An Arc of Thought:

From Rorty's Eliminative Materialism to his Pragmatism

Richard Rorty used to say that he was a perfect example of Isaiah Berlin's hedgehog: he had really only ever had one idea. Considering the vast range and diversity of the topics Rorty addressed—encompassing epistemology, metaphysics, the philosophy of mind, the whole history of philosophy and of the culture more generally, literature, politics, and more—such a claim might seem literally unbelievable. But I think there is a core of truth to it. For there is an almost ballistic trajectory described by his thought from very early on—well before *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*—that brought him to the mature form of his pragmatism. The later work can be seen as the result of an extended meditation on the lessons that could be drawn from the earlier work. Rorty relentlessly followed out the logic of his argument, no matter where it led, continuing to draw consequences long after the switch on most thinkers' internal compasses would have flipped from the *modus ponens* to the *modus tollens* position. Indeed, one trait he shared with his Princeton colleague David Lewis is the frequency with which they, more than almost any other philosophers of their generation, found it necessary to remind their audiences that "an incredulous stare is not an argument," as Lewis memorably put it. Of course, the sort of intense, resolute, ruthless singlemindedness that regularly provokes that kind of stare has been the source of some of our greatest philosophical high adventures—one need only think of Spinoza, Hobbes, and Berkeley, or of Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche.

We have a pretty good idea where Rorty eventually got to.[1] He thought that the biggest contribution philosophers had ever made to the culture more generally was the Enlightenment. What was important about that conceptual sea-change is that we gave up the idea of the norms governing human conduct having their source in something non-human (their being something imposed on us by a divine will) and came to see that we ourselves need to take responsibility for those norms—that we need to deliberate with each other and decide what sort of beings we want to be, and so what we ought to do. Rorty was finally led to call for a *second* Enlightenment: one that would extend to our *theoretical* conception of *knowledge* the same insight that animated the first Enlightenment's constructive criticism of traditional ways of construing the *practical* sphere. Here, too, Rorty thinks, we need to find ways to free ourselves from the picture of humans as responsible to something non-human. On the theoretical side the non-human putative authority to which we find ourselves in thrall is not God, but objective Reality. Of course, no reconceptualization can free us from the friction of what Dewey called "problematic situations." But we should understand that constraint as a feature of our practices, not something external to them, binding us from the outside. We need collectively to deliberate and decide what we should *say* in very much the same way the first Enlightenment taught us we need collectively to deliberate and decide what we should *do*. And the reason is the same in both cases: Anything else is unworthy of our dignity as self-determining creatures.

What line of thought drove Rorty to this astonishing conclusion? Here is my hypothesis: I conjecture that it starts with the ideas behind the eliminative materialism he had arrived at already by 1970. Red-diaper baby that he had been, Rorty was always going to be a conceptual revolutionary. His first target was the philosophy of mind, where he singlehandedly came up

[1] I am thinking of the line of thought Rorty presented under the title "Anti-Authoritarianism in Epistemology and Ethics" in his 1996 Ferrater Mora Lectures at the University of Girona.

with a genuinely new response to the hoary mind-body problem.[2] Picking up a trope from Hegel, Nietzsche had famously announced that God is dead. What was novel about this was not its atheism; far from it. It was rather its commitment to there having *been* a God, but one whose very existence depended on our thought and practices. When we moderns began to live, act, and believe in different ways, God went out of our lives—and so, the radical thought went, out of existence entirely. Just so, Rorty claimed (as against, for instance, Wittgensteinian behaviorists) that we do have Cartesian minds. But that ontological fact depends on our social practices. It is intelligible—and even, perhaps, advisable—that we should change those practices in ways that would entail that we "lose our minds."

Rorty takes Descartes to have introduced a distinctively modern conception of the mind (as part of the "subjective turn" that preceded our "linguistic" one). The genus of Cartesian "pensées" that subsumes phenomena otherwise as diverse as thoughts and sensations as species is defined by "Incorrigibility as the Mark of the Mental"—as the title of his classic essay has it. No-one else is in a position to override my sincere, contemporaneous first-person reports of my occurrent mental events. (This is, of course, the very feature that led Wittgenstein to deny the intelligibility of construing any our utterances as *reports* of *things* that exhibit this peculiar sort of privacy.) The thought that is decisive for Rorty is double-barreled. Its first element is the idea that incorrigibility in this sense is a *normative* phenomenon: a matter of the incontestable *authority* of certain reports. The second is a social *pragmatist* idea he credits originally already to the Enlightenment: that normative statuses such as authority are always instituted by social practices. It is (contra Wittgenstein) perfectly intelligible that some of our utterances should both be reports and incontestably authoritative. That is not, however, because of the antecedent

[2] Contrast functionalism, which had many fathers.

intrinsic metaphysical or ontological character of what they are reports of. It is because we can say just what we have to *do* in order *treat* a class of our utterances as incontestably authoritative reports: as incorrigible. So treating them institutes that kind of normative status. But it is our creature. Rorty thinks the ancient Greeks did not have Cartesian minds. And what we have given, by arranging our practices so as to institute norms with this distinctive character, we can take away, if we but change those practices so as to allow other sorts of evidence to have probative evidential weight in contesting the reports previously treated as incorrigible. Ironically, and radically, Rorty here makes the Cartesian's ownmost, innermost sanctum subject to the plastic power claimed sometimes claimed for it over other things, for instance by

> God-appointed Berkeley that proved all things a dream,
> That this pragmatical, preposterous pig of a world, its farrow that so solid seem,
> Must vanish on the instant if the mind but change its theme;

as Rorty's favorite poet Yeats put it.[3] The Cartesian mind is real, but it is a contingent, optional product of our mutable social practices.

I think that at this point Rorty began an extended investigation of the relation between what he came to call "vocabularies," on the one hand, and ontology, on the other—a relation that the example of eliminative materialism had shown is far too complex to be captured by talk of a "theoretical direction of fit," according to which how things anyway objectively are has authority over what we should say about it. His way forward was guided by looking at ontology through normative lenses and understanding normativity in a social pragmatist way. From the vantage-

[3] *The Winding Stair*, "Blood and the Moon."

point afforded by those strategic methodological commitments, a three-sorted ontology appears. *Subjective* (Cartesian) things are those over which each individual knowing-and-acting subject has inconstestable authority. *Social* things are those over which *communities* have incontestable authority. So one cannot intelligibly claim, say, that the Kwakiutl are *wrong* about what an acceptable greeting-gesture in their tribe is. There are no facts about that sort of social propriety over and above their collective practical attitudes of taking or treating some gestures as greetings. Finally, *objective* things are those over which *neither* individuals nor communities have incontestable authority, but which *themselves* exercise authority over claims that in the normative sense that speakers and thinkers are *responsible to* them count as being *about* those things.

I am now in a position to formulate more carefully my principal thesis about the argumentative thread that led Rorty from his early to his later thought. I think he came to apply essentially the same considerations, *mutatis mutandis*, that he had made for the *subjective* province of this threefold ontology to the *objective* province. For once ontological distinctions have been drawn in normative terms of *authority* and *responsibility*, social pragmatism about norms means according a certain substantial categorial privilege to the ontological category of the *social*. 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*. The rules and practices for making and contesting various kinds of claim belong to the linguistic communities that deploy the vocabularies in question. So among the ontological kinds of the individual-subjective, the social-intersubjective, and the objective, the social is *primus inter pares*. (Compare the judiciary,

which at least since Marbury vs. Madison, has been taken to exercise the ultimate authority to determine what falls within the proper purview of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the U.S. government.)

What sort of position does one end up in, if one tries to make the same move with respect to the category of the *objective* that Rorty made for the *subjective* with his eliminative materialism? I think he actually oscillates between two positions. Here it is important to remember that some of Rorty's views are more outrageous than others—but none are less. The more outrageous view is that the structure of authority and responsibility that constitutes objectivity is actually incoherent. When we think from a pragmatist point of view about what it would require, we see that it is not possible for us to institute such a structure. For it requires granting authority to something non-human, something that is merely *there*, to intrinsically normatively inert *things* that belong in a box with Wittgenstein's "sign-post considered just as a piece of wood." A fair amount of Rorty's rhetoric seems to commit him to a view of this stripe. What *is* intelligible is a cognitive theoretical *consensus* on various points (contingent, partial, and temporary though it may be). But the idea of something that cannot enter into a conversation with us, cannot give and ask for reasons, somehow *dictating* what *we ought* to say is not one we can in the end make sense of. It is the idea that we are subject (responsible) to an ultimately *irrational* authority—one whose cognitive *contentfulness* is, just because of that irrationality, unintelligible. Reality as the modern philosophical tradition has construed it ("just as a piece of wood") is the wrong *kind* of thing to exercise rational authority. That is what we do to *each other*.

That is the lesson we ought to have learned about God from the first Enlightenment, and it will take a second Enlightenment to teach us how to apply that lesson to Objective Reality: the successor candidate for our subjection forwarded not now by the Church, but by Science. Rorty

often consoled himself after attacks on his intellectual character forwarded by those who saw in such views a dangerous irrationalism (as though rejecting the idea of external non-human constraint meant we could no longer make sense of the idea of constraints manifested in our giving and asking each other for reasons) with the thought of those philosophes the first time around who were confidently condemned as immoralists on the grounds that they maintained that matter contained its own principles of motion.[4] We eventually learned, after all, that the sort of atheism involved in demoting that function from the divine to the mundane sphere need not lead to running-wild-in-the-streets immoralism. Perhaps someday we could also learn to put aside our initial terror and learn to live with a reconstrual of the features of our practice that the normative structure of objectivity was originally postulated to explain.

But this is not the only way to apply earlier lessons to the case at hand. Perhaps it is a cultural advance for us to find it unintelligible that a mere fact—even the fact (supposing it to be a fact), that God created us, along with everything else—should suffice to give Him *moral* authority over us, to determine who we should be and how we should live our lives. How, after all, in a post-feudal age, are we supposed to understand the connection between the two that is curled up tightly in the conception of our Lord? But if we look not to the original Enlightenment, but to eliminative materialism for our model, it seems a different lesson emerges. For the claim was precisely *not* that the structure of individual *subjective* authority that instituted mental events as incorrigible was *unintelligible*. On the contrary: we can understand exactly how we must take or treat each other in order to institute that structure and so the ontological category of things that exercise authority of that kind. The claim was rather that that structure is

[4] Cf. David Israel's wonderful book about Spinoza, *The Radical Enlightenment* [ref.].

contingent and *optional*, and that it is accordingly *possible*, and under conceivable circumstances even *advisable*, to *change* our practices so as to institute a *different* structure of authority.

What if one took up *that* attitude toward the normative structure that constitutes *objectivity*? On this line, one would not deny that the notion of objectivity *makes sense*. One would rather investigate what structure of social practices deserves to count as one where we have instituted a special dimension of normative appraisal of our performances such that authority over whether they are correct along that dimension has been deferred to some (in general) non-human *things*, which we then in this normative sense count as talking or thinking *about*. One would look to see whether this normative social structure of practices, once identified, can be seen to be *optional*, in the sense that it has alternatives that are at least *intelligible*. And one would then consider whether there are any considerations or circumstances that could make it attractive, advisable, or effective to *alter* or *discard* practices exhibiting that structure, in favor of some that have quite another shape.

The key point is that the social pragmatist claim that normativity is always instituted by our practices and practical attitudes—that normative statuses are ultimately social statuses—does not entail that only the humans who institute those statuses can exhibit or possess them. The notion of responsibility to some non-human authority is not in principle undercut by the Enlightenment pragmatist insight that any such status depends on human attitudes of taking or treating something *as* authoritative. Consider oracles. Early Chinese shamans ceremoniously put tortoise shells in the fire, and then inspected the resulting cracks for similarities to ideographic characters, searching for authoritative answers to weighty factual questions about the future. In Europe, comets and the sightings of rare birds were on occasion invested with tremendous normative significance and purport. Insofar as normative significance *is* up to us, we

can put it where we like—however unwisely. The question, it seems to me, is not *whether* we can invest authority in non-human things: *take* ourselves in practice to be responsible to them in a way that *makes* us responsible to them. Of course we can. It is rather *how* we can institute a dimension of assessment of our sayings and doings that is properly understood as granting *semantic* and *epistemic* authority over their correctness, to how it is with the things that we then, in that distinctive normative sense, count as thinking and talking *about*. What structure or constellation of social practical attitudes amounts to taking or treating some things as *representing*s, in the sense that assessments of their *correctness* depend on (must appeal to, are responsible to) objects and facts that are thereby *represented* by them?

There will be as many answers to that question as there are senses of 'representation.' If we have learned anything since Descartes put that concept at the center of modern philosophical attention, it is that there are many such senses. We can then ask of each of them, to what extent acknowledging the responsibility of some of our states, for their correctness in that sense, to various aspects of the world (including our fellow discursive practitioners) is a contingent, optional affair. What sort of expressive impoverishment would we condemn ourselves to if we gave up acknowledging (and so instituting) the distinctively *semantic* structure of authority and responsibility to largely non-human things and facts characteristic of the *referential* species of representation? I think we still have a long way to go (well into the fourth century since Descartes) in delineating that species of normative status, and so in answering the critical question Rorty is asking about it.

For what it is worth, my own answer in *Making It Explicit* is that once it is properly understood we can see that the referential representational dimension of semantic content is a central, essential, and unavoidable aspect of the game of giving and asking for reasons distinctive

of discursive practice as such. It is a transcendental feature of talking in that it is a necessary condition of the possibility of interlocutors navigating across the inevitable (and productive) differences in background commitments between speaker and hearer, so that we can use each other's assertions as premises in our own inferences. It is constitutive of the notion of information that can be conveyed by making claims to each other.

On this reading, Rorty's two principal theses are compatible with acknowledging the existence of an objective, representational structure of semantic authority. For, first, the referential, representational, denotational dimension of intentionality is understood as a *normative* structure. What we are talking or thinking *about*, what we *refer* to or *represent*, is that to which we grant a characteristic sort of *authority* over the *correctness* of our commitments, along a distinctive dimension of normative assessment we institute by adopting those practical attitudes of making ourselves responsible to what we in that sense count as making commitments *about*. And, second, we understand doing that, making ourselves responsible to non-human things, acknowledging their authority, as something *we* do—as conferring on them a distinctively *semantic* kind of normative status by our adoption of social-practical normative attitudes. The only question that remains is one of social engineering: what shape do our practices need to take in order to institute *this* kind of normative status? That is a Deweyan question that Rorty would have welcomed.