

## Rorty Passages

### From "Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism"

There is a useful analogy to be drawn between the pragmatists' criticism of the idea that truth is a matter of correspondence to the intrinsic nature of reality and the Enlightenment's criticism of the idea that morality is a matter of correspondence to the will of a Divine Being. **The pragmatists' anti-representationalist account of belief is, among other things, a protest against the idea that human beings must humble themselves before something non-human, whether the Will of God or the Intrinsic Nature of Reality. Seeing anti-representationalism is a version of anti-authoritarianism** permits one to appreciate an analogy which was central to John Dewey's thought : the analogy between ceasing to believe in Sin and ceasing to accept the distinction between Reality and Appearance. [7]

Dewey was convinced that the romance of democracy, a romance built on the idea that the point of a human life is free cooperation with fellow humans, required a more thorough-going version of secularism than either Enlightenment rationalism or nineteenth-century positivism had achieved. As Dewey saw it, **whole-hearted pursuit of the democratic ideal requires us to set aside any authority save that of a consensus of our fellow humans.** [7]

To take the traditional correspondentist notion of Truth with full seriousness, you must agree with Clough, that "It fortifies my soul to know/That, though I perish, Truth is so." You must feel uneasy at William James' suggestion that "ideas... become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relations with other parts of our experience." Those who resonate to Clough's lines **think of Truth—or, more precisely, Reality as it is in itself, the object accurately represented by true sentences—as an authority we must respect.** [8]

The best way to get into this way of thinking is become an epistemological sceptic - to start worrying about whether human language is capable of representing the way Reality is in itself, whether we are calling Reality by the right names. To worry in this way, you need to take seriously the question of whether our descriptions of Reality may not be all too human - whether Reality (and therefore Truth as well) may not stand aloof, beyond the reach of the sentences in which we formulate our beliefs. You must be prepared to distinguish, at least in principle, between the sort of belief which embodies Truth and beliefs which are merely tools, beliefs which merely increase your chances of happiness. You must read James' remark that "the trail of the human serpent is over all" as a confession of despair. [8]

**[Dewey] viewed the theory that truth is correspondence to Reality, and the theory that moral goodness is correspondence to the Divine Will, as equally dispensable.**

For Dewey, both theories add nothing to our ordinary, workaday, fallible ways of telling right from wrong, and truth from falsity. [9]

I take the anti-representationalist view of thought and language to have been motivated, in James' case, by the realization that **the need for choice between competing representations can be replaced by tolerance for a plurality of non-competing descriptions, descriptions which serve different purposes** and which are to be evaluated by reference to their utility in fulfilling these purposes rather than by their "fit" with the objects being described.

If James' watchword was tolerance, then Dewey's was...anti-authoritarianism. His revulsion from the sense of sinfulness which his religious upbringing had produced led Dewey to campaign, throughout his life, against the view that human beings needed to measure themselves against something non-human. [14]

Dewey's stories are always stories of the progress from the need of human communities to rely on a non-human power to their realization that all they need is faith in themselves; they are stories about the substitution of fraternity for authority. His stories about history as the story of increasing freedom are stories about how we lost our sense of sin, and also our hope of another world, and **gradually acquired the ability to find the same spiritual significance in cooperation between mortals that our ancestors had found in their relation to an immortal being.** [14-15]

Freud's account of the origin of conscience provides a good handle by which to grasp Dewey's motives. For the dialectical standoff in contemporary analytic philosophy between pragmatists and their "realist" opponents (Nagel, Dworkin, Searle, et al.) is usefully thought of as the reciprocal unintelligibility to one another of two very different types of people. The first are those whose highest hopes are for union with something beyond the human - something which is the source of one's superego, and which has the authority to free one of guilt and shame. The second are those whose highest hopes are for a better human future, to be attained by more fraternal cooperation between human beings. These two types of people are conveniently describable in Freudian terms: they are the people who think subjection to an authority-figure is necessary to lead a properly human life and those who see such a life as requiring freedom from any such subjection. [15]

Hans Blumenberg has argued that the Renaissance was a period in which people turned from eternity to futurity. This turn is the one which, in my view, is fully accomplished, in the area of philosophy, only by pragmatism. The de-eternalization of human hope had to wait four hundred years to become philosophically explicit. **The representationalist tradition in philosophy which was dominant in those four hundred years hoped that inquiry would put us in touch, if not with the eternal, at least with something which, in Bernard Williams' phrase, "is there anyway" - something non-perspectival, something which is what it is apart from human needs and interests.** Pragmatists do not think inquiry can put us more in touch with non-human reality than we have always been, for **the only sense of "being in touch"**

they recognize is causal interaction (as opposed to accurate representation). [16]

To devote oneself to getting knowledge as opposed to opinion - to grasping unchanging structure as opposed to awareness of mutable and colorful content - one has to believe that one will be cleansed, purified of guilt and shame, by getting closer to something like Truth or Reality. When opponents of pragmatism say that pragmatists do not believe in truth, they are saying that pragmatists do not grasp the need for such closeness, and therefore do not see the need for purification. They are, their metaphysically-inclined opponents suggest, *shameless* in their willingness to revel in the mutable and impermanent. Like women and children, they seem to have no super-ego, no conscience, no spirit of seriousness. [18]

### **From unpublished "Preface to *Pragmatism: A View*"**

The lectures in this volume attempt to envisage what philosophy would be like if our culture became secularized through and through—if the idea of obedience to a non-human authority were to disappear completely. [1]

The sublime is unrepresentable, undescrivable, ineffable...The beautiful harmonizes finite things with other finite things. The sublime escapes finitude, and therefore both unity and plurality. [1]

Plato's Idea of the Good is of something sublimely admirable. The Christian Idea of Sin is of something sublimely evil. The romance of Platonism, and of the Beatific Vision, is of something unspeakably precious--something which even Homer or Dante can never hope to capture. The romance of Radical Evil is the romance of something unspeakably depraved, something utterly different from mere failure to make the right choice. It is the deliberate willingness to turn away from God. [1]

Not all religions require sublimity, but orthodox Christian theology—the religious discourse which has dominated the West—has always brushed aside the finitely beautiful and the finitely ugly, the finitely benevolent and the finitely vicious, in favor of the infinite distance between us and the non-human being whom we vainly attempt to imitate. This theology borrowed its imagery from Greek philosophy's attempt to abstract from finite human purposes. Carpenters and painters, politicians and merchants, calculate finite means to finite ends. Philosophy, the Greeks said, must transcend such ends. [2]

[T]he epistemological, subjectivist, twist which Descartes gave philosophy produced a new version of the Sublime. This was the infinite, abyssal, unbridgeable gap between our pragmatic minds or jerrybuilt languages and Reality As It Is In Itself. [3]

John Dewey told a complementary story of a post-Kantian awakening by showing how the French Revolution enlarged our sense of the politically possible and how industrial technology has enlarged our sense of other mundane possibilities. These changes, Dewey says, made us realize that we may be able to make the human future very different from the human past: they help us get over the philosophical idea that we can know our own nature and limits. In the last two centuries, it has become possible to describe the human situation not by describing our relation to something ineffably different from ourselves, but by drawing a contrast between our ugly past and present and the more beautiful future in which our descendents may live. [4]

The philosophical views sketched in these lectures offer a way of thinking about the human situation which abjures both eternity and sublimity, and is finitistic through and through.[4]

Dewey urged that we turn our backs on the very idea of Reality As It Is In Itself. Nietzsche saw this idea as an expression of the same weakness, the same masochistic desire to bow down before the non-human, as had permeated Christian "slave-morality". Dewey saw it as a survival of the ancient world's organization of society into artisans and priests. [5]

For Nietzsche and Dewey, the idea that Reality has an intrinsic nature which common sense and science may never know—that our knowledge may be only of Appearance—is a relic of the idea that there is something non-human which has authority over us. The idea of a non-human authority and the quest for sublimity are both products of self-abasement. [5]

For thinkers of this sort--those who are content with beauty—the proper place for sublimity is in the private consciousness of individuals. [7]

...Derrida, a great imaginative writer who takes sublimity and ineffability as his principal themes...Lacan and Zizek see both art and politics as centering around an unachievable but unforgettable sublimity, for which the mere beauty of peace, prosperity and happiness can never substitute. From the point of view taken in these lectures, the attempt to make sublimity central to reflection on the human future is as dangerous as making God, or Sin, or Truth central to such reflection. [8]

[W]e should separate the quest for greatness and sublimity from the quest for justice and happiness. The former is optional, the latter is not. [8]

### **From Second Girona Lecture: “Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism”**

You are a polytheist if you think that there is no actual or possible object of knowledge which would permit you to commensurate and rank all human needs. [5]

Polytheism, in the sense in which I have defined it, is pretty much coextensive with romantic utilitarianism. [6]

Polytheists agree with *Mill* and Arnold that poetry should take over the role which religion has played in the formation of individual human lives, and that nothing should take over the function of the churches. Poets are to polytheism what the priests of a universal church are to monotheism. So once *you* become polytheistic, *you* are likely to turn away not *only* from priests, but from such priest-substitutes as metaphysicians and physicists. [6]

The celebration of an ethics of love would then have taken its place within the tolerant polytheism of the Roman Empire, having disjoined the ideal of human brotherhood from the claim to represent the will of an omnipotent and monopolistic Heavenly Father. [9]

I have imagined such a non-Platonic and non-exclusivist form of Christianity in order to emphasize that no chain of inference links the ideal of human fraternity to the ideal of escaping from a world of appearance inhabited by animals to a real world in which you will become as gods. [10]

I have argued elsewhere...that if there is an inferential connection between devotion to democracy and an anti-representationalist view of truth and knowledge, it is that the latter is better suited to the purposes of the former than are representationalist theories. [11]

It is an advantage of the anti-representationalist view of belief which James took over from Bain and Peirce--the view that beliefs are habits of action--that it frees us from the responsibility to unify all our beliefs into a single world-view. [11]

The attempt to love Truth, and to think of it as one, and as capable of commensurating and ranking human needs, is a secular version of the traditional religious hope that allegiance to something big, powerful, and non-human will persuade that powerful being to take your side in your struggle with other people. [14]

[Dewey's] lifelong distaste for the idea of authority--the idea that anything has authority over the members of a democratic community save the decisions of that community. This anti-authoritarian motif...[18]

Suppose that a source which you believe to be non-human tells you that all men are brothers, that the attempt to make yourself and those you cherish happier should be expanded into an attempt to make all human beings happy. For Dewey, the source of this suggestion is irrelevant. You might have heard it from a god or a guru, but you might just as well have found it carved out by the waves on a sandy beach. It has no validity unless it is treated as an hypothesis, tried out, and found successful. [20]

Science thereby loses the position it inherited from the monotheistic priesthood, as the people who pay proper tribute to the authority of something "not ourselves". [22]