Richard Rorty's pragmatic vision

By: Eva Perez de Vega Steele

I. Rorty and pragmatism

Richard Rorty's philosophical position can be placed in stark opposition to what he saw as the dominant one in western tradition since Plato: a philosophy preoccupied mostly with "true" knowledge and based on dualistic and essentialist models that aimed to penetrate beneath appearances to arrive at the immutable truths, out there, waiting to be discovered. Rorty saw in pragmatism the potential to move beyond the impasse of dualism and truth-seeking philosophy towards a *philosophy of social hope*[1]; one that helps us carry out practical tasks to move towards a more just and democratic society. He was not preoccupied by whether our ideas correspond to some fundamental true reality. Indeed, for him there was no such reality.

In this paper the focus will be on Rorty's vision of pragmatism specifically as it relates to his position against dualistic thinking. I argue, together with Rorty, that dualism is a very restrictive way of conceptualizing the world, because it aims at explaining things by reducing them to immutable categories that are not sensitive or responsive to the context from which they emerge. The first part of the paper (I) will address Rorty's particular insight and contribution to pragmatism; the second part (II) will focus on his antipathy to dualism and the causes for his rejection, including representation. The focus here will be on the mind-body dualism, as an example of one of the most persistent dualities and one that Rorty returns to often in his writings and lectures. Lastly, I will touch on Rorty's bigger picture hopes for philosophy and the role that pragmatism plays in this conception. The main aim of the paper is to show that Rorty saw pragmatism as a force capable of dismantling ingrained dualities and capable of revitalizing philosophy by offering an entirely new way of thinking; one no longer bound by the falsity of "truth" and dualisms, but rather on the hope for social justice.

---

[1] This is referencing Richard Rorty's last book *Philosophy and Social Hope*: a collection of essays and lectures aimed at a wider audience, addresses his political and social hopes for philosophy.

1.1 Philosophy of hope, not truth

In his writings Rorty rejects Platonism and praises the philosophy of classical pragmatist such as William James and John Dewey, who together with other influences such as Wittgenstein, Quine and Sellars have helped him develop his own version of pragmatism. When targeting Platonism Rorty is not referring to the thoughts of Plato himself[2] rather the school of thought that emerged from reading passages in Plato's writings, which developed into what became the overpowering dualisms of western philosophy. Rorty was consistently critical of these ingrained dualisms, and shared Dewey's antipathy to dichotomies such as: matter versus mind, appearance versus reality, made versus found, sensible versus intellectual, among others. In the preface of one of his last books, *Philosophy and Social Hope,* Rorty states that: "Dewey thought, as I do, that the vocabulary which centers around these traditional distinctions has become an obstacle to our social hopes." Rorty continues:

> "This question, the question of the nature of the problems which the Greeks, Descartes, Kant and Hegel have bequeathed to us, leads us back around to the distinction between finding and making. The philosophical tradition has insisted that these problems are found, in the sense that they are inevitably encountered by any reflective mind. The pragmatist tradition has insisted that they are made - are artificial rather than natural- and can be unmade by using a different vocabulary than that which the philosophical tradition has used."[3]

Thus, philosophical problems are not entities that are out there waiting to be discovered, rather they are "invented". Rorty hoped that in changing our conception of philosophy away from the belief in immutable truths we would recover philosophy's social dimension, and restore its ability to be of use to our practical lives.

---

[2] Who he refers to as: "the genius who wrote the Dialogues". *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. xii.
[3] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope,* p. xxi-xxii

1.2 Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature

In his seminal first book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Richard Rorty aims to deconstruct ingrained assumptions about our current philosophical tradition. He claims that philosophers are deceiving themselves when they think that there exist fundamental philosophical problems. Rorty deconstructs these perceived perennial philosophical problems, and he does this from a historicist perspective; by claiming that in actuality they developed from historical accidents in our culture. For Rorty, the themes on which our current philosophical problems rest are misguided and stale, and rest on a confused picture of man that we inherited from the Greeks, which worsened with Descartes and deteriorated even further with Kant. He refers to a notion of man which he qualifies as a "glassy essence"; an essence he aims to dispel with his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.*

When the book was published it had an immense impact but was very controversial. In an interview for Stanford University Radio[4] Rorty was asked about why it was so controversial, to which he responds that it was believed to be an attack on analytic philosophy, specifically the movement in the Anglo-philosophical world that started with Bertrand Russell. Yet he insisted that he had not intended it that way at all, rather his intention was to celebrate those analytic philosophers, like Quine, Sellars and Wittgenstein who were an important influence on him. However he wrote about them in a way that seemed to suggest that philosophy understood as a study or analysis of language is something we can put behind us. Analytic philosophy at the time seemed to be engaged with the idea that by analyzing language we could dissolve philosophical problems. So Rorty's charge against this conception of language was seen to be a direct attack to the discipline of Philosophy itself. In the introduction to the book, Richard Rorty describes his

---

[4] Interview with Rorty by Robert Harrison on Stanford University Radio, KZSU, in "Entitled Opinions (about life & literature)"

project as being indebted mostly to three philosophers he admires; Wittgenstein in his conception of philosophy as therapy, Heidegger for his historicism, and Dewey for his pragmatism. In subsequent publications he adds Quine, Sellars and Davidson to the list, as analytic philosophers who he sees as having been able to:

> "successfully, and rightly, blur the positivist distinction between the semantic and the pragmatic, the analytic and the synthetic, the linguistic and the empirical, theory and observation."[5]

Rorty supports his philosophy on that of the thinkers he admires in order to dismantle what he identifies as stale dualisms and supposed "perennial problems" of philosophy. While Rorty's version of pragmatism is often thought of as "idiosyncratic"[6], he nonetheless saw in pragmatism the capacity to create a radical break with restrictive ways of doing philosophy.[7]

> "I argue that the attempt (which has defined traditional philosophy) to explicate "rationality" and "objectivity" in terms of conditions of accurate representation is a self-deceptive effort to eternalize the normal discourse of the day, and that, since the Greeks, philosophy's self- image has been dominates by this attempt."[8]

This proposed new way, however, is admittedly indebted to thinkers he admired and categorized as pragmatists.

> "If one shares the pragmatists' anti-essentialism, however, one will tend to see the problems about which philosophers are now offering "objective, verifiable, and clearly communicable" solutions as historical relics, left over from the Enlightenment's misguided search for the hidden essences of knowledge and morality."[9]

---

[5] Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*. Introduction. xvii

[6] Richard Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn*, p.14

[7] He was not alone in this conception, Davidson already wrote of a "sea change" arriving in philosophy.

[8] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. p.11

[9] Richard Rorty: "Pragmatism, Relativism, Irrationalism" p.170

1.3 Philosophy of use

According to pragmatist thinking "truth" is not something "out there", an absolute or universal object or goal. "We cannot regard truth as a goal of inquiry. The purpose of inquiry is to achieve agreement among human beings about what to do, to bring about consensus on the ends to be achieved and the means to be used to achieve those ends".[10] What Rorty most admired about the pragmatist project was the potential it had to do away with a reductionist way of doing philosophy that focused on finding immutable truths and the setting up of dualities.[11] For Rorty, philosophy had to have a social dimension and as such it has a responsibility to engage and be responsive to political and social forces of its time: it had to engage the life of people in order to be *useful*:

> "pragmatists (…) have no use for the reality-appearance distinction, any more than for the distinction between the found and the made. We hope to replace the reality-appearance distinction with the distinction between the more useful and the less useful."[12]

Asking whether something is "real" for Rorty is just asking the wrong question. A better question would be is it "useful", or is it going to contribute to improving our lives? Rorty is arguing against an essentialist view, that problems are self-existing entities waiting to be found, in favor of what some have called a *constructivist view* that problems can only be considered real problems when applied to specific cases and related to questions that are specific to aspirations we may have. In other words, in relation to what is useful and what we want to *do* in the world.[13] In his words:

---

[10] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope,* p. xxv

[11] Regarding the immutability of philosophical problems he can be seen to be close to Hegel in thinking that philosophy is a product of the time on thought.

[12] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope,* p. xxii

[13] John Danvers, *Picturing Mind: Paradox, indeterminacy and Consciousness in Art and Poetry*, p.333

"On this view, when we utter such sentences as 'I am hungry' we are not making external what was previously internal, but are simply helping those around to us to predict our future actions. Such sentences are not used to report events going on within the Cartesian Theatre which is a person's consciousness. They are simply tools for coordinating our behavior with those of others."[14]

Throughout his career he references the "Cartesian Theater" as something derived from Descartes that served to "invent" consciousness and thus separate the mind as the *inner* from the body and the material world as the *outer*. The material world becomes a representation that is provided by the inner eye of one's own mental capacity. Here lies one of the major "philosophical confusions" that according to Rorty has lead western philosophy astray. For Rorty, the distinction between the mind and the body that has pervaded philosophy is a false distinction, which mirrors the incorrect assumptions made regarding *representations*. He presents the views of Aristotle and Descartes as paradigms of models that have enforced the false distinction between the mind and the body as well as other pervasive dualities such as reality versus appearance. In this paper I aim to argue that it is through pragmatism that Rorty sees a way out of these "philosophical confusions" and to free us from the notion of human knowledge as representations in a "Mirror of Nature".

---

[14] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope,* p. xxiv

II. Rorty's non-dualism

Richard Rorty argues emphatically against the dualistic thinking that he saw as deeply ingrained into European philosophical tradition since Descartes. While his vision of philosophy and the role of pragmatism in it was quite unique, he can be seen as having continued the tradition of the founders of American pragmatist thinkers, such as Charles Peirce, William James and John Dewey, to whom Rorty acknowledges a particular debt. Rorty is against the use of, and reliance upon, oppositional dualities like: mind or body, absolute or relative, real or apparent, true or false. He doesn't believe that the philosophical "problems" that such dualities raise are particularly interesting or useful to one's life.

For Rorty it is anti-dualism that links the philosophers that he admires. These are philosophers who are wildly diverse, often finding themselves on different sides of the analytic-continental divide; such as William James and Friedrich Nietzsche, Donald Davidson and Jacques Derrida, Hillary Putnam and Bruno Latour, John Dewey and Michael Foucault. But the dualism that Rorty is referring to is not a mere antipathy to binary oppositions, rather it means that: "they are trying to shake off the influences of the peculiarly metaphysical dualism which Western philosophical tradition inherited from the Greeks."[15]

Other supporters of pragmatism have also aimed to do away with dualism in favor of a "blurring of boundaries". In *Two Dogmas of Empiricism* Quine already pointed to this intent by claiming that on abandoning what he saw as the two dogmas of empiricism there would be: "blurring of the supposed boundary between speculative metaphysics and natural science." [16] Putnam also recognizes that:

---

[15] "A World without Substances or Essences" in *Philosophy and Social Hope*. P.48

[16] The two dogmas he refers to are, first the divide between analytic and synthetic truths, and the second dogma according to Quine is that of reductionism.

"All of these ideas- that the fact/value dichotomy is untenable, that the fact/convention dichotomy is also untenable, that truth and justification of ideas are closely connected, that the alternative to metaphysical realism is not any form of skepticism, that philosophy is an attempt to achieve the good – are ideas that have long been associated with the American pragmatist tradition"[17]

However, while pragmatism aims to blur boundaries and question engrained dualities, it is sometimes necessary to use binary oppositions in order to make a specific point. Indeed each concept, word or term one discusses implies an opposite concept without which it would make no sense. The very use of language implies the setting up of binary oppositions or dualities in order to make communication intelligible, for instance using the term "more" implies its negative "less". As Rorty's himself puts it: "it is not clear that thought is possible without using such opposites."[18] Thus, when arguing against dualism, as Rorty did, one may need to employ dichotomies or dualities in the argument, but these need not be confused with what Rorty meant when claiming he was an anti-dualist. This was very poignantly targeting the misconceptions he believed we inherited from Platonism and Cartesian thinking.

2.1 Rorty and the mind-body problem

Rorty aims at the dissolution of the mind – body problem; a problem we owe to Descartes who, according to Rorty, actually "invented" the mind and gave mirror imagery one of its central themes. The goal of his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* seems to be to dismantle this glassy image: "I try to show that the so-called intuitions which lie behind Cartesian dualism are ones which have a historical origin."[19] Rorty argues that the relation of body to the mind that we hold today is a result of persistent historical conceptual confusions that lead us to asking the wrong questions. One of Rorty's contentions in the first chapter of the book is that the distinction

---

[17] Putnam. *Realism With a Human Face*. 1990, p.xi

[18] "A World without Substances or Essences" in *Philosophy and Social Hope*. P.47

[19] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. p.10

between the mind and body that has pervaded philosophy is a false distinction, which mirrors the incorrect assumptions made regarding *representations*. He presents the views of Aristotle and Descartes as paradigms of models that have enforced the false distinction between the mind and the body.

The Cartesian conception of knowledge uses visual perception to claim that the mind has the capacity to mirror what is out there in the world and provide an accurate depiction of reality as internal *representations* that are solely in the mind. There is an "Inner Eye" or "Eye of the Mind" that surveys these representations giving us a mirror image of the world which is what we believe knowledge is: knowledge as inner representations. Rorty claims that this is so ingrained in us that we are surprised it was not an issue taken up directly by Aristotle and Plato. Rorty quotes Wallace Matson to show that the mind-body divide that is now so pervasive in us, did not actually exist as such for the Greeks. For the Greeks there was no division between the events of our *inner life*, such as consciousness, from the events in the *external world*. The very notion of "idea", as something pertaining to the world of our inner consciousness, comes from Descartes and Locke, and doesn't really have an equivalent in antiquity.[20] But the novelty of Descartes was that there was a "single inner space" where all truths were kept including the "confused ideas" of perception and sensation, as well as the more reliable truths of mathematics and the like. This is what for Rorty has come to us in what we call "mental".

Aristotle's *hylomorphic* conception of knowledge relies, not on representations as images in the mind to depict reality, but rather on the notion of *identity*, so that "the subject becoming identical with the object." [21] Further, Rorty points out that Aristotle distinguishes between reason as grasp of universals and the living body which deals with motion and notions of sensation. For Aristotle the faculty that received universals - what we call the mind- was potentially separate-

---

[20] Although Rorty makes a precision that Plato does reference the "Foro Interno", p.50
[21] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p.45

able from the body, but it was unclear if it stemmed from a single substance that encompassed both. This distinction, in Rorty's words, is: "one which could draw the line between the cramps in one's stomach and the associated feeling in one's mind." However, Rorty claims we have lost this particular distinction in favor of distinguishing "between consciousness and what is not consciousness."[22]

Thus, Rorty's contention is that while the dualism between the mind and the body persists in contemporary discussions, it is a different dualism from that of Aristotle and also different from that developed by Descartes, but one that has developed historically from them.[23] He claims that what still persists is what we inherited from Descartes as a tendency to "lump together" the notion of the *intentional* and the *phenomenal*, into what we call "mental". This is because Cartesian notion of "thinking" did encompass a myriad of things including "feeling", as well as doubting, imagining, understanding, affirming, willing and denying.[24] However, Descartes' famous statement, "*cogito ergo sum*" undoubtedly privileges thought, rationality and reason, over feeling, irrationality and intuition; it relies on the notion that philosophical and scientific enquiry is a process of constructing rational answers to rational questions. Under this conception, reliable knowledge can only be established through the exercise of thought and reason.

Rorty rejects this contention, holding these to be false choices emerging from the Cartesian "invention" of the mind. What is clear from Rorty's early writings is that his aim to "free us from the notion of human knowledge as an assemblage of representations in a Mirror of

---

[22] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. P.51

[23] He also claims that Cartesian dualism is different from the dualism of contemporary philosophical discussions, because we have lost touch with the notion of "substance" from the seventeenth century. He believes that contemporary philosophers are returning to Aristotle's notion of "thing" which is not as sophisticates as Descartes' "substance"

[24] However, I would say that this is not entirely accurate and actually undermines the project of Phenomenology and people like Merleau-Ponty who actually aimed to bring the phenomenal to the fore as something that is about experience of the body. However, this would digress from Rorty's point.

Nature."[25] According to Rorty the two views, Artistote's *hylomorphic* and Descartes' *representations*, are epistemic views that while radically different, they both "lend themselves to the imagery of the Mirror of Nature"[26], where knowledge is conceived of as a mirror of reality, thus perpetuating dualistic thinking.

2.2 Rorty on Representation

The belief that things that are out there in the world are "mirrored" or "represented" inside of the mind, as mirror copies of what is external, leads to the dichotomous separation between what is internal as *mental*, and everything else that is external as *material*. For Descartes, we had images of reality in our minds, which necessarily implied a separation between the body and the mind. Rorty is very critical of represeantationalism, because it leads, among other things to false problems, such as the mind-body problem discussed earlier. Indeed, Rorty's self-proclaimed anti-representationalist position supports the notion that without representation, the dominant dualities of the western philosophical tradition which have preoccupied philosophers since Descartes, such as the mind-body/matter duality and others that stem from it, would dissipate and cease to be a philosophical concern. Thus, the mind-body or mind-matter duality can be seen as a result of the primacy of representation.

> "To know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind: so to understand the possibility and nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations. Philosophy's central concern is to be a general theory of representation."[27]

Representationalism instills the fear that we may never overcome the gap between our subjective minds and the objective world. Rorty suggests that we should replace the idea of *representations*

---

[25] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. p.126
[26] Ibid., p.45
[27] Ibid., p.3

of the world with the idea of *descriptions* of the world designed to help us achieve particular, finite purposes. Rather than ask if we are in touch with the way the world really is, Rorty asks, from a pragmatic perspective, if our descriptions and our vocabularies help us complete our daily aspirations and actions. Anti-representationalism does not try to see the world as it is, it does not investigate knowledge or accurate representation of reality, since in every statement about the world there is an inseparable "mixture" and "cohabitation" of the subject and the object. The difference between the subjective perception of the world and how it is for the subject vanishes without the notion of representation.

While often accused of relativism, Rorty rejects this accusation because he saw himself as an anti-Platonist and anti-dualist who does not accept Platonic dualities such as absolute versus relative, or ideal versus actual. Rorty resists employing Platonic terminology and questions the "Kantian and Hegelian distinction between subject and object (…) the Cartesian distinctions which Kant and Hegel used (…) and the Greek distinctions which provided the framework for Descartes' own thought".[28]

> "I do not know how to argue the question of whether it is better to see human beings in this biologistic way or to see them in a way more like Plato's or Kant's. So I do not know how to give anything like a conclusive argument for the view which my critics call 'relativism' and which I prefer to call antifoundationalism' or 'antidualism'."[29]

Rorty is interested in what he calls a "non-representationalist account of knowledge" which he claims is what Davidson added to that of Dewey[30] and developed into what was called the "biologistic" approach which further dispels the dichotomous picture of man that he is criticized:

> "So to rid our thinking of the vestiges of Cartesianism, to become fully Darwinian in our

---

[28] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope,* p. xviii-xix
[29] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope,* p. xxxii
[30] Larry Hickman, *John Dewey between pragmatism and constructivism*,

thinking, we need to stop thinking of words as representations and to start thinking of them as nodes in the causal network which binds the organism together with its environment. Seeing language and inquiry in this biologistic way, a way made familiar in recent years by the work of Humberto Maturana and others, permits us to discard the picture of the human mind as an interior space within which the human person is located."[31]

Here we can intuit Rorty's understanding of language; not one made of an immutable rigid structure, but rather, one that is part of a "network", closely tied to its environment. Rorty was a strong advocate of the social conception of language which was not the most dominant philosophies of language at the time. A popular conception of language at the time was headed by Chomsky, whose linguistic model conceived of language as being made up of two components; a reservoir of words or dictionary, and a set of rules determining how those rules are combined. In this model there is an *abstract robot* that is embedded in each individual's brain in charge of bringing these two components together to form a language. This is a completely internal and context-free linguistic model, which perpetuates the mind-body divide that Rorty was so adamantly rejecting. It was also a highly reductive conception of language and far removed from how language was actually being used, with all its dialects and slangs, and variants of use. Rorty's conception of language was much closer to that of the later Wittgenstein, who indeed was much admired by Rorty.

2.3 The role of language

"Pragmatists hope to break with the picture which, in Wittgenstein's words, 'holds us captive' - the Cartesian-Lockean picture of a mind seeking to get in touch with a reality outside itself. So they start with a Darwinian account of human beings as animals doing their best to cope with the environment - doing their best to develop tools which will enable them to enjoy more pleasure

---

[31] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. xxiii

and less pain. Words are among the tools which these clever animals have developed."[32]

Wittgenstein was a very influential figure for Richard Rorty. Indeed the later Wittgenstein[33] would prove to be very important in the way Rorty conceived of language and of mental representations. In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein challenges us not to just think about what something can mean, but rather to look around at the context in which the words and sentences are being deployed. He urges us to investigate meaning by '*looking and seeing*' the variety of uses a word or sentence is being given, and to do so not in generalizing thoughts but by looking at the particular context of use of the particular instance "look and see whether there is anything common to all, but similarities, affinities, and a whole series of them as that. To repeat: don't think, but look!"[34] Here language is conceived of as context-sensitive, the social context is what gives language its meaning. If we conceive of language this way it is unnecessary to have mental pictures of words, instead language requires one to have sensitivity and an understanding of the context in which language is being used; a broader, more socialized conception. Language is external to our mind, and intimately tied to the social fabric we are surrounded by; it emerges and is affected by the social context in which it is used. It expresses the social context; it is not a *mirror* of that context.

From this point of view, language comprehension requires more than just understanding words and sentences in isolation. To generate a coherent dialogue, to communicate information, or to articulate a story, processes other than purely linguistic ones are necessary. It is crucial to bring general world knowledge into the use of language and to integrate the language being articulated with the life context in which it resides: *'to imagine a language is to imagine a form*

---

[32] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope.* P. xxii

[33] we see a very different Wittgenstein inhis later writings such as the *Philosophical Investigations* from the young man who aimed to find a systematic categorization of language, conceiving of it as a mental system of representation bound by logical rules and describable almost as if a scientific entity. In his later philosophy he seems to be giving significance to language precisely for opposite reasons; because it is embedded with the unpredictability characteristic of our *humanness*, and as such it is imperfect and messy, yet rich and empowering, giving us the ability to communicate an infinite amount of possible things.

[34] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §66

of life."[35] Here language is not conceived as a mere representation of reality, but as actually *doing* something, as having an *expressive* dimension. The expressivity of language was of interest to Rorty, because in it there is no dichotomy between the inner and outer, it contains both mind and body as one, as opposed to the notion of representation which holds the mind as primal. [36]

While Rorty does not attribute beliefs and desires to non-users of language,[37] Rorty, and his pragmatist precursors, consider humans as animals actively participating in the world, not sitting outside the world "objectively" observing what goes on.

> "I have been suggesting that we think pragmatism as an attempt to alter our self-image so as to make it consistent with the Darwinian claim that we differ from other animals simply in the complexity of our behavior"[38]

Organism and environment, human and animal and man and world aren't considered to be binary oppositions. Humans are animals "doing their best to develop tools which will enable them to enjoy more pleasure and less pain. Words are among the tools which these clever animals have developed".[39] This was called Rorty's "biological approach" which emphasized using philosophy as a means to improve one's life; a project that was integral to philosophy before it was professionalized as a discipline. Such sentiment seemed to Rorty, and other pragmatists, to have been abandoned in favor of excessive professionalization of Philosophy as a discipline.

---

[35] With this quote Wittgenstein seems to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of a language is part of an activity, a form of life; what he called a *language game*, *Philosophical Investigations*, §19

[36] The development of the expressivity of language was further undertaken in more systematic detail by his student Robert Brandom in: *Making It Explicit.*

[37] He claims that such an attribution would be speaking metaphorically. Richard Rorty, *The Philosophy of Hope*, p. xxiv

[38] "Ethics Without Principals" in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p.72

[39] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope,* p. xxii

III. Social dimension of Rorty's Philosophy

In a short section on irrationalism included in: "Pragmatism, Relativism, Irrationalism" Rorty narrated the debate that was being had at the time at the American Philosophical Association regarding the position that professional philosophers were expected to have. The question put forth by the Association was if philosophy professors should be "free-wheeling and edifying" or "argumentative and professional". Refusing to make a choice between these options, Rorty aimed to answer a bigger question: what was the role of pragmatism for philosophy and was it possible to be a pragmatist and still be professional?[40]

3.1 Pragmatism and the profession of philosophy

According to Rorty, classical pragmatist William James[41] was suspicious about the growing professionalization of the discipline of philosophy. He thought it was important for philosophy professors to be "edifying and visionary" and that it was not possible to be both a pragmatist and a professional. In discussing James, Rorty states: "James, however, saw professionalism as a failure of nerve rather than a triumph of rationality."[42] James, much like Rorty later, was not of the opinion that philosophers should be as much like scientists as possible, discussing "objective, verifiable, and clearly communicable truths." Rorty disagreed with the legacy left by Plato and Kant, and with the opinion of some of his contemporaries[43] who defended the conception of philosophy as a discipline dealing with "permanent problems for human thought." The concern was that without these permanent problems it would seem that there is no disciplinary method to

---

[40] Collected in *Consequences of Pragmatism.* P.160-175

[41] Together with Dewey, James was in Rorty's opinion one of the two only American writers who offered a radical suggestion for making the future different from the past.

[42] Richard Rorty: "Pragmatism, Relativism, Irrationalism" p.170

[43] For example, Lovejoy.

articulate thoughts and no intellectual rigor with which to develop possible solutions.

On a biographical note, it is interesting to recall that Rorty gave up his prestigious academic position at Princeton when his doubts regarding the dominant analytic philosophy intensified. From this it could appear as if he agreed with James' opinion regarding the incompatibility of the profession of philosophy and pragmatism.[44] He continues: "For my purposes, it is an issue about whether we can be pragmatists without betraying Socrates, without falling into irrationality."[45] But Rorty also raises bigger picture questions regarding the role of philosophy in society at large, often culminating in dismissive remarks such as: "Philosophy in America is just one more academic specialty."[46] However I believe Rorty wanted to re-claim for philosophy a social dimension that it had lost due to a desire for ascribing it to a science. He actually vindicates the importance of the existing tension between "the philosophy as science and the philosophy as vision" which was already present in Plato's dialogues. Rorty sees the numerous attempts at dissolving this tension as attempts to strictly define the boundaries of the discipline, either as a strict science or as one freed of any scientific rigor. If the arts produce "vision" and science produces "results", for Rorty philosophy's results can only produce "dialogues". Rorty admits that philosophy is a unique and particular discipline with its unique material, or mode of communication, but is also very indebted to looking outside of itself, at society at large, in order to advance within it:

> "But although philosophy is formally autonomous, it is not materially self-sufficient. It draws its nourishments, obviously, from research in other disciplines, and, less obviously but even more vitally, from debates between ideologues."[47]

It is in the tension between the rigor of a science and the creativity of an art form that philosophy

---

[44] Indeed he left and never really returned to teaching in a Philosophy program, teaching instead in the humanities at the University of Virginia.
[45] Richard Rorty: "Pragmatism, Relativism, Irrationalism" P169
[46] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. p.396
[47] Ibid., p.420

for Rorty is allowed to do its work and fulfill its social dimension.

3.2 A brief critique: The *Linguistic Turn and* empiricism

Given the specific nature of the topics that have been presented thus far, a valid critique that this paper may raise is its partial character. Certainly there are important aspects of Rorty's philosophical world that have been left out. To briefly mention two particularly important ones: first, the lack of reference to the first book which he edited, the *Linguistic Turn*, and the second is the lack of tackling Rorty's position on the notion of "empiricism" in philosophy. This could certainly be a valid critique, thus it is important to briefly address them.

The *Linguistic Turn*, is a term Rorty coined with the publication of the book with the same title. In the introduction to this volume which he edited he states that the emergent "linguistic philosophy" is the "most recent philosophical revolution". In an interview he gave in 2003 Rorty was asked about how he saw his first book, *The Linguistic Turn*, thirty-five years after its publication. To this he reiterated that he still saw it as a mistake to claim that to do philosophy one has to have a "systematic theory of meaning". This seems consistent with what we know of Rorty, and it is certainly something that we can agree with. However, he continues:

> "On the other hand, the replacement of experience by language in the work of people like Sellars did help convince people that if you could talk about linguistic behavior then you didn't really have to talk about experience or consciousness. That was a step forward."[48]

This last statement is puzzling, and a much harder one to agree with. Indeed, this aspect of Rorty's philosophy has been heavily criticized, because it dismisses the many references to experience that classical pragmatists, such as James, have given and that seem integral to its very existence. Rorty felt that empiricism was a very vague term, but his dismissal of it was emphatic. It nonetheless seems contradictory to be so dismissive of the notion of empiricism, if one is to

---

[48] *Philosophy Now* – Issue 43. https://philosophynow.org/issues/43/Richard_Rorty

understand pragmatism, as Rorty did, to be so tied to the "philosophy of use"; as having the capacity to make an impact on how we lead our practical lives. This seems to be Rorty's weakest affirmation, as echoed by the many critiques he received: "I agree with those who have strongly argued that to eliminate experience from pragmatism (old or new) is to eviscerate pragmatism, to leave us with a gutless shadow of pragmatism."[49]

This paper clearly aims at exploring a very specific aspect of Rortean philosophy and its contribution to pragmatism, namely his non-dualistic approach. It is not intended to be a full account on his philosophy thus it intentionally and necessarily leaves out other important and much debated topics of contention in Rorty. While these are certainly important aspects of his intellectual career and his contribution to pragmatism, the shortcomings of not including them in further detail is hopefully outweighed by maintaining a focused discussion, and using specific aspects to help understand the much larger picture. Rorty's discussion of the mind- body and identity are aspects that helped him tackle the bigger picture, which gives pragmatism a transformative role, with the capacity to revitalize the discipline of philosophy.

3.3 Why Rorty?

A question that might arise given the idiosyncratic nature of Rorty's pragmatic vision is, why write about Richard Rorty when aiming for insight into pragmatism? Surely there are other more systematic and consistent contemporary accounts of pragmatism. One such account is that of Robert Brandom, who has been acknowledged by Rorty himself and other contemporary philosophers as someone who is greatly furthering the cause of pragmatism and doing so in a highly systematic manner.[50] Nevertheless, there is something very appealing about Richard Rorty's vision of philosophy, the hopes he had for pragmatism and its role in society, as well as

---

[49] Richard Bernstein. *The Pragmatic Turn*. P. 128
[50] "Perhaps the most ambitious understanding of pragmatism is that advanced by Robert Brandom". Richard Bernstein. *The Pragmatic Turn.* Prologue P. 15

his career as a philosopher engaged in the intellectual life of his time through politics and hopes for social change. His radical way of tackling what have been historically untouchable topics of philosophy, down to questioning the very nature of the discipline, are of interest to our contemporary society. There is an increasing interest in the social dimension of philosophy, and Rorty brings in a refreshingly radical viewpoint to this dimension.

Rorty's philosophy vindicates the social dimension of the discipline of philosophy. In his book *Philosophy and Social Hope* Rorty discussed the social role of philosophy, with statements like "everything is a social construction":

> "To say that everything is a social construction is to say that our linguistic practices are so bound up with our other social practices that our descriptions of nature, as well as all of ourselves, will always be a function of our social needs."[51]

The answer to his self-imposed question of whether one can be a pragmatist and a professional philosopher, has a mixed response. His leaving academic philosophy,[52] -the teaching of the "discipline of philosophy"- might suggest that the answer is negative: one cannot be both a pragmatist and professional *academic* philosopher. However, he never stopped writing and doing "professional philosophy" via publications of books and lectures, and his influence in philosophy cannot be underplayed.

In this paper I set out to explore Rorty's position and motivations behind his strong anti-dualistic approach, specifically as it related to the mind-matter/ body dichotomy. For this it was necessary to slightly broaden the radar of topics in order to better understand the context in which he was working and the multiple influences to his work. Rorty portrayed pragmatism as a generalized form of anti-dualism and anti-essentialism:

---

[51] "A World without Substances or Essences" in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p.48
[52] His career is also particularly interesting; his doubts about analytic philosophy that pervaded Princeton made him relinquish a highly coveted academic position there, in order to become a professor of humanities at the University of Virginia.

"as an attempt to break down the distinction between the intrinsic and the extrinsic features of things. By thinking of everything as relational through and through pragmatist attempt to get rid of the contrast between reality and appearance"[53]

From this quote it is clear that what Rorty saw as the contribution of pragmatism to philosophy was the relinquishing of dualistic ways of thinking; pragmatism has the force to shatter the ingrained dualities, and as such it has a revolutionary dimension: the capacity to radically change the way we think.

Thus, we can conclude that Rorty's contribution is twofold: first, ascribing to pragmatism the power to have us think in radically new ways; no longer bound by dualities like mind-body, and instead rooted in a "philosophy of use"; and second, to reintroduce the social dimension of philosophy that seemed to have been forgotten in favor of professionalization and demarcation of the discipline of philosophy. When asked about what the future of philosophy might be, Rorty claims:

"I think it's entirely a matter of unpredictable, imaginative great men and women coming along and surprising everybody. Wittgenstein and Heidegger could not have been foreseen. They changed our conception of philosophy. So did Kant and Hegel. Nobody could have predicted Kant. Or Hegel. In the 21st century there may be a couple of figures equally imaginative, but we won't know what the future of philosophy is until we find out who those people are."[54]

In another interview Rorty proclaims: "Talking about old problems doesn't revitalize philosophy, what revitalizes philosophy is some genius proposing a new way of thinking."[55] It is unclear if he was proposing himself as that genius, but was is clear is how he ascribes to pragmatism the capacity to revitalize philosophy by breaking with Platonic dualism and propose: "a new way of thinking."

---

[53] "Ethics Without Principals" in *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p.72

[54] *Philosophy Now* – Issue 43. https://philosophynow.org/issues/43/Richard_Rorty

[55] Interview with Rorty by Robert Harrison on Stanford University Radio, KZSU, in "Entitled Opinions (about life & literature)"

Bibliography

Bernstein, Richard. *The Pragmatic Turn.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010

Danvers, John. *Picturing Mind: Paradox, indeterminacy and Consciousness in Art and Poetry.* Amsterdam- New York: Rodopi, 2006

Rorty, Richard. *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972-1980*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1982

Rorty, Richard. "Mind-Body Identity, Privacy, and Categories." The Review of Metaphysics 19, no. 1 (1965): 24-54. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20124096.

Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009

Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and Social Hope*. London: Penguin Books, 1999

Rorty, Richard. "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 53, no. 6 (1980): 717-38.

Hickman, Larry. *John Dewey Between Pragmatism And Constructivism*. Fordham University Press, 2009

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations.* trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998

Philosophy Now – Issue 43. https://philosophynow.org/issues/43/Richard_Rorty

Interview with Rorty by Robert Harrison on Stanford University Radio, KZSU, in "Entitled Opinions (about life & literature)"