Rorty on realism, antirealism, and antirepresentationalism

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Abstract: The article reconstructs Rorty's dismissal of realist positions in epistemology and semantics, his reframing of the realist claim that the world is determinate, material, and independent from our thoughts and descriptions, his position regarding scientific realism, and the comforting role that truth and realism play in metaphysical realism. Further, the article addresses the open question of whether Rorty had a realist turn toward the end of his career.

1. Introduction

Rorty's undoubted "militancy against realism" (Gascoigne 2008, p. 86) rendered him, amongst others, the labels "linguistic idealist," "social constructivist," "relativist," and "nihilist." The present article cannot address these charges in detail but will focus on where many of the charges fall short, namely in not taking full account of Rorty's transition from representationalism to antirepresentationalism and, connected with this, his transition from questions of inventory to questions of relevance for action, which imply a shift from theories of truth to theories of complex behavior.

According to Rorty, realism—the assumption that the world is independent from our thoughts and descriptions and that we can accurately understand and represent how the world is beyond ourselves—is both theoretically deficient and politically dangerous. Realism is theoretically deficient because there is no non-circular way to test and justify the criteria according to which our ideas, descriptions, and moral conducts have "hit the mark" (Rorty 1999a, p. 82). Regarding philosophy's methods in general, Rorty stated in his first introduction to *The Linguistic Turn*:

> The history of philosophy is punctuated by revolts against the practices of previous philosophers and by attempts to transform philosophy into a science – a discipline in which universally recognized decision-procedures are available for testing philosophical thesis. […]
> In the past every such revolution has failed, and always for the same reason. The

revolutionaries were found to have presupposed […] the truth of certain substantive and controversial philosophical thesis. Every philosophical rebel has tried to be 'presuppositionless,' but none has succeeded. This is not surprising […] [because to] know what method to adopt, one must already have arrived at some metaphysical and some epistemological conclusions. (Rorty 1992a, p. 1)

The search for universal criteria and independent tests is futile because criteria and tests are always scheme-dependent and ultimately mere extrapolations of intuitions. "[I]n principle a philosopher can always invoke some idiosyncratic criterion for a 'satisfactory solution' to a philosophical problem (a criterion against which his opponent cannot find a non-circular argument)" (Rorty 1992a, p. 2).

Realism-talk is politically dangerous because it fuels the biopolitical mechanisms that poststructuralist thought has pointed out for essentialism: supposed eternal truths about human nature are potential tools for oppression and hinder pluralism and cultural change.[1] In Rorty's words: "You risk losing the sense of finitude, and the tolerance, which results from realizing how very many synoptic visions there have been, and how little argument can do to help you choose among them" (Rorty 1999c, p. 20).

The following sections deepen these theoretical and practical issues by reconstructing Rorty's dismissal of realist positions in epistemology and semantics (2), his endorsement of a reframed version of the ontological and metaphysical realist claim that the world is material, determinate, and independent from our thoughts and descriptions (3), his position regarding scientific realism (4), and the comforting role that truth and realism play in metaphysical realism (5). Lastly, the article addresses the open question of whether Rorty took a realist turn toward the end of his career (6).

2. Crushing the mirror: Differentiating between realism, antirealism, and antirepresentationalism in Rorty

2.1. From "knowledge of" to "knowledge that"

In the middle chapter of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty gives a historical account of what he describes as the transition from "knowledge of" to "knowledge that." "Knowledge of" is built on the Greek analogy between perceiving and knowing (Rorty 1979, p. 157); seeing an object is equivalent to knowing the object. This picture of "knowing" resides on a whole cluster of ocular metaphors like the "mental eye" or the mind as a "mirror of nature," which Rorty thinks should better be dismissed. The "spectator theory of knowledge" (as Dewey called it) is built on ontological and epistemological gaps between knowers and the objects they see and know; the object's image is "mirrored" in the "glassy essence" of the spectators' minds, and a knowledge-claim is true if the speaker's mirror isn't obfuscated. This way of describing knowledge is intrinsically open to

skepticism because the criteria according to which one could establish whether the mirror worked correctly and whether the produced image is exact are not clear.

Rorty dismantles the "spectator theory of knowledge" by drawing on Sellars' attack on the Myth of the Given, Quine's attacks on the contingent-necessary distinction, and Davidson's attack on the scheme-content distinction. For Sellars, there is a difference between *seeing* a red triangle and *knowing that* there is a red triangle. The second implies that one can give reasons for her belief and takes part in the practice of knowing and justifying one's beliefs. "[I]n characterizing an episode or 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" (Sellars 1963, p. 169, cited in Rorty 1979, p. 141). This means switching from talking about objects to talking about justification of beliefs about objects, from debating empirical content to debating propositional content. Note that Rorty's target is not science (not talking about *objects* in general) but epistemology (the *theory of knowledge of objects* in general). Rorty's epistemological behaviorism, as he labels his position in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, is not a comment on science's potential or the status of the world beyond us; rather, Rorty's epistemological behaviorism switches the focus to what is implied when we use the category "knowledge": As knowledge is bound to the practice of justifying beliefs, for Rorty, epistemic judgments are always also a social affair. Further, knowledge means to "notice under a description, not just respond discriminately to [stimuli]" (Rorty 1979, p. 183). To take "knowledge of" for "knowledge that" is a "confusion between elements of knowledge (propositions) and physiological conditions" (Rorty 1979, p. 143), between "awareness as discriminative behavior and awareness in the logical space of reasons" (Rorty 1979, p. 182).

2.2. From referential semantics to pragmatist semantics

Aside from nurturing the confusion of explanation with justification, the ocular metaphors on which the spectator theory of knowledge (and its successors in philosophy of language) are built call for tools to bridge the gap between the spectators and the objects they see or name. As problems were piling up in epistemology – according to Rorty's further historical account – the focus was switched to different grounds, that is to the philosophy of language. The "dubious epistemological notion of 'direct observational report' as the link between man's mind and its object" was substituted by the notion of "reference" (Rorty 1976, p. 324). "Meaning" had to become the mirror that the "mind" was prior to epistemology.

Rorty instead thinks that semantics should be kept "pure of epistemology" (Rorty 1979, p. 211) and the ontological and metaphysical ballast that comes with it. According to Rorty, Davidson did for "representation" what Sellars did for "experience," namely dispense with it "by replacing beliefs viewed as representations with beliefs viewed as states attributed to persons in order to explain their

behavior" (Rorty 1998c, p. 128). According to Rorty, what Davidson shares with Quine is his behaviorism, which "makes language into something people do, rather than something standing between them and something else" (Rorty 1992b, p. 368). After Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," according to Rorty, sentences were "no longer thought of as expressions of experience nor as representations of extra-experiental reality. Rather they were thought of as strings of marks and noises used by human beings in the development and pursuit of social practices – ends which do not include 'representing reality as it is in itself'" (Rorty 1992c, p. 373). This is because copying independent reality is not needed to cope with the world and our peers. I will come back to this in sections 3. and 6.2.

According to Rorty, Davidson "erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around in the world generally" (Rorty 1992c, p. 373). Words have no intrinsic, fixed connection to the world, but our changing linguistic behaviors allow us to coordinate our actions in our common environment.

When starting from the contingent set of ocular metaphors, which's invention Rorty traces back to the Greeks, questions of ontological inventory and epistemological and semantic questions of how to discriminate accurate from erroneous impressions and descriptions seem natural. By switching the initial set of metaphors from the field of sense-perception to the field of action, philosophy's aim is no longer "truth" but "agreement among human beings about what to do" (Rorty 1999b, p. xxv). For Rorty, this follows from abolishing, with Davidson, the scheme-content distinction, meaning the differentiation between some given, stable material (the content) and the this material organizing, classifying frame (the scheme):[2] "Nothing in Davidson looks much like a parallel to 'How do we know that any of our ideas have anything to do with reality?' It was the latter question, and the epistemological skepticism made possible by thinking of ideas as a veil between the subject and the object, which made ideas-as-interface a topic for philosophical reflection in the seventeenth and eighteenth century" (Rorty 1992b, p. 368).

What is changing, when transitioning from the dualism of scheme and content to holism, are not answers but questions. With the scheme-content distinction, questions like "What is language?", "What is the world (in itself)?", and "How can one be sure that the two are in alignment?" seem interesting and profound. Without the scheme-content distinction, these same questions seem flawed and beside the point (Rorty 1991a, p. 2) because there is no basis from which these types of questions could be reasonably asked. When one relinquishes the idea of a dualism of spectators and objects, of scheme and world, "and thus the idea that different languages represent the world from different perspectives" (Rorty 1992c, p. 372), then there is

> no point in quarrels within analytic philosophy about 'realism' and 'antirealism.' For the latter
> quarrels presuppose that bits of the world 'make sentences true,' and that these sentences in

turn represent those bits. Without these presuppositions, we would not be interested in trying to distinguish between those true sentences which correspond to 'facts of the matter' and those which do not (the distinction around which realist-vs.-antirealist controversies revolve). (Rorty 1992c, p. 372)

2.3. From representationalism to antirepresentationalism

In his introduction to *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, Rorty differentiates between two forms of antirealism, which, for matters of clarity, I am indexing here as antirealism$_1$ and antirealism$_2$. Antirealism$_1$ is the opposite of realism, where both realism and antirealism answer representationalist questions (Rorty 1991a, p. 2); antirealism$_2$ is largely synonymous with antirepresentationalism (Rorty 1991a, p. 8). Rorty dismisses the first opposition, and with it realism and antirealism$_1$, while he embraces antirepresentationalism, and with it antirealism$_2$, although the term Rorty uses more often for his own position is (depending on the context) antirepresentationalism, antifoundationalism, or antidualism.

Representationalism, which is the basis for realism and antirealism$_1$, tries to bridge the ontological and epistemological gaps between two supposedly distinct spheres—the investigator and the world, subject and object, mind and body, language and world, scheme and content—by supposing that they "stand over and against" (Rorty 1991a, p. 2) each another. Around 1900, the opposite of realism was still idealism, but by 1990 "discussion has shifted from whether material reality is 'mind-independent' to questions about which sorts of statements, if any, stand in representational relations to nonlinguistic items" (Rorty 1991a, p. 2). Today "the opposite of realism is called, simply, 'antirealism'" (Rorty 1991a, p. 2). This is Dummett's version, who sees realism as "the belief that statements of the disputed class […] are true or false in virtue of a reality existing independently of us. The anti-realist opposes to this the view that statements of the disputed class are to be understood only by reference to the sort of thing which we count as evidence for a statement of that class" (Dummett in Rorty 1991a, p. 3). For Rorty, what changes between realism and antirealism$_1$ are the answers (from affirmative to negative regarding direct contact and from correspondence to coherence regarding the theory of truth), but the representationalist outlook remains in place.[3]

Antirepresentationalism (and antirealism$_2$), on the other hand, is "the attempt to eschew discussion of realism by denying that the notion 'representation' or that of 'fact of the matter' has a useful role in philosophy" (Rorty 1991a, p. 2). Antirepresentationalists do "not view knowledge as a matter of getting reality right, but rather as a matter of acquiring habits of action for coping with reality" (Rorty 1991a, p. 1). Antirepresentationalism dismisses the opposition that creates the gap to which realism and antirealism$_1$ give their differing answers. Subject and object are not seen as standing "over and

against" each another but as an interactive unit in which lines of distinction can be drawn, but, insofar as they are drawn, they do not bear essentialist implications. The interaction of agents with and within their environment is seen holistically (Rorty 1991a, p. 10). As the mind is not a "mirror" for the world, language is not a medium of representation but a tool for coping, and the tool is not separable from its user (Rorty 1982a, p. xvii).[4]

Critics who accuse Rorty of relativism, linguistic idealism, or social constructivism do not always take sufficient account of Rorty's distinction between antirealism$_1$ and antirealism$_2$. Mistakes of a categorical nature can easily occur because, while Rorty is widely known for his fight against realism, he did not dedicate equal force to fight antirealism$_1$. On theoretical grounds, this is because the arguments against realism *are* the arguments against antirealism$_1$. When the representational picture is gone, realism and antirealism$_1$ dissolve as a pair. On political grounds, antirealism$_1$ seemed – in the time Rorty was writing in – less in danger to provide tools for oppression because authority remains solely within the community of inquirers and describers. In Rorty's account, this guarantees openness for change and allows for Rorty's radical antiauthoritarianism. Still, it is important to underline that Rorty did not embrace antirealism$_1$ but only antirealism$_2$, which is antirepresentationalism.

3. Rorty's materialist antifoundationalism: From the inventory of substances and essences to relevance for action

Rorty's antirepresentationalism believes that:

> Language, like our bodies, has been shaped by the environment we live in. Indeed he or she insists on this point – the point that our minds or our language could not (as the representationalist skeptic fears) be 'out of touch with the reality' any more than our bodies could. What he or she denies is that it is explanatorily useful to pick and choose among the contents of our minds or our language and say that this or that item 'corresponds' or 'represents' the environment. […] [Because it is] one thing to say that a prehensile thumb, or an ability to use the word 'atom' as physicists do, is useful for coping with the environment. It is another thing to attempt to explain this utility by reference to representational notions. (Rorty 1991a, p. 5)

Rorty's antirepresentationalism operates with one fewer level of explanation: The antirepresentationalist explains successful interaction with the utility of the tools implemented where the representationalist wants to explain the tools' utility by dint of their hook on real reality. In Rorty's account, his version of pragmatism embraces the metaphysical realist sentence, "(I) Most of the world is as it is whatever we think about it (that is, our beliefs have very limited causal efficacy)" (Rorty 1982a, p. xxvi). However, for Rorty, this is not to be confused with "(II) there is something out there

in addition to the world called 'the truth about the world'" (Rorty 1982a, p. xxvi). In Rorty's opinion, only the second claim fuels questions regarding realism and antirealism$_1$ and the alleged problems with skepticism and relativism because it opens the gap between "What you are talking about" and "What you are *really* talking about."

For Rorty, this gap is an intuition rather than a theoretical necessity and an intuition that he wants to get rid of (Rorty 1982a, p. xxix). For Rorty intuitions are "never anything more or less than familiarity with a language game" (Rorty 1979, p. 34), and in the case of realism and antirealism$_1$, the intuition comes from centuries of ocular framings. Rorty acknowledges that representationalist intuitions are so deeply rooted as to be almost indistinguishable from common sense in our current practice. "*Of course* we have such intuitions. How could we escape them? We have been educated [to have them] […]." (Rorty 1982a, p. xxix). The question is whether we should do them justice just because they are so "compelling and deep" or extirpate them. Rorty thinks we should "do our best to *stop having such intuitions*" (Rorty 1982a, p. xxx) because they generate theoretic deadlocks and potentially fuel dangerous political impulses. This does not mean to dismiss all commonsensical notions of reference and realism, but according to Rorty we should get rid of their *philosophically loaded* versions that imply the sharp gap between ourselves and the world, which in Rorty's account only a certain type of philosophy assumes.[5]

For Rorty, "The question is not whether human knowledge in fact has 'foundations' but whether it makes sense to suggest it does – whether the idea of epistemic or moral authority having a 'ground' in nature is a coherent one" (Rorty 1979, p. 178). "Can we treat the study of 'the nature of human knowledge' just as the study of certain ways in which human beings interact, or does it require an ontological foundation […]? […] The first alternative leads to a pragmatic view of truth and a therapeutic approach to ontology" (Rorty 1979, p. 175).

Rorty subscribes to a robust form of materialism ("non-reductive physicalism"), but by circumventing questions of access in epistemology and reference in semantics through the elimination of the representational picture, ontology drops out as a corollary. There is no place for talk of substances and essences in antirepresentationalism because there is no sharp distinction between the world with and without us—we do not "stand over and against" (Rorty 1991a, p. 2) each another. The world's and our materiality becomes interesting when it is relevant for our actions, but it is not a goal of inquiry that could be sharply divided from our other goals and purposes. Only if we need truth *in addition* to success (sentence "II" cited above) do we need to differentiate between the world under our description and the world without us. When successful interaction is the only goal, then acknowledging causal pressure is enough, and "'objective truth' is no more and no less than the best idea we currently have about how to explain what is going on" (Rorty 1979, p. 385).

Rorty's antifoundationalism amounts to a reminder not to confound "contact with reality (a causal,

nonintentional, non-description-relative relation) with dealing with reality (describing, explaining, predicting, and modifying it – all of which are things we do under descriptions)" (Rorty 1979, p. 375). Therefore, "Rorty is a realist in the sense that the world shapes human practices and languages; indeed he is a realist up to that point at which we abandon pragmatism for representationalism" (Dieleman 2017, p. 136).

4. Scientific realism: Rorty on reality under conditions of freedom

"Did cold fusion occur?" Rorty *sees no* problem with this question within the practice of science. Rorty not only does not criticize the sciences; he underlines their success regarding prediction and control and praises their moral virtues, which he identifies in the use of persuasion rather than force, relative incorruptibility, patience, and reasonableness, among others (Rorty 1991b, p. 61).[6] Rorty *does* see a problem with this question within the practice of philosophy when philosophy does not want to know, like the sciences do, if cold fusion occurred, but if cold fusion *really* occurred. Only the second outset opens the gap that Rorty thinks we should abandon.

For scientific realist philosophers, according to Rorty, it is not enough to explain "the success of technology based on the belief in elementary particles by the existence of elementary particles [which would be the explanation of the sciences]. For they recognize that this sort of explanation is trivial. All it does is to say that we describe our successful actions as we do because we hold the theories we hold" (Rorty 1991b, p. 54).

> To get beyond such vacuity, the realist must explain something called 'science' on the basis of something called 'the relation of scientific inquiry to reality' – a relation not possessed by all other human activities. So, to get his project off the ground, he must have in hand some independent criterion of scientificity other than this relation to reality. He wants to claim that 'because there really *are* elementary particles' is part of the best explanation of the success of IBM. (Rorty 1991b, p. 54)

According to Rorty, what would be required to achieve this level of independent certainty is to "answer the question 'what kind of mechanism is truth?' If realists are going to do any explaining that is not of the […] ['because we hold the theories we hold'] sort they are going to have to describe two bits of a mechanism and show how they interlock" (Rorty 1991b, p. 55). For Rorty, realists are not able to provide such a description. They rely instead, like Michael Williams, "on the claim that such a spelling out is in principle possible and that, when actual, it would constitute the 'best explanation' of the success of science" (Rorty 1991b, p. 56). For Rorty, this is not enough. In Rorty's eyes, realists fail to deliver and substitute the lacking criteria with their realist intuition.

Rorty thinks that "there is no such thing as 'the best explanation' of anything, there is just the explanation which best suits the purpose of some given explainer" (Rorty 1991b, p. 60). Questions that start from a holism of scheme and content are action-targeted not object-targeted; the "purpose of some given explainer" in his or her worldly environment has to be suited, not the object separated from the explainer.

One attempt to overcome the realist deadlock comes from John McDowell, who rules out inaccessibility between the two spheres by sustaining that investigators and world are governed by the same norms; world and investigators share the same space of reasons—that is, the conceptual realm extends "all the way out." For Rorty, this is just a version of Michael Williams' claim that "spelling out" the mechanism of "truth" is "in principle possible" because McDowell does not show that world and investigators are governed by the same norms; he just assumes they are—it is part of his premises. For Rorty, McDowell fails to deliver, as Williams does, because neither of the two can demonstrate having done what they claim to be able to do in principle, namely describing the interlocking mechanism of truth (Williams) or proving that the world and investigators are governed by the same norms, that "norms transcend consensus" and are "answerable to the facts" (McDowell). McDowell grants that:

> It is true that we have only whatever lights are at our disposal to go on in bringing such a norm [of inquiry] to bear – which involves deciding what to say about, for instance, whether or not cold fusion has occurred. We understand […] it by the lights constituted by being a (more or less) competent party to the practice. But it does not follow that nothing can be normative for moves within the practice except ensuring that one's peers will let one get away with them. There is a norm for making claims with the words 'Cold fusion has not occurred' that is constituted by whether or not cold fusion has occurred; and whether or not cold fusion has occurred is not the same as whether or not saying it has occurred will pass muster in the current practice. (McDowell 2000, p. 118)

Rorty's answer is:

> I can agree that 'Did X happen?' is not the same question as 'Can saying X happened pass muster in the current practice?' But of course, as we pragmatists always say on these occasions, the difference is not one that makes a difference. For anything that helps you decide to answer either question in the affirmative will, assuming that you yourself are a participant in the current practice, let you answer the other question the same way. Pointing out that two questions differ in meaning is not, in itself, enough to show a difference between two norms. (Rorty 2000d, p. 125)

Realists want to have a weapon against fiction. They want to make sure to be able to decide between mere fantasy and "hard facts" and are afraid that Rorty's claim for solidarity (which is practice immanent objectivity) instead of (practice transcendent) objectivity does not offer this sort of weapon. However, for Rorty, if freedom is granted, it is difficult for fictious claims to pass the judgment of the scientific community (Rorty 2000d, p. 127) simply because scientists do not want to fall out of success, and this means they cannot ignore causality: "I think that if we do our best with our peers, we need not worry about answering to any other norms, nor to the world. For, as Davidson teaches us, you and your peers and the world are always bouncing off each other in causal ways. That causal interaction – that perpetual triangulation – is as intimate as connection with either world or peers can get" (Rorty 2000d, p. 127).

For Rorty, wanting more than this is a psychological urge, not a theoretical necessity; "the realistic true believer's notion of the world is an obsession" (Rorty 1982b, p. 13) born from the fear of losing contact with the world. This fear arises together with the scheme-content division and goes away when one stops dividing the world into spectators and objects and thus needing interfaces to bridge the gap (Rorty 1982b, p. 14). Rorty thinks there can be proof of electrons hitting screens because there is a practice that involves the use of the word "electron" in connection with certain experimental procedures, but there is no practice that proves truth beyond any actual practice.

For Rorty, the world in its material sense is simply "the stars, the people, the tables, the grass – all those things which nobody except the occasional 'scientific realist' think might not exist" (Rorty 1982b, p. 14). In its conceptual sense, "the world" is "those planks in Neurath's boat which at the moment are not moved around" (Rorty 1982b, p. 15). On this level, the notions "electron" and "table" serve the same purpose; they do not correspond to ontological givens that could be abstracted from our aims and desires—not because they are not "out there" but because their being there is not in question, hence is not in need to be affirmed (e.g. Rorty 2000d, p. 102). The notions "electron" and "table" are simply tools that help us coordinate our actions in our common environment.

5. Metaphysical realism: Rorty on reality under tyranny

"[I]f we take care of freedom, truth will take care of itself" (Rorty 2000b, p. 343). This is because in ideal conditions, if inquiry is free from social power mechanisms,[7] causal constraint will take care of discarding the less successful interactions. But what if freedom is not granted? Is there not a sense to "truth" apart from mere (scientific) success?

For metaphysical realists, truth also has a comforting role; truth is something to hold onto in dark times. In devotion to (practice-transcendent) truth, metaphysical realists believe they have a tool to ensure dignity.

[S]eeing all criteria as no more than temporary resting-places, constructed by a community to facilitate its inquiries, seems morally humiliating. […] [Because] when the secret police come, when the torturers violate the innocent, there is nothing to be said to them of the form 'There is something within you which you are betraying. Though you embody the practices of a totalitarian society which will endure forever, there is something beyond those practices which condemns you.' This thought is hard to live with. (Rorty 1982a, p. xlii)

After Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* appeared, there were extensive discussions regarding his reading of Orwell's *1984*. Richard Bernstein stated that Orwell shows where non-realist approaches are leading and that there is no way to distinguish Rorty's coherentism from the torturer O'Brien in Orwell's novel (Bernstein 2003). James Conant wrote that "in non-totalitarian societies, the following two tasks generally coincide: the task of seeking to justify a claim to the satisfaction of other people and the task of seeking to establish that a claim is justified in the light of the facts" (Conant 2000, p. 306). Rorty answered:

Rather than distinguishing two tasks, I would say: in non-totalitarian societies, we take the facts to be established when we have conciliated our opinion with those of others whose opinions are relevant (our fellow-citizens, our fellow-jurypersons, our fellow-experts, etc.). Conant goes on to say that these two tasks "diverge radically" in totalitarian societies. I would say: in such societies it becomes very difficult, and often impossible, for anyone to find out what the facts are, because agreement is no longer a good sign of truth. The difference between Conant and myself is that he thinks that someone like Winston, trapped in such a society, can turn to the light of facts. I think that there is nowhere for Winston to turn. (Rorty 2000b, p. 342)

On epistemological grounds, this is due to the same reason given above, which is the point of lacking criteria beyond determinate practices.

In the case of Winston and the 'patients' whom the KGB used to send to what it called 'psychiatric clinics,' their memories are right and the people around them are lying. […] But neither Winston nor the Elvis-sighter is in a position to find out whether their memories are right or wrong. For neither can turn away from the effort to achieve coherence among their beliefs […] and instead start comparing their memories with 'the facts.' [There is no procedure called 'turning to the facts' which will help them.] Conant speaks as if Winston's memories are the best evidence as to the facts. Orwell and we know that they are, but how is Winston supposed to know that? (Rorty 2000b, p. 343)

The truth of Winston's memories is "recognizable from the outside – from where we are" (Rorty 2000b, p. 343), but there is no outside position to one's own life.

The second reason is the action-point, namely the point regarding the coordination of one's behavior

with that of others, which, if freedom is not granted, is a matter of hegemony and brute power play. If no one confirms our version, truth does not empower us with agency: "the truth of Winston's beliefs is irrelevant to the relation between himself and O'Brien" (Rorty 2000b, p. 344). One may well know that 2+2=4, but how does that alter one's position in the power mechanism? It might alter one's position if one is able to convince others and build a practice of resistance to this claim, but then again, solidarity is the key to change, not practice-transcendent objectivity. Following Rorty, Chris Voparil wrote in the Boston Globe after Trump was elected:

> The ultimate target of propaganda is not just our grounding in objective reality but our agency, our capacity to resist. This capacity relies not on connection to truths, but on webs of belief and desire – identities – that are coherent. […] Defeating lies requires not just insisting upon facts but erecting barricades that keep our selves and our commitments coherent. […] Most in need of recovery, in a post-truth world, is not just our relation to objective reality, but to our fellow citizens. (Voparil 2017)

According to Rorty, to hold onto realism and truth might well comfort the suppressed in the sense wanted by Conant—at least until they remain alone with O'Brien in room 101—but it will certainly not lead to change, and for Rorty, comfort was not enough.

6. Did Rorty take a realist turn in the later part of his career?

Brandom's volume *Rorty and His Critics* (2000) is famous due to, as Stout puts it, one of the "the most startling passage[s] […] in the entirety of Rorty's published writings" (Stout 2007, 16). In this passage, Rorty agrees with Ramberg that the use of "getting things right," which Ramberg promotes based on Davidson, is fully compatible with his own approach, and he declares the intention to use it in the future (Rorty 2000e). In the same volume, incomprehensibly for many, Rorty remains adamant about his refusal of Brandom's request to use his notion of "made true by facts" (Rorty 2000a). Philosophers sympathetic to the New Pragmatist approach read the passages as an admission of Rorty's eventual failure to avoid truth and realism and, like Stout, they "do not see how to square" (Stout 2002, p. 52) Rorty's agreement with Ramberg while he continues to resist Brandom. "Ramberg and Brandom appear to be explicating the same pre-philosophical ideal of 'getting things right' in the somewhat different philosophical idioms of Davidson and Sellars, neither of which strikes me as inherently tainted by metaphysics" (Stout 2002, p. 52). Others, like William Curtis, hold that "Stout and others read far too much in Rorty's 'Response to Ramberg.' […] [T]here is ample evidence in Rorty's earlier writings […] that suggests that he *always* held this 'reformed' position urged by Ramberg" (Curtis 2015, p. 73).

The questions of whether Rorty's admittance to Ramberg entails a substantive revision of his position

or rather a clarification and whether Ramberg's and Brandom's notions are effectively congruous continue to inspire debate (e.g., see Gascoigne 2008, pp. 213-221; Stout 2002, Stout 2007; Levine 2010, Levine 2020, Huetter-Almerigi 2020). I think Stout's hint to the "pre-philosophical ideal of 'getting things right'" is pivotal because, depending on the interpreter's inclinations and intuitions, for some this pre-philosophical ideal coincides with representational realism, for others not, and this is precisely Rorty's point; Brandom's version accommodates traditional realist intuitions better, which is the reason why Rorty dismisses Brandom's account. Ramberg's version instead stresses the post-ontological action-targetedness of truth-claims, not their hinge on a pre-philosophical idea of traditional realism. The pre-philosophical ideal Ramberg's version hinges on is the intuition that we are able to interact successfully with our environment—without entailing or accommodating metaphysical realism.

6.1. Rorty on Brandom's notion "made true by facts"

Brandom's accommodation of traditional realist intuitions is in the following citation:

> That old semanticist and modal logician Abraham Lincoln was asked 'If we agreed to call the tail a "leg," how many legs would horses have?' His answer was: 'Four, because you can't change how many legs horses have by changing the way we use words.' This is surely the right response. One cannot change the nonlinguistic facts, in the unloaded sense, by changing linguistic ones. In the counterfactual situation envisaged, the words 'Horses have five legs,' would be true, but only because it would not say that horses have five legs, and so would not conflict with the fact that horses would still have four legs. (Brandom 2000b, p. 163)

The important question here is how far Brandom's "nonlinguistic facts," and "facts" more generally, are "unloaded". Brandom's use of the notion "fact" *is* unloaded insofar as the notion "fact" is intelligible only relative to vocabularies with "making true" and "correspondence" (Brandom 2000b, p. 185)—it is wholly inferential in this sense. This is why Rorty thinks that Brandom has his "heart […] in the right place" (Rorty 1998c, p. 135). However, the notion "fact" *is not* unloaded when it comes to the hidden background assumption the notion draws on, which is that there *is* a way the world is. Brandom leaves the belief in the deeper truth of common sense untouched, whereas Rorty wanted to take common sense's power away. "[N]obody would have had a use for this cluster of notions [which include 'facts'] unless they had a conception of beliefs cutting reality at joints which are not relative to vocabularies – so Ockham's Razor suggests that we skip the representing and just stick to the justifying" (Rorty 2000a, p. 185). In Brandom's eyes, one can change the meaning of the old metaphor "fact" and use it in this new defused version, but Rorty says:

> My fear is that countenancing these dangerous idioms (like truth and fact) will be taken as a concession by the bad guys. […] These guys do not agree with Brandom and myself that

increased freedom and richness of Conversation is the aim of inquiry, but instead think that there is the further aim of getting Reality right (as opposed to getting, for instance, snow, photons, baseball, Cezanne and the best use of the term 'Fact' right). (Rorty 2000a, p. 188)

Hence, Rorty embraces exactly what Brandom anticipates as Rorty's potential answer: "no matter how docile training may seem to have made them [the dangerous idioms like 'truth as correspondence to the facts'], they are always reliable to reassert their wild nature and turn on their supposed master" (Brandom 2000b, p. 167). Brandom's version of the notion "fact" plays with and hinges on practice-transcendence. This is why Rorty held it to be too dangerous to be endorsed.

6.2. Rorty on Ramberg's notion of "getting things right"

For Rorty, Ramberg's notion of "getting things right" means making our description better suitable to our purposes, not making our description better answerable to the world beyond our purposes. Ramberg's notion takes account of the shift from talking about accurate representations of substances and essences to maxims for action referred to in section 3. Sentences are true with respect to their success in action, not with respect to the object described. This is a small but important difference: Antirepresentationalism assumes that copying is not needed for successful coping, and the structure Ramberg's notion resides on is antirepresentationalist and post-ontological in this sense.

Ramberg starts from Davidson's concept of triangulation, which Rorty, after agreeing to Ramberg's interpretation and revising his own former interpretation, describes as follows:

> The point of […] [triangulation] is that you cannot get along with just holistic inferential relations between beliefs and statements (as coherence theorists tried to do) nor with atomic relations of being-caused-by (as realists fixated on perception still try to do). You have to play back and forth between causation and inference in a way which does not permit any of the corners of a triangle to be independent of any of the others. (Rorty 2000c, p. 78)

Ontology drops out when it means talking about essences and substances purified of our interaction, but causal determination remains in place insofar as the angle with the world is always already factored in.

> Getting snow right – getting still more truth about snow – is not an end in itself but a means to the purpose for which we invented the term 'snow.' […] 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.' (Rorty 2000e, p. 376)

According to Rorty, in Ramberg's version, "an account of truth is automatically an account of agency, and conversely" (Rorty 2000e, p. 371). Like the terms "electron" and "table" above, the term "snow" is bound up with our practices that rendered the use of the term "snow" helpful in the first place.

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Ramberg's notion "getting things right" does not imply practice transcendence. This is why Rorty embraced the term.

6.3. Revision or clarification of Rorty's position?

Whether Rorty's concessions to Ramberg entail a substantive revision or rather a rhetorical clarification of Rorty's position is part of a larger debate. The common core amongst Rorty-scholars seems to be that Rorty clarified his position (e.g. Curtis 2015, p. 73; see also Bacon in this volume), whereas the common core among Rorty's critics seems to be that Rorty's concessions to Ramberg *should* have entailed a revision of his position that Rorty, contradictorily, did not endorse. I instead think that Rorty's embracement of Ramberg's interpretation of Davidson *does* imply a substantive revision of his position but that this revision, as Rorty himself suggests, *does not* endanger some of his core claims because the revision is not of the sort Rorty's critics want it to be (Huetter-Almerigi 2020).

After his concessions to Ramberg, Rorty could still sustain that there is no Truth with capital "T" about the world because Ramberg's notion does not commit to practice-transcendence. We can get "snow" right, but

> Why cannot we get Reality (aka How the World Really Is In Itself) right? Because there are
> no norms for talking about it. Quot homines, tot sententiae: you can say anything you like
> about the deep underlying nature of reality and get away with it. There are norms for snow-
> talk and Zeus-talk, but not for Reality-talk. That is because the purposes served by the former,
> but not those served by the latter, are reasonably clear. (Rorty 2000e, p. 375)

Therefore, Rorty's antiauthoritarianism remains untouched.

Yet, after his concessions to Ramberg, Rorty holds that there are non-causal word-world relations (Rorty 2000e, 374), and this is a revision as substantive as it can be. Instead of holding, as he previously did, that the world constrains our beliefs (only) causally, Rorty now says, with respect to his revised interpretation of Davidson's concept of triangulation, that:

> It was a mistake to locate the norms at one corner of the triangle – where my peers are –
> rather than seeing them as, so to speak, hovering over the whole process of triangulation.
> […] It is not that my peers have more to do with my obligation to say that snow is white
> than the snow does, or than I do. (Rorty 2000e, p. 376)

This entails what Rorty himself calls a "partial reconciliation of pragmatism and realism" (Rorty 2000e, p. 374)—*practice-immanent* realism! Still, after Ramberg, there are normative lines running from the world to us and our peers, although never only in this direction but always "hovering over the whole process of triangulation."

7. Conclusion

As has been seen, the reasons for Rorty's "militancy against realism" (Gascoigne 2008, p. 86) were of first and second order and of a theoretical and political nature. The meta-philosophical rationale behind Rorty's militancy was also that his antiauthoritarianism was not compatible with the need to "bow" to anything other than ourselves and our peers (Rorty 2000e, p. 376). For Rorty, this was a way to follow through with the ideas of the Enlightenment. According to Rorty, the Enlightenment substituted God with truth, and we should now substitute truth with solidarity for emancipatory reasons. Philosophy's role is not to substitute, reinforce, or be the foundation of science (the sciences do quite well without philosophy's support) but to contribute to helping coordinate our behavior with that of others in always less cruel ways. For Rorty, the best way to guarantee this was to create an environment in which unfamiliar ideas could emerge and create tensions with the horizon of beliefs that had, up to that point, been taken for granted—that is, with our most dear and undoubted intuitions. "The systematic elimination of such tensions, or of awareness of them, is what is so frightening about *Brave New World* and *1984*. So our best chance for transcending our acculturation is to be brought up in a culture which prides itself on *not* being monolithic" (Rorty 1991a, p. 14). Philosophy, in Rorty's eyes, should contribute to keeping tensions alive and be a tool for cultural change, not "the search for some final vocabulary, which can somehow be known in advance to be the common core, the truth of, all the other vocabularies which might be advanced in its place" (Rorty 1982a, p. xlii).

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Recommended Literature for Further Reading

Bernstein, Richard. 2014. So Much the Worse for Your Old Intuitions; Start Working Up Some New Ones. *Contemporary Pragmatism* 11 (1): 5-14.

Bernstein elaborates on Rorty's take on intuitions and underlines the concept's bearing in the

discussion Rorty had with Ramberg and Brandom in 2000.

Dieleman, Susan. 2017. Realism, Pragmatism, and Critical Social Epistemology. In *Pragmatism and Justice*, Eds. Susan Dieleman, David Rondel, and Christopher Voparil. 129-146, Oxford University Press.
Dieleman spells out why and how Rorty's antirepresentationalism pairs well with Critical Social Epistemology, especially Miranda Fricker's concept of hermeneutical injustice, and gives concrete examples from the feminist and LGBT movements.

Ramberg, Bjørn. 2015. Davidson and Rorty: Triangulation and anti-foundationalism. In *Life and World. The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*, Eds. Jeff Malpas and Hans-Helmut Gander, 216-235. London and New York: Routledge.
Ramberg gives a comprehensive outline of Rorty's and Davidson's position regarding "triangulation" and "anti-foundationalism" and widens his interpretation of Rorty in the context of hermeneutics.

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[1] On this point, also see Michael Bacon on Rorty's antiauthoritarianism in this handbook and Dieleman 2017.

[2] For a comprehensive outline of the "scheme-content" distinction: Baghramian 1998.

[3] In *Consequences of Pragmatism* and *Truth and Progress*, the same points with different foci sound like this: In "The World Well Lost," Rorty argues that without the Kantian dualisms, there is no need for the realist notion of "the world." Once, following Quine, analyticity and, following Sellars, the Myth of the Given are gone, and respectively once Kant's "Ding and sich" together with the Kantian epistemology is gone, there is no need to bridge the gaps (Rorty 1982b, pp. 13-16). In "Antiskeptical weapons: Michael Williams vs. Donald Davidson" Rorty writes: Davidson "thinks the only way to get rid of the dualism of subject and object is to say that the purported gap between the two is an arbitrary line drawn across this web – a line that serves no purpose except to create a context within which Descartes and Stroud can get to work" (Rorty 1998a, p. 161).

[4] Also see the introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism*: language is not "a tertium quid between Subject and Object, nor […] a medium in which we try to form pictures of reality, but […] part of the behavior of human beings. On this view the activity of uttering sentences is one of the things people do in order to cope with their environment" (Rorty 1982a, p. xviii); and Rorty's introduction to *Truth and Progress*: "the appearance-reality distinction falls for the useful-not-useful-distinction" (Rorty 1998b, p. 1).

[5] In "Realism and Reference" Rorty defines three notions of "reference." The first one is common sense, which does not imply existence: "In this sense one can talk about phlogiston, Santa Claus etc. Then there is an intermediate notion […] in which one can only talk about what exists, but in which the truth of one's remarks is not determined by the discovery of what one is talking about. Rather, the subject is changed. If one says 'There are no such things as X's; what you are talking about are Y's,' one does not mean that X's are identical with Y's;" (Rorty 1976, p. 325.) The third notion of reference "is fully transparent" (Rorty 1976, p. 325) and corresponds to the philosophical notions of Reference and Truth for which, in Rorty's account, no one outside the practice of a certain kind of philosophy has any use.

[6] On Rorty never being against science but only against scientism also Brandom 2000a.

[7] This freedom comes in grades.