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# Rorty's Point of Departure from Mainstream Pragmatist Approach to Epistemology\*

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Our main focus in this paper is to try to show Rorty's point of departure from mainstream pragmatist treatment of epistemology. In his pragmatic approach to epistemology, Rorty urges that a good pragmatist should abandon epistemology as a foundational and rational discipline and instead opt for conversation, the view that knowledge is an expression of judgment of a historically conditioned social group.<sup>1</sup> According to Rorty, the view that we should disentangle ourselves from rigid canons of epistemology is the quest of classical pragmatism traceable to the writings of William James and John Dewey. On this showing, Rorty argues that conversationalism is consistent with mainstream or original pragmatism. Contrary to Rorty's claim we try to show, in the following pages, that his pragmatic approach to epistemology is a deviation from mainstream pragmatism. We establish that mainstream or classical pragmatists do not repudiate epistemology.

*Keywords:* Rorty, pragmatism, epistemology, conversationalism, truth

## 1. Introduction

Rorty in his conversationalism argues that a good pragmatist should reject epistemology as a foundational, normative, and rational discipline. Pragmatists should also drop altogether talks about truth. What they should do is to engage in conversation, the view that knowledge derives its legitimacy solely from a given social group. Rorty alleges that Peirce contributed nothing to pragmatism except giving it a name and being a source of inspiration to William James. This is because, in his view, Peirce failed to break away from the rigid canons of epistemology that construe knowledge as a foundational, normative, and rational discipline (1996, 220). Rorty instead prefers James and Dewey, as he claims, James sees truth as "what is good in the way of belief" (1996, 221) while Dewey takes truth to be what we are justified in believing in the sense of a social phenomenon (1979, 9). On this showing, Rorty argues that his conversationalist epistemology conforms to the spirit of mainstream or original pragmatism because it has its roots in the writings of James and Dewey. Contrary to Rorty's claim, we argue that conversationalist epistemology is a deviation from mainstream pragmatism. By way of initial introduction, we flesh out some core theses of mainstream pragmatism.

## 2. The Theses of Pragmatism

There are variations in classical pragmatist treatment of epistemology. However, a common thread runs

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through their positions. We have identified principally six theses of mainstream pragmatism. These theses reflect in the writings of almost all the three classical pragmatists.<sup>2</sup>

(1) Human knowledge is best understood as an activity whereby the human species seeks to adapt to its environment. Beliefs and systems of beliefs are instruments or mechanisms generated by people for the explicit purpose of adapting successfully to the environment. Accordingly, human inquiry is the process whereby we seek to pass from a state of not knowing how to respond to the world to a state of forming beliefs that serve as ways of adapting successfully to the environment (Peirce 1934, 5: 370; Dewey 1960, 223-26; Almeder 1980, 1-13; James 1981, 273-75).

(2) Accordingly, beliefs or systems of beliefs are to be judged acceptable or unacceptable insofar as those beliefs when adopted as rules of human behavior facilitate one's dealings with sensory experience. Consequently, all the rules of evidence and rules of acceptance for various beliefs are valid only to the extent that they tend to produce beliefs that are successful, that is, beliefs that allow us to manipulate our environment successfully to meet human needs (Peirce 1934, 5: 372; James 1968, 223-26; Almeder 1980, 1-13; Quine 1981, 32ff.).

(3) All beliefs or systems of beliefs are fallible and subject to revision. At any time the truth value assigned to our beliefs is subject to revision or withdrawal in the light of new evidence and changes in the rules for determining the validity of that evidence. Pragmatists believe that even in mathematics the truth of our belief is dependent on how we choose to define the basic terms, which if our needs were different we would have defined differently. In short, pragmatists believe that there are no propositions whose truth is not in principle subject to revision in the light of future evidence (Dewey 1913, 8; Peirce 1934, 7: 568; James 1968; Almeder 1980, 44ff.).

(4) The only method for determining which belief about our external world is acceptable is the scientific method. Indeed, the only criterion for the meaningfulness of a proposition about the physical world is whether it is confirmable or falsifiable under the method of natural sciences. For the classical pragmatists, especially Peirce, only the method of natural sciences has succeeded in providing us with beliefs that in the long run are successful and has enabled us to adapt to our physical environment. This means that differences in sense experience, according to the pragmatists, must lead to variations in received beliefs. In effect, the evidence from sense experience should count for confirming or falsifying those beliefs (Dewey 1917, 29-53; Peirce 1934, 7: 377; James 1968, 201).

(5) Unlike classical empiricism as expressed by Locke, Berkeley, and Hume wherein the truth of a proposition is anchored on how it originates from experience, pragmatism considers the truth or acceptability of one's belief as a function of whether what one expects if the belief were true will continue to obtain in the future. According to James, it is not in the root, but in the fruits of our beliefs that truth lies (1968, 14ff., 195; Peirce 1934, 7: 78; Dewey 1960).

(6) Sentences or statements about physical objects are to be regarded as true if they are warrantably assertible or authorizable under rules of induction and in the rules of deductive inferences. These rules are in turn acceptable only to the extent that they produce the beliefs that allow us to accommodate our basic needs in an ever changing environment (Peirce 1934, 1: 634; Dewey 1941, 169-86; James 1968, 49; Almeder 1980, 55ff.).

Thesis (1) shows the pragmatic utility principle. It stands out as the most popular thesis of pragmatism. Mostly credited to James as his major contribution to the pragmatic discourse (Hamlyn 1970, 119), the thesis has traces in Peirce's pragmatism, where Peirce put forward practical usefulness as the criterion of meaningfulness or belief as a habit of action. Peirce invites us to "Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical

bearings we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object" (1934, 5: 402).<sup>3</sup> This thesis captures the most widely cited pragmatic definition of truth which avers that truth is what is satisfactory to believe (James 1907, 59). Contemporary pragmatists such as Susan Haack have consistently argued that James' insistence on truth as what is useful in the way of belief does not exclude the fact that truth is correspondence. According to Haack, therefore, what James means about beliefs which are useful or good or expedient are beliefs which are safe from danger of inconsistency with subsequent experience (1976, 233). It means that true beliefs, according to James, are beliefs which are verifiable and confirmable by experience. It is for this reason that James argues, "Experience, as we know, has ways of boiling over, making us correct our present formulas" (1907, 145).

Theses (2) and (4) combine the utility principle with the ideas of correspondence and representation. In thesis (2), the point is clearly made that our beliefs facilitate dealings with our sensory experience about the external world. However, they (beliefs) are valid only if they make projections that are eventually successful in serving human needs. The scientific method alluded to in thesis (4) is suggestive of mental representation, the idea that there is an external world out there that we come to know as a copy in our minds. Apart from that, pragmatists believe that all rules of evidence and acceptance for various beliefs (epistemic norms) are valid on the basis that they have a utility value. Here we see that the pragmatist test for whether the method of acquiring beliefs is a valid method or not is whether the application of that method helps us develop beliefs that allow us to adapt successfully to our environment. The point must be reiterated that this utility principle in pragmatism does not imply that the pragmatists abandon truth as the goal of scientific enquiry. It tacitly assumes that general successful beliefs be regarded as true and the scientific method is the most efficient method for achieving such an objective.

Thesis (3) tacitly concedes fallibilism. Fallibilism is an essential ingredient of modest foundationalism. It is the idea that propositions are fallibly true. It is opposed to the Cartesian foundationalism where true propositions are taken to be infallible.<sup>4</sup> Fallibilism implies that if ideas are probably true then the truth value of propositions will immediately be annulled in the light of new evidence. Thesis (6) reiterates the principles of deduction and induction in traditional epistemology. The principle of deduction is employed in Cartesian foundationalism where the inferential connections between basic and non-basic beliefs are taken to be deductive. The principle of induction is employed in modest foundationalism where inferential connections between basic and non-basic beliefs are inductive or probabilistic. Thesis (6) reinforces thesis (3) to yield fallibilism. Because fallibilism upholds the annulment of true propositions in the light of new evidence, it flows from these theses that all true beliefs are projections or hypotheses that hold tentatively until new evidence is discovered.

The moral to be drawn from the interpretation of these theses is that the classical pragmatist did not abandon the core principles of epistemology as Rorty and his adherents have argued. The fact that the classical pragmatists subscribe to the correspondence theory, the rules of induction and deduction including all other epistemic norms suggest that they did not abandon epistemology. Our main criterion for contrasting mainstream pragmatists with deviants such as Rorty is their respective attitude towards epistemology. The mainstream pragmatists though do not embrace epistemology unconditionally (because they merge it with the utility principle), equally do not repudiate epistemology altogether. But the neo-pragmatists such as Rorty repudiate epistemology. So our yardstick for measuring whether one is a faithful adherent of pragmatism or not is whether or not one repudiates epistemology. In what follows, we shall take a brief look at Rorty's conversationalism.

### 3. Rorty's Pragmatic Epistemology

Of the many neo-pragmatists, Rorty is the most vocal member of the anti-foundationalist campaign. Rorty's argument is that foundationalist epistemology is misguided. The idea that justification of a belief lies in its relation to what is given in experience is a misconception resulting from confusion about causation. This idea, according to Rorty, requires the case of truth as correspondence or as faithfully picturing the external objects. Besides, foundationalist epistemology relies on certain, apodictic, and self-enduring truth that is untenable. Rorty reads Wilfrid Sellars (1963, 169) and Quine's (1995, 255-68) attacks on the given (sense data) and analytic/synthetic dichotomy respectively, as sounding the death knell of epistemology. For Rorty, the death of epistemology had already occurred with Sellars and Quine. He merely announced the obituary (1979, 182-205).

If epistemology is dead what is its successor subject? Rorty (1979) says epistemology has no successor subject. However, we should substitute epistemology with conversation, though not as a successor subject but as a consolation lest the void created by the demise of epistemology be left unfilled. He defined conversation as the view that knowledge is only defensible within the judgment of a historically conditioned social group. For Rorty such conversation, unlike the traditional epistemological discourses which rely on hard and fast rules, has no particular disciplinary standards or neutral matrix for judging what counts as knowledge (1982, xxxix). What we ought to do is to keep talking because there is no end to the conversation. We have no objective foundation or fixed goals to ground our knowledge claims. The only workable alternative is to accept our conversation with our fellow humans as our only source of guidance (1982, 166).

On truth, Rorty argues that there is nothing plausible to say about truth. Truth is not a goal of enquiry. A goal is something you can tell when you are closer or distant away from. But there is no way we tell how close or near we are from truth. Similarly there is nothing like a cleavage between the thing-in-itself and a thing as it appears to us. Rorty thus suggests that since we have no use for appearance and reality distinction we should substitute for it a distinction between less useful ways and more useful ways of talking (1998, 1).

Having repudiated epistemology, what is now the task of the Rortian pragmatist? We pointed out that mainstream pragmatists do not reject the traditional norms of epistemology. They do not reject the rules of induction and deduction. Neither do they refute the idea of true propositions reflecting objective reality. The exception is that the pragmatists have an overarching principle for measuring what qualifies as a legitimate candidate for knowledge. And this is the utility principle. The pragmatist accommodates tacitly all traditional theories of epistemology in so far as they satisfy the utility principle. But Rorty argues that pragmatists should become conversationalists. They should reject outright all traditional epistemological theories. Thus far, it has become clear why Rorty strayed from mainstream pragmatism. The relevant issues on his point of departure are summarized below.

### 4. Rorty's Point of Departure

Rorty's point of departure from mainstream pragmatism is principally due to his uncompromising rejection of rationality, epistemic norms, and the correspondence which is grounded in traditional epistemology. The correspondence theory is the blood of epistemology from Rorty's perspective. And once he has proven it unintelligible, then epistemology is to be renounced. He prefers conversationalism instead: the view that knowledge derives its legitimacy from the judgment of a social group.

The traditional conception of epistemology crucially involves two principles, the principles of justification and ratification of knowledge. The principle of justification requires that a knowing subject provides evidence

for his or her claim to knowledge. The concept of ratification, on the other hand, upholds truth as an essential ingredient of knowledge. It is against this background that knowledge is traditionally defined as justified true belief. Traditionally, these principles are investigated *a priori*, that is, within the confines of rationality and logic. However, some epistemologists prefer to undertake the investigations of these concepts *a posteriori*, that is, in an empirical fashion. These scholars are not repudiators of epistemology, they are reformers. Thus, some foundationalists, reliabilists, etc., are reformers and not repudiators or nihilists of epistemology. So, all perceptual theories of knowledge which construe the causal condition of knowledge as the justification of knowledge and the ratification principle to be involved in the idea of correspondence, the view that there are external truth connections between our minds and external reality, are mostly reformers but not repudiators of epistemology. The same applies to pragmatists who merge the utility principle with epistemic normativity, rationality, and truth.

Indeed any scholar that rejects both the concept of justification and ratification of knowledge is repudiating epistemology. Rorty is one such scholar who rejects both principles of epistemology. But our claim that Rorty rejects the concept of justification may sound rather confusing since Rorty seems in one moment to subscribe to the concept of justification (1979, 99, 170). But that exactly is where the difficulty arises. The traditional conception of knowledge takes justification to be objective and universal, implying that the same standards of what count as justification must hold for every person. For the traditional epistemologists the concept of justification is not a mere social construct and so they are objectivists about justification. Contrary to this classical picture is Rorty's version of justification which construes standards for justification as a matter of individual preference or culture-specific. Besides, traditional epistemology requires that the concept of justification is closely tied to the concept of truth, that is, the principle of ratification of knowledge. But we see from our earlier submission how Rorty rejects the concept of truth (1998, 19). So Rorty (1998) urges that we drop altogether talks about truth because it is an unprofitable discourse. Rorty's position is grounded on the belief that justification and ratification of knowledge are socially subjective, devoid of neutral, independent, and strict benchmarks. What is true or justified depends upon the set of beliefs held by one's social group. Rorty points out that there is no necessary homogeneity across social groups. Each community has its own contingent starting point and evolution (Rorty 1998). So Rorty concludes that epistemology is dead. This is because there is nothing for epistemology to do; and no deep analysis for justification or truth (ratification). Justification and truth have no epistemic use except the particular significance that a particular society or community endows them.

Thus, epistemology withers away and it is replaced by a historically sensitive awareness of what has been handed down through the generations of one's social group. The following recapitulates summarily Rorty's point of departure from mainstream pragmatism.

Rorty's conversationalism is different from mainstream pragmatism because: (i) He debunks the idea of correspondence, rationality, and epistemic normativity whereas the mainstream pragmatists accept epistemic norms, rationality, and correspondence. Here Rorty violates specifically theses (2) and (4). (ii) Rorty rejects objective justification. In so doing opts out of thesis (6). (iii) He rejects objective truth and argues that truth should not be uttered at all, thus violating theses (5) and (6). (iv) Finally, he repudiates epistemology altogether and urges that the death of epistemology should be left with no successor subject, thus, debunking all six theses. In contrast to Rorty's death of epistemology crusade mainstream pragmatists would want to continue to engage with epistemology. They believe that though traditional theories of epistemology may have problems, the solution is not to abandon the path to objective knowledge altogether. Theories of epistemology can be adjusted or reformed in order to improve upon our conception of human knowledge.

## 5. Conclusion

Thus far, we have tried to delineate mainstream pragmatist theory and its distinctive contribution to epistemology and have contrasted it with Rortian conversationalism that claims to negate epistemology as a legitimate branch of philosophy. We also indicate that conversationalism is a deviation from mainstream pragmatism. Our argument is that mainstream pragmatists do not repudiate epistemology. At worst, we can aver that they are reformers of traditional epistemology.

## Notes

1. We refer to this view as conversationalism and hereafter use it in place of Rorty's pragmatic epistemology.
2. Some of these pragmatic theses can be found in Butler (1957, 443) and Almeder (1986, 80-81).
3. Though Peirce and James may have espoused pragmatism from different perspectives, the significant difference is that Peirce considers pragmatism as a theory of meaning while James considers it as a theory of truth. Nonetheless, the utility principle runs through both Peirce's and James' versions of pragmatism.
4. Fallibilism is also different from moderate foundationalism where basic beliefs are considered incorrigibly justified. The difference between Cartesian and moderate foundationalism is that the inferential connection between basic and non-basic beliefs in Cartesian foundationalism is deductive whereas in moderate foundationalism the inferential link is inductive or probabilistic.

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