

Now What? – Richard J. Bernstein and Philosophy after Rorty

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The Pragmatic Turn - Author Meets Critics: Richard J. Bernstein (Respondent), with Richard Kenneth Atkins, Fordham University; Michael Baur, Fordham University; Judith Green, Fordham University; Colin Koopman, University of Oregon; Hugh McDonald, NYC Technological University, CUNY; David E. McClean, Rutgers University; Shane Ralston, Penn State University, Hazleton & World; Seth Joshua Thomas, Fordham University; David Woods, The New School and South Connecticut State University

1. The gloves were off as philosophers took on Richard Rorty's sometimes curious but always earnest rethinking of philosophy in the several decades before his death. Wherever you come out on Rorty's conclusions about the utility of such basic notions as "facts" and "truth" it seems clear that he has joined the ranks of other philosophical iconoclasts who left behind a good deal of insecurity concerning the susceptibilities of Western philosophy to attacks upon its most basic presuppositions.

Richard Bernstein has already heard me provide my own little raft of observations and arguments about Rorty's iconoclastic project, sometimes regarded by some as insouciant. I think we agree on a good deal, including that Rorty is a philosopher that should be taken seriously and not swept to the side because of his breaks with various orthodoxies. We agree that Rorty was a deep humanist as well, with strong tethers connecting him to Protagoras's ancient observation, namely that human beings are the measure of all things (in fact Rorty saw Protagoras as a proto-Pragmatist). I also agree with Bernstein that Rorty was impressive when he argued, and not merely because of rhetorical flourishes or his overall facility with language. So there is not much about which I wish to argue with him.

2. To prepare the ground for some of my observations about what I have called Rorty's "linguistic absolutism" and Bernstein's response to it, I want to assert two things that my philosophical intuitions tell me are true, and for which I am also ready to argue with vigor. The first is this: The world does speak. The second: The world is enchanted. Both of these seemingly outrageous assertions are relevant to both Rorty's project and to Bernstein's criticisms of it and, I would argue, are not so outrageous when one explodes the dualism or dualisms that make them seem scandalous, apostate, and heretical. I will have more to say about this shortly.

3. In the last chapter of *The Pragmatic Turn*, titled "Richard Rorty's Deep Humanism," Bernstein tells us that "at times he [Rorty] wrote as if anyone who even thought there was a proper philosophical way to speak about truth, objectivity, and 'getting things right' was guilty of idolatry – bowing down before an external authority. But Rorty protests too much. His fear that philosophers would backslide led him to give up too easily on what Jeffrey Stout lists as 'three core commitments of a pragmatism that steer[] clear of narcissism': '(1) we inquirers have an interest in getting things right; (2) this interest needs to be understood in the context of social practices in which it is expressed; and (3) it need not be seen as implicated in a pseudo-explanatory conception of correspondence to the real.'"

Were Rorty with us, he would probably say that he pretty much agrees with Stout, and with Bernstein, on the first two of these three core commitments, but then he would say something like this – “But I can’t figure out why Stout and Bernstein think that the trouble we have had with getting things right in the context of our social practices is connected to what they call ‘a pseudo-explanatory conception of correspondence to the real.’ I agree that philosophers, and in fact most people, can get along pretty well on most days without consciously worrying about whether their ideas about the world correspond to the way they think the world really is. But that’s most days. If you push them on this point (for example, when you are trying to get them to allow gays to marry) they will eventually start to make the typical noises of the foundationalist and representationalist. Stout and Bernstein think that is not such a big deal, and that is where we disagree.” Rorty would say that Stout and Bernstein already load the dice with the construction “pseudo-explanatory conception.” Any such conception of correspondence is already pseudo, Rorty would inform them, and so the spectrum of dangers associated with it range from negligible to grave.

4. A very noticeable difference between the typical anti-realist and constructivist and Richard Rorty is that the typical anti-realist and constructivist is content to point out the philosophical and cultural problems with realism and foundationalism, while Rorty’s hair was on fire about both because realism and foundationalism are, on his account, inextricably caught up with the worst evils and cruelties that human beings have ever devised. To understand Rorty’s incessant attack on representationalism and the correspondence theory and foundationalism (and gods, and monotheisms, and reifications, etc.), one has to understand that Rorty has implicated them in a great deal of human *tragedy and cruelty*. Rorty concluded that the only way to weaken the prospects for their keeping or getting a foothold in the public imagination is to attack them incessantly, which is precisely what he did in his writings.

I have spoken of Rorty as an anti-idolator, and so has Bernstein, and this is a kind of Biblical reference. But another Biblical analogy might also apply. Rorty’s work after *The Linguistic Turn* was a Jeremiad, something akin to a prophetic warning. Here is Jeremiah (5:19), addressing the people of Israel, concerned about the impending disaster at the hands of God: “[Y]ou have forsaken me and served foreign gods in your land, so you shall serve foreigners in a land that is not yours.” Replace the word “me” with “us” (meaning all human beings in solidarity) and replace “foreign gods” with “truths derived other than through human agreement,” and you begin to get the point. The “land that is not yours” can aptly be replaced with “religion,” “scientism,” and anything else that takes “the people” in a direction other than Rorty, and Protagoras, would have preferred. The “idols” and the temptation to bow before them are, in other words, all around us, in the forms of what Rorty liked to call “God surrogates.”

Rorty’s glimpse of the dangers of foundationalism (and the idols that are born there) was akin to the new vision of the prophet struck by a piercing revelation. This is the aspect of Rorty’s thought that many of Rorty’s critics miss, but one that both Bernstein and I get, and with which we have a good deal of sympathy. Rorty thought human salvation was connected with taking the retreat to foundationalisms (the idols) *off of the table*, as they can only tempt one to an illicit violation of the new antifoundationalist, “true religion.” His critics puzzle over how taking them off of the table *entirely* is possible, and why it is so urgent. But just about every essay Rorty included in his four volumes of

philosophical papers, for example, was an attack on some form of foundationalism or realism. And, as Bernstein rightly points out, he saw foundationalisms everywhere – smuggled in by religion, in its reliance on a God beyond time and chance who directs human acts and serves as the ultimate court of appeal; in philosophy, in the forms of “reason” and epistemological foundations that support all other claims to truth; in psychoanalysis and psychology, in the form of an Unconscious – whether a Freudian individual Unconscious or a Jungian Collective Unconscious – that is really in charge of human action, and so turns the notion of human freedom into little more than a hoax; and in the form of “the world” which is the final court of appeal for human claims to knowledge and truth.

5. Bernstein, as a serious Pragmatist, likes to talk about degrees, spectrums and continuums rather than dualisms, as he does in his discussion of Habermas in the preceding chapter of *The Pragmatic Turn*. I think much of the difference between Rorty and Stout, or Rorty and Bernstein, or, for that matter, between Rorty and myself, may have more to do with the degree of concern about the problem of foundations, the quest for certainty, and so forth, than with whether or not we need to buy into an argument in which one has the choice of idolatry, on one end of the spectrum, or the choice of *sui generis* self-construction and frictionless “non-contact” between mind and world, on the other end. This smacks, or actually screams, of the fallacy of the excluded middle, and it is why Bernstein says that Rorty “gives up too easily” on Stout’s three-horned description of a true pragmatist’s proper commitments. This is the sort of dualism that Bernstein and I and other philosophers, such as John McDowell, resist. The difference has to do with where one wishes to place the emphasis, how sensitive one is to the creep of foundations-talk in philosophy and in the public culture, and the extent to which one buys Rorty’s arguments about the cultural and social dangers of foundationalisms. Rorty did not see how an appeal to “facts” or “the world” helps us because he did not see that there is much in those notions that adds to the deliberative process and ultimately to the answers to the questions “What is to be done?” and “How should we live?” He scoffed at even sincere attempts at the formation of even a minimalist empiricism, such as that proposed by McDowell. In sum, Rorty would tell us, of course, that there is no fallacy of the excluded middle, because there is no middle.

6. I realize that Bernstein thinks Rorty goes too far in all of this, but I have not seen him provide a definitive and *direct* response, such as, for example, Susan Haack has. It seems to me that he has attacked at the margins only. The nature of Bernstein’s responses have been chides about Rorty’s excesses, about certain of his misinterpretations of Dewey and others. But he has never really nailed Rorty with a definitive and philosophically fatal critique. He has accused Rorty of being guilty of the disappointment suffered by one whose god has failed him, and of seeing idolatries and proto-evil foundationalisms everywhere, but I have not seen a convincing counterstrike other than to call these by various names. Of course Rorty’s linguistic absolutism seems too extreme – how could it be otherwise when you have lost the world in the process, and seem gleeful about it? But calling a position extreme is not an argument against it. This is not to say that Bernstein has not answered Rorty *indirectly*, and much in *The Pragmatic Turn* is just that.

7. As suggested, Rorty’s antifoundationalism and linguistic absolutism, which was also a radical anti-empiricism, severed mind from world. Bernstein has criticized others who have attempted to replace the friction between mind and world which seems necessary if we are going to talk about minds

and worlds at all — his criticism of McDowell comes to mind here. But it seems to me that we need *something like* what McDowell is offering us. McDowell was at least heading in the right direction, at least on my reading of him. Whether or not Bernstein's criticisms of McDowell are apt, in order to expose the suspected fallacies of Rorty's arguments some way to reconnect mind and world seems necessary; some way to push away from linguistic absolutism and mere coherentism is required. One of the reasons McDowell is rejected by some philosophers is because McDowell seems to "re-enchant" the world — or as Rorty would say, he attempts to give us a world that is a "conversation partner."

I offer now not a full-blown philosophical argument but rather what I take to be a plausible conceptual sketch, in my own terms, of how to fix what's wrong with Rorty's antifoundationalism, as well as answer the hang-ups of many Western-trained philosophers. Like most answers to what appear to be thorny philosophical problems, the solution seems simple, but one has to step out of the maelstrom to see clearly enough to formulate it. Wittgenstein told us that it may be the types of questions we ask and how we formulate them that cause many of our problems as philosophers. Dewey taught us simply to put aside a certain view of experience that had dominated the professional imagination, and understand that experience is a reflexive and transactional affair. Kant deftly addressed Hume's seemingly unassailable conclusion that we can never know if what we consider the cause of an event in the world is really the cause, rather than something antecedent, by giving us a rather simple set of observations regarding the workings of the mind. I think that the answer to Rorty's absolutism is equally simple, but it requires setting aside the modern, Western philosopher's antipathy for certain language and phrases.

8. By now we all have observed the ways in which Western philosophy and science have created a basic dualism between human beings and the world. I do not believe that, somewhere along the evolutionary journey, minds swung free from the world, or can. Minds are not "off the grid" of the earth's or the world's formations, but a part of them. Mead told us that minds arise "within the *social* process of communication and cannot be understood apart from that process [emphasis added]. The communicational process involves two phases: (1) the 'conversation of gestures' and (2) language, or the 'conversation of significant gestures.' Both phases presuppose a social context within which two or more individuals are in interaction with one another." But surely "gestures" can be broadened in its meaning, with profit. Mead's famous example of the effect of the "gesture" of one dog to another, eliciting a response from the second, is hardly different from the second dog's seeing an avalanche headed down the hill in its direction. In either way, it must respond to the stimuli, and a proper response is the one that is life-preserving. In this way, the hill and the avalanche gesture. It does no good to say that another sentient and sapient creature, such as another dog or a human being, respectively, is required for mind to be in formation and engaged. If this is so, then the difference between gesture and "stimulus in the world" is a difference without much of a distinction. Other dogs are just part of a world that must be negotiated, as are avalanches. Mind can grow thusly, too.

9. Mead also drew a distinction between gestures and "significant gestures," the kinds of things that can only be done with language, which in turn requires a rather sophisticated ability to draw inferences, deliberate, delay response, withhold response, and the like. What language rests upon is a more sophisticated and developed ability than those of dogs, for sure. But that ability, I would argue, is not a difference in kind, but a difference in degree. I, as Bernstein, prefer the language of spectrums and

continuums. In a holistic naturalism, they tend to work pretty well. In holistic naturalism, the sort of naturalism proffered by James, asking how things are the same is as important as our typologies, which analyze into differences, for the typologies serve various purposes and are not meant to be reified.

10. My thesis, then, is that the way we engage with the non-sentient, non-sapient world is not that different from how we engage with the sentient and sapient world. And the difference between how we engage with the non-sentient and inanimate world and how we engage with each other, using language, is not off of the spectrum of more basic responses. “Open the book to page 22 for a sublime experience with Rilke’s poetry” is on the same continuum as the sun’s rays, pouring through my living room window, beckoning me to come outside and enjoy the day.

11. The idea that “the world does not speak, only we do” – one of Rorty’s favorite slogans for his antifoundationalist project – tells a different story. It is a story I reject, because of, and not in spite of, my own Pragmatist commitments. McDowell’s interesting attempt to address Rorty only trips him up and has him fall into other philosophical traps. He is caught in the game of responding on the terms of his philosophical opponents. I think it is sometimes more profitable, especially when facing an argument that seems seriously flawed but stubbornly resistant to solution, to simply step out of the confines of the arguments for a bit of fresh air or a walk around the lake. The world *does* speak in the way I described. That rocks and hills do not draw inferences is a truism. But I am not concerned with engaging with rocks and hills through signifying gestures. I take their movements or their stasis as natural gestures, ones that provide a range of possibilities for my own action or inaction, no less than an approaching dog, or a man I see far ahead of me on a trail. To know the world is to know these gestures, how I must or might respond to them, and how they must or might respond to me. In this way, the world speaks, although it cannot be a “conversation partner” in the way Rorty rightly dismisses. Perhaps it was Rorty’s prosaic bent – the same sort of prosaic bent that made it impossible for him to understand the feelings behind *The General Confession* (see his *Trotsky and the Wild Orchids*) – that made it difficult if not impossible for him to relax these categories enough. The result was a world *not* well lost, a philosophy that seemed and seems absurd.

12. To say that the world is not enchanted is to say no more than that it, ***other than in the form of other human beings***, does not have what it takes to be a conversation partner in exchanges of signifying gestures, to stick with Mead’s terminology. Mind, on my account, is more than merely the ability to produce conversations and books. Our inferential ability, which gives rise to language, is a *tool* that the world provided for a species such as ourselves, and which allows us to survive and thrive. Because we are as we are, as a species, we developed various schemes of signifying gestures, languages. But here I now have to go Hegelian: If our inferential abilities were provided by evolution than it is not to toy with the occult to consider that there is something in the order of things which those abilities echo. Many Western philosophers no longer have much use for such an idea, which is why I think Western philosophy has become so very uninteresting; it has become disenchanting. In any event, to make a claim such as this is not to make a claim that has much significance for the vast majority of our modern projects. Such a claim means that we do not always need signifying gestures in which to settle our claims to know. Gestures will, and often do, suffice. What Rorty and others would call the brute “thereness” already arrives with a multiplicity of suggestions; they are not merely “there”; it is impossible for them to be merely “there,” just as it is impossible for us to be *ganz andere* with respect to the world. The whole world has meaning for us because we are the world (not figuratively, but in actual

fact), and it is in that sense that, indeed, the whole world is enchanted. There is no receptivity of brute stimuli; all stimuli arrives already as a series of suggestions, to which we can respond or refrain from responding. (In this sense, our transactions *are* a form of conversation, but not of the linguistic variety.) It is this shift in view that makes empiricism important, but not definitive, for human action and human culture. *Bildung* still counts more than the collective content of gestures. But this does not mean that the gestures, the suggestions, count for nothing.

13. There is an answer to Rorty's world well lost, just as there is a deft answer to those who worry that the modern Jeremiah, Rorty, was just having fun at our expense. Bernstein's intuitions are right, yet I think he might not follow me down the road I just sketched, at least not the way I sketched it (preferring language that includes words and phrases such as "spontaneity" and "the logical space of reason" and "the myth of the given," and so forth). He would likely tell me I have a lot more work to do, the same sort of work that he thinks McDowell needs to do; but I think not. Anything else would just take me deeper into a game I prefer not to play any longer. Call it a matter of my philosophical faith that the world can neither be lost, nor well lost, and that any claim to the contrary is absurd and not worth my efforts.

I don't have any more time left to argue for my views, but I do think that American philosophy would do well to peel itself away from a certain hackneyed tradition, called Pragmatism, and open itself to the possibility of different *Pragmatisms* (call them if you like, collectively, "The New Sagacity"), all with a common tether to Stout's three horned test of Pragmatist commitment, but each exploring different pathways in and around it. I will end with something from Bruce Wilshire's book, *The Primal Roots of American Philosophy – Pragmatism, Phenomenology and Native American Thought* (pp. 62-63), which I think sets the tone for the other Pragmatisms, the Sagacity, that we need, and need now:

James searches for cosmic community. As in each of us our distinct sensory modalities are compounded in one consciousness, why not suppose that each of our consciousnesses might be compounded in the Earth-mind? Why should a central nervous system like ours be the only physiologically discernible correlate of some kind or degree of awareness?

James ailing and dying, his ardent departure from the beautiful earth sounds in these pages of *A Pluralistic Universe* somewhat like Gustav Mahler's at exactly this time in his own last works. James's vision is of reconciliation and universal communion, and is reminiscent of Mahler's *Song of the Earth* and his unfinished Tenth Symphony. James:

Not only the absolute is its own other, but the simplest bits of immediate experience are their own others, if that Hegelian phrase be once for all allowed. The concrete pulses of experience appear pent in by no such definite limits as our conceptual substitutes for them are confined by. They run into one another continuously and seem to interpenetrate. . . . My present field of consciousness is a centre surrounded by a fringe that shades insensibly into a subconscious more. I use three separate terms here to describe this fact; but I might as well use three hundred, for the fact is all shades and no boundaries. Which part of it properly is in my consciousness, which out? If I name what is out, it already has come in. The centre works in one way while the margins work in

another, and presently overpower the centre and are central themselves. What we conceptually identify ourselves with and say we are thinking of at any time is the centre; but our *full* self is the whole field, with all those indefinitely radiating subconscious possibilities of increase that we can only feel without conceiving, and can hardly begin to analyze.

If we recall Black Elk's vision and its enactment for the people, we see immediately that the warrior-healer's communion with Wakan Tanka and James's last insights bear a deep affinity.

The problem with Pragmatism as it is, and the problem with so much of Western philosophy as it is, is that it has lost the ability to talk like this, because philosophers have lost the world in so many different ways and, I would argue, have lost the best of what it means to be philosophers. We philosophers need to re-engage with spirit, and to be re-spirited in our engagement with life, and be down in the soil where life is lived. Rorty's is just but another version of an old, somewhat Eurocentric problem. The fact that a philosopher could argue that the world is well lost is indeed indicative of a kind of narcissism, and is evidence of the direction that philosophy dare not continue to go in its own narcissism.

It is possible to speak of truth; but the philosopher's truth cannot be the scientist's or even the theologians. In time, if we are lucky, this near-dead thing that passes for "Philosophy" – the love of wisdom – may reclaim its rightful place in the culture and in the ages. As I said, I have no idea whether Richard Bernstein agrees with much of what I have had to say here, or how I have said it, but I do know, because he is a true thinker and a magnanimous soul, that his aspirations are similar to mine in this regard.