind *in itself* in an ontological sense that would make the continued use of the mentalistic vocabulary necessary once we are no longer engaged in practices in which the category of 'mind' has any stake.

When Ramberg persuaded Rorty of the distinctive status of mental vocabulary, he did so by appealing precisely to this line of reasoning. He argued that Davidson's aim in advancing anomalous monism was not to defend the ontological specialness of the mind or of meaning. Rather, Davidson's point was that the mental vocabulary serves different purposes from the physical vocabulary, and that insofar as we continue to pursue the purposes articulated through mental discourse, we must insist

[8] Incorrigibility as a 'mark of the mental' (what Brandom characterizes as the first ontological realm) is not at issue in the case of meaning because, on my reading, Rorty does not frame the question of meaning in terms of who or what is granted epistemic authority. Rather, he treats it as a question about the conditions under which communication succeeds. On this view, communication is always public, much like Wittgenstein's beetle example, in which speech remains public even if the respective 'beetles' are private, and it is in principle impossible to determine whether the various beetles to which speakers refer when using the term 'beetle' are tokens of the same type. For Rorty, establishing identity conditions among referential objects is not required for successful communication; consequently, posing the question in those terms is misguided or even pointless. "It is pointless not just because nobody has any idea how to resolve the issue, but because nothing turns on it." (Rorty, 1979, 120) See on this also footnote 6 and my (Huetter-Almerigi forthcoming).

on its distinctiveness. Mental discourse is special not because it refers to a separate ontological realm or stands in a unique authority relation, but because it enables us to do things that physical discourse does not—namely, to express law-like relations rather than the strict law relations characteristic of physical explanation (Ramberg, 2000; Davidson 2001). This, in turn, serves "to preserve our sense of ourselves as creatures with purposes that are not exhausted by prediction and control" (Ramberg, 2000, 368). Once the rejection of the three dogmas is embraced, Ramberg argues, "we need not worry about the ontological priority of kinds of description, but only about their relative utility for specific purposes" (Ramberg, 2004, 13). This, in turn, allows us to "retreat all together from ontology, advocating a view of language that simply leaves no room for it." (Ramberg, 2004, 13).

Therefore, Davidson's monism is not of the kind that reduces ontological categories to one another. As Ramberg emphasizes, Davidson himself characterizes his position as a "*bland* monism" (Davidson, 2001, 214, my emphasis). According to Ramberg, this should be read as follows: "It is monistic, because it denies the dualist's thought that there are two ontological kinds; mental and physical. It is bland in a somewhat peculiar sense; it also denies the reductivist or eliminativist thought that there is *one* ontological kind of a sort to which our various ways of talking may stand in questionable relationship." (Ramberg, 2004, 13)

This, in a nutshell, is what ontology becomes after the dismissal of the three dogmas. The pragmatic naturalist of Ramberg's stripe is not an eliminativist in the strong sense of reducing categories to one another. Ontological discourse may still be employed, but it functions merely as a way of singling out objects from the "flux of experience" (Quine, 1951, 41), in which we happen, for one reason or another, to take an interest. Naming objects enables us to engage with our environment and with one another, without thereby committing us to any robust metaphysical or scientific claims. In this respect, Ramberg's naturalism aligns with early Quinean intuitions about abandoning foundational distinctions, yet it is decidedly not of the late-Quinean, scientistic variety that holds philosophy should ultimately cede authority to science. On the contrary, it brings into relief the difficulty of reconciling these two strands of Quine's thought.

2. Idealized Rationality

Given the pragmatic and naturalist framework outlined above, which emphasizes aims, purposes, and our creaturely needs, it may seem surprising

that Ramberg insists on ideal rationality. How can his claim that interpretivism necessarily operates according to what he calls the Rationality Maxim, or "RM" (Ramberg, 2004, 9–10), be reconciled with his commitment to naturalism?

In short, the answer again lies in anomalous monism. If we wish to preserve ways of talking that do not reduce us to mere objects of "prediction and control" (Ramberg, 2000, 368)—and for Ramberg there are compelling reasons to do so—then we require a vocabulary capable of fulfilling that function. To function properly, this vocabulary cannot be contaminated by the physical realm, even though it operates within a fully determined environment, one in which mental events are physical events and in which ideal rationality does not conflict with natural law. Ramberg finds this framework in Davidson.

When articulating his anomalous monism in "Mental Events", Davidson begins with this presupposition: "I start from the assumption that both the causal dependence, and the anomalousness, of mental events are undeniable facts"; the remainder of his paper is devoted to investigating "how this can be" (Davidson, 2001, 207). Davidson situates himself within the Kantian tradition and explicitly aims to make sense of Kant's intuition that "Philosophy [...] cannot give up the idea of nature any more than that of freedom" and "must therefore assume that no true contradiction will be found between freedom and natural necessity" (Kant cited in Davidson, 2001, 207).

Davidson's solution is his well-known anomalous supervenience relation, according to which "mental events are identical with physical events" (Davidson, 2001, 209); however, the predicates we employ in what Ramberg fruitfully terms physical and mental *vocabularies* are not coextensive (Davidson, 2001, 216). Crucially, this distinction between the identity of events and the distinctiveness of the vocabularies we use to describe them should not be understood as relying on a dualism between scheme and content. When Davidson asserts that the description of every event and the laws governing them "are linguistic" (Davidson, 2001, 215), this must be understood in the sense developed above: we cannot sharply separate a purely linguistic, analytic, or scheme component from the objects it purports to pick out..

The mental is not ontologically identical with the physical and we merely employ different vocabularies to describe the same object of phenomenon. Rather, because objects and phenomena cannot be separated from the words we use to describe them, employing different vocabular-

ies picks out different 'objects' while still situating them—here the *bland* monism—within the same world, that is, presupposing a single environment governed by strict laws. In this sense, anomalous monism is thoroughly post-ontological—post-ontological without 'losing the world,' so to speak.[9] "Anomalous monism resembles materialism in its claim that all events are physical, but rejects the thesis, usually considered essential to materialism, that mental phenomena can be given purely physical explanations. Anomalous monism shows an ontological bias only in that it allows the possibility that not all events are mental, while insisting that all events are physical." (Davidson, 2001, 214).

Importantly, this does not render mental events derivative of physical events: mental events are no less real than physical events. What differs—this is what Rorty learned from Ramberg's interpretation—are the purposes the respective vocabularies serve. Let us dwell for a moment on this notion of reality. 'Real' here does not mean the *really real* of the dualist, where reality hinges on a word–object fit and objects come with ontological hardness (meaning that there is a clear ultimate list of objects our universe contains, though, given our cognitive restriction we do not know exactly which they are). Rather, "real" means that the word–object package in question is sufficiently entrenched in our practices to make the category significant for navigating our current way of life. It is "real" in the sense that it is among the categories that currently populate our inner and outer world and which are difficult to substitute precisely because they are deeply entrenched with our current ways of making sense of our world and our lives in it.[10] By contrast with the dualist understanding of reality, according to which reality is how the world is independently of us, the post-three dogmas way of putting things takes our purposes—the questions and projects we are currently pursuing—to be an integral part of what constitutes reality. Post-ontological reality is always reality *for us*. The evaluative criterion for successful theories and terms is whether they enable us to accomplish the purposes we had in mind when we first formulated those words and theories.

What, then, are the purposes served by mental and physical vocabularies? For Davidson, "when events are related as cause and effect, they

[9] Or, to put the point in Rorty's terms, the 'world' in its dualist sense was 'well lost' to us long ago, and there is no reason to continue mourning its disappearance (Rorty, 1982).

[10] In Rorty's terms, "the world" and all the other objects which currently make up our reality are "those planks in Neurath's boat which at the moment are not moved around" (Rorty, 1982, 15).

have descriptions that instantiate a law" (Davidson, 2001, 215). The physical vocabulary answers our desire for prediction and control; accordingly, what we seek in it are generalizations and laws, more precisely, *strict* laws of natural necessity, under which individual actions and our particular ways of seeing and approaching things make no difference. The mental vocabulary, by contrast, is defined as the realm of freedom, the domain in which our choices *do* make a difference. For this reason, the instantiation of strict laws cannot be its aim; the mental vocabulary aspires to *law-likeness* (Davidson, 2001, 216–7, 224).

Therefore, to individuate strict laws in the mental realm would be a category mistake, since the realm is defined precisely by the possibility of agency—that is why Ramberg characterizes it as the *vocabulary of agency*. Accordingly, the mental vocabulary is "nomologically irreducible" (Davidson, 2001, 216) to the physical vocabulary and shifting from one to the other amounts to "changing the subject" (Davidson, 2001, 216). It is a change of subject because, even when reference is made to the same event[11], the explanations sought are incompatible as the purposes served by the respective vocabularies are not compatible with one another. This is why in Ramberg's version of interpretivism, rationality must be *ideal* rationality, why it cannot be *pure*, and why his version of rationality, as Ramberg puts it, is "*staunchely anti-reductivist*" (Ramberg, 2004, 35, my emphasis). Let's take these points in turn.

Ramberg develops his line of thought with respect to rationality in contrast to Føllesdal's humanism. Føllesdal criticizes interpretivism for relying on an idealized notion of rationality. On Føllesdal's account, interpretivism fails descriptively because it neglects the many cognitive and moral mistakes to which humans are prone every day. Since human beings are not ideal, Føllesdal maintains, any theory of what we are doing when using language must take such imperfections into account. Ramberg, by contrast, argues that interpretivism cannot operate with anything less than the "Rationality Maxime (RM)" of the Ideal Interpreter (IDA) (Ramberg, 2004, 9–10). The reason is that, if interpretivism were to follow Føllesdal's intuition and theoretically accommodate empirical imperfection, it would attempt to bring under natural law—that is, *strict* law in Davidson's sense—something that should remain only *law-like*, thereby committing the category mistake discussed above.

[11] Here, "same," as noted above, does not denote a reductive ontological identity relation; rather, it functions within a pragmatist, post-ontological framework.

For Ramberg, what is distinctive of persons or free agents should not be captured by "predicates of empirical law" (Ramberg, 2004, 16). In this sense, the mental vocabulary is prescriptive rather than descriptive. Focusing on "rationality-considerations *is* to deprive those concepts of the particular kind of stability which empirical theorizing requires of its predicates" (Ramberg, 2004, 16, my emphasis). The reason is "its constitutive relation to agency" (Ramberg, 2004, 16), i.e. the possibility of *choosing* how to act and to act differently, which arises precisely from not being governed by strict laws but only by law-likeness. "I suggest that this is a constitutive feature of the vocabulary of agency—i.e., a part of what it is to consider some item an agent. [...] To endorse it is to preclude the possibility that any vocabulary of empirical theory could ever do the job for which we rely on the ascription of intentional states." (Ramberg, 2004, 43) The central aim of Ramberg's vocabulary of agency, following Davidson, is to "cut across bodies of empirical, nomological generalizations" (Ramberg, 2004, 16). Once one switches from the physical to the mental vocabulary, one is "not making an empirical claim at all" (Ramberg, 2004, 32). In this sense, "RM," the Ideal Rationality Maxime, is *constitutive* of his approach (Ramberg, 2004, 10).

However, although ideal rationality in this sense is distinct from empirical law, it is not "pure" insofar as it is not independent of aims and desires:

> We might press the point by saying that how rational it is rational for us to be depends on the contingencies of our creature needs and interests and on the features of the environment within which we pursue their satisfaction. Looking for a more felicitous, less paradoxical way to put it, we should say that the idea of pure rationality, conceived as explicable in terms of formal principles, is an idea that for the purposes of rationalizing interpretation of behavior is without categorical force.
>
> Ramberg, 2004, 35

It lacks categorical force because, if it were devoid of interests and purposes, it would likewise be devoid of content. More precisely, what holds for any term holds for "rationality" as well: it cannot be divided into scheme and content. Rationality is therefore always *particular* rationality, shaped by specific aims and directed toward particular objects. Accordingly, rationality in Ramberg's sense—that is, the vocabulary of

agency as a whole[12]—is always in the service of some concrete agent engaged in a determinate project. "Hence, ideal interpretation settles content only relative to contexts specified in terms of some subset of the various purposes, aims and interests we may have in approaching a subject [...]."(Ramberg, 2004, 26) Ramberg's IDA (ideal interpretation) is never operating at a *general* level but always "for one purpose or another" (Ramberg, 2004, 27).

Accordingly, defining rationality as such, or in abstraction, is impossible; this is why Ramberg's position is "staunchly anti-reductivist." For "there is no fixable, explicable notion of rationality against which we can measure [...] findings [of possible empirically investigated human cognitive capacities and strategies] and draw conclusions about the degree and distribution of rationality" (Ramberg, 2004, 35). Since rationality is always in the service of our projects and arises from our "creature need and interest with the environment in which we function" (Ramberg, 2004, 36), there is no basis for a reductive account of rationality: "nothing can serve as final arbiter in our effort to choose among competing cognitive strategies" (Ramberg, 2004, 37). Importantly, further inquiry into rationality "will not tell us how to acquire fewer false beliefs, or desire better things, or act more wisely" (Ramberg, 2004, 39). Rather, rationality, understood as a constitutive feature of the vocabulary of agency, can be seen as a byproduct of evolved practices developed to cope with problems as they arise.[13]

This stands in marked contrast to the Kantian notion of rationality as reconstructed by Rorty:

> inquiry, to be rational, had to be conducted within a permanent framework knowable a priori, a scheme which both restricted possible empirical content and explained what it was rational to do with any empirical content which came along. Once schemes became temporary, the scheme-content-distinction itself was in danger, and with it the Kantian notion of philosophy as made possible by our a priori knowledge of our

[12] For Rorty, this is the reason why Davidson uses "rationality, normativity, intentionality, and agency as if they were roughly co-extensive predicates" (Rorty, 2000b, 371).

[13] I owe this, along with the concluding thought of this paragraph, to Rob Sinclair, to whom I am immensely grateful—for his insightful engagement with my work and for the entire adventure of putting this volume together. I am also deeply grateful to Federico Penelas, who generously provided comments on an earlier version of this article, and to Henrik Rydenfelt for coordinating the last steps of the publication.

> own contribution to inquiry (the schematic, formal element—e.g. 'language'). Rorty, 1979, 272–3

The citation is drawn from Rorty's discussion of the futility of insisting on meaning-invariance. On his view, conceiving of meaning as fixed was intelligible only within a framework in which the three dogmas remained operative. Once those dogmas are abandoned, not only does our understanding of meaning shift, but, as Ramberg further argues, our conceptions of rationality, and, consequently, of philosophy itself, are transformed as well.

Since, for Ramberg, rationality is inseparable from the vocabulary of agency, which is, by definition, open-ended, it cannot be conceived as a finite object of study. Rationality becomes a topic for philosophy precisely insofar as philosophy is not engaged in the descriptivist business of discovery but in the prescriptivist task of enlarging the scope of our possible projects and expanding what we can take ourselves to be doing, all while remaining a built-in feature grounded in empirically evolved capacities.

3. Naturalized Philosophy

For Ramberg, conceiving of philosophy in this way amounts to naturalizing it. However, naturalism after dualism does not consist in the "naturalization of some domain [...] to bring it under the scope of natural science" (Ramberg, 2004, 39). Rather, for the pragmatic naturalist, "the argument runs in the other direction" (Ramberg, 2004, 41).

> The pragmatic naturalist [...] treats the gap itself, that which transforms reduction into a philosophical project, as a symptom of dysfunction in our philosophical vocabulary. Pragmatic naturalism does not aim at conceptual reduction, but at a transformation of those conceptual structures we rely on to sustain our sense of a metaphysical gap between those items we catch in our vocabulary of thought and agency, and those items we describe in our vocabularies of causal regularities.
>
> Ramberg, 2004, 43

Philosophy, then, becomes the activity of investigating meaning, understood as imbued with an existential dimension. "[W]hat we folk (psychologists) care about, typically, is not how people move various parts

of their bodies, but what it is that we do by so moving them" (Ramberg, 2004, 42). Philosophy, in this sense, investigates how our activities are to be described and what gives them 'sense.' As noted in §1, 'sense' is not something that can be grasped once and for all; rather, it is enacted in interaction with others within a shared environment. It is inseparable from our interests, and the articulation and reshaping of the interests that animate our projects constitute both a part of the philosophical process and one of its central aims.

Therefore, Ramberg's project is decidedly hermeneutic (Ramberg, 2004, 15). "We may, I suppose, still think of philosophical reflection as an attempt to illuminate what there is" (Ramberg, 2004, 13), but "where agents are concerned, there is, to paraphrase Heidegger, always more being than theory" (Ramberg, 2004, 43). 'Meaning' is never a purely semantic category, at least when 'semantic' excludes the existential register. Our aims and interests, grounded in our creaturely needs, both constitute what meaning is and motivate what we do in the ideally rational enterprise of philosophy.

> Because we illuminate our vocabularies by giving explicit expression to the interest we take them to serve, philosophy itself, even at its most abstract, becomes wedded to the vocabulary of action. Any attempt to reflect upon the nature of things of some kind brings us to the question why we (should) *care about that kind of thing*, and this question will immediately throw us back into the vocabulary of agency. Ramberg, 2004, 44

Philosophy, then, is not primarily in the business of explaining what we do, but of elucidating why we do the things we do. Within the context of post-ontological ontology, philosophical reflection becomes "a matter of providing characterizations of the interests we have in referring to items of this or that sort" (Ramberg, 2004, 13). Description, therefore, cannot be divorced from ethics, nor from reflection on what we aim to do with our lives. As Ramberg put it:

> [w]hat pragmatic naturalists with one hand take away form philosophy—the idea of ontology (whether as metaphysics or natural science) as a substantive inquiry into the legitimacy of vocabularies—they return with the other; we are left with a conception of philosophy as aiding our practical and ethical

> deliberations, our experimentations, by imaginatively providing alternatives to what begins to look like conceptual hang-ups and fixed ideas ('intuitions'), and depicting altered self-conceptions for us to try out. On this view, the job of a philosopher is to make vivid how our practices might change if we were to describe things—particularly human beings—in altered vocabularies, or if we extend particular vocabularies into new domains. Ramberg, 2004, 47

In the best Rortyan manner, redescription is the task of philosophy for Ramberg, with Davidsonian ideal rationality serving as its guiding force: "I have proposed a view of philosophy that emphasizes the distinctiveness of the vocabulary of intentional states, of agency, and which ties philosophy as an enterprise to that distinctiveness" (Ramberg, 2004, 45). Philosophy, in this sense, is not concerned with uncovering metaphysical truths or fixed ontologies, but with expanding the imaginative and practical horizons of human thought and action.

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PART III

METAPHILOSOPHY, POLITICS AND CULTURE

Philosophy as an Instrument of Anti-Authoritarianism: On Ramberg's Dialogical Metaphilosophy

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This paper centres on an analysis of Ramberg's early paper, "Rorty and the Instruments of Philosophy", which I see as presenting Ramberg's own original and explicitly Platonic dialogical metaphilosophy, one which I have been greatly influenced by. This metaphilosophy is designed to overcome the main blind spot Ramberg saw in Rorty, namely that he lacked a positive conception of philosophy, and hence provided no sustainable vision of how philosophy could serve pragmatic, anti-authoritarian ends. Despite Ramberg's charitable attribution of this metaphilosophy to Rorty, I argue that this is not plausible, and that Ramberg should in fact further distance it from Rorty with commitments to philosophy having a subject-matter and to the reality of experience. I end by questioning Ramberg's loyalty to naturalism, which I see as a tactic of materialism, and hence contrary to his pragmatic and anti-authoritarian aims.

1. Ramberg on Conversational Openness

Bjørn Ramberg is a pragmatic naturalist who was at one time, and perhaps still is, concerned with "overcoming the metaphor of inner space and the reifications associated with the concept of mind" (Ramberg, 2006, 226),

just like Wittgenstein, Ryle, Dennett and Rorty before him. My *Inner Space Philosophy* (Tartaglia, 2024) is a celebration of that very metaphor. It is not just the idea of mind as inner space that has concerned Ramberg, however, but metaphysics and ontology generally, which, like his mentor Rorty (Ramberg, 2023), he has seen as an outdated project of trying to rank descriptions from best to worst (Ramberg, 2013; 2018). I think the traditional metaphysical project of trying to work out what kind of reality we belong to, and what we fundamentally are, is not only perfectly legitimate, but, when done right, one of the most attractive features that philosophy has to offer to a world that currently cares little for it, to our detriment. And to bring up a third conspicuous point of apparent disagreement, Ramberg has taken seriously Rorty's anti-essentialism about philosophy, and so has thought there might be something wrong with saying that it has its own distinctive subject-matter (Ramberg, 2001, 39). I think it has a subject-matter, just as chemistry, history and criminology do (Tartaglia, 2016a: chapter 3; Tartaglia, 2016b). Our views seem rather divergent, then, and I am afraid I may even count as one of Ramberg's "die-hard Platonists, or (non-exclusive) fearmongers with chips on their shoulders and beams in their eyes" (Ramberg, 2001, 18). I am finding myself increasingly attracted to Platonist traditions of philosophy, I wrote a book about technological advances which might uncharitably be described as fearmongering (Tartaglia, 2020), and I may even have some chips and beams.

On the two occasions when I met Ramberg at conferences, however, I cannot remember our disagreeing about anything, and we were enthusiastically in agreement over our shared opposition to metaphysical materialism and scientism. Admiration for Rorty was the other main thing we had in common, Rorty himself having also been opposed to metaphysical materialism and scientism, of course. Rorty was Ramberg's mentor, whereas I never met him, but Rorty is still among my very favourite post-WWII philosophers and is certainly the one whose writings I have learned most from, by far. Ramberg is an insightful and imaginative interpreter of Rorty who usually looks for favourable interpretations, while being perfectly prepared to criticise and reject, whereas my own work on Rorty has primarily been in what Ramberg calls the "demonizing" camp (Ramberg, 2001), as you would expect from a die-hard Platonist fearmonger. But all I really oppose is the anti-metaphysical currents of the 20th century philosophy which Rorty channelled. Like Ramberg, I love his romantic, world-historical pictures, his determination to make philos-

ophy useful, that he wrote clearly and with style, and above all, his anti-authoritarianism; all features I find in Ramberg's work too.

Anti-authoritarianism is a central theme of the paper Ramberg very generously contributed to a symposium on my *Philosophy in a Meaningless Life*. I made no mention of that idea in the book, but did say "the truth of nihilism [i.e. human life's ultimate meaninglessness] provides no platform for bossiness" (Tartaglia, 2016a, 172), a remark Ramberg picked up on, observing that " 'Bossiness' in this context is exactly the sort of intellectual authoritarianism that also is Rorty's target" (Ramberg, 2017, 149). This is how he explains the target:

> For Rorty, intellectual authoritarianism is the impulse to short-circuit the effort to seek a communicative resolution of differences of views and interests, by invoking a justification to act on, or against, or in spite of, others, without conversing with them. His counter-position is to advance a view of democracy centred on the idea that our most important obligation is to ensure the widest possible effective access to deliberative political conversation. One important aspect of that effort was to counteract theoretical impulses that threaten to reduce our willingness or ability to listen to others Ramberg, 2017, 148

I find that a very plausible reading of Rorty. Why was he so concerned about representationalism in *Philosophy in the Mirror of Nature*? Because it can be used to close conversations: "this is an accurate representation so there's nothing more to say, you're not at liberty to disagree". What is his concern in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*? For people to realise the contingency of their beliefs and be ironic about them, rather than authoritarian, and then to take those beliefs out into open public conversations, in search of solidarity with other ironists and non-ironists alike. What was his problem with religion? It can be a "conversation-stopper" (Rorty, 1999, 168–74). And with the phenomenal conception of consciousness common to Descartes, Nagel and Chalmers? The same (Rorty, 2007, 12); although in that particular case I think he could not have been more wrong.

Conversation-stopping authoritarianism is what I was driving at when I wrote that, "the truth of nihilism provides no platform for bossiness", as Ramberg saw better than I did at the time. The meaning of life is a very bossy idea, since it provides a supposedly non-negotiable cosmic standard against which everything we do is to be judged. The trend of discussions of the meaning of life throughout the 20th century was one of

subjectification exactly because this traditional idea started to seem too authoritarian (there was also the matter of its extreme evidential precariousness), so philosophers gradually started talking more about meaning *in* life (Baier, 1957), the kind you can supposedly have without a cosmic purpose. This more individualistic notion of meaning is now the dominant discourse and still has plenty of authoritarian potential if the "meaning" in question is thought to be something objective and precisely measurable. I'm not sure I want meaning of that kind in my life, I'd have to examine the ingredients carefully, and yet upholders of meaning in life always take it for granted that to not have any meaning in your life would be a terribly bad thing. Well, nobody can condemn my life as meaningless without going to a lot of conversational effort, because I have said I think it's meaningless, while explaining why I do not think "meaningless" counts as a condemnation. Nihilism blocks all "meaning" approaches to authoritarianism and does not open up a new one, such as that we must be defiant in the face of nihilism (Camus, 1940) or treat life with indifference (Attoe, 2023), for instance. Nihilism does not tell you how to live.

I said "*the truth* of nihilism", however, which Rorty would not like in the sense I meant it, namely the full-bodied, objective sense he campaigned against. If nihilism is true, as I think it most probably is, then there is no cosmic meaning binding our lives, so if you represent reality as containing such a meaning you are wrong. Although Ramberg is right that I share Rorty's commitment to anti-authoritarianism, then, his was far more radical: he might have agreed that nihilism has anti-authoritarian implications compared to purported truths about the meaning of life, but he would presumably have to insist that at a deeper level (could Rorty allow for such a thing?) *all* supposedly objective truths are authoritarian.

I think there is something to that, but not much. What little there is to it is that if nihilism is true, then the believer in a meaning of life is not allowed to disagree with nihilism. Reality is not being authoritarian by preventing this, however, it is just being what it is; similarly, my car is not being authoritarian by preventing me from lifting it, it is just too heavy. It is not reality that does not allow people to disagree, it is people. I find this kind of "authoritarianism" not only harmless but sensible. You can go around saying you can lift the car if you want—so the authoritarianism in question is quite unlike the political kind—but you are liable to look silly if asked to prove it. The "authoritarianism" is just that you are not allowed to say things like that (i.e. deny well-known objective truths) unless you want to look silly—so it is for your own good. And the norm can protect

us in more serious ways, of course, such as against liars and manipulators. Since lying and manipulating has never been easier than it is now, due to the rise of the information and communications technology which chains us down to watch the shadow-show, I find Rorty's anti-truth philosophy spectacularly off-message and, in the current climate, as unpragmatic as it could possibly be (Tartaglia, 2020: chapter 8), although I am sure it sounded promising in the 1960s.

In metaphysical matters, there is little risk of running afoul of the truth norm because the truths are never well-known. It is an area of inquiry—one which comes naturally to us, and hence has continuous history stretching back to the ancient world in all the major world traditions of philosophy—in which the evidence is so sketchy that you can believe all kinds of falsehoods without much risk of looking silly. Nevertheless, philosophers should always try their best to get to the truth. That is part of the job description: to advocate what you take to be the best possible candidate for truth in an area, not the best possible candidate for drawing attention to yourself, or getting into that prestigious journal to progress your career. I see no incompatibility between being focused on truth and being a pragmatist. Pragmatist philosophers focus only on truths they think might prove useful, in accordance with Peirce's Pragmatic Maxim, while avoiding pedantic ones which can barely sustain interest within insular discussions among specialists. If that is all the word means then I want to be a pragmatist, but unfortunately, I find it too often associated with anti-philosophy and naturalism—"Philosophy Critical Pragmatic Naturalism" as Ramberg dubs it (Ramberg, 2018).

Another problem with Rorty's approach to anti-authoritarianism, one which Ramberg often brings up, as have I, is that "the power of philosophy to serve the moral ends of the philosopher is weakened by the fact that philosophy is not acknowledged as a substantive project" (Ramberg, 2017, 150). For a pragmatist, someone concerned to have positive effects with their philosophical thought, the problem could hardly be bigger. For who wants to listen to a philosopher who says philosophy is rubbish, except perhaps when they are talking about how rubbish philosophy is? A member of the public might heed this anti-philosopher's advice and thereby avoid wasting time on philosophy, but that would give them no reason to take the anti-philosopher's views on political or moral issues any more seriously than those of an intelligent journalist. And they ought to take them less seriously than those of academics from legitimate disciplines, whose expertise might have some bearing on the issues.

Rorty often said that he did not intend *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* as an attempt to undermine the philosophical tradition, and indeed, that he was surprised it had been read that way. I find it unsurprising given that he leaves it until the final few pages of the book to say that philosophy *will* have a future, while remaining conspicuously less committal on whether it *should*, after hundreds of pages of arguing that the Western philosophical tradition had become an obstacle to progress, that it had undermined itself in the 20th century, and that attempts to resuscitate the beast were highly inadvisable.[1] This impression of anti-philosophy was cemented by *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, in which he talks less about philosophers and more about novelists; and by this time he had undergone a career change, so was no longer a professor of philosophy but rather a professor of humanities, subsequently a professor of comparative literature. I think one might be forgiven for mistaking Rorty for an anti-philosopher.

He did not intend to undermine philosophy, but he clearly did have very serious, lifelong doubts about it. A similar phenomenon can be found in others of his generation, such as Dennett, whose doubts came from a different place, namely his admiration for science, such that he took great pride in being both a philosopher *and* a cognitive scientist, eventually losing his patience with philosophers who make no effort to put forward scientifically testable hypotheses (Dennett, 2016, 67–8). I think the common cause was that the success of science and technology in the 20th century gave some philosophers the gut instinct that materialism must be true, and hence that the history of metaphysical philosophy, in which materialism is just one option among many, must be a source of illusion—aeroplanes and space rockets had created a strong faith that the materialism of the Stoic and Epicurean schools should never be questioned again (Tartaglia, 2020: chapters 2 and 3). Nevertheless, Rorty's metaphilosophical self-doubts did not prevent him from having social impact—he was one of the most successful public philosophers of his era. He earned his platform by being a famous philosopher, however, and that platform will not last if philosophers cannot think of anything they can bring to the conversation which a layman could not.

Ramberg, unlike Rorty, sees that if philosophy is going to be sustainably pragmatic in the cause of anti-authoritarianism, then it must bring something distinctive to the table. He saw this pragmatic concern in my

[1] The effort he put into the latter task (Rorty, 1979: chapters 5 and 6) makes me suspicious of attempts to portray him as a reformer.

metaphysical account of nihilism, and contrasted it with Rorty's purely instrumental and political approach, saying that in my case,

> the concern with openness goes beyond the instrumental and the political, it is an inherently philosophical concern. There is no guarantee that philosophy will serve openness. But when it does, it does so on terms that are genuinely its own. And that serves, not entirely paradoxically, to increase its potential for instrumental and political effect. Ramberg, 2017, 150[2]

After reading Ramberg's commentary I started to think in terms of philosophy being valuable for maintaining conversational *openness*. The word was just right, so I used it to explain why philosophers and scientists impressed by invidious comparisons between progress in science and in philosophy are missing the point:

> Judged by the standards of closure, philosophy has had little or no success: because it still asks its ancient questions. But these are not the standards of philosophy. By its own standards, it has succeeded magnificently because it *kept the conversation open*. We never let it close down, and so have managed to maintain a rational conversation that stretches throughout our history; one anyone can join, at some level at least, without the need for specialist training or equipment. That conversation pervades our history: idealism, materialism, scepticism, stoicism, rationalism, empiricism, romanticism, utilitarianism, feminism, postmodernism—these are just some of the many currents of thought which were born of philosophy and which have had an incalculable influence on people's lives, for better or for worse. Philosophy is a conversation of intellectual freedom: one which answers to natural curiosity, relies on ordinary reasoning and sense-making, and concerns reality itself.

[2] Is the air of paradox caused by an association of traditional metaphysics with lack of concern for instrumental and political matters? Rorty would make that connection, as would Dewey; perhaps most pragmatists would. I have my doubts about whether the history bears it out, however. Otherworldly prioritising of spiritual life was typically coupled with moral and political agendas for how to deal with less important and less real daily life, sometimes ingenious and sensible agendas. Plotinus was said to be ashamed to have a body, but he still set up and ran the most successful school of philosophy of his day, which doubled as an orphanage. His student Porphyry, no less otherworldly, advocated for veganism, and against a trendy new religious movement that was becoming very popular, Christianity.

> But it is inconclusive, never-ending and wearying.
>
> Tartaglia, 2020, 44; *italics in the original*

The closure of finding the right answer is relaxing because then you no longer have to think. For example, if we take it for granted that the mind must be physical *in some sense* (does it really matter which?), then we can leave it to the neuroscientists to acquire the knowledge needed by technologists to replicate the semblance of our cognitive functions in AI robots, then mass-produce them to transform human life. The problem is that the need for philosophical thought tends to reemerge of its own accord as our technology advances without philosophical reflection: when the AI robot gladiators scream in agony in the Colosseum, for instance, should we feel sorry for them? Can you have an affair with a robot, or are they just sex toys partners should tolerate?

Ramberg's reading of my work is now central to how I think of philosophical progress, namely as a matter of expanding the open conversation of philosophy among the worldwide public. The ultimate and very idealistic aim of this is for human beings to become a "philosophical species", as I like to put it (Tartaglia, 2024), together with the more immediate political aim, as advocated by Hans Jonas (1979), of bringing technological development into the remit of ordinary democratically chosen policy and decision-making, so that philosophically illiterate and unelected superrich people do not get to shape our future with their dreams and hunches.

Given my debt to Ramberg, then, let us return to the apparently striking points of disagreement in the first paragraph of this essay. In each case I just picked out an apparently incriminating (from my perspective) remark which shows nothing more than that Ramberg has thought through some of Rorty's key ideas, taken them seriously. Nevertheless, he does want to be a naturalist, whereas I do not, so that is something we shall have to return to. We are both aiming for conversational openness, and so both good Rortyans in that crucial respect, but can Pragmatic Naturalists and Pragmatic Metaphysicians peacefully co-exist? To begin unlocking the answer, let us turn to the paper from which I found the "die-hard Platonist" quote. It originates from the 1998 conference in Brazil which Ramberg talks very fondly about in his recollections of being mentored by Rorty (Ramberg, 2023), so this is a very early Ramberg paper, even earlier than the legendary one in which he persuaded Rorty to change his mind (Ramberg, 2000).[3]

[3] I reviewed the book it appeared in, announcing with great excitement: "The final essay by Bjørn Ramberg (mysteriously missing from the list of Notes on Contributors) persuades

2. Rorty and the Instruments of Philosophy

I have named this section after Ramberg's paper, which might more aptly have been called "Plato and the Instruments of Philosophy", given that he comes down in favour of Plato; it is from Plato that he takes the metaphor of argument being the "instrument" of the philosopher (*Rep.* 582E). This shows admirable independence of mind when you consider the circumstances in which it was written, namely for a prestigious conference in a glamourous destination during which it became clear to him, as an aspiring academic, that one of the world's most important philosophers, known for his vehemently anti-Platonist views, had decided to take him under his wing to help him get into the profession. Ramberg was risking it!

He starts by quoting Rorty's response to Putnam's argument that Rorty's rejection of objective truth undermines itself, with the response being that he wanted to move, "everything over from epistemology and metaphysics to cultural politics" (Rorty, 1998, 57). I always found that an odd one: surely the contradiction shows the theorizing went wrong, so why expect any social benefits? If Rorty cannot provide a coherent reason to believe there is something wrong with objective truth and representation, why care about his unresearchable hunches about the social benefits of abandoning those ideas? If they are real features of our world—if we perceptually and cognitively represent a world about which objective truths can be known—then disbelieving in those features would not benefit us, rather as disbelieving in brick walls would not benefit us.

I think it was just wishful thinking. Rorty wanted to be talking about cultural politics, it was what he really cared about, so he wanted to think his expertise in philosophy had led him there, which, as Putnam's argument shows, it cannot have done. Ramberg's more charitable interpretation is that,

> Construing traditional epistemology as unselfconscious sociology, and metaphysics, with Nietzsche, as an oddly alienated species of literature of self-creation, Rorty suggests that there are no deeper terms of assessment for philosophical theorizing

Rorty to abandon some of his best-known views!" (Tartaglia, 2003). I found it suspicious there would be information about all the other writers, but nothing about the star who achieved the big result—perhaps "Bjørn Ramberg" was a pseudonym being used to disguise the identity of somebody famous, perhaps even Rorty himself. I should have known that nothing that exciting happens in philosophy anymore.

> than those expressing moral and political values.
>
> Ramberg, 2001, 15

But if you think of epistemology and metaphysics like that, then you must be taking for granted some kind of materialist or naturalistic worldview, one which has been rejected on epistemological and metaphysical grounds by most of our philosophical traditions. You might even say that the Western philosophical tradition began with a rejection of naturalism, when Plato's philosopher stopped chasing shadows and emerged from the cave; or perhaps when Parmenides dealt with science under the category of "opinion" rather than "truth". In any case, if Rorty's worldview has not been coherently argued for, as I think Putnam's argument proves, then he was not entitled to regard epistemology and metaphysics as he did. He did indeed see epistemology as "unselfconscious sociology" and metaphysics as "an oddly alienated species of literature of self-creation", as Ramberg so elegantly puts it, but if Putnam's argument works then we have no reason to follow suit—which is the Protagorean predicament that Plato saw so clearly (*Tht*. 161D–162A; *Crat*. 386A–E).

This is not to deny a certain attractiveness to the idea that there are "no deeper terms of assessment for philosophical theorizing than those expressing moral and political values"—for if we are philosophizing, perhaps we should not consider anything more important than whether the philosophizing promotes moral and political progress. The problem with this reasoning, however, is that once epistemology and metaphysics have been disavowed, the blood runs out of "deeper" and "philosophical", the statement drops dead, and we find ourselves struggling to remember what we thought we meant by it. Rorty is proposing that philosophers do something more important and better than epistemology and metaphysics, something which contributes to moral and political progress... What? Until we know that, we will not know what "deeper" and "philosophical" mean. It is a bit like saying that football should no longer have goals, that goals have hitherto ruined the game. If you want me to take that idea seriously, you will need a good suggestion for how it can work better without goals while remaining football.

Ramberg seeks to solve this problem for Rorty by showing that his "metaphilosophical critique is itself a distinctively philosophical activity", one which "offers us a possibility for the kind of self-renewing interpretation that philosophy has been performing on itself since Plato opened the chasm between appearance and reality" (Ramberg, 2001, 15). This

is a Rortyan interpretation of Rorty. Rorty never showed much interest in what "the Aristotle who walked the streets of Athens" had in mind (Rorty, 1998, 250), his primary interest in other philosophers, past and present, was always in the use he could put their writings to. Ramberg owns up to this immediately, saying that to present Rorty as providing "a pragmatist view of what philosophy is" might be considered "a form of co-option" (op. cit, 16), given his commitment to anti-essentialism. Too right, and the thought Rorty is being co-opted into is Ramberg's own, namely that to serve the social purpose of promoting conversational openness over closure requires openness to have something to do with the nature of philosophy—the very same thought he influenced me with some two decades later.

Ramberg contrasts "deflationist" and "demonizing" interpretations of Rorty with his own. The deflationist sees Rorty as a reformer rather than an anti-philosopher, one who had some good points but was prone to rhetorical hyperbole, and hence brought the anti-philosopher misinterpretation upon himself. The demonizer, by contrast, "correctly" sees the radicalness of Rorty's opposition to "still prevalent conceptions of the tasks of philosophy" (ibid., 16). We demonizers do indeed see that, and I personally do not think he ever came up with a better recommendation to philosophers wanting to follow him into a rosier era of philosophy than: "try to think of something completely different, preferably something closer to literature, poetry and politics—oh yes, and talk about the historical greats of philosophy if you can, some of them were useful in their time, but you'll have to interpret them as saying things they obviously didn't mean, which is okay since I like that radical new French philosophy". From Dennett the recommendation was the much simpler: "become scientists", whereas from Carnap it was: "become logicians". They all had the same 20th century affliction, just different outside interests.

Ramberg might not agree with my dismissive assessment of Rorty's positive agenda, but he certainly sees that the demonizers are onto something. What Ramberg thinks they have failed to see, however, is that philosophy is "a practice which depends on just the sort of confrontation with itself that Rorty engages us in" (ibid., 16). So, it turns out that deflationists and demonizers alike have missed "Rorty's key contribution to philosophical thought" (ibid.), his "greatest contribution to pragmatism and to philosophy" (ibid., 21). He did have a "positive view of philosophical reflection" after all (ibid., 17), an important one, but his anti-essentialism blinded him to it. I am sceptical of this as an interpretation of "the Rorty

who walked the streets of Stanford", but we are in the realms of Rortyan interpretation now. Ramberg uses imaginative interpretation of Rorty's writings as a method for putting his own views forward, just as Rorty did with Sellars, Quine, Kuhn and Davidson; and just as Plotinus and Proclus did with Plato, for that matter.

Rorty's "greatest contribution" developed from his view, which Ramberg goes on to reject, that argument should not be made central to our notion of philosophy because of its inherent conservatism. Philosophy, he thought, should be a matter of looking for innovative ways to redescribe the world to drive moral and political progress, which would be impossible if the new way of seeing the world must be argued for in the terms of the old one. Here we see the influence of Thomas Kuhn's sceptical view of scientific progress, which Rorty made central to the metaphilosophy of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, where essentialist metaphysics and representational epistemology are held responsible for the authoritarian ideal of universal commensuration to which even natural science could not live up, as Rorty thought Kuhn had shown. Since the impossible ideal of universal commensuration is an obstacle to linguistic innovation, then, Rorty wanted philosophy to reinvent itself as an engine of linguistic innovation. And that is why he was opposed to making rational argument integral to the philosophical enterprise.

Ramberg sees that Rorty is thereby committing himself to a view about the nature of philosophy, one "rooted in romanticism" (ibid., 28), which he needed in order to challenge argument-based, commensuration-seeking conceptions of philosophy without falling into the "bland pluralism" (ibid., 38) of saying that philosophy is whatever philosophers do; which is what he often did say, as did Quine. I think a reasonable response to bland pluralism, given Rorty's dire assessment of the history of philosophy, would be to not care what philosophers do. However, if Rorty has a positive alternative then perhaps the situation is not so dire. Perhaps people could learn to be positive about philosophers, despite their having held back linguistic innovation for millennia with their awful representational thinking and authoritarian ideal of commensuration—for at least they eventually saw the error of their ways and are now working hard at promoting linguistic innovation. Good luck to them, everyone makes mistakes, they might be worth listening to these days, give them another chance.

Rorty will not say he has a positive alternative, however, according to Ramberg's diagnosis, because of his commitment to anti-essentialism,

which is what forced him to fall back on bland pluralism and hence be mistaken for an anti-philosopher. Essentialism is indeed the cardinal sin of philosophy for Rorty, of which representationalism was only one particular manifestation (Rorty, 1979, 357). Ramberg does not criticise Rorty by defending an essentialist view of philosophy, however (I would), but rather for not being anti-essentialist enough, saying we need to "flush out" his "residual essentialism regarding argument and rationality that reveals itself in the dualistic elements in Rorty's account of intellectual progress" (op. cit., 29).

Rorty portrays argument as a paradigm-bound "straightjacket" (ibid.) that inhibits creative redescription by imposing methodological constraints on how redescription is permitted to proceed. Ramberg, however, prefers Plato's view according to which argument is "dialogical, and thereby transcends methodology" (ibid.). It is because Rorty thinks in a dualistic and essentialist way about redescription, which in his romantic book is the "most important thing we can do" (Rorty, 1979, 358–9), that he sets up a false dichotomy between the bad, conformist approach of only accepting redescription when good argument calls for it, and the good, creative approach of redescribing the world however we like, so long as a social benefit can be envisaged. Rorty called Kuhn the "most influential philosopher to write in English since the Second World War" (Rorty, 1999, 175), and here we see the profound influence he had on Rorty. Rorty thought the paradigm of philosophy was obsolete because it served obsolete social purposes and expressed a socially damaging desire to be obsequious towards a higher authority called "Reality". As such, he obviously did not want to be seen to be presenting philosophical arguments, and hence working within the very paradigm he was out to demolish. Good "science" in the paradigm of philosophy (an exclusively Western phenomenon, according to one of his most implausible views[4]) could only ever be of the abnormal kind, that is, creative redescriptions aimed at moral and political progress, such as his own creative redescription of the traditional Protagorean relativist position as the laudable characteristic of taking an ironic attitude to one's most deeply held beliefs.

Rorty could only justify calling that redescription "philosophical" by appealing to the bland pluralist observation that a philosopher penned it. That is because he did not realise he was updating Protagorean relativism. Rorty was not only committed to constructive redescription, how-

[4] See Tartaglia, 2014.

ever, he engaged in the destructive kind too, with *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* his great achievement in that idiom. The destructive kind is the abnormal science of undermining traditional philosophical views, which Rorty used his Protagorean philosophical views to achieve, while granting a notable exemption for the equally traditional philosophical doctrine of materialism, which he endorsed throughout his career, while always insisting that it should be understood in a strictly non-metaphysical and non-reductive sense. This is because Rorty combined some Epicureanism with his Protagorean relativism; ancient philosophical schools often adopted each other's doctrines, and there is indeed a strong dose of scepticism in the atomism of the Epicureans.

If Rorty had not set himself against argument because of his dualist, essentialist thinking about redescription, as Ramberg sees it, then he might have realised that he himself argued, "Rortyan redescription" being a kind of philosophical argumentation (op. cit., 30). It was philosophical because it accorded with Plato's dialogical and non-methodological notion of argument as the instrument of the philosopher. As artificial intelligence has recently informed us, by reading previously unreadable papyrus scrolls, Plato spent his last night on earth listening to a "flute girl" (Latza Nadeau, 2024)—the flute was her instrument, argument was his.[5] Plato's notion of argument accommodates not only the Rorty/Kuhn notion of argument-based normal science, but also the creative, non-methodological process of redescription in abnormal science, which Rorty preferred. It is the latter inclusion which allows Ramberg to solve the problem which Rorty's blind spot created, namely that of draining all the blood out of philosophy.

The Platonic notion of argument includes, while being wider than, the sense in which I tell you my argument to hopefully persuade you of a truth. Plato and the Platonists went in for plenty of this, of course, but at least as important, as Ramberg sees it, is Plato's notion of argument as the dialogical process of running through your reasoning process to explain to others why you believe what you believe. This helps us understand each other so we can work together in the rational pursuit of truth and understanding—and pleasure too, to accommodate Epicureans like Rorty. This wider notion of argument has moral value because it allows us to rationally and equitably resolve disagreements, rather than having to resort to brute force or more subtle forms of coercive manipulation. Ramberg

[5] Unfortunately, he did not think she was very good; you could not get the staff in Athens in those days.

thinks this makes good on Rorty's view that there are "no deeper terms of assessment for philosophical theorizing than those expressing moral and political values". Plato would say that the deepest term for philosophical theorizing is the truth, but since The One is the same as The Good, they are not so far apart on these matters.

To illustrate Ramberg's distinction between argument in the narrower, truth-seeking sense and argument in the wider, dialogical sense, take the reasons I give you for why I think there is an intellectual reality of Forms that transcends the spatiotemporal illusion that the unenlightened call the "world". I am trying to persuade you of something I think is true and important. You may not be persuaded, but I can still succeed in my dialogical task, which is to explain to you why I think what I do. Arguing in this wider sense, which Ramberg calls "process argumentation" (op. cit., 35), helps us to better understand each other and our differences in belief, intuition and reasoning, as we work together for the common good of continually being in possession of the best descriptions of reality we can manage to produce. This process of argumentation allows us to better argue in the narrower and more immediately truth-seeking sense too, such that if you will not accept my reasons for believing in a transcendent world of The Forms, then you ought to say why, so we can carry on having a rational conversation on the topic. When you explain why I have failed to persuade you, I am given an opportunity to overturn your reasoning, which you would hope I could do if I am indeed right. For Plato and the Platonists, except perhaps during the period of the Sceptical Academy, the truth directing function of argument was its most important, even though they clearly thought the dialogical function very important too. For a contemporary pragmatist like Ramberg, who is nowhere near as sceptical about full-blooded Platonist truth as Rorty was, but still a little suspicious, the dialogical function is at least as important as the truth directing one, perhaps more so.

Plato's conception of argument as both truth-revealing and edifying, with the two instrumental effects combining to create a beautiful and moral harmony, reveals to Ramberg the main problem with the Kuhnian model of intellectual progress which so influenced Rorty. This is that it has no practical application. At the time when radical new redescriptions start to look viable, nobody can be sure whether they are in the vanguard doing abnormal science, or a mad dog whom normal scientists should dismiss to uphold public rationality. Only historians can decide this. If we are all engaged in rational Platonic argument, however, and hence are

genuinely trying to understand each other for the purposes of settling on the best available description of human experience, then those aspiring to be in the vanguard of a new paradigm will still be trying to give rational arguments for what they believe—they will not disown argument, as Rorty did in words, if not deeds.[6] They will engage in a "discourse where efforts to articulate features of human experience and ends engage with, and are shaped by, one another. That is how new ways of describing the world and our place in it come to be, new modes of description which allow us to see new possibilities for experience, which in turn provide us with new reference points for evaluations of those very descriptive strategies." (ibid., 32)

What Ramberg has in mind is creative attempts at redescription guided by "human experience", rather than a method that has been developed by attending to past successes. This is my favourite kind too. As an improvising jazz musician, I know there are methodological formulae you can follow which make you sound better. I have been working on a certain altered scale pattern all year because I know that when I play it at an appropriate moment it will make my improvised solo sound more sophisticated. If I learned lots of methods like that, as more dedicated players do, then I would sound better, of this I have no doubt. Nevertheless, the moments that make jazz great are not the result of virtuoso methodological applications, they are the spontaneous ones—it is not for nothing that jazz has been called the "sound of surprise". The highlights in jazz improvisation happen when inspiration lifts the performance—as a player you know when that is happening, and if you listen back you are surprised and pleased. The methods make that sort of thing happen more often, both by improving technique and instilling jazz instinct, and they also make your solos sound better when things are not happening yet, or anymore, or tonight. All the main methods in jazz began when "that sort of thing" happened to a pioneering improviser. Ramberg says, "there is something profoundly anti-philosophical about methodological conceptions of philosophical rationality" (ibid., 36). I agree, the best philo-

[6] That would be Ramberg's charitable interpretation. I think Rorty sometimes disowned argument in both words and deeds, since I accept Putnam's argument. For example, the main argument of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* depends on two objective truths: that there is a myth of the given and that there is no analytic / synthetic distinction. But the conclusion this is supposed to establish is that there are no objective truths. How are we supposed to move that "over from epistemology and metaphysics to cultural politics"? How do you gauge the social benefits of believing that Wilfrid Sellars was right about the myth of the given?

sophical rationality happens mysteriously in the moment, and I bet it was like that for Parmenides, Plato and Rorty too.

To endorse Ramberg's Platonic, anti-Kuhnian, anti-Rortyan conception of argument as the instrument of the philosopher, is to think that philosophy is a valuable and continuous ancient tradition of explaining to each other the reasons for our disagreements, as we work towards the twin goals of better understanding the world and each other. This is what I am calling Ramberg's dialogical metaphilosophy. It has contemporary resonance, since the view that philosophy aims at understanding rather than truth has been gaining momentum in recent years; it received a very strong defence from Michael Hannon and James Nguyen (2022), for example. Nevertheless, I think philosophy aims at both understanding *and* truth, which seems to be a commitment of Ramberg's dialogical metaphilosophy too, given that it understands philosophical rationality as a matter of trying to "articulate features of human experience".

Of course, the dialogical metaphilosophy I am calling "anti-Rortyan" is attributed to Rorty by Ramberg; he risked it in writing a Platonist paper for that conference but was not suicidal. Nevertheless, I see no desire to vindicate the philosophical tradition in Rorty, to show that philosophy has something unique to offer the world, something which binds our current efforts proudly to the philosophers of the ancient world. Rorty said the philosophical tradition either had nothing binding it together (bland pluralism) or that the bond was rubbish (representationalism, truth, commensuration, essentialism). He had the 20th century philosopher's affliction. Ramberg has argued that *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* moved beyond destructive metaphilosophy to provide us with a positive vision of what edifying philosophy could amount to (Ramberg, 2013).[7] But did it really? The references to the history of philosophy in that book are just as negative as before, and now he is talking more about other, less problematic "genres of literature", especially novels. His views on irony and solidarity are of course informed by his understanding of the history of philosophy, but he would deny they were specifically philosophical. His aim was not to revive the history of philosophy with a creative redescription, it was to serve a public purpose by arguing for some of his own original ideas. He was trying to do something different and useful, for sure, but not in order to revitalise his tradition; the latter is just an abstract something which he said he wanted to happen whenever he had to defend himself against the charge of anti-philosophy.

[7] As was pointed out by a reviewer of the book in which this article appeared, however, Rorty later renounced edifying philosophy; see Maher, 2013.

Ramberg's dialogical metaphilosophy is a perfect antidote to Rorty's blind spot, then, but it needs some supplements. It needs a commitment to philosophy having a subject matter, because you cannot continue an academic tradition by redescribing it unless you are talking about recognisably the same topics. You cannot redescribe mathematics as not concerned with numbers. It also needs a commitment to human experience and its ability to guide our descriptions, such as the experience of the impossible heaviness of the car if I were to foolishly try to lift it. I am not sure naturalists want to accept that reality, however, so to end this piece let us turn briefly to the thorny issue I raised earlier, that of whether pragmatist naturalists and pragmatist metaphysicians can peacefully co-exist. I started with some fabricated tension and shall end with the real thing.

3. Why Naturalism?

To answer that on Rorty's behalf: because he was a materialist. This is not controversial, he said he was, and he pioneered eliminative materialism, the most extreme kind. Rorty knew he was not supposed to think of his Epicurean materialism metaphysically, or even realistically, because his Protagorean relativism always came first, so he had to issue qualifications—he denied that he thought physical descriptions captured the nature of reality better than others and he gestured to there being social benefits to believing materialism. After he gave up on eliminative materialism, he advertised these qualifications as non-metaphysical materialism (Rorty, 1979, 120–25), then non-reductive physicalism (Rorty, 1991, 113–25), then naturalism (Rorty, 2007:147–59). At the end of the day, however, he was an ordinary materialist who thought "the mind is just the central nervous system under an alternative description" (Rorty, 1998, 248), as he lets slip so tellingly when needing an example to make a point on a different topic.

"Naturalism" is a great word for Rorty, since it conveys the materialist idea, but without historical and metaphysical baggage. It does this by not meaning very much, which is the context in which Roy Wood Sellars originally attracted philosophical attention to the word (Sellars, 1922: vii). It suggests materialism while hinting at something different, something more innocent, less philosophically heavyweight, a simple matter of having respect for what science tells us about the world. This has been its number one selling point in an era in which philosophy has lost its confidence and dearly hopes science will allow it to continue, so long as it

renounces its past and keeps its head down. But really, naturalism is just materialism flourishing as a belief-system, for now that it is the world's dominant metaphysics, it is not in the interest of its believers for metaphysical discussion to continue. Naturalism ends the philosophical discussion at a point in history when materialism is doing better than ever before, thereby making the weary keen to accept that it won. We must not talk about metaphysics because materialism is naturalism's disowned inner self.

It is because "naturalism" has so little content, apart from the bit its advocates do not want it to have, that efforts have been made to give it some, most notably with Ramberg's "pragmatic naturalism" and Huw Price's "subject naturalism", which Rorty equated. The pragmatic naturalist, as Rorty explained it, does not ask "What features does the world *really* have?" but rather "What topics are worth discussing?" (Rorty, 2007, 152). Rorty thought that whether phenomenal consciousness is a real feature of our world is not worth discussing, and yet virtual reality and artificial intelligence are set to make fundamental changes to human life. For genuine pragmatists, this traditional metaphysical topic has become a top priority. Ignore that one, because you have been taken in by an authoritarian, anti-philosophical tactic for preserving the metaphysical dominance of materialism, namely naturalism, and you prevent philosophy from intervening in an area in which it could be of genuine social worth. Worse still, you commit us to working morally and politically with a certain metaphysical answer, the wrong one, namely that AI robots will be just like us in respect of their "consciousness", which could make future patterns of societal interaction develop incoherently. Ramberg wants to "maintain a continuous discursive fight against subjection and obliteration" (Ramberg, 2013, 69), as do I, but says "pragmatists understand that things just may not go our way; metaphysics may prevail" (ibid., 72). The prevailance of metaphysics, such that materialism returns to its rightful place as only *one* of the options in a rational and open conversation, strikes me as the best hope philosophy has at present for becoming pragmatic rather than remaining insular.

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The Principle of Charity and the Practice of Peace: Metaphysics oder Pragmatism?

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1. Introduction

I started outlining this essay in early 2024 from my office in a college town situated on the traditional territory of the Ampinefu, in the Pacific Northwest of the US just south of BC, the Canadian province in which I was born. The American presidential election loomed large. I was going to write that it loomed large "in the background," but I stopped, because it was of course never in the background. I have lived in the US through a number of consequential presidential campaigns, but the presidential campaigns of 2024 portended something else altogether.

Midway through the year I jotted down on a sticky note "half the country is crazy"—a phrase that now guides the rhetorical structure of this essay. A cautionary note here: The term "crazy" is used to mean variously, "unusual," "false," "unintelligible," "irrational," and even "violent," but also of course, "mentally ill." Insofar as people with mental illnesses often struggle to have their own testimony taken seriously, the conflation of all these meanings makes their struggles even more challenging, and the use of the term should be discouraged on these grounds. In this essay I report on the ubiquitous use of the term, struggle with my own use of it, and discuss how, guided by a pragmatist reading of Donald Davidson, the conflation of all these referents is self-defeating. It would not surprise me if the ableism and the self-defeating nature of the term were related but I do not explore this possibility here.

I kept hearing or reading the phrase everywhere—on my social media feed, on the news, in faculty meetings. At low points I even caught myself muttering it, or in the interest of full disclosure, shouting it to the sky. That is until I listened more carefully to who was joining the chorus of shouting and realized it was *everyone*. So, by my keen powers of deduction, it became clear that I was part of someone else's "half" as *they* shouted, "half the country is crazy." Gathering all the empathy I could, I wondered if perhaps this someone else might be taking the same kind of epistemic care as I was to puzzle through what could plausibly be meant by the phrase "half the country is crazy" if everyone thought the referent of "half the country" was some other half that excluded them.

Who am I kidding. Relatively few have an educational pathway, job description, and reinforcement schedule that encourages the particular kind of epistemic care with which I have puzzled over the phrase. This isn't to boast. It is meant instead as a recognition of the contingency, with no small amount of irony and, ultimately, solidarity, that conspired to bring me as a new PhD student in the fall of 1991 to the door of Bjørn Torgrim Ramberg's office in the philosophy department on the 7th floor of the library at Simon Fraser University to ask him about Donald Davidson. There are of course other routes to epistemic care, but truly this felt—this still feels—pretty unusual, in academia especially, for the model of charity and peace that Bjørn provided as a mentor on the journey.

So back to the essay—in honour of Bjørn—where I deploy his pragmatist reading of Davidson as a modest contribution to the project of clearing through the ethical/political/philosophical sludge in which many of us living in the United States have been mired over the last few election cycles. I have fruitful conversations with Bjørn in my head, often, especially in the writing of this essay. But the sludge is deep and the challenges profound. I have started writing the essay many times over the last year, setting it aside when I was too frustrated or sad to marshal the discipline needed to say what I hoped it would be helpful to hear someone say, if not shout to the sky—anything to block the cries of "half the country is crazy." But now the election has come and gone. There is nothing to be done in this instance but write or cry, or both. It seems important to acknowledge that as a white person and a university professor, I am (as of this writing) more or less shielded from many of the privations that others have been suffering as a result of the election outcome. In this sense, writing about it is a privilege, but also a responsibility.

The arguments I offer at this point in the collective psychodrama can be no more than gestures—partial, incomplete, not enough. But perhaps they will spark curiosity in some other new PhD student who stumbles across them, wondering how best to make philosophy matter. That's what I had first come to Bjørn to figure out—how to make philosophy matter, in my case to feminism, to scientists, and heaven help them, to feminist scientists. Rorty, as a pragmatist philosopher, seemed to me to matter in all the relevant ways, but his use of Davidson seemed a complicated part of the equation about which I required some guidance. What a stroke of luck that the philosophers at Simon Fraser University had just hired someone who knew something about how Davidson might matter to pragmatism, to science, to cultural politics such as feminism. Testing if and how a particular philosophical tool might matter to feminist scientists continues to be one of the methods I use in judging the usefulness of academic philosophy, but I now try to test that usefulness against the needs of an even broader public, indeed, in my case, the American public, if such a thing can still be identified.

Whether anything can be made of the concept of an American public in the current political moment is a question that, I argue, can be answered in the affirmative, more or less, though it will take a lot of work, both in terms of laying out the argument itself, and in terms of the community building that the argument prescribes. The basic plot of the essay will be first, to air some concerns about the limits of communicative and interpretative practices during times of intense political polarization; second, to show how Bjørn's pragmatist reading of Davidson addresses these limits, clearing a path forward; and third and finally, to offer some ideas about what walking that path might look like for a pragmatist, that is, which habits we need to inculcate and which we might need to abandon as we continue with the ongoing community building required for achieving our country.

2. On the limits of communicative and interpretative practices in the current political moment

I'm going to assume if you've read this far, then like me, you've encountered in the last decade, and with increasing frequency in the last few years, claims about the failures of rationality on display by half the country. I want for the moment to model neutrality with respect to which half (and

even which country, as these concerns become increasingly global) because neither national identity nor political party affiliation seems to make much difference to the general content of the claims—there are important symmetries at work. Of course there are differences as well, depending on the granularity of the analysis, but these differences get all the attention, pretty much everywhere, and I want to focus on the similarities, something that is easier to do if national and political affiliations are, temporarily at least, deemphasized. For most of this essay then I will refer to "people who voted differently," and "supporters of the other political leader," rather than, in the US, for example, "supporters of Donald Trump" or "supporters of Kamala Harris." I want at strategic points in this essay to keep the focus on the similarities between the claims made by "us" and "them" rather than be distracted by the identities of those making the claims. This will also allow me to write as if the "us" includes you dear reader. Even if you and I ultimately differ in national identity or political party affiliation, I invite you to see how far you can come along for the ride. If I do this right, it will be pretty far.

So consider the general content of the claims at issue and focus on the ease with which they could be uttered by almost anyone: "I just don't understand how people could support political leader x; people who voted for political leader x are unhinged, irrational, uninformed, haters of democracy who want to use the government to take away our freedoms." In addition to the claims of irrationality on the part of people who voted differently from us, their beliefs are also characterized as impossible to understand, but nonetheless mistaken, often ideologically concealed, and finally, immoral. Perhaps you can already guess how these elements taken together might become an appropriate target for the kind of conceptual untangling that Bjørn's work on Davidson offers us but indulge me a little longer.

To reward your indulgence, I will admit that the targets of my concern in the US context are primarily supporters of Trump. And I think I have quite a bit of evidence supporting the view that I am on the right side of this historical moment and that the folks who voted differently from me are on the wrong side. So even as I prescribe the solidarity work needed to widen the community of people to whom we are responsible, of who counts as "us," there will be no championing of relativism to get there. Major differences must be resolved. Supporters of competing political candidates cannot each be right about the main issues that divide us. For example, I think that the people who voted differently from me

have supported a political leader who will only exacerbate the systemic harms faced by the most marginalized.

But here's the rub. If you've been watching events unfold you will have seen by now that partisans *across the political spectrum*, accuse their rivals of exacerbating systemic harms faced by the most marginalized. When leveled at me or the candidates I support, these accusations can leave me completely frustrated and even enraged. In calmer moments, however, I am able to observe that pretty much everyone likes to think of themselves as being on the side of justice in terms of protection for the most marginalized, but there is limited consensus around who is the most marginalized and therefore deserving of that justice, and what role the government should play in managing these decisions.

There is of course the possibility that when the people who voted differently from me are voicing their desire to seek justice and protection for the most marginalized, their desire is actually being *manipulated* by their political leaders, but let's focus instead on the fact that this desire is *there to be manipulated*, in them as in anyone, including me and you.

So, forget if you can the details of which political party causes me the most concern and read on as if it doesn't matter. At least part of my prescriptive project here will be to offer a reminder that working in solidarity together to widen the community will mean that differences in political affiliation take on less significance (and this starts a feedback loop—when political affiliation takes on less significance, then it is easier to widen the community.)

Here, then, is the generic conditional, neutral with respect to political and even national affiliation, that lays out the stumbling blocks to solidarity work, to community building. The conditional has a complicated antecedent: If we are right and people who voted differently from us are wrong; but they think they are right and *we* are wrong; and the stakes are high because the marginalized need protection; and we are unlikely to find violent struggle helpful; *then* we have somehow to *communicate* with the people who voted differently from us, to convince them of the errors of their ways, or at least the benefits of *our* ways, without the use of physical force.

I should note here that if you found yourself grumbling about the speed with which I dismissed the notion that violent struggle will be helpful for us, I feel your pain. But I have been following the work of Iraq-war veteran and peace educator Paul K. Chappell long enough now to know that when we entertain notions of violence, we are usually driven

by a completely unrealistic picture of what is actually involved (e.g. Chappell 2017). We have "romantic illusions of violence" (Chappell 2017, 194). However, even if some members of this imagined "we" were seasoned soldiers, the main reason for dismissing violent struggle as an option in this case is because the actual enemies here cannot be vanquished with violence. As King noted, "violence can murder the liar, but it cannot kill the lie nor establish to truth" (2010 [1967], 64) To kill lies and establish truths, we need at the very least *to communicate* with each other, which requires that we all be alive, and mostly, well.

But how would that go exactly? How on earth are we going to communicate with each other when the polarized climate makes this particular task seem singularly impossible? Here, I argue, Bjørn's pragmatist readings of Davidson's philosophy of language might matter.

3. How Bjørn's work on Davidson addresses the limits of our communicative and interpretative practices, and charts a path forward

In the mid-2000s, Bjørn wrote a couple of essays for edited collections that addressed the theme of metaphysics and its relation to pragmatism, titled "Rorty, Davidson, and the Future of Metaphysics in America" (2008) and "Method and Metaphysics: Pragmatist Doubts" (2011). More on Bjørn's definition of metaphysics and pragmatism below, but for now I note only that I take him to have defined them in just the right way. I read these two essays when they came out, initially unsure of how they might make philosophy matter. I thought metaphysics was finished and wasn't sure it needed further dismantling. Clearly, I was spending too much time, or just the right amount of time, with feminist philosophers of science typically less concerned with the metaphysical and more focused on the pragmatic. At any rate, the problem Bjørn was tackling was that it is very easy to read Davidson as a metaphysician, and if Scott Soames had anything to say about it, a failed metaphysician (Soames, 2003), but, says Bjørn, we can do way more interesting things with Davidson's theories if we read him instead as a pragmatist. So, let's do that.

Done. (Bjørn had me at "metaphilosophical divergences").

I tucked these essays away and didn't think much about them, their obvious rightness needing no further nurturing. However, in early 2024,

as utterances of "half the country is crazy" began to coalesce into a ubiquitous anthem, and the difficulties of communicating between us and them became more and more obvious, those two essays began tugging at me. If you know these essays, you might be able to predict where I'm going.

I'll begin with a pattern I have encountered in commentary on my social media feed whereby our difficulty in communicating with people in other political camps is explained by appeal to distinct conceptual schemes separating us and them. Of course, the language of conceptual schemes isn't always or even often used, but the claim that half the country is unintelligible to the other half seems to infer it. While I have long been convinced of Davidson's arguments against the very idea of a conceptual scheme, the inference gave me pause. Just how strong were Davidson's arguments here? What grounded them?

The pragmatist in me could make no sense of a *metaphysical* grounding, though in moments of weakness it certainly did feel comforting to entertain the *necessity* of Davidson's arguments. If Davidson's arguments against the possibility of conceptual schemes were revealing of some necessary feature of language, then the difficulties in communicating with people in other political camps comes down to collective failures of will or skill. Surely then, if we and they worked hard enough to get past our differences, there could be *some* hope for reconciliation through communication. If there were no *metaphysical* barriers, how hard could it be?

In "Method and Metaphysics: Pragmatist Doubts," Bjørn does not allow this small comfort if it is purchased at the expense of reading Davidson's anti-conceptual scheme arguments in metaphysical terms. If debates about the existence of conceptual schemes are played out in the metaphysical arena, then there are two paths to take, and Bjørn has pragmatist doubts about both of them.

The first path is to invoke a conceptual scheme when claiming that it is metaphysically impossible for us to understand what it is like to be a bat, say, or the supporter of a rival political leader, or an alien. All we can do when confronted with a differing conceptual scheme of this metaphysical sort is take our ball and our bat (the other kind of bat) and go home. The second path is to argue that conceptual schemes are a metaphysical impossibility in the face of a number of features of language learning and communication that hold necessarily by virtue of their being features of language learning and communication. Some people (Soames for instance) read Davidson as taking this second path. Soames then argues that contra Davidson, we have "no reason to believe that there *couldn't*

be speakers whose conceptual schemes were so different from ours that we couldn't translate their speech" (Soames, 2004, 330, quoted in Ramberg, 2011 132, emphasis added). Davidson then looks to be mistaken when confronted with the empirical facts of very real and perhaps insurmountable communicative differences between people supporting different political leaders, say.

In "Method and Metaphysics," Bjørn concedes that Davidson's arguments against conceptual schemes can indeed be read as grounded in the metaphysical, but he notes that "nothing Davidson says limits the extent to which the potential for communicative success remains an empirical question" (138). When "Method and Metaphysics" was published, Bjørn must have imagined, reasonably enough, a reading audience for whom the probability of encountering someone operating with an unintelligible conceptual scheme seemed low, so he made use of a thought experiment. He wrote: "It seems easy enough to imagine communicating organisms or systems whose makeup (say, life span) is so different from ours that communication between them and us would be impossible—perhaps we could flesh out a thought experiment such that As and Bs, happily chatting in their separate camps, would be unable even to recognize each other as communicating creatures. Would this show that Davidson is wrong?" (138). Bjørn does not think so.

He continues in a passage I quote here at length as I will return later to a number of its elements:

> Soames may well be right that on some occasions we might want to attribute different conceptual schemes to people or to cultures. What we would mean by that, however, is that their habits of acting, thinking, and speaking are different—rooted, perhaps, in vast differences in their natural or cultural environment—and that those habits are so rigid that there seems to be no way to work past them toward mutual understanding. But it wouldn't then be as if we had discovered that there are conceptual schemes after all. In such cases, we are not relying on the idea of conceptual schemes to explain anything; we are simply applying that term as shorthand for obstacles and differences that may well be quite pervasive and systematic, but whose roots and explanations are to be found in practice, in behavior, in the environment, and in interests. Indeed, it is the explanatory uselessness of the idea of a conceptual

> scheme that is the immediate pragmatist lesson of Davidson's attack on the idea. Ramberg 2011, 138–39

Now of course, one might decide to continue using the term "conceptual scheme" knowing that it is a shorthand for all the important pragmatic details that are doing the causal work, but then the worry is that the term can take on a life of its own, as it seems to have done in some corners of contemporary analytic philosophy, disguising its genealogy. One ought to handle such terms with caution.

Here is where I think Bjørn's incisive analysis leaves us. Divergent worldviews might indeed in some instances cause massive and perhaps insurmountable difficulties in communication—but this is not a metaphysical claim about what is possible or impossible. The empirical details matter. Unfortunately, in the US for example, beginning however far back we want to go, but definitely increasing with the most recent presidential campaigns, the empirical details are pointing to massive and perhaps insurmountable difficulties in communication between people, us and them, who supported different political parties.

It might seem like we are right back where we started. So what if Davidson's arguments against conceptual schemes are best viewed as empirical rather than metaphysical? How does it help to remove a metaphysical barrier to communication between us and them, but leave open the empirical possibility of massive and perhaps insurmountable difficulties in communication? Earlier I had mentioned somewhat facetiously that if the barriers to communication between us and them were empirical rather than metaphysical, then it couldn't be *that* hard to figure out a solution. But it turns out, it's still pretty hard. We are in the midst not of the empirical *possibility* of massive barriers to communication, but of the empirical *actuality* of such barriers, and it looks and feels bleak. However, the pragmatic clearing of metaphysical barriers does end up paying a number of dividends; and we probably wouldn't be honouring Bjørn if he wasn't so skilled at bringing those dividends to the fore. So, let's return now to Bjørn's earlier essay "Rorty, Davidson, and the Future of Metaphysics in America" (2008), where he argues that there are other ways that metaphysics might be muddying the communicative terrain and uses his pragmatist approach to offer a prescription and clear a path.

In this essay Bjørn provides more details about what he means by "metaphysics" and "pragmatism." He describes metaphysics as "an inquiry into the non-empirical presuppositions of knowing and doing" (441)

and contrasts it with the strains of secularization offered by Rorty's pragmatism, namely "the development of a human self-understanding that eschews the need for legitimation of human thought and sentiment by appeal to structures—modes of being—that transcend transitory, finite, situated human existence" (441). This is the kind of human self-understanding that Bjørn thinks we should get behind, and who among us could say no? In earlier work (Clough, 2021) I have joined the chorus, noting that Rorty's criticisms of philosophical appeals to foundations outside or beyond human experience should not be read as questioning the usefulness of a particular extant foundation, but were instead reminding us that "every time we thought we were appealing to such a foundation [...] we have over and over again discovered that we were fooling ourselves" (Clough, 2021, 8). All we have ever done is appeal to foundations built by us. Following Bjørn, I have argued that these boot-strapped foundations provide us all the support we need for our evidential claims and in fact require us to be even more responsible in our evidence gathering than if those foundations were imposed by forces outside us (Clough, 2021).

So, as a start, in our attempts at communication with people who voted differently from us, we ought to get over ourselves, adopt some epistemic humility, and avoid sounding like we have access to authoritative structures that transcend situated human existence. This is a negative prescription but it's not nothing. Bjørn continues:

> Metaphysics is a strategy for insulating the work of philosophy from the larger issues of cultural politics which are the locus of human action, choice and suffering. The real point of the critique of metaphysics is that we risk diminishing our own powers—both our power to see new opportunities for engaging with the world, and our power to act on suffering in ameliorating fashion. Fighting against metaphysics is to contribute to our ability and willingness to take responsibility for how we talk. Ramberg, 2008, 441

A key point here is that while we may not be able to control how other people talk, we can certainly take more care with how *we* talk, and this care will play no small part in generating the kind of communicative landscape needed for the solidarity work, together, across differences, to widen the community.

So, how careful *are* we when we talk? What do you hear when *we* shout "half the country is crazy"? I hear a number of things, but what

leaps out is an implied but metaphysically-loaded rejection of a shared world, a shared language, and shared experiences. In some cases, this rejection might be motivated by self-protection, an instinct I understand. Attempts at communication across this chasm might not be safe for everyone. But too often, I fear, the rejection of a shared world, a shared language, and shared experiences, functions as insulation from the very ground on which the work of communication needs to begin. And by being insulated in this way, we relinquish our ability to distinguish true from false, to act in ways that are helpful rather than harmful, just rather than unjust. If Davidson is right about the (idealized if not metaphysical) model of communicative triangulation, and I agree with Bjørn that he is (most recently Clough, 2020a) then we can't argue that the people who voted differently from us hold beliefs that are false, unhelpful, and unjust, while also regarding them as unintelligible (see also Clough, 2020b). So, which is it? Are their beliefs false, unhelpful, unjust? Or are they unintelligible? Reading Davidson's arguments against conceptual schemes through a pragmatist rather than a metaphysical lens, reminds us of the power that comes when we trade in the former set of characterizations—that is, the power we have "to act on suffering in ameliorating fashion" that comes with distinguishing between the true and false, the helpful and unhelpful, the just and unjust—but this is exactly the power we give up if we choose instead the latter, characterizing people who voted differently from us as unintelligible.

Back to the passage from Bjørn's 2011 essay, quoted at length, above, it becomes ever clearer that appealing to metaphysical claims about the differences between us and them, not only diminishes our powers to alleviate suffering, it does no explanatory work. When we resort to conceptual scheme language and its cognates, this is merely a "shorthand for obstacles and differences that may well be quite pervasive and systematic [as they indeed seem to be in the current political climate], but *whose roots and explanations are to be found in practice, in behavior…*" So, here's another pragmatist prescription we can identify in Bjørn's metaphysical doubts: To fully clear the path of communicative challenges so that we can work in solidarity to widen our community, we need to dig down to the roots of our practices and behaviors.

4. Walking the communicative path as a pragmatist

So what are the practices and behaviors of concern? Let's start with the recent presidential election in the US and get clear about how many people

actually *voted* for the other political leader. It was this particular behavior, more than the results of the electoral college and thus the election itself, that left many either excited, angry, perplexed, or some combination. Perhaps surprisingly, given what was at stake, only 63.76 % of the "voter eligible population" actually voted. According to Election Lab at the University of Florida, this figure is historically high but not quite as high as it was in the 2020 federal election (McDonald, 2024).

As of Nov. 22, a PolitiFact report noted that of those who voted, Trump won the popular vote over Harris by just 1.62 percent. That's a smaller difference between candidates than any election since Bush won in 2000 by 0.51 percent. "Going back further, only John F. Kennedy in 1960 and Nixon in 1968 won the popular vote by smaller margins, 0.17 percent and 0.7 percent, respectively" (Jacobsen, 2024). The report continues: "In both percentage and raw votes, Trump's margin is on pace to be less than half of what Biden achieved four years earlier."

Finally, according to *The New York Times* (2024) as of December 1, of the 154 million votes counted so far (estimated >99% counted) the popular vote looked like this: Harris received 74 441 588 votes (or 48.33% of the eligible voters); and Trump received 76 917 128 votes (or 49.94% of those voters). For those still concerned about conceptual scheme relativism, it might be reassuring to hear that as of Dec. 1, the more conservative outlet, *Fox News* (2024) reported identical numbers (updated feeds on both sites were still reporting very similar numbers as of Dec. 30. 2024).

So in the US context, at least, it is clear that the election results tell us *nothing* about *half* the country, at best we learn that approximately half of the two thirds of those eligible to vote chose a different candidate than we did. This is important. But still, it does reveal that well over 70 million people are wrong in some important ways, while at the same time, those 70 million are convinced that the other 70 million are the ones who are wrong in some important ways. Once again, with feeling: "So now what?"

To work in solidarity, to widen our community, requires the difficult task of communication across differences in ways that successfully identify errors in the thinking of those with whom we disagree, and strategically recommend our own ways of thinking instead. To do this well, there are probably a number of new communicative habits we need to develop, and quite a few old habits we need to abandon. In this final section, I identify some from both categories, highlighting a pragmatist throughline very much inspired by Bjørn's work on Davidson.

Much of what I review here is presented in more detail in "Charity, Peace, and the Social Epistemology of Science Controversies" (Clough, 2020b), as well as in "Rorty as Liberal Ironist Peace Warrior" (2020a). I also find inspiration in Elizabeth Anderson's 2022 essay "Can We Talk: Communicating Moral Concern In An Era Of Polarized Politics," and I was particularly gratified that she cites the work of Chappell who I mentioned earlier, in particular his book *The Art of Waging Peace: A Strategic Approach to Improving Our Lives and the World* (2013). Chappell's conception of Peace Literacy, of peace *as* a literacy, a set of skills, a *phronesis*, has informed my public philosophy work over the last few years (e.g., Matheis and Clough, 2021), especially that related to political polarization generally, and as it affects the uptake of science-informed policy, in particular.

Here then are some suggestions for moving forward—they are all really obvious, but also difficult to practice, so we need to do just that, *practice* them, and we should allow ourselves some grace when we fail. That is one of the virtues of thinking of peace as a literacy or skillset rather than as a moral category. Because most of us believe we are good people, we'll expect that peace should come easily to us, and we might find ourselves getting defensive or feeling shame when it doesn't. Just as children need training and practice in reading and writing, so too with peace skills. We shouldn't expect people to be any good at any of this, even good people, without a lot of training and practice.

4.1 Adopting epistemic humility

With respect to our commitment to the values we hold dear, we should try to adopt epistemic humility and avoid its opposite, epistemic hubris. Insofar as metaphysical themes are those that scratch an itch for certainty, "for legitimization in terms of something beyond human interest," we should keep in mind that our appeals to the authority of our values are thoroughly human, contingent and defeasible. This point mirrors Rorty's commitment to irony that Bjørn has done much to recommend. In his essay "Irony's commitment" (2014) Bjørn asks the question you might also be asking at this point: "How can it be that we strengthen [our] values by insisting on their contingency?" (Ramberg, 2014, 144). Bjørn proceeds to allay the relativistic fears underlying the question, but I want also to interject some pragmatic elements of *strategy* here.

It's embarrassing that I have to remind myself of this, but whenever I am trying seriously to engage with someone intent on changing my mind

but whose views seem completely out of touch with what I know to be real and true, there is no more effective strategy they might deploy to keep me from listening to them than when they make clear the impossibility that they might be wrong. So presumably, this works both ways. I have had occasion to quote Josiah Royce in this regard:

> Take whatever thou knowest of desire and of striving, of burning love and of fierce hatred, realize as fully as thou can what that means, and then with clear certainty add: such as that is for me, so is it for [them], nothing less. Royce, 1895, 158

And as I work with irony and epistemic humility to widen the community of people to whom I am responsible—to change hearts and minds—I must also be prepared to be changed. As Christian Matheis puts it "In laboring to endure one another, we make one another. To state it another way, humane co-affective relation refers to the way that another person plays a role in laboriously making me, and that I play in making another person" (Matheis, 2014, 12).

Modeling an acceptance of the contingency of my views, does not mean that I have to be prepared to give up my basic commitments to justice, say, but my evidence for these commitments is complicated and very much a product of the particular books I have read, the scholars, including Bjørn, with whom I have had the good fortune to work—accidents of influence, history, carefully curated social media feeds, and a variety of other contingent features that not everyone could possibly share, including or especially my interlocutors, on those rare occasions when we are in a room together long enough to have the kind of conversations that would reveal these differences. My interlocutors live in echo chambers whose outlines are obvious to me, but I have far less access to the architectural renderings of my own epistemic shelters. This asymmetric accessibility reminds me of the importance of extending to others what Robin Dembroff calls "ideological mercy" (Dembroff and Sosis, 2019). While I have good reason to think those who voted differently than me hold a number of positions that are mistaken or misguided, it behooves me to examine explanations for their mistakes or misguidance that appeal to the very different epistemic paths they have taken to get there, rather than jumping to the conclusion that we have consumed and evaluated identical evidence sets and they have simply rejected that evidence due to ideological fealty to the forces of evil.

The practice of both humility and hubris are contagious. If we find ourselves in a school board meeting with parents who signal by various means that they voted for a different presidential candidate than we did, we have an opportunity to choose which—humility or hubris—we will practice, hoping thereby to encourage its adoption by others. (At other times, when we haven't slept well, or had enough to eat, we are more likely to go with our ingrained habits and, as philosophers, those ingrained habits are more inclined to hubris than humility, in which case, the best we can do is recognize it, offer ourselves some grace, and try again next time).

An attitude of humility can of course be faked. I do think though that there is something to the habitual act of admitting you might be wrong that can end up producing genuine humility over time even if the initial act was insincere, a point made by Beaulac and Kenyon in their essay "The Scope of Debiasing in the Classroom" (2018). I highly recommend this essay for a helpful discussion about what some of the suggestions I offer here would look like in practice, including "The Concession Exercise," which is a "fake it until you make it" assignment to help the development of humility.

4.2 Locating common ground

I have already mentioned the need to acknowledge the common ground that we share with our interlocutors, but it bears repeating. It draws on the principal of charity, part of which involves the Davidsonian reminder that mutual intelligibility requires we hold a number of true beliefs in common, against which false beliefs can be identified as false. I have at times in this essay modeled rhetorical neutrality with respect to which political leader's supporters I think are wrong, in order to emphasize that the communicative and interpretive problems under discussion arise from a great deal of common ground between people no matter which political leader they voted for (to review an incomplete list: supporters of rival political leaders have expressed concern that their opponents are a danger to democracy; that they want to use the government to take away important freedoms, and that they are trampling on the rights of marginalized people). What we need to do now, is communicate with each other that we share these concerns.

This is not to minimize the very real differences in how the concepts of "democracy," "freedom," and "marginalized," are deployed by people

who voted for different presidential candidates, but rather to offer a starting point. And increasingly, that starting point is looking more and more like the practice of radical interpretation—the Davidsonian thought-experiment that imagines us finding ourselves in a strange land, perhaps a red state (or a blue state!), where we don't recognize the native language. But we can triangulate between the shared bits of the world to which the native speakers are referring and the sounds that they make and take it from there. It is laborious and painstaking, but what else is there to do? Discovering, and taking seriously, that people who voted differently from me have a deep commitment to something they call "freedom," (however different it is from my conception) invites a conversation about what features of freedom are important to each of us, or at least it does not foreclose these conversations, which is a start. And there is abundant sociological research about the efficacy of strategies for shifting attitudes that otherwise put "freedom" in conflict with concepts such as "equality" (see Clough and Loges, 2008, 88–91). These strategies were taken up by the Civil Rights movement in the US, and they had some success. That fact that much of that success has been eroded is a good reminder that democracy is less like running a race and more like tending a garden. The work is never finished. And we have good models for how to continue.

Onward!

Let's imagine that you did not vote for Trump and you are in a position of needing to make common cause, and therefore to establish some common ground, with people who did. As an example, in "Charity, Peace, and the Social Epistemology of Science Controversies" (2020b) I tried to model what it would be like to find common ground with parents who are hesitant to vaccinate their children. Some vaccine-hesitant parents support Trump, some of them are my students and my neighbors, some of them volunteer with me at our local high school.

Finding common ground on this issue was a difficult and sobering task, and not the least because it meant communicating with people who voted differently than me in the last presidential election. It was also sometimes difficult to communicate my findings to people with whom I share roughly the same political affiliations. Policies around mandatory vaccinations for children hit close to home across the political spectrum. Ultimately, I was encouraged by Maya Goldenberg's work (2016; 2019) to abandon the common view that vaccine hesitant parents are necessarily "anti-science," and uninterested in evidence or truth. It turns out that

many of these parents share basic beliefs that are true, they care about their children (!) and according to Goldenberg they want the best medical science they can find that will tell them whether a particular vaccine will hurt their particular child. For a variety of good reasons, hearing from medical professionals about statistical patterns that made the harms to their own child *unlikely*, was unsatisfying for these parents. They were also sometimes concerned about the effects of financial incentives on the objectivity of research that had been sponsored by pharmaceutical companies (imagine!).

As an exercise in humility, I reflected on my own confidence in the efficacy of vaccines. It is a *little* informed by some literacy in the relevant biomedicine but mostly, as Naomi Scheman reminds us, it is based on a great deal of trust (Scheman, 2001). As someone white, middle-class, and well-educated, I have lots of reasons to trust the science behind vaccines, or at least very few reasons *not* to trust the science. In fact, I have received the MMR vaccine at least twice in my lifetime and probably three times. True story. Also true, the reason for the last of these vaccines was not due to careful deliberation on my part about the evidence of the MMR vaccine's efficacy, but because of my trust in vaccines generally and my failure to remember the previous vaccine I had received, and my doctor's failure to look up my records, because of his *complete trust* in my memory! If I was Black or indigenous, and/or I had lived in a community affected by the opioid crisis, I might not have reason to trust medical, governmental, or pharmaceutical institutions and my response to mandatory vaccine policy might be very different.

Returning to vaccine hesitant parents, to be sure, some of their fears are not well-supported by evidence and can be exaggerated and ramped up on social media. Distinguishing between fact and Russian-bot- inspired conspiracy is getting increasingly difficult and will only get more so, *for all of us*. As Naomi Oreskes reminds us, we all can and have been manipulated by the well-funded manufacturers of doubt on any number of science policy fronts (Oreskes and Conway, 2010). But I want to be clear that our desire for good evidence, for truth, is something we have in common. This desire is not what is being manufactured, it is what is being manipulated. In "Charity, Peace, and the Social Epistemology of Science Controversies," I concluded my discussion about vaccine hesitant parents by noting that "where we disagree is not over the importance of having true beliefs, or the importance of evidence, it's over which beliefs are true, and who to trust as an authority in those cases (most of them) when the evi-

dence is too complex to be evaluated by non-experts" (Clough, 2020b, 138). As the late Helen De Cruz would no doubt remind us, more of our beliefs than we'd probably like to admit function as connection points with our communities and less as straightforward descriptive claims for which we have gathered direct and explicit evidence (see her wonderful essay "Believing to Belong: Addressing the Novice-Expert Problem in Polarized Scientific Communication" 2020). Her point explains the heavy social freight that weighs on us when we are asked to consider the merits of beliefs that are opposed to ours, adding to the difficulties many of us experience in talking across those differences. This is just an overview of some of the arguments that allow me to rest assured that we and those with whom we have deep disagreements are not separated by metaphysically impossible chasms, with evidence seeking on our side, and full-throated irrationality on their side. Still, it might be that as Bjørn put it, "their habits of acting, thinking, and speaking are [so] different [...] and [...] so rigid that there seems to be no way to work past them toward mutual understanding" (2011, 138). At some point, our habits and theirs might be too entrenched to change, regardless of how much care we take to try and communicate across our common ground.

This is a demoralizing reminder of just how bad things have become (and/or the cognitive inflexibilities of age, including my own) but I took some comfort in a set of interviews with people who supported Trump that was published in *The New York Times* under the headline, "The Trump Voters Who Don't Believe Trump." The interviews made clear that, for example, "when the former president endorses violence and proposes using the government to attack his enemies, many of his supporters assume it's just an act" (McCreesh, 2024). These supporters and I might have other issues about which we disagree, like the importance of integrity in a presidential candidate, but at least we do not disagree that violence is something to be avoided. In other words, while our moral habits of acting, thinking, and speaking might be difficult to change, these habits might not be as different from each other as we might have thought.

And identifying the content of our habits, learning what we *actually* think about these kinds of moral issues, where "we" now includes all of us, will only happen when we talk to each other. Failing to do so has serious consequences, as recently explained by Kwame Anthony Appiah (2024). In response to a question to "The Ethicist" from Nov. 29, 2024, about whether those who support Trump should be held responsible for the threats to democracy that he posed in his actions (or inactions) on Jan. 6, 2021, Appiah replied:

> In a study published last year, researchers at U.C. Berkeley and M.I.T. provided evidence that democratic back-sliding around the world—with citizens voting for authoritarian leaders—is driven in part by voters who believe in democracy but doubt that the other side does. The researchers found that such voters, once shown the actual levels of support for democracy among their opponents, became less likely to vote for candidates who violated democratic norms. *The general point is that not understanding the actual views of people of other parties—and assuming the worst of them—can be dangerous for democracy*.
>
> Appiah, 2024, *emphasis mine*

The study Appiah referenced was by Braley *et al* (2023) which found that "US partisans are willing to subvert democratic norms to the extent that they believe opposing partisans are willing to do the same." At the root of the problem here is not so much the subversion of democratic norms, as the lack of empathy that allows us to so easily believe others have an affinity for this kind of subversion when in fact they do not.

4.3 Developing empathy

That empathy could be taught or developed was new to me, but doing so is a key element of the educational project for Peace Literacy to which I now contribute (peaceliteracy.org). I worked on a pilot study to assess the efficacy of Peace Literacy curriculum in developing empathy (Montfort, Betts, and Clough, 2025). A call to develop our capacity for empathy might seem to stray away from the epistemic issues on which I have focused, but empathy, I argue, is required for communicating, especially across differences (Clough, 2020b). In her essay "Empathic Knowledge: The Importance of Empathy's Social Epistemology," Georgina Campelia argues that we need to conceive of empathy "as a social epistemic practice within which knowledge is formed and confirmed with others" (Campelia, 2017, 530).

Returning to "Charity, Peace, and the Social Epistemology of Science Controversies" (2020b) I argued that Campelia's account "overlaps with Davidson's model of interpretational charity and triangulation, not just to the elements of active attention that we might sort as epistemic, but also to the kinds of attention we might sort as moral because social" (Clough, 2020b, 134). Davidson's focus on interpretational charity assumes that we

recognize each other as interlocutors, but the conditions for that recognition require the development of empathy.

> [. . .] At a very basic level, identifying similarities, identifying common ground, is made possible by our ability to recognize each other empathically as people with whom we might actually communicate. But to recognize each other empathically as people with whom we can communicate, we need the identification of common ground. Empathy involves a feedback loop between caring for someone and recognizing similarities between ours and other's emotional states and points of view, but there is also a feedback loop between empathy and the identification of common ground. Finding common ground with someone helps us have empathy for them and vice versa.
>
> All of these conditions must be present, arising together in some measure, for communication to be possible. These three features—empathy, common ground, and communication—cycle together. Coordinating all of this takes practice and skill. But we do it more or less successfully, all the time.
>
> Clough, 2020b, 135

I do not mean here to minimize the very real differences that exist among members of the American public, say, nor do I mean to downplay the fact that I have never had to do anything other than *imagine* what it would be like to have a conversation with someone who endorsed violence against people who hold my political views. I think these kinds of conversations are critical and there are experts with the peace skills required to have them, but these dangerous scenarios are statistically swamped by the more prosaic and everyday opportunities for communication across difference—opportunities for conversation that we all probably want to avoid, but that we should all get better at having. Let's reflect on conversations with someone who thinks that universities are elitist institutions filled with faculty selected for their liberal bias, say (you are free to imagine here whatever a difficult conversation would look like where you didn't fear for your physical safety, but you were none-the-less uncomfortable enough that you really would rather not engage).

In the current political climate, we are losing our capacity for empathy, or it is becoming increasingly restricted to a smaller and smaller community. It is getting harder to recognize our similarities with those outside our communities. As we lose our capacity for empathy, I have

argued, "we become more confident about the accuracy of our claims and the inaccuracy of all others, and we communicate less." In this way, "empathy and epistemic humility are critical conditions of phronesis, of the engaged practice of objective evidential deliberation, of communication" (Clough 2020b, 138–139).

5. Conclusion

What is required for the solidarity work of widening the community of people to whom we are responsible includes the expansion of the notion of interpretational charity to include the empathic recognition of our interlocutors, the extension of invitations to difficult conversations through an appeal to common ground, the practice of taking the time to listen and engage epistemic humility. Together these practices help us develop trust around a critical truth of the matter articulated by Andrea Gibson, another scholar/poet who left us too soon. Gibson writes: *"We are all in this together, doing pretty much the best that we can, pretty much all the time"* (Gibson, 2023). Gibson went for the laugh by noting that if what we are seeing is people doing their best, this just shows that most people's best is pretty bad. But we pragmatists know, as Gibson did, that with practice we can get better.

And while the problems of communicating across difference have become increasingly intractable in the last few years, upon reflection they are problems that crop up at any time for anyone who finds herself a political outsider in a given domain, intent on ameliorating unjust conditions—a feminist philosopher of science say (Clough, 2003), or a field linguist-turned social critic as Bjørn describes her (Ramberg, 1988). I continue to be grateful that I had Bjørn's guidance as I was first learning how to navigate these problems. To be sure, the navigational skills required are not the kind that one ever finishes learning; and my various and perennial lapses are entirely my responsibility. But working with Bjørn gave me my start.

When we first met, Bjørn was an expat in Canada and too soon, even before I finished my PhD, I left Canada to become an ex-pat in the US. I wonder if there is something about the (not quite) radical interpretation required for surviving and thriving as an ex-pat that informs the interest I share with Bjørn in widening the circle of community, or at least our shared interest in removing philosophical barriers to the project. It seems likely to have informed our shared conviction that it can be done.

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Notes

I wanted to acknowledge a recent essay by David Coady (2024) who sees problematic appeals to conceptual schemes in the language of "echo chambers" and argues that we should dispense with this language. I think the concept of an echo chamber is still helpful though I agree that we need to take care to avoid the self-defeating relativism that Coady associates with it. I find that Kelly Furman's essay "Epistemic Bunkers" (2023) extends these concepts in all the right directions.

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Philosophia as Cultural Politics: Reading Ramberg's Rorty with Isocrates

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As Richard Rorty would be the first to remind us, we have only one way to see where the course of intellectual development leads, and that is *in retrospect* (see Rorty, 1989, 55–6). When in the midst of change, all we can do is guess. But if I were to venture such a guess, it would be that philosophy will continue down the pragmatist path that was first cleared by Peirce, James, and Dewey; which was expanded greatly by central achievements in mid-century analytical as well as continental philosophy; and which then took a new, and in some ways more radical, turn thanks to the very same Richard Rorty. Philosophy, I prophesy, will keep inching ever closer to *pragmata*, it will keep moving more deeply into the practical affairs that form pressing concerns in the lives that we lead.

This scenario is wishful thinking, perhaps, rather than an honest guess, but it nevertheless raises a question about Rorty's role in our future pragmatist dreamworld: To what extent has Rorty provided philosophy with a self-image to build on? What could "building on Rorty" even mean?

Many would reject these questions outright. They would claim that all Rorty ever did was take philosophy apart, and that one cannot build on Rorty for the same reason that one cannot build on rubble. This reaction overlooks Rorty's own repeated assurances that he did not envision any "end of philosophy" (see Rorty, 1979). When many commentators have nevertheless read him in this way, it must mean they have not in fact read him, or at least not very well—and certainly not with any measure of good

will. A better approach would be to acknowledge that Rorty wants to enact a radical shift to philosophical practice, though one which falls (just) short of ending the enterprise as such. As Kai Nielsen once argued, the idea that Rorty is "trying to deal a deathblow to philosophy" is quick, superficial, and mistaken. He adds, however, that Rorty does want to "deal a deathblow to a self-image and a cluster of related practices that philosophers tend to have and indeed hold on to tenaciously" (Nielsen, 1991, 4).

The question, "Where do we go from Rorty?," is thus one with real stakes: And while the answer to that question does not have to be "to our graves" or "into unemployment," it also cannot be a straightforward "straight ahead." Could the answer, then, be something like "backwards, to tradition"? This, in essence, is the answer provided by Bjørn Ramberg (2001), in his important article, "Rorty and the Instruments of Philosophy." The main point of Ramberg's article, as I read him, is that even after Rorty has dealt his deathblow to those tenaciously held self-images and practices, there remains *something* in the philosophical tradition to inform what Ramberg calls "a pragmatist conception of philosophy." I take this to mean that one can be a Rortyan style pragmatist and still be recognizable as a philosopher.

In a rather bold move—considering that Rorty consistently chose Plato as the figurehead of the philosophical self-image he wanted to kill off—Ramberg suggests that we should indeed view Plato as the origin of this *something*. Specifically, Ramberg makes Plato the origin figure of "thought aiming for dialectical illumination," and for argumentation as a practice that "expand[s] and elaborat[es] the space of discursive options." What originates with Plato, Ramberg suggests, is what remains the discipline's wellspring to this day, namely the ambition to employ "the tensions present in our concepts to create new possibilities for us to appropriate and consider" (Ramberg, 2001, 36 and 37).

In this article, I accept Ramberg's suggestion that one can be a Rortyan and still be recognizable as a philosopher, but I want to question his attendant recourse to Plato. Given the radical nature of the shift Rorty is trying to enact, I think Ramberg too easily accepts mainstream philosophy's tendency to repress and marginalize its negative "other"—most notably thinkers of a sophistic stripe. Taking a cue from Barbara Cassin, I want to suggest that Rorty's project is better served by a reorientation towards the "history of neglected and repressed traditions, of alternative paths." This is hard work, Cassin notes, for, "Philosophy has organized things so that any critique of the royal road is rejected as not being philos-

ophy" (Cassin, 2014, 1 and 2). It is a work that Ramberg does not take on, since in tying our commitments to Plato, he exhibits a version of philosophy's standard reflex: If it does not somehow start with Plato, it cannot be philosophy. "What other conception of philosophy *is* there?," one might ask. "What other commitments *could* we have?" This kind of reaction is to the point, for it reveals that we have been so impressed by the royal road that we have become blind to alternative routes.

The instinct I will try to substantiate in this article is that we cannot heed the radical impetus of Rorty's work by anchoring the discipline in Plato, and that we must therefore look towards alternative traditions to inform a pragmatist conception of philosophy. By placing our bets on Plato, we obstruct Rorty's proposed shift towards a postmetaphysical culture, thus leaving an important potential in Rorty's work fallow. This is the problem with Ramberg's move: It too comfortably allows philosophers to keep doing roughly what they have always been doing.

I believe the consequences of Rorty are more radical than this. In fact, I believe that to take Rorty seriously is *to refuse to let philosophy be what it has been*. More specifically, I believe that Ramberg's Plato-infused solution is incapable of following up Rorty's appeal that philosophers should shift their priorities towards service to the cultural politics of the community in which they find themselves. In the late Rorty, the one who talks about *philosophy as cultural politics*, this call is phrased in no uncertain terms. Rorty writes, for instance, that philosophers should take as their "principal assignment [...] to intervene in cultural politics," and adds that,

> [Philosophers] should ask themselves whether taking one side rather than another [in technical philosophical debates] will make any difference to social hopes, programs of action, prophecies of a better future. If it will not, it may not be worth doing. If it will, they should spell out what that difference amounts to. Rorty, 2007a, x

Rorty is not content with a minor, after-the-fact consideration about the practical implications of various areas of professional philosophy. Rather, his ideal of philosophy as cultural politics has far-reaching disciplinary consequences. The ideal aims, in fact, to uproot the very *disciplinarity* of philosophy.

> The professionalization of philosophy, its transformation into an academic discipline, was a necessary evil. But it has encouraged attempts to make philosophy into an autonomous

> quasi-science. These attempts should be resisted. The more philosophy interacts with other human activities—not just natural science, but art, literature, religion and politics as well—the more relevant to cultural politics it becomes, and thus the more useful. The more it strives for autonomy, the less attention it deserves. Rorty, 2007a, x

In this article, I want to suggest that we can better develop Rorty's idea of philosophy as cultural politics if we tie our commitments not to Plato, but rather to his adversary, Isocrates. An intellectual figure consistently marginalized from mainstream philosophy, Isocrates is a key exemplar of Cassin's "neglected and repressed traditions." So completely has Isocrates been marginalized from the history of philosophy that most today do not count him as a philosopher at all, but rather as a "rhetorician" or, even, an "orator" (see Poulakos, 1997 or Too, 1995).[1] And he has indeed grown central to the contemporary discipline of rhetoric, where he is now counted as an important origin figure and an alternative to the Aristotelian tradition (Conley, 1993, Poulakos, 1997, Haskins, 2010). Isocrates' practice was, however, distinct from (what philosophers think of as) rhetoric, and Isocrates himself consistently referred to his art as *philosophia*—philosophy. This was not, as some seem to assume (see e.g. Poulakos, 1997), simply a euphemism for the art of oratory, but a sign that Isocrates sought something more than the rhetoricians of his day, though something less than his adversary Plato. While Plato aimed to establish philosophy as a distinct form of inquiry apart from others, Isocrates insisted on an entirely quotidian and pragmatic conception of this practice, where philosophy interacts with and even blends into "other human activities," in a notable example *avant la lettre* of Rorty's "cultural politics."

Isocrates provides, I am tempted to say, the first pragmatist conception of philosophy, one which emerged alongside and in competition with that of Plato. As pragmatists, we need to rediscover the Isocratean route.[2]

[1] Isocrates is routinely counted among the ten "Attic orators," despite the fact that he, as he himself repeatedly stresses in his written texts, was no such thing.

[2] This rediscovery is, of course, well under way, see e.g. Haskins, 2010—though mostly, as far as I can see, outside of philosophy. There have been certain earlier starts, however, including Matson, 1957.

Philosophy for the *Polis*

Isocrates was born in 436 BC, a decade or so before Plato, whom he also outlived by a decade, to become a very old man, dying at the age of 98, in 338 BC. Isocrates' long life stretches across a period of history where Athens went from being at the pinnacle of power in Greece to a situation where that position was almost entirely lost: He was born at the height of the Athenian Empire, just a few years before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, and he died in the year of Philip's decisive victory at Chaeronea and subsequent conquest of Greece.

Isocrates' lifespan as well as his life's work were deeply marked by what he saw as precipitous cultural *decline*. He dealt with this circumstance by engaging in constructive self-definition and problem-solving on behalf of the polis; as a writer, educator, and (public) intellectual, he took it upon himself to assess Athens' historical greatness, its current situation and opportunities, as well as its future prospects. And he engaged in the question of what—given this past, present, and future—was required of the citizens of the polis.[3]

Isocrates' strong disapproval of the Athenian society of his day is worth noting from the start, since this similarity with Plato offers a background against which we can more clearly see the differences between them. Like his adversary, Isocrates deemed the contemporary democracy deficient and debased, and again like him, he distanced himself from the sophists of this day, whom he felt catered to sycophants.[4] The democracy, he argued repeatedly, had degenerated from the golden age of Solon, Cleisthenes, and Pericles; in the 4th century, it displayed lack of restraint (*akolosia*) and arrogance (*hybris*) and no longer valued self-control (*sophrosyne*) as it ought to.[5] Despite expressing dislike of flattery, the citizens of Athens had nevertheless come to accept it in public affairs, where they "made speakers practice and study not what will help the state but how they might say what pleases you."[6] As for the sophists of his day, he faulted them, in his pamphlet, *Against the Sophists*, for not speaking the

[3] Isocrates switched between dealing with the affairs of a single polis (most often, Athens) and those of Hellas in general. For the sake of simplicity, I have for the most part let his panhellenism lie in this chapter.

[4] I should note that Isocrates mostly faults his contemporaries and competitors in the 4th century, and not the so-called Older sophists of an earlier generation.

[5] This specific wording occurs in *On the Peace*, in Papillon, 2004, 161, but a similar critique can be found in several of Isocrates' texts.

[6] *On the Peace*, in Papillon, 2004, 136–7.

truth, for making "greater promises than they plan to fulfill," for making "boasts with too little caution," and for valuing "moral excellence and happiness so little." Isocrates' front against the sophists echoes many of the complaints aired in Plato's dialogues. Like Plato, Isocrates argued that the sophists were greedy and boastful, and ridiculously so, since it was doubtful whether their curriculum added anything of real value:

> They have no concern for the truth but think that their art (*techne*) consists of attracting as many students as possible by the smallness of their fees and the grandness of their instruction and of being able to earn something from them. They themselves are so senseless—and they assume others are as well—that they write speeches that are worse than private citizens might improvise.
>
> *Against the Sophists*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 63.

But where many of Plato's dialogues (cf. the *Gorgias*) leaves the impression that the manipulative art of public speaking and a degenerate democracy are two sides of the same coin, Isocrates consistently resists this conclusion—from both sides at once. For one, he repeatedly asserts that democracy is the best type of regime. Thus he underlines, in the *Aeropagitucus*, that, "In most of my previous speeches, I clearly condemn oligarchy and political advantage (*pleonexia*), and praise equality (*isotetas*) and democracy."[7] As for public speaking, he could not have reserved a more important place for this practice. The most famous expression of this is no doubt the so-called "hymn to logos," which first appears in the *Nicocles*, and which he revisits in the *Antidosis*:

> For in our other facilities [...], we do not differ from other living beings, and in fact we are inferior to many in speed, strength, and other resources. But since we have the ability to persuade one another and to make clear to ourselves what we want, not only do we avoid living like animals, but we have come together, built cities, made laws, and invented

[7] *Aeropagiticus*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 196. I should mention that he adds to the line cited, "– not all democracies randomly, but giving just and sensible praise to those which are well established," and also, that he, in the *Aeropagiticus* and several other texts, propagates for a return to an earlier, and less "radical," democracy. Isocrates is, in other words, a political conservative, but contra scholars like David Konstan, I still think the evidence points—clearly—towards the conclusion that he is a politically conservative *democrat*. See Konstan, 2004.

> arts (*techne*). Speech (*logos*) is responsible for nearly all our inventions. *Antidosis*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 251.

He goes on to determine that, "We regard speaking well to be the clearest sign of a good mind, which it requires, and truthful, lawful, and just speech we consider the image (*eidolon*) of a good and faithful soul." He concludes that, "nothing done prudently occurs without speech (*logos*)."[8]

Isocrates thus diverges clearly from Plato's path when it comes to his view of persuasion and public speaking, which he in fact sees as the basic enabler of social interaction and civilization, and not at all as something to be avoided. As we have seen, Isocrates offers ample criticism of how the art of speaking is taught and practiced, but he has no principled objection to it. Unlike Plato, Isocrates does not long for another *way* for humans to interact with each other; he does not entertain the idea that we can have a form of communication that somehow avoids persuasion altogether. Nor does he construe persuasion as an ancillary to a philosopher's exclusive truth (cf. the *Phaedrus*). For him, no such form of communication exists, and even if it did, it would not matter much, since persuasion is the wellspring of sociality and civilization. In stark contrast to Plato, then, Isocrates offers an image of persuasion not just as basic to human interaction, but as a—potential—force of good. When this force does not always, in practice, work for the good, that tells us nothing at all about the art, it only reveals that many people lack the education and virtue necessary to make good use of it, and this then becomes the *raison d'etre* for Isocrates' philosophy.

Despite tying his philosophy to the art of public speaking, he does not find himself tied to the cultural atmosphere of (4^{th} century) Athenian democracy. To the contrary, a critique of the cultural tendencies of his time was at the core of his intellectual program. On a more general level, though, Isocrates motivates philosophy almost exclusively with the good it can do to the life of the polis. To borrow Rorty's vocabulary, Isocrates' philosophy is consistently geared towards making a "difference to social hopes, programs of action, prophecies of a better future" for an actual community and its everyday affairs, and his work consistently revolves around *this* community's values—*its* culture, *its* tradition, *its* ideals. His philosophy is of and for this world—that is to say, *his* world.

Unlike Plato, Isocrates did not advocate any principle of separation between philosophy and public affairs. His disdain for contemporary

[8] *Antidosis*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 251–52.

democracy and its attendant teachers of public speaking never drove him suggest anything like Plato's world of Ideas, nor did it cause him to think of philosophy as anything like a discipline, a practice somehow distinct from what Rorty called "other human activities." To Isocrates, there was only one world of ideas, and that was the world of the polis—this is where ideas are formed and presented, attacked and defended, tested and revised. As Kathryn Morgan writes, "Isocrates believes, as Plato does not, that reasoned political debate by citizens gives the city the best chance of making a correct decision" (Morgan, 2004, 145). The *scene*, as it were, of the wisdom that philosophy seeks is the public sphere. This means that the work of philosophy cannot be achieved by reaching for some other sphere, it can only be done from within, and in engagement with, the community to which one belongs. Philosophy in Isocrates' sense cannot be done in private symposia, in the controlled conversational environment of the Socratic *elenchus*. As Isocrates' choice of the speech format indicates, he conceives of philosophy as a *public* art, one performed in front of an audience. Isocrates' philosophy entails, as David Depew and Takis Poulakos notes, that "one cannot be practically wise without cultivating the ability to say the right thing at the right or the opportune moment; and one simply cannot achieve this skill—the skill that Isocrates wants to teach—without positioning oneself as one who appears before and is accountable to one's fellow citizens" (Depew and Poulakos, 2004, 9). To *appear before* and be *accountable to one's fellow citizens* are here to be interpreted quite literally, as signs that Isocrates' philosophy was in fact construed as a public practice, the commitments of which are tied to the welfare of the community in which one finds oneself. Isocrates' philosophy, Ekaterina Haskins writes, exhibits none of "the sort of theoretical detachment one finds in the intellectual projects of Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum"; instead, it suggests a "more performatively grounded notion of human agency" (Haskins, 2010, 2 and 3).

Against the Hairsplitters

What, precisely, did Isocrates mean when he used the word *philosophia*? This question is badly put, since Isocrates was typically not very precise about its meaning. Indeed, he often expressed disdain for exaggerated precision, on this and other issues. In the present context, this should not be a cause for despair; and it should certainly not lead us to think of Isocrates, as many have done, as "a figure of inadequacy" (Too, 1995, 1).

Instead, we can think of Isocrates' consistent aversion against exaggerated precision and technicality as a sign of his *pragmatism*. Despite originating in the Greek, this term is here of course an anachronism. It is, however, a perfectly acceptable one, for it points to how Isocrates consistently evaluated philosophy with the criterion of what difference it would make to practice. If it did not make any difference, then, Isocrates believed—just like Rorty—that "it may not be worth doing" (Rorty, 2007, x).

Isocrates' "pragmatism" surfaces time and again in his writings, but perhaps nowhere as clearly as in his *Encomium of Helen*, where he faults other sophists and philosophers for their endless ruminations on puzzles and paradoxes. "Without a thought for private or public affairs, they delight most in arguments that find no use at all," he says, and adds that, if they were upright citizens, "They [w]ould throw away this hairsplitting, which pretends to make refutations (*elenchoi*) in speech but which has long since been refuted in action." If they were serious citizens,

> They should pursue the truth, educate their students about the affairs in which we act as citizens, and develop their students' experience of these matters, with the consideration that *it is much better to conjecture reasonably about useful things than to have precise knowledge of what is useless*, and that to be a little ahead in important matters is better than to excel in small matters that are no help in life.
>
> *Encomium of Helen*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 33–4. (My emphasis).

Unlike Plato, Isocrates does not see "the benefit of nit-picking, argument-following, and refutation-currying conversations" (Moore, 2020, 214), and he displays nothing but "contempt for intellectual gymnastics" (Morgan, 2004, 135). The sentiment is on display again in *Against the Sophists*, where he elaborates somewhat on *why* philosophical hairsplitting is useless: "I am amazed when I see these men claiming students for themselves," he begins, and explains that "they fail to notice that they are using an ordered art (*tetagmene techne*) as a model for a creative activity (*poietikon pragma*)."

> What is said by one person is not useful in a similar way for the next speaker, but that man seems most artful (*technikotatos*) who both speaks worthily of the subject matter and can discover things to say that are entirely different from what

> others have said. The greatest indication of the difference is that speeches cannot be good unless they reflect the circumstances (*kairoi*), propriety (*to prepon*), and originality.
>
> *Against the Sophists*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 64.

Later in the same text, he writes sarcastically that, "These people go through such useless theories that if anyone followed them in practice he would immediately be in deep trouble."[9]

His aversion to theoretical precision, and conversely, his constant call to keep it useful, runs as a continuous line from *Against the Sophists*, his very first published text, to *Panathenaicus*, his very last. In the latter, he writes, again with thinly veiled sarcasm, that programs of education focusing on eristic dialogues are perfectly acceptable for young persons, since "even if these studies are able to accomplish nothing else, they will at least turn the young away from many other harmful activities." Beyond youth, however, these exercises cannot be recommended, "For I see that some of those who are so devoted to precision in these exercises that they even teach others do not use the knowledge they have in the right way (*eukairos*) and, in fact, in other subjects they have less good sense (*phronesis*) than their students (dare I say even than their slaves)."[10]

We should not see Isocrates' anti-precisionism as a lack of ability on his part, but rather, as one more sign that Isocrates assumed the public life of the polis as the context of his practice: He knew that the *ekklesia* or the *agora* did not allow for the sort of precision the interlocutors in Plato's dialogues (or the young men trained in eristic dialogues) desire. For him, the main challenge was therefore never to find the "correct" definition of a given phenomenon, but to find ways of understanding and speaking of that phenomenon that could make sense to—and, yes, *sway*—the citizens of the polis.[11] This, I take it, is what Haskins means with her phrase "performatively grounded notion of human agency"; it is not about pinning phenomena down, once and for all, but about finding ways of speaking about them that allow us to respond wisely to the situations we find ourselves in.

Isocrates' pragmatism runs even deeper than this, however. For his tendency to ridicule precision, technicality, and formalism is also connected to an idea of *habituation*, which entails that our ways of doing things in any

[9] *Against the Sophists*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 66.

[10] *Panathenaicus*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 176.

[11] Though, as he somewhat bitterly notes in the *Antidosis*, he did not always succeed in this regard.

case have another source than philosophical definitions, positions, and arguments. In this connection, it is interesting to note that Isocrates, at one point, talks about "the great power of practice (*epimeleia*)"—and there is no doubt that practice, for him, is a basic challenge as well as an opportunity.[12] It is a challenge because he believes that we do not, in general, change our minds, shift our commitments, or replace our identities and social bonds for no good reason. A lot of the time, we don't even do so in the presence of good reasons. The great power of practice is, in other words, a constraint. This, of course, is what motivates his complaints against the sophists: They promise a great deal, but if they (or their customers) had had a more realistic idea of how enculturation and habit work, their promises would be exposed as a bluff. In contrast, Isocrates makes far more modest promises for his own teaching. "Abilities in speaking and all the other faculties of public life are innate in the well-born and developed in those trained by experience," he notes, and then adds simply that, "Education (*paideusis*) can make such people more skillful and better equipped at discovery. It teaches those who now hit upon things by chance to achieve them from a readier source."[13] But if the great power of practice constrains us, the latter quote also establishes that it offers an opportunity; by way of *practice* we can develop skill and facility; the great power of practice is such that we can continue where nature and primary socialization left off, as it were.

As Isocrates sees it, practice and habituation do not only give shape to individuals' lives, but to entire societies: Just as individuals develop character through iteration and reinforcement, so does a city, and the challenge of *practicing* in the right way, so as to develop the right type of character, is our first requirement—as individuals and as a polis. In the *Aeropagiticus*, where Isocrates is once again on his hobbyhorse about the superior configuration of the democracy of the 5th century, the underlying theme is public virtue—which Isocrates takes to be intimately tied to the city's constitution. The problem with 4th century democracy, however, is not the constitution itself, which is never anything but a formalized image of the morals of the people, but cultural decline, specifically the contemporary lack of moderation (*sophrosyne*). Here, Isocrates takes the argument one

[12] *Antidosis*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 244. The word is translated here as "practice," but it also (even primarily) means something like "care," as in "take care of" or "to be concerned about." It also connotes attentiveness and tending to one's duties and responsibilities.

[13] *Against the Sophists*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 64. Isocrates here anticipates Aristotle's famous rationale for rhetoric in *Rhetoric*, 1.1.

step further. It is not enough to simply acknowledge the great power of practice, he suggests, we need, *at the cost of* such things as "meticulously written laws," to place primacy on practice, i.e. on "habits," "everyday activities," and "customs."

> But progress in virtue comes not from these [precise laws] but from everyday activities: most people turn out to conduct themselves according to the habits in which they were educated. Second, a large number of specific laws is a sign that a city is badly governed, for in erecting these obstacles to crime, people are forced to make many laws. Those who are properly governed do not need to fill the stoas with written [laws] but to have justice in their souls. Cities are well governed not by legislation but by customs, and those who have been badly brought up will venture to transgress even meticulously written laws, whereas those who have been well educated will be willing to obey even simple laws.
>
> *Aeropagiticus*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 191–92.

On "Swift-Flying Feet"

Despite his aversion to technical definitions, Isocrates does offer certain positive hints, here and there, of what he means by the term philosophy. A prominent example is the *Antidosis*, which in effect is an apology for the art he has practiced throughout his long life. Though, here too, he points out, in characteristic fashion, that we should not ask for exact knowledge.

> [T]hose whose concern is philosophy pass on to their pupils all the structures which speech (*logos*) employs. When they have given them experience and detailed knowledge of these, they again exercise the students and make them accustomed to hard work, and then force them to synthesize everything they have learned in order that they may have a more secure understanding and their views (*doxai*) may be better adapted to the right moments (*kairoi*). It is not possible to learn this through study, since in all activities, these opportune moments elude exact knowledge (*episteme*), but in general those who are particularly attentive and can understand the consequences most often apprehend them.
>
> *Antidosis*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000.

The extract offers a clear contrast to Plato's conception of philosophy, in that it connects this practice neither to a stable sphere against which our concepts can be measured and validated, nor to certainty, nor to anything resembling metaphysics. Instead, Isocrates' *philosophia* refers, as Stephen Usher points out, to an "interactive study of practical (including international) politics, ethics, and rhetoric" (Usher, 1999, 297). This "interactive study" begins, the *Antidosis* makes clear, from the technicalities of *logos*—what we would today call rhetoric. To put it differently, the structures of speech are, for Isocrates, the foundation—the basic "craft," as it were—of philosophy.

One acquires knowledge and familiarity with these structures not by asking the right questions, that is, not by Plato/Ramberg's "dialectical illumination," but by way of "experience and detailed knowledge." There is a certain sort of dialectic involved in Isocrates' conception of philosophy too, of course, but this dialectic is rhetorical, rather than logical, and the paradigmatic situation is the rhetor addressing the Assembly rather than the private inquisitor engaging in tightly controlled exchanges. Philosophy, in this conception, is coupled to—indeed largely co-extensive with—public education, *paideia*.

His emphasis on experience and detailed knowledge as the building blocks of this education assumes that we, through systematic study of history and tradition and human experience, can discover *known* ways of doing things with words. And while these known ways do not exhaust our opportunities, it would be unwise not to start with them. The educational thrust of his philosophy is underlined by the phrase about "hard work," which again offers a clear contrast to Plato's dialectical ideal. To exercise students and accustom them to hard work, suggests, as Haskins noted, that Isocrates' philosophy is grounded in *performance*; it is a skill that must be trained, and the basic fuel of this training is experience—the experience gained by observing and studying others, as well as that gained by practicing it oneself.

The basic mode of Isocrates' philosophy is to enact cultural ideals by way of model speeches. Isocrates is not very explicit about this in the above extract, but at the heart of his philosophical teaching were his own written speeches, which were designed to model oratorical skill and situational (moral) wisdom in a single movement. Isocrates' model speeches are much more, however, than rhetorical exercises of the type one finds in some of the sophists (cf. Antiphon); they are cultural critiques that engage with real, ongoing public affairs. In his critiques, Isocrates himself

is very much present, whether he takes on someone else's character or his own. As Kathryn Morgan writes, "The Isocratean speaker rails at, reasons with, and cajoles his audience. When he addresses the Athenians, he attempts to teach them to be an idealized version of themselves" ('Morgan, 2004, 135). Unlike Plato, then, Isocrates did not hesitate a second about the value of *mimesis*—indeed, imitation was at the very core of his philosophy. For when he "attempts to teach [the Athenians] to be an idealized version of themselves," he does so by putting himself forth—immodestly, one might say—as a model citizen. This admittedly makes Isocrates a somewhat difficult character to like, but that is beside the point: The important thing is that philosophy, in Isocrates' conception, does not hinge on an ability to separate reality from appearances, but rather on our ability to work with—that is emulate, develop, and adapt—*models*. His approach on this point recalls a comment Rorty once made about various modes of (moral) philosophy, where he expressed his preference for a mode that proceeds by "choosing heroes, debating which figures a youth should try to model himself upon." Such debates, Rorty added, "concern alternative moral identities—and thus provide moral issues to get one's teeth into—in a way that debates about the alternative merits of the categorical imperative and the utilitarian principle do not" (Rorty, 2007b, 2000).

If Isocrates provides a prototype for Rorty's talk about cultural "heroes," and if he proceeds by way of modelling cultural ideals, we should acknowledge that these are far from being universally accepted conceptions of philosophy: Some would probably object that Isocrates leaves no room for what should be an important ambition in any philosophy, viz. to question widespread opinions, since his modelling mode leans too heavily on models familiar to the culture in question. A similar objection might even be made on "Rortyan" grounds, for does Isocrates not place his bet on *normal* discourse rather at the expense of *revolutionary* ditto? How can imitation possibly engender innovation?

The objection is not without relevance, for Isocrates does say that, "One should not look for novelty in these discourses about rules for living, for in them there is no room for paradox, or for what is incredible or unconventional. Instead we should consider most accomplished the man who is able to draw together the most ideas held by others and to articulate them elegantly."[14] But this only takes us back to the previous point about practice and habituation, where Isocrates, as we have seen, puts a

[14] *To Nicocles*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 165–66.

heavy emphasis on how we are practically bound by the commitments we have been habituated to take as ours. Given his conception of philosophy, where the basic criterion is to make a difference for the life of the polis, it would be entirely absurd to aim for "what is incredible or unconventional," for "paradox"—for the simple reason that such moves will not persuade anyone.

This stance, however, does not prevent Isocrates from taking on the role of cultural critic. Far from it: As we have seen, cultural criticism is at the very core of his philosophical program. In performing this critique, however, he constantly tries to heed the pragmatic criterion of making a difference to practice. He has various ways doing this, and one of them—again—directly recalls Rorty: It is the technique of juxtaposing the expressed ideals of one's culture—drawn loosely from history and tradition, myth or literature, public discourse, and the like—and the actual practice of that same culture. Isocrates' critique thus takes the form of what we, to strengthen the link to Rorty, can call *achieving our polis*. A telling example of this is *On the Peace*, where Isocrates' uses the cultural ideals of the Athenians themselves to criticize their empire, which he refers to as a "disaster."[15] A related technique is when he, as in the *Panathenaicus*, uses the cultural commitments of the polis to lay out a potential, a set of choices, certain courses of action, which it—given those commitments—would be meaningful for that community to pursue, e.g. that the Hellenes should band together and make war on the barbarians. These techniques are only examples, and I am perhaps misguided in calling them "techniques," given Isocrates' own point that there are no fixed ways of doing these things, since each situation presents us with a new set of constraints and possibilities. The central point, however, is that cultural criticism is very much an option also after one has relinquished the desire for "paradox" or "the incredible."

As for (the related) purpose of innovation, it is not so foreign to Isocrates' philosophy as it might seem. A hint of this is provided in the final part of the above extract, from the *Antidosis*, where Isocrates underlines the *dynamic* nature of his teaching. What he teaches—in effect, what he models—is a set of mobile resources. The promise offered by his philosophy is that of an intellectual capacity built outwards from the basic building blocks he refers to as "the structures which speech (*logos*) employs." But these building blocks, even the entire repository of resources one is left with at

[15] *On the Peace*, in Papillon, 2004, 157.

the end of Isocrates' teaching, are neither exhaustive of nor sufficient for practical wisdom, which should rather be understood as a product of the confrontation between one's views (*doxai*) and the situation or "opportune moments" (*kairoi*). It is not only that philosophy itself fails to offer exact knowledge, but rather, that no such thing is in sight anywhere. For since "opportune moments elude exact knowledge (episteme)"—and since no responsible conception of philosophy, on Isocrates' view, can elude those opportune moments—we must expect philosophy to be an ongoing, never-ending work of public communication.

Against this background, philosophy is not to be understood as a "quest for certainty," but rather as a practical educational program that one can (and should) engage in to capacitate oneself as a public model and counsel. The central idea—if not a central word[16]—in the *Antidosis* extract is the challenge of adapting to fleeting moments, since it signals that the work of philosophy will never be done; there is no destination, no "end of inquiry," as pragmatists would say. Instead, Isocrates' philosophy incorporates the mythic Kairos figure, who according to legend says, when asked why he had long hair covering his face, but none at all in the back: "To be seized by the ones who approach me [but then:] Once I have passed on my swift-flying feet, I'll be captured by no one, longing to make me rewind, reeling me in from behind."[17] Isocrates' "kairotic" emphasis entails, I would argue, that philosophy is endlessly innovative. Philosophy begins with "experience and detailed knowledge," with the basic "structures which speech employs," but it ends in endless dynamic and creative efforts to model and counsel a polis in the changing situations in which it finds itself. Which is another way of saying that it never ends.

Backwards, but to Neglected and Repressed Traditions

If what I have said goes some way towards making an "Isocratean" reading of Rorty's cultural politics more attractive, this proposal neverthe-

[16] Too's readable translation is here at a certain distance from the literal Greek, καὶ τῶν καιρῶν ἐγγυτέρω ταῖς δόξαις γένωνται. Norlin's earlier translation is closer to the original, with the phrase, "bring their theories [*doxais*] into closer touch with the occasions [*kairon*] for applying them." See Isocrates, *Antidosis*, George Norlin, on: `http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/`.

[17] Morgan, 2004 highlights Isocrates' emphasis on consistency to an extent that would challenge my rather more "kairotic" reading. I believe she has identified an important strain in Isocrates' thought, but I am not convinced the consistency ideal drowns out kairos in the way she suggests.

less comes with certain complications—at least as an alternative to Ramberg's "Platonist" reading. The most significant challenge is the distinctly *Gadamerian* inflection of Ramberg's Plato.

In "Rorty and the Instruments of Philosophy," Ramberg explicitly invokes Gadamer to support the contention that "in dialogue, argument and counter-argument stand mutually illuminated," adding that this, "as Gadamer persuasively argues, is the essence of Platonic dialectic" (Ramberg, 2001, 36). Gadamer's lead becomes quite apparent also in the central place that Ramberg reserves for the idea of *tradition*. What is the point of invoking Plato?, Ramberg asks. Is it simply, as Rorty would say, that Plato "kicked off the sequence we now refer to as the history of Western philosophy?" That cannot be all, Ramberg adds, for this would put us in "danger of jeopardizing the idea of philosophy as a tradition," which, given Rorty's own emphasis on conversation, would seem like a risky thing to do. For Ramberg, the crux of the matter is that "the idea of a tradition is a normative one," in the sense that it tells all who take part that they are engaged in the *same* conversation, the *same* effort to "come to grips with the subject" (Ramberg, 2001, 38 and 39). Without Plato to anchor the philosophical tradition, the conversation of philosophy—to the extent it would now even qualify as such—would be shallow, superficial, and instrumental; it would be a series of (sophistical) *arguments* rather than *argumentation*, i.e. "thought aiming for dialectical illumination."

For my purposes, the complication here is not so much Ramberg's use of Gadamer, as it is Gadamer's use of Plato—which Ramberg appears to take on board. The trouble, as has been articulated well by John Arthos, is that: "What has typically been read as rhetoric's counter-tradition, a kairotic-performative rhetoric championed by Isocrates and Cicero against Platonic essentialist philosophy [. . .], is for Gadamer the counter-tradition to Western essentialism as a whole, anchored squarely in Plato's dialogic example!" (Arthos, 2008, 172). In his rereading of Plato's significance for rhetoric, Gadamer arguably opened up new and interesting ways of reading Plato, which incidentally have been developed much further in recent years, though often without any explicit reference to Gadamer (see e.g. Allen, 2010 or Kastely, 2015). But despite the promises of this revisionism, it cannot—except at the risk of its own plausibility—eliminate the differences between Isocrates and Plato, and in fact, this revisionism only consolidates further the image of the "royal road": Now, not only is Plato the intellectual anchor of philosophy, he is also cast in the same role for rhetoric!

What gets buried, when Ramberg reads Rorty's pragmatism through Gadamer's Plato, are those "neglected and repressed traditions"—those "alternative paths"—that Barbara Cassin encouraged us to find. In burying those neglected and repressed traditions, I believe Ramberg removes much of the potential for the pragmatist conceptualization of philosophy that he himself seeks. Isocrates provides precisely what Ramberg fears will be lost if we give up Plato, namely a *tradition*. But if we start from *this*—kairotic-performative—tradition, we get a much more radical way of reading Rorty's pragmatism than the one Ramberg presents us with.[18] We get a pragmatism that emphasizes *cultural politics*, where metaphors of "dialogue" and "conversation" point not (only) to face-to-face encounters between specialists in academic symposia and seminar rooms, but also (and not least) to public performances in democratic spaces about matters of public concern—what the Greeks in fact called *pragmata*.

If, as Nielsen argued, Rorty's work prompts us to enact a shift in the self-image and practices of philosophy, then I hope to have given at least a first stab at showing how Isocrates offers a more apt point of origin for a pragmatist conception of philosophy than does Ramberg's Gadamerian Plato. If I have, this is because Isocrates presents a self-image for philosophy which is much more modest than Plato's—more modest, indeed, than what one generally finds along the "royal road."

Isocrates moderates the promises of philosophy, first, by underlining that "nature," or primary habituation, is not so easily turned around. People do not, in general, change their minds, shift their commitments, or replace their identities and social bonds for no good reason—and a lot of the time, they do not even do so in the presence of good reasons. Education by way of philosophy is both possible and potentially effective—if it were not, Isocrates would be out of a job. Its scope is nevertheless limited, since it must always grapple with people's natures as well as the other forms of habituation that are at work on them—and those are persistent phenomena indeed.

Next, he moderates philosophy's self-image with his emphasis on kairos. He asks us to relinquish any idea of another *kind* of knowledge

[18] I am presenting the choice of traditions here as a *choice*, which Ramberg, in another very enlightening piece, has given me reason to think that he might not approve of, cf. Ramberg, 2011. I believe, however, that the choice between Isocrates and Plato is not a choice between two different traditions as much as between the two faces, or two emphases, of the same tradition. They are not *different things*, but the *same thing, done differently*. And unless we are beings incapable of making choices at all, we can indeed choose to shift our emphasis; and arguably shifting one's emphasis is a very Gadamerian to do.

than the experiential one that goes into the training, since "opportune moments" (*kairoi*) in any case "elude exact knowledge (*episteme*)." Rather than the desire for a different kind of knowledge entirely, Isocrates tells us to work towards the more mundane ideal of *synthesis*. When he says that students should "synthesize everything they have learned," this is a purely practical piece of advice; it means, quite simply, that one should rehearse seeing, weighing, judging, and maybe rearranging, the various components of a situation against each other, so that a wise course of action can be identified. Since otherworldly *episteme* is off the table, we are left with an ongoing effort to match up *doxa* with *kairos* using thiswordly and pragmatic *phronesis*—the only type of wisdom that makes a difference in practice. But since there are an infinite number of "opportune moments"—each one to some extent unique—one cannot expect to learn this art "through study": Phronesis remains suspended between experience, on the one hand, and situational creativity, on the other. Under these circumstances, the only claim Isocrates makes on behalf of his philosophy (cf. the final lines of the extract from the *Antidosis*) is that his program of study will *better* equip someone to adapt views to situations, and hence, to offer wise counsel.

For those accustomed to Plato's conception of philosophy, which strives to establish *enduring* answers, Isocrates' version of that practice is sure to disappoint. Most likely, they will think of him as a "figure of inadequacy," since, from their point of view, Isocrates appears to leave substantial questions—What is Truth? What is Beauty? What is Good?—in the balance, only to orient philosophy towards fleeting *moments*.

But if this disappoints philosophers, they should rather be disappointed by discovering that the self-image they "hold on to tenaciously" does not itself hold. As Rorty once put it, philosophy's traditional self-image has rested on "visions of becoming destiny's tot, reality's faithful companion, truth's devoted servant, reason's guardian—rather than simply one more product of transitory circumstance," and these, he says, "bolster fantasies we would be better off without" (Rorty, 2010, 3). Isocrates bolsters no such fantasies, entertains no such visions. Instead, as a true pragmatist, he returns time and again to the question of how philosophy can make a difference to the practical affairs that form pressing concerns in the lives that we lead. It is time that we, pragmatists, discovered his neglected and repressed tradition.

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The Imperative of Translation: Germaine de Staël on Culture, Interpretation, and Politics

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I have written this paper for Bjørn (Ramberg)—and yet it is about nineteenth-century philosophy, a far cry from the majority of his published work. However, since I started working with Bjørn as a doctoral student—it must have been around 1996/97 and I fondly remember his curious and gentle, yet intellectually rigorous approach to dissertation advising—our joint efforts have been, mostly, on European philosophy. Shortly after my dissertation defense, we co-authored an overview article on hermeneutics. Many years later we co-taught a class on nineteenth-century philosophy. I know for sure that I have learned a lot from Bjørn, philosophically and in human terms. My work on Germaine de Staël's theory of translation and interpretation is a continuation of a project that started in and through conversation with Bjørn.

* * *

The relationship between interpretation and translation has been a topic of philosophical discussion at least since romantic hermeneutics (Schleiermacher, the Schlegel brothers, and others), but was further expounded, in the twentieth century, by thinkers of a Continental as well as an Anglophone disposition (Benjamin, Szondi, Gadamer, Derrida, Ricœur, Irigaray, Kristeva, Davidson, and Rorty). Among the early contributors to this discourse is the French-Swiss philosopher Germaine de Staël, whose life and

cultural contributions were a living exercise in cultural transmission, and whose prominence in international politics was closely connected to her role in forging connections between cultures and languages and bridging political and philosophical paradigms.

In discussing Staël's philosophy of translation, my point of departure will be her late "The Spirit of Translation" (1816), but also earlier works such as the magisterial *The Influence of Literature upon Society* (1800, henceforth: *Literature*) and *Germany* (1810/1813). These works, immensely popular at the time, were rapidly translated into a host of different languages and influenced British and Italian romanticism, Russian thought and politics, and the transcendentalist, feminist, and abolitionist movements in the US (mostly in the Boston area, with Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Lydia Maria Child, and others [see Wellek, 1981, 217; Mueller-Vollmer, 1991 and 2003]). In this way, Staël's philosophy—*on* translation; *in* translation—left traces all the way to contemporary pragmatist thought.

Throughout her work, Staël emphasizes that the translator needs to maintain the foreign aspects of the text or speech translated. However, she does not focus only on the foreignness or individuality of literary *style*, but also on the "foreignness" of the *ideas* conveyed.[1] She emphasizes how translations can enrich a given horizon of language and culture, but also stresses the political importance of translation, especially (but not only) with respect to international collaboration.

In the scholarship, attention has been paid to Staël's notion of international politics (Sluga, 2015; Sluga, 2021; Fontana, 2015), on the one hand, and her notion of cultural mediation, on the other (e.g., Mueller-Vollmer, 1991 and 2003; Gurwirth, Goldberger, and Szmurlo, 1991). Less attention has been paid to the ways in which her international strategizing is intertwined with—or, stronger still: informed by—her philosophy of culture and art. It is the goal of this article to offer such a perspective and to do so by pitching Staël's philosophy of translation as a bridge between her philosophy of culture and her contribution to international relations.

I first turn to Staël's argument in her 1816 essay on translation (Section One), then look at how the topics of translation and interpretation structure key Staël'ian works such as *Literature* (Section Two) and *Germany* (Section Three). I conclude by reflecting on the merits of Staël's position and on how, in her case, her philosophical commitments translate into and

[1] Staël's point is not that style and ideas are completely distinguished, but that they present different lenses through which a text can be approached.

are indistinguishable from her larger life choices as a nineteenth-century woman of extraordinary philosophical and political talent.[2]

1. Thinking About Translation

The last text Staël published before her death at age 51, "Essay on Translation," first emerged in Italian translation. It was written in the wake of the Napoleonic warfare and Staël's influential contribution to the Congress of Vienna and the restructuring of the maps of modern Europe. While exiled by Napoleon for a period of more than ten years (commencing in 1803), Staël had spent time in Germany, but also in St. Petersburg and Stockholm, forging bonds between Tsar Alexander and Prince Bernadotte and working to strengthen the allegiance against Napoleon's Grand Armée.[3] She was described at the time as " 'the conscience' of an outraged Europe, and as the person who had the most influence over both the Tsar and Bernadotte" (Carl Gustaf von Brinkmann, quoted from Sluga, 2015, 147). As a key strategist in the anti-Napoleonic camp, she helped to secure, among other things, the transfer of Norway from pro-Napoleonic Denmark to Sweden (Fairweather, 2005, 411–15).

In the prime of her cultural, political, and intellectual influence, Staël's work was translated and reviewed across Europe, Russia, and the US. The essay on translation is part of the philosophical legacy that Staël, weakened by illness, consciously left behind. At this point, she had already produced a thorough survey of German culture and systematically analyzed and discussed the need for cultural transfer and international collaboration. From the beginning to the end of her philosophical-political career, cultural transfer stood forth as one of her philosophical leitmotifs.

From her 1800 study of literature onwards, Staël participated in the debate about the relationship between ancient and modern cultures. In line with Schiller, the Schlegel brothers, and Hegel—but having developed

[2] Along with the author and date-style references inserted in the main text, the following abbreviations are used for frequently cited works by Germaine de Staël: SW = *Selected Writings*; ŒJ = *Œuvres de jeunesse;* L= *The Influence of Literature on Society*; DLL = *De la littérature*; G = *Germany;* DLA = *De l'Allemagne*; CPE = *Considerations of the Principal Events of the French Revolution*; CRF = *Considérations sur la Révolution française*; ST = "The Spirit of Translation"; T = "De l'Esprit des Traductions"; C = *Corinne, or Italy*; Co = *Corinne ou l'Italie*. Texts are cited with page references to the English translations, followed by references to the French originals. Full references are listed in the bibliography.

[3] Staël describes this period in *Ten Years of Exile.* Translated by Doris Beik. Introduction: Peter Gay (New York: Saturday Review Press, 1972); *Dix années d'exil.* Edited by Simone Balayé and M. Bonifacio (Paris: Fayard, 1996).

her position before and/or independently of these philosophers—she saw ancient cultures as characterized by immediacy and modern cultures as reflective and searching for an explicit, philosophical legitimation of their *raison d'être*, a legitimation that could no longer be linked to a glorious past. Staël's essay on translation explicitly addresses the condition of literature in modernity or, more appropriate to her language, in revolutionary and post-revolutionary Europe.

In the 1816 essay on translation, Staël focuses on how texts and expressions from other cultures serve to keep open one's own horizon of understanding. As she argues, "if each modern nation were reduced to its own riches, it would always be poor" (ST 279; T 294). Without impulses from the outside, a culture will stagnate. Moreover, the very power of imagination—which, along with reason, makes up the faculties of the mind[4]—needs to be stimulated by foreign ideas and expressions. "In order to preserve a country's literature from banality," she argues, "there is no more effective means than translating foreign poets" (ST 280; T 194).

Staël illustrates her point by way of a familiar example: that of modern French literature. At the time, French classicism, with its insistence on ahistorical and transcultural aesthetic norms, served as an ideal for literatures across Europe. In her reasoning, a one-sided celebration of classicism had led to a dismissal of non-classicist literatures and drama. It is illustrative that Shakespeare's work, today an unquestioned pillar of the Western canon, was dismissed by Voltaire, before being rehabilitated through, partially, the works of Lessing, Herder, Schlegel, and others (for a discussion of this point, see Gjesdal, 2013 and 2018). Moreover, when foreign texts were translated—into French, but also into German, Danish, and a host of other languages—they were often translated in the style of classism, making it possible not only to stage Shakespearean drama in French (!) in Germany, but also to present his drama in neo-classical, alexandrine verse form (Bernofsky, 2005).

Staël is critical of this kind of monolithic cultural transposition. As she puts it:

> to draw a real profit from translation one should *not* follow the French, who give their own color to everything they translate. Even if in doing so one were to change everything one touches

[4] As Staël writes in her 1795 "Essay on Fictions": "Man has only two distinct faculties: reason and imagination. All the others, even feeling, are simply results or combinations of these two. The realm of fiction, like that of the imagination, is therefore vast. Fictions do not find obstacles in passions: they make use of them" (SW 61; ŒJ 131–32).

> to gold, it would still be impossible to derive any nourishment or new food for thought; although the finery might be slightly different, one would always see the same face again."
>
> ST 163; T 294, emphasis added

A translation that simply adds *quantitatively* to the existing literature (more texts, same style and set of ideas) is not worthwhile. Such a practice of translation will not challenge the already existing ways of thinking and expression—it will not add a *qualitatively* new dimension, be it at the level of thoughts or style (for Staël, thought and style are closely related, albeit not identical).

As Staël argues, the kind of literature that expands our thoughts and practices can bring the author glory—a term that is present in her work from the 1790s onwards. Imitation, she makes it clear, does not produce glory (ST 163; T 294). This, moreover, is not a matter of the recognition (or lack of such) bestowed on an artist, writer, or politician: One may well be celebrated without one's work reaching the level of glory. "Glory" refers to paradigm-making expressions and actions, that is, expressions and actions that disclose novel human possibilities. Acts and expressions deserving of "glory" are those that set a new standard and benefit a larger group, culture, or even humanity.

Translated texts that introduce new kinds of thinking and new modes of expression will help humankind aspire towards the universal (ST 163; T 294). At stake, in other words, is an expansion of one's horizon through the engagement with others. In Staël's mind, this is a matter of individual as well as cultural edification. This is an aspect of her thought that will later resound in the works of Emerson, Fuller, Thoreau, and, by way of the influence of transcendentalism, in Cavell, Rorty (edification), and other 20th-century American thinkers (for a history of the related, but not identical, concept of perfectibility, see Passmore, 1979).

As Staël sees it, cultural edification is an ongoing effort, on behalf of an individual or culture (both levels are needed), to leave behind limiting attitudes; it is a striving towards a perspective that is free of bias and prejudice. The point is not that translations of foreign literatures can or will *guarantee* such a process, but that the ongoing introduction of new ideas and modes of expressions is a necessary aspect of the effort to keep expanding a cultural horizon.[5]

[5] It should be noted that this will, inevitably, be a process in which a culture that is open to translations will tend to facilitate open mindsets, which, in turn, will facilitate more

From this point of view, the linguistic richness of modern Europe is a boon. The acolytes of the neo-classicist French taste, Napoleon included, had not learned to appreciate this.

In the context of translation, however, Staël's focus is more precise. She is worried that French grammar and style is rigid in a way that makes it harder to produce translations that retain the "foreignness" of the original text. As she puts it, "the modern languages contain so much diversity that French poetry cannot gracefully yield to Latin's rule" (ST 164; T 295). English, by contrast, is deemed more flexible—grammatically and stylistically. Yet the English have not, she argues, been sufficiently eager to expand their literature with "precise and natural" translations (ST 164, T 295).

In her essay, Staël discusses modern translations of Homer—a key example in the romantic literature on translation and interpretation. According to Staël, Homer's work is expressive of a particular worldview. At stake is not primarily the work of an individual author and their inner, imaginative, emotional, and psychological state, but of a particular culture reaching its most adequate articulation: the *Iliad* "is the image of human society at a certain stage of civilization, proof that it bears the imprint of its time and even more than that of its author" (ST 164; T 295). If the German classicist and poet German Johann Heinrich Voss has produced the "most accurate" translation of Homer, this does not mean that he, with his work, has fully managed to transport the Greek mindset into a modern German hue. As Staël makes it clear in a passage that deserves to be quoted in full:

> Voss's translation is recognized as the most exact translation in existence in any language. He used the rhythm of the ancients, and it is said that his German hexameter almost follows the Greek hexameter word for word. Such a translation effectively provides a precise knowledge of the ancient poem; but is it certain that the charm of the original poem, accessible neither through rules nor through erudition, has been thoroughly translated into the German language? The number of syllables has been retained, but the harmony of sounds has not remained the same. When German poetry follows, step by step, the traces of the Greek original, it both loses its natural

translations, and so on. What we here encounter is but a translation-oriented version of the hermeneutic circle.

> charm and fails to acquire the beauty of the musical language that was accompanied on the lyre. ST 165; T 295

It is worth noting how Staël's argument at this point differs from, say, Schiller's. Schiller is interested in the divide between what he calls naïve and sentimental poetry. The naïve poet, as he puts it, "merely follows simple nature and feeling, limiting himself solely to imitation of reality" (Schiller, 2005, 204; 1962, 440). The sentimental or modern poet, by contrast, "*reflects* on the impression the objects make upon him and only on the basis of that reflection is the emotion founded, into which he is transported and into which he transports us" (Schiller, 2005, 204; 1962, 441). For Staël, by contrast, the problem is not simply a matter of premodern versus modern literatures, but of different languages and the translatability between them, even within—*especially within*—modernity. Not only is there, vertically, a hermeneutically productive historical and linguistic distance between Homer and the modern world. There is also, horizontally, a *linguistic* divide between ancient and modern languages *and* between contemporary cultures. Linguistic differences cannot be reduced to historical ones. Further, Staël defines modern literature as intrinsically pluralistic, hence also in need of the synergy (the stimulation of the imagination) created by translation. The diversity of languages is, in her view, an opportunity—it is part of the fabric from which human reason can extract resources and nourishment in its quest for progress. Hence, Staël's emphasis on the uniqueness of a language—of a language being expressive of a worldview or horizon—is not an argument against translation. Quite the contrary. Nor is it a critique of Voss's approach to translation. The point, rather, is that *even* for a translator as capable as Voss, it will be challenging to stretch the boundaries of his own language and the limits it sets. In Staël's judgment, the much-praised Voss translation moves towards accuracy and sacrifices the naturalness of the German—and precisely this naturalness is what is needed in order to convey the tone and ideas that distinguishes the Homeric Greek. With respect to its methodology, Voss' translation is contrasted with Vicenzo Monti's translation of the *Illiad* into Italian. Monti's translation, Staël argues,

> [h]as both pomp and simplicity: the most ordinary practices of daily life such as clothes or dinners are enhanced by the natural dignity of Monti's expressions, and the most solemn events are made accessible to us through the realism of his scenes and the fluency of his style. ST 165; T 296

As such, the Italian translator offers an example to be emulated—one that conveys into Italian the rich fabric of Homer's Greek prose (ST 165; T 296). This is not about Monti following rules or reaching a new level of accuracy (here Voss remains superior), but about bringing to life a distinct Homerian tone that does justice to the epos. For, as Staël argues:

> Translating a poet is not like taking a compass and measuring the dimensions of the building. It is making a different instrument vibrate with the same breath of life as the one we normally hear. A translation should provide as much pleasure as the original, not just duplicate its features. ST 282; T 296

Broadening her scope beyond Homer, Staël advises that neo-classicism—German, French, Italian, or otherwise—be left behind. She advocates a new romantic literature, as developed, above all, in England and Germany (and propagated in her own *Germany* six years earlier).[6] A turn towards this new literature allows readers to expand their mindsets, rather than lingering over the image of a past long gone. The point, as Staël puts it (again with a reference to Italy), is "*not* to borrow but to *learn* (connaître), and *not* to imitate but *to achieve emancipation* from those conventional forms that persist, in literature as in society, and prevent the expression of any natural truth" (ST 166; T 296, translation modified). This applies to novels and poems, but even more so to theater—"truly the executive branch of literature" (ST 166; T 296), and an artform to which Staël, in the context of *Germany*, dedicates 13 out of a total of 85 chapters. As an artform, drama merges the private and the public, the cultural and the political. Thus, it achieves, in her reading, what modern literature at its best can do: broadening the horizon of human understanding and action by stimulating the faculty of imagination. Staël advises the Italians:

> Some countries are militaristic; others are political. Italy's reputation should be based on its literature and its art; otherwise, that country will fall into a sort of apathy from which even the sun might not be able to wake it.
>
> ST 167, T 297, translation modified

[6] While a full discussion of Staël's understanding of romanticism is beyond the scope of this article, I would like to draw attention to her emphasis on its political dimension and its orientation towards tolerance, a multiplicity of voices, etc.

Hence, when Staël publishes her advice to the Italians—whose culture she had lavishly praised in her novel *Corinne, or Italy* (1807)[7]—translation emerges as a hermeneutic-cultural as well as political tool.

While Staël's late essay highlights her interest in the philosophy of translation, the topics of cultural mediation, translation, and the relationship between literature and politics had been central to her earlier work.[8] To understand the full scope of Staël's approach to translation and cultural mediation, we need to consider her previous work in this field.

2. Literature, Politics, and Cultural Translation

"The Spirit of Translation" is the last work Staël finished and published before her death. Her interest in translation, though, developed much earlier and also informs her celebrated *Literature*. When Staël started working on *Literature*, she already had a significant philosophical contribution to her name: *Treatise on the Influence of the Passions*. Moreover, she had written political treatises, plays, and short stories, among them a triplet of novellas that, when published in 1795, was accompanied by the programmatic "Essay on Fictions," in which she emphasizes the relevance and importance of political and philosophical literature.[9] Needless to say, the essay gave further credence to the novellas, which dealt with controversial topics such as slavery, misogyny, and domestic violence.[10] If women, at the time, were told to dabble in literature rather than committing themselves to philosophy and politics, Staël deliberately undermined this way

[7] Moreover, the eponymous protagonist of *Corinne* serves as a mediator between languages and cultures and consciously reflects on cultural differences and the need for cultural transmission.

[8] In this respect, Staël's theory anticipates Schleiermacher's approach in his celebrated 1813 *Akademievortrag* on translation (published a few years later, i.e., around the same time as Staël's essay). For an English translation of Schleiermacher's essay, see Venuti, 2022, 51–72.

[9] "Essay on Fictions" was translated into German by Goethe and published by Schiller. In this context, the essay was divorced from the novellas, i.e., the call for a political and moral literature was separated from the treatment of topics such as enslavement and domestic violence. For a discussion of Staël's notion of political literature, see Gjesdal, 2025.

[10] In emphasizing Staël's early turn to political literature and relating it back to her abolitionism and addressing of domestic violence, I deviate from Isbell (1994), for whom her notion of political literature is primarily a matter of fostering German national sentiments in the defense against Napoleon's troops.

of thinking by emphasizing that literature itself can be both philosophical and political.[11]

Five years later, Staël, in *Literature*, takes this kind of thinking one step further. Here, she is particularly interested in how modern literature (broadly conceived and, as such, including philosophy) can provide a space for intellectual freedom and critique and thus stand up against tyranny. Moreover, on a more general basis, literature and cultural expressions serve to keep thought alive and put prejudices and biases under scrutiny: "The cultivation and improvement of Literature are the best means by which you can effectually combat the obstinacy of inveterate prejudices" (L I 56; DLL 30). From this point of view, literature contributes to, but also demands, a certain kind of freedom. It must be ascribed with political power. As she puts it, "before the eyes of [the most potent monarchs], political and religious philosophy would rise up in the shape of the most formidable insurrection" (L I 58; DLL 31).[12]

While *Literature*—especially in its references to political fanaticism, tyranny, and misogyny—draws on Staël's earlier contributions to moral psychology, this is the first work in which we see her develop her characteristic historical-systematic methodology, a methodology that she might have encountered in the works of Johann Gottfried Herder, but that would later be associated with G. W. F. Hegel (a philosopher Staël does not discuss or reference in her work). Decades before the publication of Hegel's lectures on fine art, Staël provides a survey of the historical development of literature. Her ambition, as she puts it, is to "consider philosophically the gradual development of the human faculties, as it displays itself in the distinguished works that have afforded delight or instruction to mankind, from the age of Homer down to the present time" (L I 31; DLL 15). However, while Staël's method is historically informed, she still develops a systematic argument about literature, art, and education in culture. She develops, in short, a historical, bottom-up approach to systematic philosophy. Moreover, a short decade after the publication of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, she questions the notion of the purity of aesthetic

[11] Among the later thinkers that were troubled by Staël's gesture—and by the very existence of an intellectual woman of her caliber—is Nietzsche, who writes: "It was for women's own good, when Napoleon gave the all-too-eloquent Madame de Staël to understand: *mulier taceat in politicis*!" (Nietzsche, 2002; 2016, section 232).

[12] Earlier, in *A Treatise*, Staël had advocated for the importance of study and literature when it comes to overcoming impassionate behavior such as fanaticism which, on her books, is associated with one-dimensional politics and a blind and naïve following of a leader (Gjesdal 2023).

judgment (and thus follows Kant's own openness towards art that, at the expense of the pure aesthetic judgment, entails a moral dimension; see Guyer, 1990). She argues:

> Literary criticism (la critique littéraire) is not unfrequently [...] a sort of treatise on morality. By yielding merely to the impulse and guidance of their talents, eminent writers might discover everything that is heroic in self-devotion, and all that is affecting in the sacrifices we make of our interests or passions. By studying the art of moving the affections, we explore the recesses and discover the secrets of Virtue (la vertu).
>
> L I 37; DLL 19

Staël's approach to literature can be exemplified by way of her assessment of ancient literature and drama (see e.g., L I 108, 121; DLL 65, 73–74). In this context, she is surprisingly critical, mixing hermeneutic charity with her assessment of the works discussed. That is, what she argues against is not so much the virtues of ancient literature per se, but the relative absence or subservient role of women in ancient literature (a point that Wellek [1981, 221–22] will not forgive her). As an aesthetician, she objects to the modern imitation of ancient ideals, seeing ancient literature as belonging to its time and region, not as providing a universal standard that exemplifies good drama and literature *überhaupt*. The ancient cultures are, for her, forever gone. It is in this spirit that Staël advocates for a genuinely *modern* literature. It is within modern literature that translation, in her view, plays a particularly important role. Yet the power of (modern) literature is threatened by (at least) three kinds of forces and circumstances.

Firstly, literature, as a realm of imaginative, free, and even playful expression, is censored politically by rulers who fear its power. As Staël puts it, "[w]e have seen many tyrants who were ostentatious in their protection of the sciences and the arts: but all of them have dreaded the natural enemies of protection itself—men who think and philosophize" (L I 59; DLL 31–32). This is so because, as she sees it, "[i]ndependent philosophy [...] alone, can arraign before the tribunal of reason all the opinions and institutions of mankind" (L I 61; DLL 33). Yet to cultivate genuine liberty, both literature and philosophy are needed—liberty, for Staël, only thrives in a society in which multiple voices sharpen each other in debates and through eloquent articulations of new perspectives.

Secondly, literature is threatened, from within, by the prejudices of its culture. One example of such blindness is the exclusion of women

in ancient as well as modern literatures, that is, the exclusion of a good half of the population and their experiences and expressions.[13] She also analyzes the particular ways in which women writers are taken down, especially in France, by a public that refuses to take them seriously and afford them the recognition they deserve for their works (L II 150–167; DLL 324–335; see also Gjesdal, 2024). In this context, Staël connects provincialism and misogyny or, at a more general level, attitudes that we today would describe as prejudices and implicit bias (see for example C 14.1: 224–25; Co 346).

Third and finally, Staël sees literature, especially the literature of her own period and culture (i.e., that of revolutionary and post-revolutionary France), as threatened by an unhealthy sovereignty complex. Convinced of their cultural superiority, modern French writers have failed to look abroad and thus also failed to absorb and make use of the resources and possibilities of the romantic spirit, as it developed in the northern cultures of England and, even more so, Germany. What is more, Staël (like Herder before her; see Gjesdal, 2024), ascribes some of the greatness of modern German culture to the way in which German writers are oriented towards other literatures, e.g., Elizabethan drama. She finds a similarly productive orientation towards translation and cultural transfer in Spanish drama, quoting its synergy with Arab literature (L 253–54; DLL 166).

What is at stake, for Staël, is not simply the development of a particular kind of literature. For her, rather, the issue—and this is a point that the American transcendentalists would happily adopt (Muller-Vollmer 2003; Fuller 2024)—is the education of humanity towards a less insular, more broad-minded outlook. Staël speaks of this as the education of human nature (L I 73–76; DLL 270–273), i.e., not just of an individual or of a particular culture, but of humankind as such. As humans, we are distinguished by the possibility for individual and collective self-improvement. This places on us a particular kind of responsibility or ethics of edification. With an argument that (again) flies in the face of Kant's idea of the autonomy of the pure aesthetic judgment, Staël reasons that literature is more than a source of aesthetic pleasure and edification: in a modern world, it is essential to the kind of liberty that facilitates a republican mindset. As she puts

[13] In her own work, Staël seeks to counter such tendencies. In an early dramatic work as well as a later work such as *Reflection on Suicide* (1813), she holds up the example of famous women, for example that of Lady Grey, who meets her death with calm and composure. Her novel features the pensive Delphine and the larger-than-life Corinne, creating nothing short of a Corinne-fever in Europe and the US, with Margaret Fuller at one point presenting herself as a Yankee Corinne.

it: "It is no longer an art merely; it is a power; it is become a weapon to the human mind, which hitherto it had only instructed and amused" (L II 77; DLL 273).

For Staël, republicanism—whose promise was made clear throughout the initial phases of the French revolution, but whose realization was quickly coopted, first, by the terror and later by Napoleonic rule—is the political form that both facilitates *and*, to an equal measure, depends on the possibility for such edification. Again, in Staël's words: "a spirit of republicanism requires a revolution in the character of literature" (L II 112; DLL 296). The republican spirit depends on the existence of a wide range of voices and develops through an ongoing dialogue between different points of view. As such, a young republic such as France would do well to welcome foreign literatures. This is not only a matter of aesthetic appreciation, but also, Staël argues, a question of keeping alive the republican spirit. For as she sees it:

> the advancement of Literature, that is to say, the ulterior perfection of the art of thinking and of expressing one's thoughts, is necessary to the establishment and to the conservation of Liberty. L I 53; DLL 28

This is the point at which Staël develops her view, later to be fleshed out in "The Spirit of Translation," of the tension between soft and hard diplomacy; between cultural mediation and cooperation, on the one hand, and domination, militarism, and warfare, on the other. As she puts it:

> the enemies of liberty, it is true, may be overpowered in battle: but, in order to make the principles of that liberty take root and flourish in a country, the military spirit must be done away; thought and reasoning must be called in. L I 62; DLL 34

In a similar spirit—that of avoiding domination—she advises Jefferson, in their correspondence (1816), to abandon slavery in the South so that, as she puts it, there is at least one republic of reason in the world.

In the areas of modern aesthetics and hermeneutics, it is hard to think of a philosopher who ascribes to translation and cultural mediation a more crucial role than Staël does (as for translation studies readers, she is included in Robinson, 2014; but strangely not in Venuti, 2022). For her, translation is not external to modern literature—it is *not* a process that is undertaken independently or in addition to a well-functioning literary

and philosophical culture. Translation is *imperative* to a thriving modern literature; it characterizes the situation of modern literature *as* modern.[14] In this context, it is worth noting that her early work, such as her abolitionist novella "Mirza," does not feature this point but presents the Senegalese protagonist by highlighting her knowledge of French literature and culture (see Gjesdal, 2025).

3. Germany

The circumstances surrounding the publication of Staël's large-spanning study *Germany* are unusually dramatic. Staël's work was written in exile, substantial chunks of which were spent in Germany. She had started working on the book in 1808, when Napoleon defeated the Prussians at the Battle of Jena. It was finished two years later. However, Napoleon ordered his troops to destroy the book (the first two volumes and the print plates for the third). The book was eventually published in French in London in 1813, just as the news about the German victory against the French in Leipzig reached the city (Isbell, 1994, 12). The first the edition of 1 500 copies sold out in three days (Isbell, 1994, 2). An English translation followed quickly, sold out, and there was a call for a second edition only six weeks later (ibid.). In this sense, *Germany* not only comes with its own translation history and the work played an important role across the German-speaking lands (helping to forge a cultural and intellectual identity), but also sparked international interest in German philosophy and spurred a generation of American academics (e.g., George Ticknor, George Bancroft, and others) to seek out German universities and intellectual culture (Mueller-Vollmer, 2003, 112, 128).

In the secondary literature, *Germany* has sometimes been read as a piece of nationalist propaganda, i.e., as part of Staël's political resistance against Napoleon and an effort to muster a German uprising. Along such lines, it has been argued that Staël's fame can be explained by the very cosmopolitanism she helped destroy (Isbell, 1994, 4). It cannot be denied that Staël, with her work, sought to provoke German resistance by instilling sentiments of patriotism and enthusiasm. Yet the book is more than that. For in this work, Staël further develops her view of cultural diversity

[14] Hence, whereas a later philosopher such as Hegel defines literary modernity as reflective and focused on the self-understanding of the individual and its place in the social world, Staël, by contrast, sees modern literature as reflective of a spirit of pluralism and cultural mediation.

and openness, arguing that other European nations should take an interest in the then-overlooked cultural productions of the German-language areas. She also insists that German literature and philosophy is distinguished by its openness towards other ways of thinking, i.e., its inherent cosmopolitanism.

At the time, Germany, as a nation state, did not exist and Staël's first job was to "invent it" (Isbell, 1994, 6). Yet her understanding of German culture is comprehensive. In her discussions, she includes a fair share of Danish-German culture (including the poets Jens Baggesen and Adam Gottlob Oehlenschläger, and the sculpturer Bertel Thorvaldsen). She also discusses English literature. And she, further developing her line of reasoning from *On Literature*, discusses French prejudices against German culture and thought.

Staël was familiar with German philosophy and culture. In Paris, she had socialized with, among others, Wilhelm von Humboldt from the early 1790s onwards and she had read Kant, especially *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (the first reference to his work is in *Literature* [L II 199; DL 357]; for her later engagement with Kant, see Vigus, 2008 and 2018). In the years between 1789 and 1812, she made several trips to the German lands (her longest stays were in the years between 1803 and 1807 [Isbell, 1994,10]). Hence, rather than reading *Germany* as a piece of "propaganda," it serves, in my view, as a treatise in which Staël takes a stance on what she sees as the most significant, yet underappreciated philosophical movements of the day, those of idealism and romanticism, and, in so doing, further strengthens the kind of cosmopolitanism and *Bildung* that she had advocated from early on and would sum up a few years later in her essay on translation.

In *Germany*, Staël situates German-language culture and thought within a framework of geography, nature, and ways of life. Methodologically, she thus draws on and further develops her historical-systematic approach. She also refines her philosophy of history. As she now argues, the *Bildung* of humanity goes through four different phases, the last of which, commencing with the Reformation, is characterized by love of liberty:

> [...] the philosophical progress of the human race should be divided into four different periods: the heroic times, which gave birth to civilization; patriotism, which constituted the glory of antiquity; chivalry, which was the military religion

> of Europe, and the love of liberty, the history of which dates its origin from the epoch of the Reformation.
>
> G I 48; DLA 117

In her view, the French revolution built on and furthered the desire for liberty, but did not fully realize it. With Napoleon, France turned into an empire, governed by internal tyranny and external warfare. Hence the goal of her study is threefold: first to have her fellow French appreciate a culture and a philosophy that they have tended to look down on; second, to have the German-speaking parts of Europe appreciate the uniqueness of their own culture, possibly also gaining the kind of self-esteem and appreciation needed to resist Napoleon's military advances; third, to instigate the love of freedom and liberty that she sees as central to modern society.

In approaching the German language areas, Staël makes clear that a language and a form of life are closely intertwined. As she puts it:

> In studying the spirit and character of a language, we learn the philosophical history of the opinions, manners and habits of nations; and the modifications which language undergoes must throw considerable light on the progress of thought.
>
> G I 90; DLA 158

What characterizes the German language areas, as she sees it, is that they, in spite of a shared language, have not been governed by one standard or taste. Hence, within the German speaking areas, a wide range of expressive forms live side by side—quite different from the centralized taste of the French. In Staël's portrait, the German-language culture is:

> an empire without one common centre of intelligence and of public spirit; it did not form a compact nation, and the bond of union was wanting to its separate members. This division of Germany, fatal to its political force, was nevertheless favorable to all the efforts of genius and imagination. In matters of literary and metaphysical opinion, there was a sort of gentle and peaceful anarchy, which allowed every man the complete development of his own individual manner of perception.
>
> G I 32; DLA 102

As opposed to France, where a dominant taste reigns large, in Germany "most writers and reasoners sit down to work in solitude or surrounded only by a little circle over which they reign" (G I 32; DLA 101).

Maybe because the German language areas were not yet unified, writers and thinkers tended to look abroad. While this is, in Staël's view, generally to be perceived as a strength, the admiration of the foreign should not go so far as to threaten the sense of one's own culture. In a passage that clearly betrays her politics of identity building, she puts it as follows:

> In literature, as in politics, the Germans have too much respect for foreigners, and not enough of national prejudices [préjugés nationaux]. G I 33; DLA 102

Picking up the fight for German-language culture that was already launched, internally, by, among others, Lessing and Herder (whose contributions are discussed in *Germany*), Staël is baffled to see how Francophile (or even French-language) culture is dominant across the German areas. She is less than generous in describing this tendency and how it leads to a misdirected obsession with gossip from the neighboring country:

> In many northern countries, people still repeat anecdotes of the court of Louis the Fourteenth. Foreigners, who imitate the French, relate the quarrels of Mademoiselle de Fontanges and Madame de Montespan, with a prolixity of detail, which would be tedious even in recording a transaction of yesterday. G I 74; DLA 114

At stake is what Staël calls an "erudition of the boudoir" (G I 74; DLA 114). As she elaborates:

> What damage [mal] would not this spirit of imitation do among the Germans! Their superiority consists in independent spirit, love of solitude, and individual originality. The French are powerful only *en masse*. G I 87, translation modified; DLA 156

It is important to see how Staël distinguishes between passive imitation of other cultures (which she is against) and active borrowing or emulation (which she appreciates). Hence, in her discussion of contemporary German philosophy, she starts out with lengthy presentations of British and French thought, then introduces, after four chapters, *la philosophie allemande*. The point, in other words, is not that German philosophy is

ur-German or that it only develops its own resources. Rather, she admires (a point we also find in Kant, Herder, and others), its willingness to synthesize French and British thinking, hence establishing a new philosophical platform—the one that enabled idealism and romanticism, which Staël perceives as distinctly modern movements.

As opposed to British empiricism and French materialism, the idealist and romantic frames of mind have room for an educational philosophy, one in which individual and cultural *Bildung* support and mutually enhance each other. Moreover, this is related to a view of the self as temporally developing and as defined by an ethical responsibility to productively relate to itself and to others—"others" including both other human beings and nature—or, in its most comprehensive form, what Staël (borrowing from Friedrich Schleiermacher) calls *the universe* (e.g., G II 291; DLA 717).

It is important that, for Staël (in line with Schleiermacher [see Gjesdal, 2024]), the understanding of the universe itself, in all its diversity, is beyond the epistemic scope of an individual human being. As she puts it, evidencing a metaphysical bend that she, at this point, shares with the German philosophers she covers:

> Every man may find, in some different wonder of the universe [de l'univers], that which most powerfully addresses his soul. One admires the Divinity in the character of a father, another in the innocence of a child, a third in the heavenly aspect of Raphael's virgins,—in music, in poetry, in nature, it matters not in what: for all are animated by a religious principle, the genius of the world, and of every human being.
>
> G II 291; DLA 717

Earlier in her work, Staël had traced this insight back to Leibniz (G II 150; DLA 591), whom she characterizes as a German Bacon or Descartes, i.e., as the philosopher who led German thought into its mature, modern phase—the phase in which it can achieve results that the French philosophers, as she saw it, have failed to arrive at.

In *Germany*, Staël's critique of French culture is as important as her praise of the Germans. Not only is French philosophy deemed too materialist and the French, culturally speaking, seen as being powerful only *en masse*. But also, she observes that in France, one is interested in people, in Germany in books (G I 95; DLA 165). She complains about a French tendency to dismiss alternative points of view and contrasts this with the sit-

uation in Weimar, where the conversation is "constantly excited" (G I 104, translation modified; DLA 174). By keeping alive a will to conversation, the Germans have created an independent republic of letters (G I 96; DLA 166). While the French fail to appreciate German culture because it does not meet the "one" golden standard (G I 145; DLA 211), this is, for Staël, precisely what makes it fertile ground for the "republican" literature that she had praised already ten years earlier.

As Staël argues in *Germany*, the republican spirit is led back to the cultural diversity of the German lands. It is also led back to an educational system that prioritizes the study of foreign languages and the humanities. As she observes:

> The study of languages, which, in Germany, constitutes the basis of education, is much more favorable to the evolution of the faculties, in the early age, than mathematics, or the physical sciences. G I 119; DLA 189

In a similar spirit, Staël praises Herder for his mediation of Spanish and Portuguese poetry, and for his reappreciation of the ballad (G II 86; DLA 523). She also admires the German interest in non-Western cultures, especially in Indian art and thought. Hence, German philosophy, in Staël's (admittedly idealizing) picture exemplifies the ethics of hospitality that she advocates. As she sums up her credo:

> Different nations ought to serve as guides to each other, and all would do wrong to deprive themselves of the information they may mutually receive and impart [...] We should do well then, in all foreign countries, to welcome foreign thoughts and foreign sentiments, for hospitality of this sort makes the fortune of him who exercises it. G II 99; DLA 541

In this sense, Staël develops her philosophy of translation and cultural transfer not only in the late, theoretical essay, but also in and through her active, hermeneutic work.[15]

4. Concluding Thoughts

Staël's philosophy of literature and translation show how culture necessarily develops in dialogue with others. A culture that is closed off

[15] Staël thus furthers the kind of spirit—the insistence on the need to let "imagination go visiting," that Arendt later associates with Kant's political philosophy (see Arendt, 1982, 43).

around itself will necessarily stagnate. However, there is also a political aspect to Staël's approach: her emphasis on the importance of translation, cultural mediation, and exchange of ideas are key factors in her republicanism, but also in her advocacy of soft diplomacy (for her politics, see Schroeder, 1994; Sluga, 2015).

Through her international contacts, discussions, correspondence, and strategizing, Staël not only theorized but also lived out her ideal of cultural transmission.[16] Her approach to translation highlights two different, yet closely related aspects of her philosophy: her commitment, on the one hand, to individual edification and, on the other, to cultural development and universality. In each case, the development at stake is driven through a hermeneutic engagement with a plurality of different perspectives, hence also as something that cannot be deduced or a priori postulated, but that we, as finite human beings, can only approximate through collaboration, interaction, and an awareness of the limiting *and* enabling aspects of our being situated within a particular culture and a particular historical horizon.

[16] Throughout Staël's life, her philosophy, politics, and friendships were closely related. In pre-revolutionary Paris, she entertained a friend group that included Wilhelm von Humboldt, Thomas Jefferson, Marquise de Lafayette, Thomas Paine, and Governor Morris. Her guests at the family estate at Coppet in Switzerland included Benjamin Constant, her longtime lover, the historian and economist Jean de Sismondi, the philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt and his wife Caroline, August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel, the German geographer Carl Ritter, the poet and thinker Friedrich Tieck, the poet Zacharias Werner, the Danish-German writer Friedrike Brun and her daughter Ida, as well as the Danish poet Oehlenschläger. Lady Hamilton came from England, ditto for Lord Byron whom, residing nearby, would row across the lake to dine and converse with the Madame. Her international outlook was retained—*contra* Napoleon's intentions, it was indeed strengthened—when the exile forced her out not only of Paris and France, but also of Switzerland. In Germany, she met with Schiller, Goethe, Jakobi, Schelling, Fichte, Wieland, and others. During her stay in St. Petersburg, she recited from the finished, but yet unpublished *Germany*, thus using her study of life and thought in the German lands to muster support for her anti-Napoleonic alliance. In Stockholm, where she resided from the end of 1812 until the summer of 1813, her salon was described as a veritable *café politique* (Sluga, 2015, 147). After Napoleon's defeat and her return to Paris, her salon was key to the follow-up of the Congress of Vienna through the Treaty of Paris, which included a stance on the colonies, on abolitionism (though slavery was not abandoned until 1848), and a commitment to pan-European collaboration. Through her friendship, then extended correspondence with John Quincy Adams, Albert Gallatin, and Thomas Jefferson, she ensured that her political thoughts and solutions were disseminated beyond France and Europe (Mueller-Vollmer, 2003).

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The Irruption of Words and the Voice of the Dead: Ramberg on Rorty's final vocabularies

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I can hardly begin this article without saying that Bjørn Ramberg is one of the most important intellectuals in the development of my philosophical life. Indeed, in the late 1990s and the early years of this century, after having held an undergraduate fellowship at the University of Buenos Aires devoted to the work of Donald Davidson, and having earned my bachelor's degree at the same university with a thesis on Richard Rorty—on the basis of which I was then preparing my doctoral dissertation, also centered on the author of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*—coming across Bjørn's writings was one of the great theoretical illuminations that guided my work.

The deep admiration I felt for each of his texts was, in turn, the occasion for the development of new ideas that I always sensed to be in the lineage of the kind of theoretical concerns I discerned in Bjørn. That admiration was consolidated in 2013, on the First International Richard Rorty Symposium, which I had the honor of organizing in Buenos Aires (thanks to the support of the Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero, César Lorenzano, Verónica Tozzi, Chris Voparil, and Michael Williams). Bjørn visited my country, and I was able to meet him and realize that his extraordinary intelligence was not his greatest virtue.

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I found in him an exceptional human being, endowed with a profound intellectual and human curiosity that gave him an extraordinary capacity for empathy. I felt that his generosity made it possible for a sense of friendship to take shape almost immediately—something I was fortunate to see renewed in the various encounters we had in the following years. His generous invitation to travel to Oslo in 2019 to discuss the concept of "post-truth" was the culmination of that experience of theoretical and existential closeness that people like Bjørn make manifest so naturally, without any kind of calculation.

It is for this reason that taking part in this collective volume in his honor is, for me, both a great privilege and a profound responsibility: that of offering him a few philosophical words that he might read with at least a fraction of the enthusiasm with which I read each of his texts.

Writing for one of your teachers to read you is always an enormous challenge, and in Bjørn's case, much of his work has always carried that same tone of respect toward his own philosophical mentors. Reading Bjørn is reading a collection of never-ending conversations with his two great masters, Donald Davidson and Richard Rorty—conversations in which, more than once, the disciple laid the groundwork for a deeper understanding and a widening of the conceptual and expressive horizons of his predecessors.

In this text, I will focus on certain aspects of the Rorty–Ramberg conversations, paying attention to some of the critical remarks Bjørn directed toward the author of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. In approaching that dialogue, I will give particular attention to the third great and omnipresent master in Bjørn's work—one with whom he does not seem to have configured a conversation like the others, but who rather appears as an unavoidable philosophical ghost, a kind of basso continuo that profoundly accompanies all Bjørn's writing: Hans-Georg Gadamer.

I

Throughout the years of the intellectual relationship between Rorty and Ramberg—and in the recurring reconsiderations the latter undertook after Rorty's death—Ramberg has offered both innovative defenses of the general outlines of the American thinker's philosophy and critical examinations of the blind spots he identified in his mentor's neopragmatism. The most frequently revisited of these criticisms is the one developed in Ramberg (2000), concerning the viability of rehabilitating a non-merely

causal dimension when thinking about the relationship between language and the world within a non-representationalist framework. Drawing on Davidson's teachings about triangulation, Ramberg pointed out to Rorty that there would be no cost to his anti-representationalism if he made room for the idea of "getting things right." Notably, Rorty conceded this point in Rorty (2000), his famous reply to Ramberg's paper.

Less often revisited is Ramberg (2011), in which a severe critique is developed against certain aspects of Rorty's thought as presented in CIS—a critique that, in part, rests on questioning elements of Rorty's philosophical trajectory from the 1980s onward, insofar as he failed to take up what had been promised at the end of PMN: the work of Gadamer. Curiously, in his intellectual autobiography published posthumously a year before Ramberg's text, Rorty himself explicitly acknowledges and validates that abandonment of the promise, when he rejects the last part of PMN, stating that it "now strikes me as a false start: the contrast I drew there between 'systematic' and 'edifying' philosophy was not the one I wanted," concluding that "my invocation of Gadamerian hermeneutics was feeble and unproductive" (Rorty, 2010, 13). In what follows, I will return to Ramberg's critique of Rorty's de-Gadamerization in order to assess its scope.

I'd like to begin by quoting a striking passage from Dennett's autobiography, in which he recounts a conversation he had with Rorty—precisely in my hometown:

> Dick didn't always discourage the most radical (mis?)readings of his words, I think it is fair to say, and this attitude earned him some serious enemies in analytic philosophy. We often discussed this, most memorably at a sumptuous lunch in Buenos Aires. [...] At one point, I allowed that I cared more about maintaining the respect and interest of cognitive scientists than of most philosophers, and he responded by confessing that he didn't give a damn about his reputation among scientists—or philosophers; he coveted the esteem of poets!
>
> Dennett, 2023, 359

It was 1989, and Rorty had just published CIS, whose purpose was presented in the clearest possible terms: "this book tries to show how things look if we drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and private, and are content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable" (Rorty, 1989, xv). The possibility of leading an intellectual life that honored those demands

while remaining aware of the aforementioned incommensurability was presented in that book through the figure of the "liberal ironist".

To be a liberal, following Shklar (1984), is to be the kind of person for whom committing acts of cruelty is the worst thing one can do. The characterization of the ironist, however, is more complex, since Rorty develops it throughout the book in an ambivalent way. At the very beginning of the book, Rorty introduces the ironist as "the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires—someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance" (Rorty, 1989, xv). But later, in Chapter 4, the ironist is presented as a special kind of nominalist historicist. It is for the configuration of this type that Rorty introduces the notion of *final vocabulary*. The concept is presented as follows

> a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. Rorty, 1989, 73

And based on that concept, the ironist is characterized as

> someone who fulfills three conditions : (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Rorty, 1989, 73

In this way, the ironist is not merely someone who acknowledges contingency, but rather someone who furthers her pursuit of authenticity by reinterpreting the inherited final vocabularies—either by making them her own or reshaping them into new expressions that hold personal significance. Ironism is, then, the historicist and nominalist mode of carry-

ing out the existential project of self-creation, self-enlargement, autonomy, and authenticity.

This is how we can understand the profession of faith that Rorty conveyed to Dennett in Buenos Aires. First, because there is an inescapable link between the nominalist-historicist and the one who places special value on poetry. For Rorty, the recognition of contingency leads us to see "the poet, in the generic sense of the maker of new words, the shaper of new languages, as the vanguard of the species" (Rorty, 1989, 20). But more than that, it is the poet who is in the best position to perceive the ubiquity of contingency

> the strong maker, the person who uses words as they have never before been used, is best able to appreciate her own contingency. For she can see, more clearly than the continuity-seeking historian, critic, or philosopher, that her language is as contingent as her parents or her historical epoch. She can appreciate the force of the claim that "truth is a mobile army of metaphors" because, by her own sheer strength, she has broken out of one perspective, one metaphoric, into anothe.
>
> Rorty, 1989, 28

The ironist is thus the strong poet that Harold Bloom described in *The Anxiety of Influence*, *The Anatomy of Influence*, and other works—the one who pursues self-creation driven by "the horror of finding himself to be only a copy or a replica" (Bloom, 1973, 80). In this way, I sketched the general contours of the connections that Rorty establishes between historicist nominalism, ironism, and strong poetry.

Let us now return to Ramberg and his call for more Gadamer in Rorty's work. This claim is articulated precisely by paying attention to the way Rorty conceives of subjectivity through the notion of *final vocabulary*. However, this demand—present in the aforementioned 2011 paper by Ramberg—seems to be in tension with another text he published that same year, in which he highlights the deep Gadamerian legacy not only in PMN but also in CIS. Let us briefly examine how Ramberg reads Rorty through Gadamer in each of these texts.

In Ramberg (2013)[2], the starting point is Rorty's appropriation of Gadamer's hermeneutic historicism. Ramberg emphasizes that Rorty reads

[2] The first version of the paper was written in 2010 and it was published in German in 2011 (Ramberg, 2011a). For quotations I am using the version published in English two years later.

Truth and Method as a source for a notion of self-creation without reliance on a human essence, that is, a form of subjectivity that produces itself without depending on a fixed nature. Ramberg reminds us that, for Rorty, Gadamer "helps reconcile the 'naturalistic' point [...] that the 'irreducibility of the *Geisteswissenschaften*' is not a matter of a methaphysical dualism with our 'existentialist' intuition that redescribing ourselves is the most important thing we can do" (Rorty, 1979, 358–59). From this follows the idea that philosophy is not about knowledge but about creating possibilities of being.

Ramberg stresses that this reading turns the ontological core of Gadamer's hermeneutics into an anti-metaphysical tool. If for Gadamer prejudices are the conditions of understanding and "*application* is a critical moment in all understanding" (Ramberg, 2013, 54), Rorty radicalizes the claim: understanding does not mirror a pre-given ontological structure but is historically constituted through linguistic practice. The "historicity of understanding" thus becomes an argument against philosophy's claim to determine the general constraints on human thought and agency. Gadamer provides Rorty with the conceptual basis to replace the idea of knowledge with that of conversation, and truth with situated interpretation.

Ramberg calls this *semantic historicism*: all understanding is mediated by historical and linguistic practices that cannot be objectified. In this sense, Gadamer and Rorty share the critique of the subject–object dualism and the idea that the subject discovers itself as already immersed in the world. But whereas Gadamer formulates this in an ontological register, Rorty transforms it into an ethical one: an invitation to redescribe without claiming metaphysical authority.

Thus, Rorty's notion of *edification* emerges as a pragmatist reinterpretation of Gadamerian *Bildung*. In PMN, edification is "the project of finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking" (Rorty, 1979, 360). The change from PMN to CIS is that the idea of edification, in the first book, helps Rorty to establish the metaphilosophical point that philosophy must be transformed into a creative rather than theoretical practice, and in the second one, the notion deepens (disappearing) through Rorty's articulation of the relation between private autonomy and public solidarity: the individual's self-creation (inspired by Gadamer's hermeneutics) must coexist with the liberal commitment to avoid the humiliation of others.

These considerations by Ramberg are substantially qualified in the second of the papers specifically devoted to the connections between Rorty and hermeneutics. Ramberg (2011b) points out that the kind of herme-

neutics Rorty adopts is only partial: he takes from Gadamer the idea of the finitude and historicity of understanding but leaves aside the latter's deeper analysis of subjectivity and of the authority of meaning in the interpretive process.

In his new reading, Ramberg points out that when Rorty, concerned with dismantling representationalist epistemology and foundationalism, turns hermeneutics into a metaphor for a new way of doing philosophy, he ends up setting aside its phenomenological content. Instead of analyzing the concrete experience of understanding, he focuses on a broad historical narrative in which the main protagonists are systems of thought or "vocabularies" rather than subjects embodied in interpretive practices.

Ramberg particularly questions the way Rorty proposes a conception of the self as a self-creating being, defined through the contingency of its final vocabulary. Ramberg accepts Rorty's historicist and anti-representationalist starting point, but argues that the way Rorty conceives of *final vocabulary* inherits an impoverished notion of subjectivity. Ramberg begins with Rorty's Davidson-influenced view: the subject is not an autonomous entity but a node within an intersubjective network of beliefs, desires, and linguistic practices. From this perspective, meaning arises through processes of triangulation—the interaction between speakers and a shared world—which implies that all rationality and subjectivity are public and shared. However, according to Ramberg, the idea of *final vocabulary* reintroduces a residue of individualism incompatible with the Davidsonian view: the final vocabulary seems to mark the normative boundaries of an isolated subject, reinstating a kind of "closed" or "self-affirming" subjectivity. In his words, "a final vocabulary seems to inherit whatever arbitrariness may attach to any particular individual's commitments, rather than serve as a possible means for mitigating such arbitrariness" (Ramberg, 2011b, 45). For this reason, *final vocabulary* ends up appearing as the limit of the individual subject—an arbitrary and closed repertoire of discursive resources, without a living relation to something broader (tradition, community, experience). Ramberg argues that this version of subjectivity makes *final vocabulary* seem arbitrary, because it depends on an individual's repertoire; reinforce a subjectivist individualism, in which each person is trapped within their own language; and fail to explain how authority and normativity can arise beyond the subject (for instance, in tradition, dialogue, or the interpretive community).

At this point, Ramberg introduces Gadamer's hermeneutics as a possible way to overcome the impoverished conception of subjectivity that he

attributes to Rorty. Hermeneutic philosophy, he recalls, was conceived as a critique of the "philosophy of subjectivity," both in its Enlightenment and Romantic versions. For Gadamer, we do not first understand ourselves and then the world: we always understand ourselves within the framework of traditions, languages, and institutions that precede us. Individual self-consciousness is not the foundation of reason, but a moment within a broader historical process. In this sense, hermeneutics does not seek to destroy reason but to rescue it from the limits of subjectivism, redefining it as a historically situated and socially mediated capacity. Understanding, far from being the act of a sovereign subject, is an event that occurs through the interaction among interpreter, text, and tradition.

One of the concepts Gadamer develops to express this idea is that of "play." In play, the subject gives themselves over to a dynamic they do not fully control: the game absorbs them and shapes their actions. Analogously, in hermeneutic understanding, the individual allows themselves to be guided by the movement of meaning that arises in encounters with others or with tradition. This experience shows that the relationship between subject and object is not the most fundamental one; what is primary is the participatory relation in which meaning emerges as something that involves us. To understand is, in this sense, to be "played" by language and history as much as to act within them. In this structure lies an idea of reason that does not oppose historicity, but rather assumes it as its condition of possibility.

Through this reinterpretation, Gadamer introduces a new link between reason, authority, and tradition. All understanding relies on a background of prejudices that orient interpretation; far from being an obstacle, these prejudices make understanding possible. The critical task, then, is not to eliminate them but to subject them to dialogue—distinguishing those that open the horizon of meaning from those that close it. The authority of tradition is neither absolute nor irrational: it depends on an act of free recognition on the part of subjects, who both receive and transform that tradition. That is why Gadamer can affirm that all true authority is founded on an act of freedom. This dual relationship—of dependence and critique—is what defines hermeneutic rationality.

Ramberg maintains that this way of thinking about reason and subjectivity can help Rortian pragmatism solve some of its dilemmas. If we adopt the hermeneutic idea of participatory subjectivity, we can understand *final vocabularies* not as fixed boundaries of an individual, but as temporary configurations within a process of ongoing dialogue and trans-

formation. In this way, the authority of meaning does not originate in the subject but in their belonging to a community of interpretation and in their responsiveness to traditions that exceed them. Integrating this dimension would make possible a version of pragmatism that is less individualistic and more open to the living historicity of understanding.

To advance in this direction, Ramberg proposes modifying some naturalist assumptions that constrain Rorty's thought. Instead of identifying the mental exclusively with the linguistic, he suggests considering broader forms of subjectivity that are also manifested in other living beings. Here he introduces the concept of "animal subjectivity" as a way of extending the notion of agency beyond propositional discourse. Drawing on contemporary ethological studies—particularly Gordon Burghardt's research on animal play—Ramberg argues that the capacity for play reveals an elementary form of subjectivity, a combination of natural regularity and spontaneous freedom. Observing play in different species allows us to recognize an evolutionary continuity in the ways living beings relate to their environment and to one another. This continuity, he suggests, invites us to rethink human subjectivity as a natural phenomenon—yet one not reducible to the physical or the merely rational.

Attention to animal subjectivity serves a precise philosophical purpose: it helps to re-educate our intuition about what it means to be a subject. By studying other forms of life, we discover aspects of our own agency that do not depend on language but are still normative and relational. In this sense, Ramberg proposes a "gradualist naturalism"—an approach that recognizes different levels of subjectivity in the biological world and that avoids opposing the mental to the physical or the rational to the natural. This broadened naturalism would allow pragmatists to preserve their commitment to science without falling into conceptual dualisms or reductionisms. Moreover, it would restore the link between reason, body, and world that the hermeneutic tradition has long maintained.

From this perspective, Rorty's notion of *final vocabulary* can be reinterpreted. Rather than understanding it as the arbitrary limit of an individual, it can be seen as the momentary form taken by our rational responsiveness to the world. Final vocabularies are historical and revisable structures, sustained by shared interpretive practices. Their authority derives neither from the will of the subject nor from transcendent truth, but from mutual recognition and the openness to otherness that all understanding requires. Thus, pragmatism can incorporate the hermeneutic principle that understanding entails being affected by what one seeks to

understand. Rationality would no longer be an exercise of control or self-assertion, but a disposition to listen and to be transformed by the meaning that emerges in dialogue.

In what follows, I will aim to examine Ramberg's observations, making some considerations that may, in part, vindicate Rorty's position. To this end, I will distinguish two levels in Ramberg's critique: on the one hand, the reference to animal subjectivity, and on the other, the intertwining of the individual and tradition.

II

Ramberg defends the idea of *animal subjectivity* as a way of overcoming the excessive logocentrism that may underlie Rorty's articulation between subjectivity and the notion of a *final vocabulary*. In this regard, I believe there are two aspects of Ramberg's observation that should be distinguished: on the one hand, the need for a gradualist, emergentist account of our connection with other living beings—especially animals—and, on the other, the importance of incorporating the bodily dimension into the characterization of subjectivity.

Concerning the first point, I will only note that Rorty (and especially Brandom) can indeed be accused—precisely because of their emphasis on language—of failing, unlike the classical pragmatists, to remain faithful to Darwin, and of thereby advocating some form of discontinuity within natural history. Rorty would insist that the linguistic turn has given pragmatism the opportunity to come even closer to Darwin, insofar

> when Darwinian evolutionary theory was brought together with the suggestion, [...] that it is language, rather than consciousness or mind, which is the distinguishing feature of our species, Darwinian evolutionary theory made it possible to see all of human behaviour [...] as continuous with animal behaviour. For the origin of language, unlike the origin of consciousness, or of a faculty called 'reason' capable of grasping the intrinsic nature of things, is intelligible in naturalistic terms. We can give what Locke called a 'plain historical account' of how animals came to talk. However, we cannot give a plain historical account of how they stopped coping with reality and began representing it. Rorty, 1999, 68

The observation regarding corporeality seems to me of the utmost importance. However, although I acknowledge that Rorty himself was not sufficiently explicit in developing the bodily dimension implicit in his extraordinary description of what we are as "incarnated vocabularies," I have argued on several occasions that the very appeal to vocabularies is the key to embodying his philosophy (Penelas, 2022; Penelas, 2025).[3] Indeed, I believe that the *final* nature of final vocabularies, although Rorty associates it with the limits of justification, should be read in affective terms. The words of our final vocabularies—at least the most charged among them—are those that, when challenged, produce in us an emotional impact that leads either to fight with others or to redescription of our own cultural heritage. The causal dimension of both the encounter with other vocabularies and the metaphors that provide the starting point for a change in one's final vocabulary cannot be understood without recognizing that our bond with the words that matter to us is emotional and bodily. Hence Rorty conceives humiliation as the distinctive way in which one can be cruel to a human being (that is, to an *incarnated* vocabulary); by devaluing the importance someone attaches to the words of their final vocabulary, we inflict a kind of pain that, obviously, has bodily dimensions. It suffices to think of the causal efficacy of insults—especially when uttered in our mother tongue—to see that emphasizing *words* rather than the propositional contents of our beliefs is the way in which, with Rorty, we can do justice to his emphasis on the *incarnation* of language. In turn, this embodiment of language implied by such a reading of final vocabularies makes it possible to further explore the viability of integrating animal subjectivity into Rorty's aforementioned Darwinian continuism.

Let us now turn to Ramberg's main objection to the notion of *final vocabulary*, namely, that it depends on Rorty's overly individualistic conception of subjectivity. At this point, I will draw, to understand the scope of that critique, on the way it was interpreted by the philosopher Yvonne Huetter-Almerigi in a recent paper. Huetter-Almerigi (2022) presents Ramberg's critique of Rorty regarding the concept of *final vocabulary* as framed around the tension between continuity and rupture in the relationship between the individual and shared normative and linguistic frameworks. It is difficult to attribute to Rorty a non-social conception of subjectivity. Indeed—as Ramberg himself points out, in Rorty's Davidson-influenced view, the subject is not an autonomous entity, but rather

[3] See algo Santelli (2020).

a node within an intersubjective network of beliefs, desires, and linguistic practices. From this perspective, meaning arises through processes of triangulation—the interaction between speakers and a shared world—, which implies that all rationality and subjectivity are public and shared. Ramberg's rejection of Rorty's notion of *final vocabulary* (which is intrinsically social) thus seems to be more closely related to the fact that it is articulated in a virtuous way with the idea of the *strong poet*—an idea that entails the vindication of the possibility of rupture with tradition, rather than merely gradual change through the inherently transformative application of concepts within hermeneutic praxis. Instead of rupture, Ramberg emphasizes interpretive continuity: the change of vocabulary does not result from an individual decision or act of creative will, but from participation in shared processes of understanding. This reinterpretation seeks to avoid the risk of arbitrary individualism and the loss of normative authority that would follow from Rorty's more radical version.

Huetter-Almerigi offers a brilliant defense of Rorty. She acknowledges that his insistence on the "calling of the genius" or *strong poet* functions as an operative strategy, not merely a descriptive one: the *vocabulary of rupture* serves to keep open the possibility of radical change within the antirepresentationalist framework. Rorty does not deny the social continuity of language, but he stresses that every innovation—every new metaphor or "strong poetry"—requires a moment of rupture, a point of temporal dislocation in which something unprecedented emerges and can later, retrospectively, be reintegrated into the normative fabric.

In this sense, Ramberg and Rorty are not so much opposed as they represent two complementary moments of the same process: Ramberg privileges stability and the continuity of meaning, while Rorty insists on the creative and disruptive instant. Huetter-Almerigi suggests that the key to articulating both perspectives lies in introducing the temporal dimension: rupture is the moment of emergence of a new vocabulary, while continuity is its subsequent assimilation and survival within public discourse.

Thus, Ramberg's critique points out that Rorty's conception of *final vocabulary* needlessly breaks with the intersubjective continuity of linguistic experience. But reinterpreted through temporality and pragmatism, that rupture can be seen not as a negation of continuity, but as the condition of possibility for cultural and political change.

I fully agree with Huetter-Almerigi's reading and her vindication of Rorty's thought in CIS and in his later writings. Her description of Rorty's dialectic between continuity and rupture, between attachment to and dis-

tancing from what is inherited, between the irruption of the new and its subsequent socialization, seems to me to do full justice to Rorty's thought. For instance, it clearly accounts for the way in which the American philosopher (following in the footsteps of John Dewey and George H. Mead) conceived how educational policies should be developed. Since for Rorty education is nothing other than "the shaping of an animal into a human being by a process of socialization, followed (with luck) by the self-individualization and self-creation of that human being through his or her own later revolt against that very process" (Rorty, 1999, 118), what follows is that primary and secondary school constitute the spaces of socialization and consolidation of what is common, while university studies should have among their aims to confront individuals with doubts about what they have inherited, so that they may acquire the tools to transform themselves into beings capable of self-ascribing some form of autonomy and authenticity.

> Socialization has to come before individuation, and education for freedom cannot begin before some constraints have been imposed. But, for quite different reasons, non-vocational higher education is also not a matter of inculcating or educing truth. It is, instead, a matter of inciting doubt and stimulating imagination, thereby challenging the prevailing consensus. If pre-college education produces literate citizens and college education produces self-creating individuals, then questions about whether students are being taught the truth can safely be neglected. Rorty, 1999, 118

I especially value Huetter-Almerigi's appreciation of the role of metaphor (which, in Rorty, in turn draws on Davidson's approach to that trope) as the causal engine of disruption. It is there, I believe, that the greatest divergence from Ramberg's interpretation can be found. Let us pay attention to the following paragraph:

> Final vocabularies, as structures of commitment and orientation, are—just as Gadamer says of language as such—something we as thinking agents operate in and through. They are not objects of reflective awareness to be endorsed or rejected or explicitly compared one with another. 'Reasoned modification' of final vocabularies happens not through choice, nor through analysis, but through the judicious, careful, and tentative 'application' of vocabularies, as something that we as thinking

> creatures 'are engaged in and engaged by', in new ways, or in places where we have not before been.
>
> Ramberg, 2011b, 58–59

The kind of change Ramberg envisions is the change mediated by the application of concepts and rational evaluation. Curiously, that emphasis seems to depend on the very sort of hyper-intellectualist approach to subjectivity that his appeal to the animal—with its bodily dimension as the main aspect to be considered—aims to question. Yet Rorty has repeatedly described the ironist's experience in causal terms. The contact with other final vocabularies is what causes the experience of existential doubt about the inherited final vocabulary. Ramberg himself has described the experience of ironism in prodigious terms, as existential rather than epistemic (Ramberg, 2014). My own emphasis on paying close attention to the fact that Rorty speaks of lexicons (set of words), and not merely of networks of beliefs, attending to the bodily-affective dimension of words—that is, to his idea that we are "incarnated vocabularies"—provides the conditions for understanding Rorty's description of some of the most significant changes in the history of individuals and communities as an appeal to the idea of metaphorical rupture, of playing with nonsense. Such changes are not the result of the application of concepts, but rather, at times, of the dislocated use of words. In Rorty's own words:

> There is no method or procedure to be followed except courageous and imaginative experimentation. [...] [M]eaninglessness is exactly what you have to flirt with when you are in between social, and in particular linguistic, practices—unwilling to take part in an old one but not yet having succeeded in creating a new one. [...] Drop the appeal to neutral criteria [...] Instead, just make invidious comparisons between the actual present and a possible, if inchoate, future. Rorty, 1998, 217

Moreover, when Rorty incorporates Gadamer's work into his philosophical repertoire in PMN, and introduces through it the notion of *edification*, he already marks this double dimension of continuity and rupture that Huetter-Almerigi highlights in her text:

> The attempt to edify (ourselves or others) may consist in the *hermeneutic* activity of making connections between our own culture and some exotic culture or historical period, or between our own discipline and another discipline which seems

> to pursue incommensurable aims in an incommensurable vocabulary. But it may instead consist in the "poetic" activity of thinking up such new aims, *new words*, or new disciplines, followed by, so to speak, the *inverse of hermeneutics*: the attempt to reinterpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions. Rorty, 1979, 360, *emphasis added*

In this passage, Rorty presents the dialectic of edification as comprising three moments: the "hermeneutic moment" of the fusion of horizons, understood as the incorporation of what is foreign into what is one's own; the "poetic moment" of the irruption of the new (especially new words); and the moment of incorporating the old into the new (a moment that, strikingly, Rorty calls "the inverse of hermeneutics"). Ramberg already had considered the first of the three moments very early in his philosophical development, noting that

> [t]he occurrence of incommensurability is actually an essential part of this hermeneutic process. For incommensurability is precisely a signal of a conflict of prejudgements and preconceptions. And it is only through conflict, through disruption, that it is possible 'to become conscious of these prejudices as such'. We remain unaware of our basic assumptions until faced with someone who does not share them. Ramberg, 1989, 1989

But Rorty had already—also at a very early stage of his own self-affirmation as a pragmatist philosopher—anticipated the aspects of CIS that Ramberg overlooks and Huetter-Almerigi values: namely, that the assimilation of what is foreign differs from the adoption of what is new insofar as the latter—unlike the former—is often preceded by the poetic moment, which cannot be understood in terms of a fusion of horizons.

Huetter-Almerigi emphasizes in her text the political significance of what she calls the "vocabulary of rupture." That is, she pays particular attention to the importance of the notions of *final vocabulary* and *strong poet* as tools for Rorty's liberal project. I fully agree with her on this point. However, in what follows, I would like to focus on something she does not sufficiently highlight in her text: that the introduction of these tools is, in the first instance, made by Rorty to think through the figure of the ironist as one who is traversed by the anxiety of influence and the need to develop a project of self-creation. Attending to some of the specific features that

Rorty's conception of the strong poet entails will allow me to identify—finally, and somewhat unexpectedly—certain points of convergence with Ramberg's reading.

III

Let us return to the notion of the strong poet as presented by Bloom. Among all the operations a poet can undertake when dealing with the anxiety of influence, the most radical is that of the one who manages to imprint his mark upon the past. I cannot fail to mention that Bloom takes this idea from an Argentine writer: Jorge Luis Borges. Indeed, at the very beginning of Chapter 1 of *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom notes that "Borges remarks that poets create their precursors" (Bloom, 1997, 19). The Argentine writer expresses this idea in his 1951 essay "Kafka and His Precursors":

> If I am not mistaken, the heterogeneous pieces I have enumerated resemble Kafka; if I am not mistaken, not all of them resemble each other. This second fact is the more significant. In each of these texts we find Kafka's idiosyncrasy to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had never written a line, we would not perceive this quality; in other words, it would not exist. The poem "Fears and Scruples" by Browning foretells Kafka's work, but our reading of Kafka perceptibly sharpens and deflects our reading of the poem. Browning did not read it as we do now. [...] The fact is that every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future. Borges, 1989, 711–12

Thus, what fascinates Bloom is that the Borgesian insight "is not that the prior poet appears to have written the new poem, it is that the new poet appears to have written the prior poet's poem" (Bloom, 2011, 19). Yet Bloom makes a relevant observation to our discussion: "sadly, Borges idealized his account of literary influence by rejecting any idea of rivalry or competition in regard to precursors" (Bloom, 2011, 25). Indeed, in the same text cited, Borges notes: "in the critics' vocabulary, the word "precursor" is indispensable, but it should be cleansed of all connotation of polemics or rivalry" (Borges, 1989, 712). The difference between Borges and Bloom seems to lie in whether one must adopt a classical or a romantic conception of the phenomenon of influence. It is often overlooked that,

in fact, when Borges formulates his thesis of retroactive causality, he refers to T.S. Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in which Eliot clearly states that:

> No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. [...] [W]hat happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. [...] The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered.[...] [T]he past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.
>
> Eliot, 1941, 25–6

But the position Eliot adopts based on this—let us call it—"poetic holism" stands at the very antipodes of the Romantic exaltation of genius. On the contrary—and this is precisely what seems to have appealed to Borges, who understood influence as something that should be stripped of rivalry—Eliot embraces what he calls an "impersonal theory of poetry," according to which the poet's duty is to "depersonalize" himself, in the sense of giving priority to art over his own personality:

> what happens [to the poet] is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality. Eliot, 1941, 28

Bloom's image of the strong poet seems to stand in stark contrast to this depersonalization so dear to Eliot—and, perhaps, to Borges as well. The anxiety of influence is conceived by Bloom as a history of conflicts, struggles, appropriations, and reappropriations—a battle for the shaping of an individuality that leaves a mark. This is precisely the image that captivated Rorty when he sought to think of the figure of the victorious ironist in her process of self-creation, striving to detach herself from the inherited tradition.

This tension between Eliot–Borges and Bloom–Rorty seems to mirror the one Ramberg identifies between Gadamer and Rorty, when he emphasizes the ontological role of tradition in hermeneutics as a space of

collective transformation. Ramberg's recovery of Gadamer's appeal to the notion of play—as the process through which players are constituted even as they transform it by playing—clearly carries Eliotian resonances. The Rortyan focus on the process of de-socialization toward individuation that poiesis illuminates is precisely what Gadamer and Ramberg dismiss from the standpoint of a philosophical anthropology that, in Huetter-Almerigi's words, privileges the vocabulary of continuity.

At this point, we could recall Ralph W. Emerson's classic text "The Conservative", in which he distinguishes between the "Party of Memory" and the "Party of Hope" to describe two fundamental impulses that run through all social, political, and spiritual life (Emerson, 1841). The Party of Memory represents fidelity to the past, respect for tradition, continuity, institutions, and accumulated wisdom. Emerson associates it with *understanding*. The Party of Hope, by contrast, embodies the reformist or creative impulse, confidence in the future, moral and intellectual innovation, and the breaking with what is established. It is the principle driven by *imagination*. Emerson observes that in the United States, the Party of Hope prevails. According to him, unlike in Europe, the nation's youth and the absence of an entrenched aristocracy allow imagination and confidence in the future to dominate the political and cultural scene. We might say that, for an American, what "America" signifies is, more than "freedom," "future."

Undoubtedly, the entire pragmatist tradition (and paradigmatically, Dewey) is distinctly American in this regard. Although for pragmatism there is no action without memory—without the sediment of the past—it is the dimension of the future that shapes the focus on life privileged by the pragmatist image of the human. "Hope" is the most important word in its vocabulary. Rorty is thus a faithful heir of Dewey in choosing Bloom over Eliot in this respect.

However, although Rorty adopts Bloom's image of the strong poet as a champion of self-creation, he does not fully embrace with the same force the idea of the anxiety of influence. I believe that, in this sense, Rorty is closer to Borges who disdains the notion of conflict as governing the relation between the old and the new in the private sphere of constituting an autonomous self.

This can be seen, for example, in the way Rorty reads Freud—as proposing the idea of the unconscious as a conversational partner of our conscious self. Rorty privileges one of the two senses he finds in Freud's work as shaping the notion of the unconscious: the one according to

which "[the unconscious] stands for one or more well-articulated systems of beliefs and desires, systems that are just as complex, sophisticated, and internally consistent as the normal adult's conscious beliefs and desires" (Rorty, 1991, 149). With this notion in view, Rorty concludes that "what is novel in Freud's view of the unconscious is his claim that our unconscious selves are not dumb, sullen, lurching brutes, but rather the intellectual peers of our conscious selves, possible conversational partners for those selves" (Rorty, 1991b, 149). It is not hard to agree with Rorty when he himself acknowledges that "this way of stating the aim of psychoanalytic treatment may seem to make everything sound too *sweetly* reasonable" (Rorty, 1991, 150 n. 11, *emphasis added*). Conceiving of psychic life—our dealing with the blind traces that haunt us from the past—in conversational terms seems to reinforce Rorty's reluctance to think of the dialectic between past, present, and future in terms of conflict. *Pace* Rorty, a large part of Freud's teaching is that the history of our subjectivity can hardly be encompassed by the categories of inherited sediment/disruption of the new.

The great Argentine psychoanalyst Marcelo Barros once told me in a personal conversation that, in his view, it is very difficult for an American to grasp the full dimension of Freud's work. According to him, one of Freud's greatest lessons is that many of the inherited traces are inassimilable for a self which is conceived as autonomous and capable of self-creation. The nature of subjectivity is, therefore, tragic—and, Barros added, Americans in general are reluctant to accept the idea of tragedy. If we adopt this perspective, Bloom—perhaps by virtue of his profound knowledge of Jewish thought—is more receptive to the idea of tragedy and, in that sense, less American than Rorty. For although he believes in the possibility of strong poets, he acknowledges that their victory, if achieved, is the outcome of a hard-fought struggle with tradition. In contrast to that tragic dimension, Rorty has no difficulty in pointing out that "to emphasize idiosyncrasy is to emphasize the *comic* variety of human life rather than the *tragedies* that morality hopes to avert" (Rorty, 1991b, p. 153, *emphasis added*).

Thus, a point of affinity that I now find with Ramberg's appeal to Rorty in terms of the vocabulary of continuity is that, at least when it comes to thinking about private projects of self-creation, Rorty should be more attentive to the tragic dimension of the anxiety of influence that Bloom was able to discern. I am not abandoning now my defense of the vocabulary of rupture, but now it seems to me that the figure of the ironist should be

presented in ways less tied to comedy than Rorty appears to assume. The idea of rupture is not merely the idea of change; it involves a tearing of the continuity that once constituted us. "Pain", "mourning", "break", "guilt", "betrayal" are words that always haunt the ironist. Ramberg's insistence on the ontology of tradition may serve as a good antidote to the lightness that Rorty sometimes adopts when thinking about the contingency of the self.

This blind spot in Rorty's conception of subjectivity can be exemplified through his own existential experience. It is time to return to the conversation he had with Dennett in Buenos Aires—the one in which Rorty admitted to his colleague that the intellectual figures he values most are poets (above scientists and philosophers). Faced with such a remark, Dennett felt compelled to ask:

> Why? His father, he said, had been the poetry editor of *Dissent*, that worthy left-wing magazine, and as a high school student Dick had tried his hand at writing a sonnet. [...] He showed his sonnet to his father, who read it briskly and handed it back with a single comment: "Doggerel." Dennett, 2023, 359

We thus learn that Rorty's great poetic operation—taking Bloom's strong poet as the model for the ironist, the one capable of leaving behind what is inherited to carry out his private self-enlargement—is tied to an act of paternal humiliation during his adolescence. One might say, in Rortyan fashion, that this was his way of working through the trauma and being able to say, "Thus I willed it"; others might insist that there is no *poiesis* capable of overcoming the reverberation of what we cannot, even if we wish to, leave behind. Perhaps Ramberg's main point in his critique of Rorty is nothing other than the insistence that every genius, in seeking her idiosyncrasy, inevitably carries with her the voice—whether loving or humiliating—of her dead.[4]

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On Not Selling Human Freedom Short: Ramberg, Rorty, and Democratic Normativity

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Among Bjørn Ramberg's distinct and enduring contributions to contemporary pragmatist philosophy are his finely-grained redescriptions of Rortyan positions that, by tempering Rorty's own anti-Philosophical excesses, have helped us see what Rorty should have said without violating any of his core commitments. Ramberg's "*Revisionist Rortyanism*" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 2), his too-humble name for the "invigorated, assertive, historically self-conscious brand of pragmatist philosophical reflection" defended throughout his writings, contains kernels of wisdom that through a slow but steady process of germination, in some cases over a couple of decades, are responsible, more than any other thinker (save perhaps Richard Bernstein), for the richer, more nuanced appreciation of Rorty that has emerged in recent years.[1]

This chapter takes up what may be Ramberg's biggest preoccupation in his illuminating body of work on Rorty: addressing "the absence of a normative description of the practice of philosophy" in the neopragmatist's corpus (Ramberg, 2001, p. 27). After briefly surveying familiar critiques of Rortyan pragmatism's normative lacunae, I gather a handful of scattered insights—primarily from Ramberg, but also Robert Brandom and Joseph Margolis—that grants glimpses of a positive conception of

[1] For a survey of this work, see Voparil (2022b).

Rortyan pragmatic normative philosophy.[2] We owe the most promising of these glimpses to Ramberg (2000), most famously in the supple exposition of Davidson's stances that spurred Rorty to acknowledge "the inescapability of the normative" and the pivotal amendments it prompted to his long-held views on realism (Rorty, 2000a). Still, as Ramberg himself has acknowledged, the Davidsonian formalist account of triangulation that Rorty came to endorse, including its attendant commitments to (semantic) truth, word-world relations, and getting things right, nevertheless leaves an interpretive gap: namely, elucidating the normative commitments—ethical and epistemic—of Rorty's pragmatism, a set of commitments that can be summed up simply as his antiauthoritarianism.[3]

My aim in this chapter is to give an account of Rortyan pragmatic normativity that fills this gap. While not systematically elaborated by Ramberg, such an account can be developed from his recognition that Rorty's pragmatism is "committed above all to the idea of philosophy as an engagement for human freedom" (Ramberg, 2017, p. 140). After establishing the key tension Ramberg identified between Rorty's Deweyan aspirations for a reconstructed practice of philosophy that intervenes in cultural politics and his reluctance to advance and defend a normative account of the practice of philosophy beyond simply "just what we philosophy professors do," I sketch what I call a notion of democratic normativity that starts with Rorty's commitments to human agency and to our ethical relations to other human beings, and outline the normative conception of pragmatic philosophy required to attain his aspirations for moral and political progress.

It is "democratic" in the sense, as Clayton Chin has put it, that Rorty calls on us to "accept the human responsibility for normativity" (Chin, 2018, p. 38), and is informed by Rorty's antiauthoritarianism, his commitment to accepting "our inheritance from, and our conversation with, our fellow humans as our only source of guidance," in ethics and epistemology (Rorty, 1982, p. 66). That is to say, for Rorty all normative questions are a matter of the values, identities, and boundaries of particular com-

[2] I follow Bernstein's (2010) habit of using "pragmatic" in the broad sense of the tradition's philosophical commitments.

[3] This interpretive limitation is evident in the list of commitments Rorty felt compelled to catalog as being unaffected by his concessions to the Davidsonian picture Ramberg successfully had urged upon him (see Rorty, 2000a, pp. 375–76). On the normative commitments of Rorty's antiauthoritarianism, see Brandom (2021).

munities.[4] Metaphilosophically, it is democratic in that the practice of philosophy, as Mattew Festenstein has put it, is "on all fours, epistemologically and morally speaking, with the array of other discourses that jostle for the attention of the citizenry" (Festenstein, 2003, p. 15). It prioritizes breaking free from entrenched existing vocabularies with the aim of expanding human freedom, understood primarily in terms of our agentive capacity to generate new descriptions, imagine new metaphors, and ultimately authorize new norms through modifying our practices. But it also espouses a conception of *rational* conversation that is both epistemic and ethical, oriented to listening to and understanding, rather than defeating, opponents' arguments. The result is a Rortyan normative conception of philosophy whose practice aims at promoting democratic virtues of inclusion and epistemic humility and that privileges our ethical relations to our conversation partners within the space of reasons, while at the same time endorsing reasoned normative assessment of better and worse based on practice-intrinsic standards of correctness.

1. Rorty's Elusive Normativity

During Rorty's lifetime, and still in many quarters today, the widely accepted view was that he abandoned "traditional normative notions such as truth and objectivity that are supposed to anchor thought to reality" (Tanesini, 2010, p. 200).[5] Rorty's work is rarely cited, let alone engaged in any substantive way, within mainstream inquiries into standard normative topics (e.g., Turner, 2010), other than as a punchline. Influential commentators within the pragmatist orbit who did examine Rorty's writings from such vantages almost uniformly found his philosophy lacking, to put it mildly. To take several noteworthy examples among many: Jürgen Habermas held that "As soon as the concept of truth is eliminated in favor of context-dependent epistemic validity-for-us, the normative reference point necessary to explain why a proponent should endeavor to seek agreement

[4] On this point see Festenstein (2003) and Chin (2018, Chapter 5). The circularity of this practice-based or inside view of normativity is of course a central feature of pragmatism: e.g., Putnam: "what we have [...] are practices, which are right or wrong depending on how they square with our standards. And our standards are right or wrong depending on how they square with our practices. This is a circle or, better, a spiral, but one [...] regarded as virtuous" (Putnam, 1990, p. 304). Or Dewey: "How, it will be asked, can inquiry which has to be evaluated by reference to a standard be itself the source of the standard?" (Dewey, 1986, p. 13).

[5] For a recent example, see Gaskill (2022)

for *'p' beyond the boundaries of her own group* is missing." "If something is 'true'," he continues, "if and only if it is recognized as justified 'by us' because it is good 'for us', there is no rational motive for expanding the circle of members" (Habermas, 2000, p. 51). Similarly, Hilary Putnam asserted that pragmatic normativity "is not simply determined by consensus, but is something that requires evaluation" (Putnam, 1992, p. 77), arguing that Rorty's pragmatism fails to "preserve our commonsense realist convictions" and any sense of normative correctness capable of providing a criterion to "distinguish a genuine reform from its opposite" (Putnam, 2000, pp. 83–5). Susan Haack likewise charged Rorty with reducing truth to agreement and making evidence irrelevant to justification such that to "justify a belief is to defend it to some audience or other" (Haack, 1998, pp. 19–20), and with embracing a "cynicism which would undermine not only epistemology, but all forms of inquiry" (Haack, 1993, p. 6). Absent a concern for truth and why it is important, we have no reason to reject "sham reasoning" (Haack, 1998, pp. 7–8).[6]

To shed greater light on Rorty's elusive normativity, two preliminary steps are needed: to nail down what we mean by normativity (this section) and then to outline the particular conception of philosophy's normative role that Rorty relies on (the final one). One way to characterize the normative project of traditional epistemology he opposed is to think of it as "articulating the conditions that beliefs must satisfy in order to be justified, leading to further recommendations concerning which beliefs we ought to hold and those we should not" by identifying criteria that make clear "our rational responsibility toward our beliefs" and thereby to facilitate self-correction or improvement (Sinclair, 2004, p. 55). Such truth-indicative criteria are ones that "normative epistemology will show we have good reason to believe point us toward the way the world is, in the way we have good reason to believe that a compass will point us toward the Magnetic North Pole" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 4).

The pragmatists' contribution to this picture is an insistence upon the primacy of practice and an unwillingness to transcend our immersion in the practical life of social and historical communities. Robert Brandom has described the chief pragmatic insight as "the idea of the relativity of values to human interests—the thought that practical norms are ultimately to be derived from the needs and wants of the desiring beings understood to be subject to those norms" (Brandom, 2021, p. xi). In Putnam's explanation,

[6] See Ramberg (2001) for an in-depth account of Haack's critique of Rorty's inadequate commitment to philosophical method and how this critique misses its mark.

"[T]he pragmatists urged that the agent point of view, the first-person normative point of view, and the concepts indispensable to that point of view, should be taken just as seriously as the concepts indispensable to the third person descriptive point of view" (Putnam, 1995, p. 215). There is no reducing or eliminating this normative embeddedness since "our sense that utterances and thoughts can be correct or incorrect, true or false, is necessary for us to take ourselves to be talking and thinking about a shared world with others" (Putnam, 1983, p. 246).[7]

Where Rorty diverged from Habermas and others is in explicitly rejecting the idea defended by Putnam that a belief-independent standard of truth or correctness can be secured amid our practical normative embeddedness in the world. He recognized the normativity inherent in our "endorsing" use of truth (see Rorty, 2010). Yet because he understood that normativity to be a function of and inextricable from our practices, a decontextualized notion of truth projected as an independent goal or standard could never be more than an "empty compliment" (Rorty, 1991, p. 6) we pay to beliefs to which we already are committed in practice. Rorty was unyielding on this point: "I cannot give any content to the idea of nonlocal correctness of assertion" (Rorty, 1998, p. 60). As Brandom elaborates Rorty's stance: "just as we should be antiauthoritarian in ethics in rejecting the authority of God over the correctness of what we do, we should be antiauthoritarian in epistemology by rejecting the authority of objective reality over the correctness of what we believe" (Brandom, 2021, p. xi).

This reading is insightful as far as it goes. But it captures only the negative normative impulse in Rorty, without yet characterizing his positive conception. Since Rorty himself never offered a systematic elaboration, let us turn to three of the most promising takes on pragmatic normativity to evaluate them for adequacy to Rorty's project: those of Brandom, Ramberg, and Joseph Margolis. The first is Brandom's account of "pragmatism about norms." "Only in the context of a set of social practices—within a vocabulary," he writes, "can anything have authority, induce responsibility, or in general have normative significance for us" (Brandom, 2000, p. 161). Brandom is particularly illuminating about what he has called Rorty's "social practice theory of normativity in general" (Brandom, 2021,

[7] I should acknowledge the oversimplification in this paragraph given the different conceptions of practice that exist among pragmatists. For our purposes here, it is enough to underscore James Liszka's point that classical pragmatism and neopragmatism share a recognition that our normative practices work best "in a moral landscape with a certain topology" of habits and "the *right sort of community*" (Liszka, 2013, p. 59).

p. xvi). The distinctive Rortyan move, on this view, emerges with his claim all normative statuses are social statuses, establishing what Brandom dubs the "social status of unoverridability":

> The authority of sincere, contemporaneous first-person reports of whether one is in pain or of what one is currently thinking [...] cannot be overridden by any evidence available to other subjects [...] That authority [...] should be understood as consisting just in how such reports are taken or treated by other practitioners. Brandom, 2021, p. xvii

Brandom no doubt has pinpointed a signal element of Rorty's thinking around normativity here that underwrites key epistemic and ethical commitments.[8] Yet the "origin story" Brandom tells about Rorty's pragmatism explicates this normative stance entirely in terms of "the conceptual background" of Rorty's thought, as an expression of his early eliminative materialism.[9] As a result, while this elaboration yields surprising insights into the implicit Kantian residue in Rorty's thinking about normativity, the full consequences of Rorty's social-practical account of normativity for "our fellow humans as our only source of guidance," as well as the Deweyan influence on his view of what philosophy is good for, his priority of democracy to philosophy, and so on are nowhere accounted for.

Ramberg's insightful revelations concerning what Rorty, despite his previous protestations, shares with a Davidsonian account of the inescapability of the normative run into a similar explanatory limitation as Brandom's. Ultimately, both underwrite a formal account wholly consistent with Rorty's philosophical pragmatism yet one from which no practical normative guidance falls out to explain his moral and political positions. Yvonne Huetter-Almerigi concisely explains this Davidsonian "package" conception of normativity:

> [C]ontact with the world is trivial. We always already are in touch. We cannot not be in touch. But there is no "how things really are." This does not mean that we can make just any claim. We have to "get things right" and this entails that I, my fellows, and [objects and phenomena] are a package in the process of description and redescription.
>
> Huetter-Almerigi, 2020, p. 81

[8] See Voparil (2014).
[9] See Brandom (2013, 2021).

This picture of triangulation, as Rorty eventually recognized, is the better account of our relation to reality, word-world relations, and meaning than his earlier incomplete view with only two corners of the Davidsonian triangle. Nevertheless, Davidson himself made clear that "The norms I am concerned with here are not the norms of responsibility, obligation, or morality" but "simply a condition of understanding the thought and action and talk of thinking creatures" (Davidson, 1999, p. 599). Ramberg likewise reminded that on this Davidsonian account, "The norms of agency, those expressed by the charity of the ideal interpreter, are not norms that we can hold up before ourselves or others as directives or guides to behavior" (Ramberg, 2000, p. 362). While these background conditions are not devoid of normative content, inasmuch as they are manifestations of Wittgensteinian forms of life, we don't yet have an explicit source of ethical and political normative authority needed to realize the aims of Rorty's pragmatism.[10]

Ironically, given his visceral antipathy toward Rorty's pragmatism,[11] the closest we come to illuminating Rortyan normativity may be Margolis's notion of "*sittlich* normativity." Margolis argued that all agentive norms indeed are projected from "the contingent interests of the artifactual, second-natured creatures we take ourselves to be" (Margolis, 2021, p. 403). On this view, "the *sittlich*, as actually and pertinently *intended* within a living community, adequately determines (confers and confirms) the valid standing of some designated set of agentive norms" (Margolis, 2021, p. 404). This stance finds an ally in one of Rorty's heroes, Wilfrid Sellars, who held that "the most fundamental principles of a community, which define what is 'correct' or 'incorrect,' 'right' or 'wrong,' 'done' or 'not done,' are the most general common *intentions* of that community with respect to the behavior of members of the group" (Sellars, 1963, p. 39).

Margolis's conception of normativity as thoroughly and inescapably *sittlich* should be amenable to pragmatists who hold that there are no standards that exist wholly outside the social nature of norms.[12] Colin Koopman has dubbed this "normativity without foundations"—or, more specifically, "authority without authoritarianism": recognizing that "our practices are still deeply dependent upon conceptions of correctness and rightness" while remaining "in the midst of the critical cultural flows in

[10] On Rorty and Wittgensteinian forms of life, see Perona (2015).
[11] See, for instance, Margolis (2000).
[12] See note 4 above.

which we find ourselves without appealing to something beyond those flows that would sponsor salvation from the outside" (Koopman, 2011a, p. 561).[13] However, disagreements emerge over the matter of securing "the validating grounds of agentive norms" (Margolis, 2021, p. 395). For example, Putnam insisted upon a normative standard of rightness or "some kind of correctness that is substantial" as an essential source of epistemic guidance in belief formation where what we take to be true is constrained by what actually is true (Putnam, 1983, p. 246). Here the contrast is the supposedly standardless cultural relativism often attributed to Rorty. Yet even those unsympathetic to Rorty, like Margolis, found Putnam's effort to secure normativity via a limit theory of truth or *Grenzbegriff* unpersuasive: "an arbitrary machine wheeled out to disallow the threat of relativism" (Margolis, 2002, p. 153).

Margolis concluded that Rorty's is the more consistent pragmatism than that of Putnam and Habermas.[14] He is clear that "the whole of our biology and cultural history fails to disclose any conceptually compelling grounds on which agentive norms (norms concerned with the exercise of what we regard as human autonomy or freedom or flourishing) may be objectively confirmed" (Margolis, 2021, p. 402). Yet unlike Rorty, Margolis is not a quietist about philosophy's normative role. For Margolis, the *sittlich* is "entitled to claim an objective function of its own, even with regard to the revision of agentive norms. Still, as thoroughly artifactual (contingent, changeable, parochial, contentious, disputed)," he continues, "it cannot be more than second best." In other words, "it can hardly be counted on to provide demonstrably privileged sources by which to validate our claims or legitimate our validative practices before any universal tribunal." We do, nevertheless, have at our disposal "some reasoned selection of the *sittlich* norms we deem promising and congenial" (Margolis, 2021, pp. 405–6).

I find Margolis's notion of *sittlich* normativity to be highly illuminative of Rorty's pragmatism. Yet where Rorty's stance seems to run aground is in the severity of his call for a "shift from epistemology to politics" (Rorty, 1989, p. 68). Rorty politicizes normativity such that there are no extra-communal sources of authority, viewing it as a function of our ethically and politically situated interestedness in the world, and claim-

[13] Koopman develops a "conception of critical inquiry whose basic categories of critique are *problem* and *response*—as an alternative to *position* and *negation* or *truth* and *error*" (Koopman, 2011a, p. 558).

[14] See, for example, Margolis (2002, Chapter 5, 2010, Chapter 3).

ing that his pragmatism's "account of the value of cooperative human inquiry has only an ethical base, not an epistemological or metaphysical one" (Rorty, 1991, p. 24). On Ramberg's generous reading, the implication is that questions about vocabulary choice are normative, in that there is "an irreducibly practical element—in the sense that they cannot be extricated, by abstraction, from what are essentially experientially derived considerations of what we think we want to be like, what we want our practices to become" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 47).

If Rortyan normativity resides precisely in the commitments implicated in who we are and what we hope to become, and how norms of better and worse are a function of our community, our traditions, our moral identity, and better versions of ourselves, the question is how on this view we can speak of any reasoned account of these norms.[15] As we know, for Haack (1995), without a clear standard for distinguishing rhetoric from genuine philosophical argument the epistemological framework for rational inquiry collapses. Similarly, for Putnam "by abandoning any notion of substantial correctness, Rorty is left without any leverage to motivate a rational change in view. Rejecting truth, as Putnam thinks, Rorty must face the consequence that nothing he says could really be an argument" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 26). A common feature of these critiques is that Rorty's over-politicized pragmatism has abandoned reason and the force of rational argument as essential philosophical contributions to inquiry and belief formation. Until Rorty's rejection of rational argumentation is overcome, his stance appears normatively toothless.[16]

2. Ramberg on Rorty's Normative Pragmatism

To see how Ramberg recovers a Rortyan sense of rationality, we can start with his appreciation for how Rorty's shift to politics does not leave epistemology behind entirely. Rather, Rorty reconceives epistemic normativity so that it is not isolable from our ethical and political practical embeddedness. As Ramberg notes, Rorty's pragmatism sets itself against "the regulative idea of a chief vocabulary, a scale, a hierarchy of forms of descrip-

[15] Indeed, Margolis discerns this dimension in Rorty but writes it off on account of Rorty's lack of systematic philosophical elaboration: "Rorty falls back to *sittlich* solidarity—ethnocentricity—but not as a reasoned philosophical option" (Margolis, 2021, p. 417). See also Penelas's (2010) case for Rortyan argumentation.

[16] Brandom claims that "Far from rejecting the notion of *reason*, Rorty seeks a broader, deeper conception of it" and actually calls him "the prophet of a particular kind of emancipatory reflective reason," but, alas, does not elaborate (Brandom, 2021, pp. xxv–xxvi).

tion, a hierarchy that may be discovered, that would be independently authoritative, and final" (Ramberg, 2011, p. 143). Ramberg's key insight here is to locate this critique within an explicitly normative background of freedom and agential choice.[17] As he writes, Rorty attacks the failure to acknowledge contingency as a reliance upon some "unexplicated notion of cognitive goodness," like "rational" or "justified" or "truth-indicating," that does "not tell us what to do in order to argue well, how to go about realizing our aim of being rational in our preferences, of holding the justified view, of uncovering the truth" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 33). Moreover, this stance:

> sells freedom short by diminishing our active participation in, and thus our willingness and ability to take responsibility for, any particular rendering of our relations to the world, to each other, and to ourselves. Ramberg, 2011, p. 143

Put another way, any ontological or metaphysical account, whatever its merits, cannot tell us "under what aspects we should care about things." Such determinations, Ramberg continues, are normative, but "retain for pragmatists an irreducibly practical element—in the sense that they cannot be extricated, by abstraction, from what are essentially experientially derived considerations of what we think we want to be like, what we want our practices to become" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 47). Conceding normative authority to standards thusly abstracted is to abdicate our own freedom and agency.

Rather than being a flight from philosophy and a particular normative conception of it, then, Rorty's stance represents a further cashing out of pragmatism's commitment to the primacy of practice that underscores its ethical dimensions. The source of the responsibility highlighted by Ramberg resides in our *sittlich* commitments, what Margolis aptly characterizes as "the completely vulnerable, earthbound contingency of the concept of normativity" (Margolis, 2021, p. 391). Put bluntly, Rorty politicizes normativity, as Chin has argued (Chin, 2018, p. 175). Rorty himself was never that explicit. But in an illuminating passage responding to Jaegwon Kim's criticism of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* for "socializing" truth, Rorty distinguished between saying "there are no such things as truth-makers" and saying "social approval is the only truth-maker."

[17] The recognition of an ineluctable realm of choice in which any appeal to philosophy for guidance will be necessarily circular was present since Rorty's earliest writings. See Voparil (2020) for a full account of these early commitments and their implications.

His stance, he clarified, asserts the former, not the latter. Rather than " 'socializing' truth," he wrote, "like James and Dewey, I am trying to moralize it" (Rorty, 2020, p. 151).

Viewing truth as a species of the good, in James's sense, has two important implications for understanding Rorty's pragmatism. The first is that epistemic normativity is not abandoned entirely, only located with a particular (contingent) moral and ethical frame. The second is that the beliefs and practices of actual communities become paramount. As Festenstein explains, "Questions about all forms of authority or normativity become political, then, in the sense that they become questions about the governing values and boundaries of a specific community" (Festenstein, 2003, p. 6).

Ramberg's signal contribution is to discern the revised conceptions of rationality and argumentation that nevertheless remain crucial within the Rortyan picture. He clarifies that Rorty's moves do not take him as far from a conception of reason as Rorty sometimes seemed to think:

> Any gloss—or analysis—of 'rationality' represents some particular application of our cognitive practices to themselves. Whatever normative force such a particular application has, inevitably derives from attachments to aspects of our actual cognitive practices. These attachments, in turn, can be rooted nowhere but in experience, in the interaction of our creature need and interest with the environment in which we function.
>
> Ramberg, 2004, p. 36

Importantly, he adds: "this does not mean that these practices cannot be meaningfully criticised or reformed—it implies only that they cannot be assessed wholesale, by some standard not of our own experiential devising" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 36). This stance is just another way of "stressing the point that philosophy is reflection on *praxis*" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 45).

Ramberg fills in the details of this novel reading by offering an important corrective—namely, that Rorty's talk about vocabulary choice is misleading in a fundamental sense. As Ramberg explains, Rorty often posited an opposition between "the intravocabularic movement of rational thought and the dynamics of vocabulary change" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 30)—in other words, the difference between arguments that take place within a vocabulary or language game and arguments about the validity of competing vocabularies. Because he rejected any notion of reason as "a built-in truth-seeking faculty," Rorty advocated "giving up the idea that

intellectual or political progress is rational, in any sense of 'rational' which is neutral between vocabularies." Yet he also maintained that "Within a language game, within a set of agreements about what is possible and important, we can usefully distinguish reasons for belief from causes for belief which are not reasons" (Rorty, 1989, pp. 47–8).

Ramberg discerns two problems within this familiar Rortyan view. The first is that the distinction between normative judgments within language games (or vocabularies) vs. normative judgments across or between them has no practical import within actual philosophical inquiries. This is equally true of Rorty's vaunted differentiation of normal and abnormal discourse. Ramberg's account of why is helpful:

> Vocabularies of active philosophical discourse are dynamically evolving processes, changing as we work our way through them; they are therefore not the sorts of things we stand over against and select between, nor are they, a fortiori, the sorts of things to which we may be antecedently committed. As fully thematized, conventional linguistic structures, vocabularies can only emerge clearly before us as objects of reflective deliberation and decision once we have a clear sense of the experience they make possible, when we know, that is to say, how to delineate and leave them behind. Ramberg, 2001, p. 31

If we only become aware of vocabularies in which we are enmeshed retrospectively, there is no practical norm that follows from the within-without or normal-abnormal distinctions.

The second problem is that this distinction leads Rorty to locate rationality only on the intravocabulary side. As a result, the process of moving from one vocabulary to another can only be irrational, or at least nonrational. Viewed from one angle, what Ramberg calls "Rorty's central historicist metaphilosophical point" about the nonrationality of intellectual progress is important: "there is no general method to be found here, no specification in abstracto of intellectual technique that can mitigate the sheer contingency of the kind of intellectual movement that led us from a teleological to a Galilean view of the world" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 32). Viewed from another, Rorty was mistaken to conclude from this historicist insight that argument and rationality have no bearing on intervocabulary matters.[18]

[18] Chin makes a related argument that Rorty's implicit normative resources are aimed at the problem of "internormative engagement" within an explicitly pluralistic context of

To be clear, Ramberg affirms with Rorty that "there is no other measure for critical evaluation of what we do or want than other things we do or want; there is no critique or justification that transcends the contingencies of need and interest, contingencies that give our vocabularies their shape" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 45). The key point here is that, contra Rorty, this stance "does not force us to give up the idea that philosophy has a constitutive relation to the norms of reason." "When we invoke norms of reason," Ramberg continues, "we are drawing on interestingly distinctive explanatory resources" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 45). It is this recognition of better and worse explanatory resources that survives Rorty's critique of antirepresentationalism and that constitutes the core of Rortyan normativity, even if Rorty generally was too wary of philosophical privilege to affirm it.[19]

One must squint to see a normative conception of philosophy in the constellation of seemingly nonphilosophical motifs alluded to thus far: interests, intuitions, purposes, "people's sense of who they are and what matters to them." Nevertheless, these dimensions of practical life constitute the core of Rortyan normativity. For Rorty the only "*normative Bezugspunkt*" or reference-point he has recourse to is one grounded in his particular moral identity: "one can give the notion of 'moral obligation' a respectable, secular, non-transcendental sense by relativizing it to a historically contingent sense of moral identity"—in his case, a moral identity that is the product of "a culture which worries about the fact that Amer-

competing normativities (Chin, 2018, pp. 4–6). See also Gómez Salazar (2016) on Rorty and "normative pluralism." The Rortyan resources and "method" of internormative engagement that Chin excavates are consistent with Ramberg's account, with the caveat that their seemingly opposed stances on "method" derive from different uses of the term—one common in political theory and the other to philosophy. I don't think Chin would object to Ramberg's point that "As soon as we try to beef up the notion of argument to make it rich enough to settle what is or isn't genuine philosophy through methodological considerations, we find ourselves shuttling once again between characterizations of good argument whose terminological circularity renders them toothless, empties them of content, and conceptions that turn out to beg substantive questions at issue between opposed views, and so have significantly more bite than we are bargaining for" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 34).

[19] Stuart Rosenbaum insightfully argued that the best way to understand Rortyan rationality is to "think of it simply as the exercise of a kind of skill, as the exercise of a knowing-how which must forever escape capture in a knowing-that net." On this view, normative standards "are not independent of successful practice of the skill; and formulation of standards is a consequence of the successful practice." In other words, the "test of success is simply successful negotiation of the set of problems, obstacles, or what have you, that having the skill suits one to negotiate" (Rosenbaum, 1986, p. 97). See Voparil (2025) for a fuller account of Rosenbaum's reading and the normativity of Rortyan "muddling through."

ican black slavery and European pogroms seemed sensible and right to previous generations of white Christians" (Rorty, 2000b, p. 61).

The normativity within this picture emerges from our embeddedness within the ethical relations and moral commitments of a particular community's practices, rather than from cognitive sources that exist outside of those moral communities and their practices. This is the fundamental difference between Rorty and Habermas, Putnam, Haack, et al. They locate normativity in conceptions of truth or reason that derive their corrective power from their purported neutrality and independence in relation to our practices; Rorty sees such notions as "empty compliments" and manifestations of authoritarianism to boot. As Ramberg explains, " 'rationality' and 'truth' are not notions that have substantive normative content at all independently of our concrete evaluations of particular instances of cognitive virtue, evaluations which must remain [...] interest and purpose relative" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 37). Rorty was fairly explicit about this. But his responses were taken to be further corroboration, from an outside-view of the normative, of his pragmatism's inability to transcend an ethnocentric cultural relativism.

What Ramberg helps us see is the coherence of the implicit conception of pragmatic normativity endemic to Rorty's stance. For all of Rorty's protestations against the idea of philosophical argumentation, Ramberg reveals how an "idea of philosophical argumentation as defined with reference to a normatively significant ideal of rationality" remains available and indeed central to Rorty's thinking (Ramberg, 2001, p. 40). The key is to appreciate the shift from a practice-extrinsic to a practice-intrinsic picture of normativity. Within the Rortyan frame, "any characterization of rationality or of warrant sufficiently abstract to appear philosophical will, by virtue of this fact, be normatively impotent." The reason for this, Ramberg continues, is that any such characterization "will not tell us how to acquire fewer false beliefs, or desire better things, or act more wisely" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 39). Nevertheless, there are reasoned standards for these corrections, which can be defended through argument, already implicit within our normative entanglement with our own contingent interests and practices. As Rorty wrote,

> If one drops the idea that there is a common ground called 'the evidence,' one is still far from saying the one's person's web is as good as another. One can still debate the issues on all the familiar grounds, bringing up once again [...] all the varied

> advantages and disadvantages of the two views [...] One will muddle through, hoping some reweaving will happen on both sides, and that some consensus may emerge.
>
> Rorty, 1991, p. 67

Transcendence of our entwinement with this particularity and contextuality comes at the price of normative vacuity.

3. Rortyan Pragmatic Philosophy and Democratic Normativity

With Ramberg's insights in hand, we now can return to a Rortyan take on philosophy's normative role. A key tension Ramberg identifies in his sympathetically critical interpretation of Rorty's thought is the disjuncture between, on the one hand, Rorty's Deweyan aspirations for a reconstructed practice of philosophy oriented to the social and moral problems of the day, and on the other his reluctance to advance and defend a normative conception of what philosophy should be and do. As Ramberg explains, "Rorty's attempt to redescribe philosophy, to make us reconceive what we are doing when we philosophize, is at odds with the empty tolerance that arises from the thought that there is no right or wrong way to characterize philosophy" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 25). Indeed, Rorty's stance that there is no inherent philosophical subject matter, nor perennial philosophical questions that we are compelled to address, leads to the conclusion that philosophy is "just what we philosophy professors do," where the only differences between philosophical perspectives are "stylistic" (Rorty, 1982, p. 220). The implication is that there is little more to philosophy than "hit lists of texts and sociological reports" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 38).

Ramberg rightly perceives that this stance, which he calls Rorty's "vacuous pluralism" about philosophy (Ramberg, 2001, p. 29), is clearly inadequate to Rorty's own aims for his pragmatism: "the point of philosophy should be to serve the human good, and that means, for a Deweyan pragmatist, contributing to our conception of and prospects for attaining a society of justice, equality and individual freedom" (Ramberg, 2017, p. 147). As we have seen, there was little explicit development by Rorty of a normative conception of philosophy to advance these ends. Ramberg's contribution is to cash out the details of the normative commitments implicit in Rorty's vision, particularly in relation to notions of rationality and argumentation which Rorty was so disinclined to espouse. Moreover, Ramberg does this in ways consistent with Rorty's commitments to human agency and our ethical relations to other human beings.

To spell this perspective out, we can outline chief candidates for the normative function of philosophy and appeals to truth:

(1) To motivate a rational change or improvement in belief

(2) To authorize a standard of correctness or rightness that is substantial

(3) To distinguish between what we take to be true and what is true

(4) To separate rhetoric from rational argument

(5) To provide epistemic guidance in belief formation

(6) To institute a method of reasoning that structures rational inquiry

Rorty's conception of philosophy is most directly attuned to (5). He clearly rejects (2) as well as (3), at least in the terms in which the latter typically is specified. We shall see that he need not abandon (1), (4), and (6). A full grasp of Rorty's position, however, also illustrates how the above list is normatively inadequate in the face of his Deweyan commitment to philosophy as an instrument of social change oriented to enlarging human freedom.[20]

As we know, a primary target of Rorty's critique of metaphysics and ontology is the assumption that they will reveal a rank order or hierarchy of descriptive vocabularies that is somehow foundationally justified. As Ramberg explains, not only does this "sell human freedom short," by restricting the scope of agency and choice, "we diminish our selves—our ability both to shape and to embrace our fate—by maintaining a demand for legitimization in terms of something beyond human interest" (Ramberg, 2011, p. 137). Brandom puts it this way: for Rorty, "*normative* [as opposed to causal] constraint is wholly our creature" (Brandom, 2021, p. xxii). By locating normativity within what Ramberg calls "vocabulary constituting interests," then, intellectual authoritarianism is avoided (Ramberg, 2006, p. 228). On this view, whatever philosophy does, it "cannot be construed as a matter of gauging the relative referential success of various descriptive practices. It becomes, rather, a matter of providing characterizations of the interests we have in referring to items of this or that sort" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 13).

The rub is how to characterize the normativity of these "vocabulary constituting interests." In the previous section we established how Rorty's

[20] See Voparil (2022a, Chapter 3).

effort to "moralize" truth entails situating it within the moral and ethical commitments of a particular community. Rorty's claim that cooperative human inquiry has "only an ethical base, not an epistemological or metaphysical one" (Rorty, 1991, p. 24) means that "questions of what sort of predictive vocabulary to apply when, and to what—or whom, are questions that by their nature will not be contained within the scope of theoretical criteria of theory-choice" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 47). The normative grounds for such choices, therefore, are furnished by the ethical base of our community of inquiry. Rather than starkly opposing this ethical base to the epistemological and metaphysical, though, as Rorty sometimes suggested, we can hold, following Margolis, that our philosophical commitments are inseparable from "the entrenched habits of interpreted history, prudential interests, and envisioned possibilities of human intervention and evolving experience" (Margolis, 2021, p. 396). Any epistemology and metaphysics severed from this practical normativity cannot tell us "under what aspects we should care about things" (Ramberg, 2004, p. 47), since for Rorty there is no "*normative Bezugspunkt*" other than our "historically contingent sense of moral identity" (Rorty, 2000b, p. 61).

To illuminate the conception of reasoned discourse that Rorty's pragmatism requires, Ramberg turns to Gadamer to outline a conception of argumentation that aims not at producing agreement but understanding. He makes vivid the difference between seeking to defeat an opponent and claim victory vs. seeking self-critical examination that expands the available discursive space and opens new imaginative pathways. What results is "a conception of philosophical rationality that is a moral stance rather than a methodological notion" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 37) and more in keeping with Rorty's own emphases on generating new vocabularies and on recognizing the moral or ethical background of dialogical engagement—specifically, the nature and extent of our ethical relations to our conversation partners, including those whom we exclude or ignore.[21]

Returning to our list of chief candidates, thanks to Ramberg we can appreciate how a Rortyan perspective need not deny that improvements in belief can be rational (1), that rational argument has utility (4), and that there are forms of reasoning conducive to inquiry (6), as long as these philosophical tools are recalibrated in moral and ethical rather than methodologically-privileged ways. This means abandoning "the misleading contrast between rational argument and creative, vocabulary-innova-

[21] Huetter-Almerigi and Ramberg (2023) refer to this as "expansive solidarity."

tive reflection" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 41). Instead of scuttling truth, it means cultivating "an improved ability to see competing truths in perspective, to weigh their relative significance anew. To do so, we need to stretch, alter, and renew our vocabularies" (Kraugerud & Ramberg, 2010, p. 65). It means that argument aims not primarily at agreement but at understanding, not at defeating an opponent but achieving illumination, and that it proceeds not only via logic but by appealing to sentiment. And it means putting non-transcendendable contingency at the forefront and recognizing the full significance of keeping the conversation going: "neither the significance nor indeed even the content of what we say is settled as long as people continue to talk in response" (Ramberg, 2001, pp. 35–7).

For Ramberg, the Rortyan normative conception of philosophy demands a willingness to listen to others. To quote Ramberg, "For Rorty, intellectual authoritarianism is the impulse to short-circuit the effort to seek a communicative resolution of differences of views and interests, by invoking a justification to act on, or against, or in spite of, others, without conversing with them" (Ramberg, 2017, p. 148).[22] Central to challenging authoritarianism—in Rorty's jargon, subordinating ourselves to nonhuman authority—is "to counteract theoretical impulses that threaten to reduce our willingness or ability to listen to others, to listen in that [Gadamerian] hermeneutical sense" (Ramberg, 2017, p. 148). On this view, the normative thrust of Rorty's pragmatism resides in the "effort to philosophically strengthen our capacity and willingness to listen to those who think and speak differently from ourselves" (Ramberg, 2017, p. 148).[23]

While Ramberg doesn't make this connection explicitly, his reading confers normative significance on Rorty's frequent allusions to our assessment of whom we regard as "conversation partners." Implicit here is a standard of normative assessment that gives Rorty a (local) version of candidate # 2. As Koopman has explained, "the correctness of the employment of a concept, which of course can change over time as we reapply the concept in novel situations by coming up with new usages of words, hinges not on the way in which our words track something ultimate in reality itself but rather merely on the extent to which we use our words in

[22] While I don't have the space to pursue it here, a very interesting related perspective is Carl Sach's account of Rorty's aversion to "normative violence." Relating it to Miranda Fricker's notion of epistemic injustice, Sachs explains that "normative violence generally involves positioning oneself as enjoying cognitively privileged access to ontology, hence as exempting oneself from the flux and contingency of cultural politics" (Sachs, 2017, p. 287).

[23] See also Voparil (2020).

ways that our conversation partners themselves endorse in the context of conversations" (Koopman, 2011b, p. 72).

Rorty's attention to the ethical dimension evaluates our judgments about who counts as a competent member of our community of justification (e.g., Rorty, 2000b, p. 15). Without intentional efforts to expand both our community and the logical space of moral deliberation, those whom we have ignored will remain unacknowledged and, as a result, our beliefs unimproved. It is captured by Chin's insight that for Rorty "*rationality is an ethical relation among groups*—a disposition toward new and existing conversation partners that frames their engagement in reflexive equality" (Chin, 2018, p. 217).[24] This gloss helps make sense of Rorty's claim that "being rational and acquiring a larger loyalty are two descriptions of the same activity" (Rorty, 2007, p. 53). Taking other human beings seriously, to use one of Rorty's hallmark phrases, "prioritizes our ethical relations to other groups in the game of giving and asking for reasons" (Chin, 2018, p. 186). On this view, Rorty's objection to Habermas's privileging of the force of the better argument is that it ignores the ethical dimension of rationality that manifests as "a willingness to engage in intersubjective construction, in deeper, reflexive relations with others" (Chin, 2018, pp. 185–86). As Chin sums it up, on a Rortyan view "rational justification always involves the ethical choice of which terms and vocabularies to employ and whom to speak to" (Chin, 2018, pp. 219–20).

Recognizing the primacy of the ethical translates into a clear directive for philosophers to attend to our concrete relations to and reliance upon other human beings within the space of reasons. As Ramberg explains, "Philosophical rationality cannot be methodologized because it is fundamentally a moral response to the essential incompleteness of our discursive efforts, the dependence of all our thinking on what others will do or not do in response to the words we offer" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 38). That is, "No descriptive strategy or technique, no method, no decision to change topics, subject, or style can make what we say less dependent on the living indeterminacy of the contributions of those who keep making it possible for us to say it" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 41).

If we listen ethically and practice epistemic humility, *pace* Habermas, then remaining within "*the boundaries of her own group*" need not be rela-

[24] For Calcaterra, human vulnerability to humiliation and suffering can be seen as the only "universal" ethical criterion in Rorty's pragmatism, "provided that it is not a universality based on reason but on the functional unity of the affective and the 'rational' spheres" (Calcaterra, 2019, p. 121).

tivistic or without motivating force for the improvement of belief. Instead of implying a rudderless relativism in need of an external compass to keep it from "anything goes," Rortyan ethnocentrism recognizes that our culture and tradition confer normativity. These normative ties to others are ethical *and* epistemic in that they "demand of us a willingness to put our thoughts in the hands of others, and to be willing to stand, in some measure, refuted" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 38). Keeping the conversation going in Rorty's sense is to recognize "the shared effort which relates the remarks of one interlocutor to those of another, however much they disagree" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 39).

This Rortyan reconstruction of rationality along ethical lines offers pragmatists a stronger account of how our community can be expanded to excluded others than Habermas's appeal to a "rational motive" for inclusion. As Festenstein explains, "the excluded group needs some purchase on the moral imagination of the dominant, and this in turn means that the latter must to some degree view the former as part of the same community, 'one of us' " (Festenstein, 2003, p. 12). This is why Rorty insisted upon the value for social movements and intellectual revolutions of "*un*warranted" assertions that become warranted only as our norms and standards evolve: "pragmatism allows for the possibility of expanding logical space, and thereby for an appeal to courage and imagination rather than to putatively neutral criteria" (Rorty, 1998, pp. 59, 218). As Festenstein puts it: "Rorty's point is that criticism has no normative grip, in the sense of latching on to the specific reasons, beliefs and dispositions of an agent, as a matter of anything but contingent acculturation and persuasion" (Festenstein, 2003, p. 13). There are no neutral standards or transcendental norms outside of the community's beliefs and values that motivate the improvement of belief besides those of another community, real or imagined, to which we recognize ethical relations of responsibility. Correcting or replacing existing norms nevertheless always is possible via envisioning a new sense of community.

While we may not have at our disposal noncircular reasons or a knockdown argument to convince the Nazi or the segregationist they are wrong, Rortyan pragmatists are not without normative resources: "From within the perspective of [Rorty's] ethnocentric liberalism [. . .] the segregationist is vile and should be overthrown. But it also recognizes that there is no sense in which the segregator is rationally compelled to acknowledge this himself, by the lights of *his* identity or community" (Festenstein, 2003, pp. 12–13). Such persuasion demands narratives—"sad and sentimental

stories" (Rorty, 1998, p. 172)—and other ways of remaking moral identities and hence the norms to which our community practices.

The account of Rortyan democratic normativity I have sought to develop enables Rorty to achieve his Deweyan aspirations for the practice of philosophy by highlighting the normative force of his familiar calls for novel vocabularies and imaginative redescriptions. The key Rambergian insight I have built on is that these calls are not novelty for novelty's sake, nor outside or an alternative to rationality, but themselves a reasoned philosophical operation. On this conception, rather than jettisoning philosophical rationality the Rortyan perspective reconceives it as moral rather than methodological, ethical rather than solely epistemological. That is, the normative thrust of Rortyan pragmatic philosophy resides not in privileged philosophical safeguards, be it a standard of correctness or distinct method of inquiry, but in the nature and extent of ethical relations and practices that comprise its use. As Ramberg writes, "for Rorty, it is a moral imperative, not a philosophical one, to engage in anti-authoritarian metaphilosophical criticism, and to provide ways of describing human practice that foster democratic attitudes, the art of listening" (Ramberg, 2017, p. 149).

The epistemic and ethical dimensions of democratic normativity underscore what Ramberg takes to be Rorty's profound effort to elucidate "the moral nakedness of our decisions to include and exclude voices from the conversation"—in other words, to deny that any philosophical standards and commitments which result in the exclusion of others as conversation partners are "groundable in anything but expedience" (Ramberg, 2001, p. 40). As both Rorty and Ramberg fundamentally grasped, to our great benefit, to think or do otherwise is to sell human freedom short.

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