Why Rorty is not an Idealist

Alex Manning
Pragmatism Tutorial
Second Paper (Spring 97)

As a philosopher who fundamentally challenges and rejects an understanding of truth as having to do with a world outside of our beliefs about the world, it is unclear what role the real world, the world we continually run up against, plays in Richard Rorty's thought. To many philosophers, and to many lay people as well, Rorty seems to underemphasize a notion of the "real world", meaning a world which exists outside of our beliefs about it and to which we have to respond to. This has often lead critics of Rorty to charge him with idealism; with believing that human beliefs in fact constitute the real world. This paper will look at Rorty’s response to such arguments. It will look at the relation between Rorty’s anti-Representationalism, his understanding of the "real world", and the casual relation of that "real world".

The Idealist Charge

The idealist charge runs something like this. Because Rorty denies a sense of truth that matches up reality with our beliefs about reality, he denies that there is a world independent of our beliefs about that world. He maintains that there is no way to know if our ideas really fit the world, and therefore that we should stop thinking that this is an interesting philosophical or
cultural question. If there is no world independent of our beliefs about that world, then it seems
that the world is dependent upon our beliefs: we in some sense constitute the reality of the world.

Rorty claims that this sort of criticism is like the criticism that Bernard Williams voices against the later Wittgenstein in “Wittgenstein and Idealism”. “Williams says there that a
Wittgensteinian view of language seems committed to the following chain of inference:

1. ‘S’ has the meaning we give it.
2. A necessary condition of giving ‘S’ a meaning is Q.
   \[-\quad \text{Ergo}\]
3. Unless Q, ‘S’ would not have a meaning.
4. If ‘S’ did not have a meaning, ‘S’ would not be true.
   \[-\quad \text{Ergo}\]
5. Unless Q, ‘S’ would not be true.

Since the values of Q will typically include human social practices, the conclusion of this set of
inferences is, indeed, reminiscent of transcendental idealism” (ORT, 4).

For example, consider what happens when we replace S with “There are mountains” and
Q with the set of social practices that give “There are mountains” a meaning. If we think that the
meaning of “There are mountains” depends crucially on the set of social practices that govern
when we use the phrase “There are mountains” and the way we react to that phrase, we will think
that unless those social practices existed, “There are mountains” would not have any meaning. If
“There are mountains” had no meaning, then “There are mountains” would not have any truth
conditions. And thus, if there were no social practices supporting the claim, “There are
mountains” would not be true. Our social practices create our truth.

Rorty’s Response

Rorty’s response to such claims is to grant that the chain of inference is true, but that it
doesn’t establish what the critic thinks it does. In terms of Williams’ criticism, “the anti-
Representationalist will reply that (v) merely says that unless certain social practices are engaged
in, there will be no statements to call ‘true’ or false”’ (ORT, 4). This isn’t problematic however,
because of course if there was no language, there would be no truth or falsity. That however,
doesn’t have anything to do with whether the world exists independent of our language. It is
merely a question of whether we think the world has a "truthhood" or "falsehood" in itself, or
whether "truthhood" and "falsehood" are products of the interrelation between language and the
world.

Indeed, in societies which don’t speak English, and therefore don’t have the set of social
practices, the particular noises and reactions to noises that English speakers do, it’s easy to think
that “There are mountains” doesn’t have any meaning. To that linguistic community, the phrase is
merely nonsense. It thus doesn’t have any truth conditions either. This doesn’t strike us as
controversial, however. We don’t think that if English didn’t exist, there wouldn’t be mountains as
we know them.

Rorty suggests that this sort of criticism trades on an ambiguity in the word
"independence”. In the sense in which Rorty denies “mind-independent reality”, he thinks that
“it is pointless to ask whether there really are mountians or whether it is merely convenient for us
to talk about mountains” (Does Academic Freedom Have Philosophical Presuppositions --
henceforth: DAFHPP, 56). On the other hand, he would not deny “there were mountians before
people had the idea of ‘mountain’ in their lagnague” (DAFHPP, 56). He makes clear that he does
not think there is “a chain of causes which makes mountians an effect of thought or words”
(DAFHPP, 56).
In this sense, Rorty wants to stress the differences between his position and the idealist position. Rorty admits that “the problem for anti-Representationalist is to find a way of putting their point” which avoids sounding like they claim that there is “a force which shapes facts out of indeterminate goo, constructs reality out of something not yet determinate enough to count as real” (ORT, 5). He confronts this problem by stressing that it is no more useful to say “atoms are what they are because we use ‘atom’ as we do” than that ‘we use ‘atom’ as we do because atoms are as they are’” (ORT, 5). Rorty claims both understandings of the relation between language and reality are problematic.

Whereas the idealist thought that there was this human mind, and then there was this external world which was the creation of the human mind, Rorty is suggesting we should stop thinking about the external world as in a definite, clear or knowable relation to the human mind.

Rorty claims that:

if [he] ever suggested that the world’s metaphysical structure was a ‘reflection of logical structure,’ then [he] was wrong. For as [he] (now, at least) see[s] the matter, the picture of the mind projecting structure onto an unstructured world is just as bad as the idea of the world projecting structure onto, or into, language. [He] should like to reject the whole set of optical metaphors -- the question Which comes first, subject or object? This means rejecting the question Whose contours were there first? Language’s or the world’s? Whose contours are reflecting whose? (RP, ?)

He suggests we should merely view our actions as “coping with reality”, where “reality” is the unassuming notion of “things in space and time not the effects of causes in the human mind”.

The difference for Rorty between his brand of neo-pragmatism and old school idealism is that he thinks it useful to think that the world exists in a sense independent of our beliefs about it, in a sense where it has its own independent causality, without thinking that there is any way to
match up our descriptions of the world with the world as it is independent of those descriptions. Though the pragmatist “agrees that there is such a thing as brute physical resistance”, he doesn’t think that such a resistance a useful understanding of truth (ORT, 81). All Rorty wants to say is that our interactions with the world are most successfully characterized as coping with a world which is not the product of our own beliefs. The “anti-Representationalist is quite willing to grant that our language, like our bodies, has been shaped by the environment we live in” (ORT, 5), where shaped means only that our language forms in a process of causal interaction with a world outside of our language.

In this sense, Rorty is saying that there is a difference between the “world being out there” and “truth being out there” (CIS, 4-5). To say the former, something which is relatively uncontroversial today, would be merely to say that “most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states” (CIS, 5), while to deny the latter is to say “where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations” (CIS, 5).

Rorty objects to an understanding of knowledge which thinks that knowledge consists of beliefs that are both justified and also get reality like it really is. He does not, however, think that language operates in isolation from any world that is not the product of our beliefs about the world. Rather, Rorty thinks that our language interacts with a world that is usefully seen as outside of the causal influence of our beliefs. When we have a language game, a preaccepted vocabulary, the world will interact with our language in ways independent of our beliefs about the world. In this sense, the world can “cause us to hold beliefs” but only “once we have programmed ourselves with a language”, accepted a particular vocabulary (CIS, 6). He believes
that “the world may cause us to be justified in believing a sentence true” (CIS, 5). In this regard:

One way of formulating the pragmatist position is to say that the pragmatist recognizes relations of justification holding between beliefs and desires, and relations of causation holding between these beliefs and desires and other items in the universe, but no relations of representations (ORT, 96).

Our social standards of justification, responses and reactions to specific causal interactions, allow us to take one sentence as true and another false, but not because this truthhood or falsity gets reality right.

What sorts of beliefs we are caused to hold, however, varies with the vocabulary that we accept. If we think that the God is capable of ordering and governing the universe, we might think that the apparent order of the universe means God is really out there. The world causes us to hold a certain belief. If, however, we believe that evolution creates the species we see, we may take the same stimulus of ordered world as an indication that evolution is a good scientific theory.

While there is a definite sense in which causal things happen, these causal givenes are beyond our knowledge until they enter language. Rorty claims:

The way in which a blank takes on the form of the die which stamps it has no analogy to the relation between the truth of a sentence and the event which the sentence is about. When the die hits the blank something causal happens, but as many facts are brought into the world as there are language for describing that causal transaction. Facts are hybrid entities; that is, the causes of the assertability of sentences include both physical stimuli and our antecedent choice of responses to such stimuli. To say that we must have respect for facts is just to say that we must, if we are to play a certain language game, play by the rules. To say that we must have respect for unmediated causal forces is pointless. It is like saying that the blank must have respect for the impressed die. The blank has no choice, nor do we (ORT, 81)\(^1\).

---

\(^1\) Rorty here seems to agree with the scheme content distinction, but not in a sense where the scheme is seen as representing the content. The scheme interacts with the characteristic of the content. In this sense it is not true, as Davidson has argued “if we once adopt the ‘scheme-
So, Rorty is perfectly willing to accept this casual relation, in fact he sees it as pointless and sloppy to think that we could ever not do so.

The proper analogy here is with games, and agreed upon conventions. Rorty thinks that we really do interact with and cope with a world that is not the product of our beliefs about that world. So when the ball misses the line, it is out. But, he points out, how we react to this world is a product of our accepted language games. We only think the ball is “out”, because we have a language game that reacts to certain stimuli in certain ways.

The world cannot, however, cause us to choose certain vocabularies over others. Nor will we be able to find the correct vocabulary because we can see which one really fits the state of the world. Though the “object can, given a prior agreement on a language game, cause us to hold beliefs, . . . it cannot suggest beliefs for us to hold. It can only do things which our practices will react to with preprogrammed changes in beliefs” (ORT, 84). Rorty objects to people who say:

that we achieve accurate representation because, sometimes, nonlinguistic items cause linguistic items to be used as they are - not just in the case of particular statements within social practices (as when the movement of a tennis ball causes the referee to cry ‘Out!’) but in the case of social practices as wholes. On this account, the reason why physicists have come to use ‘atom’ as we do is that there really are atoms out there which have caused themselves to be represented more or less accurately - caused us to have words which refer to them and to engage in the social practices called microstructural physical explanation. The reason why such explanation meets with more success than, say astrological explanation, is that there are no planetary influences out there, whereas there really are atoms out there (ORT, 5).

He believes that there’s no way of saying that tennis is a more accurate game then basketball. All
we can do is note whether the language game we adopt is satisfying what we expected to gain from that language game. We can only take the language game, or form of life, as relative to our needs, desires and interests.

In other words, there is no way of separating this causal relation from the language we describe it in. There is no way of separating the physical stimuli from the antecedently accepted responses to such stimulus. We can’t focus on the first and come up with “a pure language” that cuts reality up at the joints, which gets the stimulus like they are before they enter language. There is no way of isolating the “causal physical force of the event” from the “merely social force of the consequence of the event” (ORT, 80). Rorty suggests that while it is useful to think that “I, the other language-users, and the rest of the universe all are what we are because the other two sides of the triangle are what they are”, it is also useful to think “that there is no point in trying to break down ‘are what they are’ into more specific processes of projection or reflection” (Rorty and Pragmatism -- henceforth: RP, 193-4). We can’t do this “because there is no way to examine only one of these three sides in isolation from each other, in order to see who is doing what to whom” (RP, 194). Or, at least, we haven’t come up with such a way.

And thus, the difference between areas of culture where agreement is common, what we usually call objective truth is found, and the areas of culture where agreement is relatively uncommon, what we usually call subjective truth, is not a question of the former getting reality right. It is merely a case of the former having a more definite understanding of what counts as justifying a certain belief. We are “in touch with reality in all areas of culture - ethics as well as physics, literary criticism as well as biology - in a sense of ‘in touch with’ which does not mean representing reasonably accurately’ but simply ‘caused by and causing’” (ORT, 9). Each
discipline is reacting to the world, regardless of whether their reaction is fragmented or cohesive. What separates apparently soft disciplines like literary criticism from apparently hard disciplines like physics, is merely the degree of rigidity in the language game; in the responses to causal stimuli. When confronted by the same physical stimuli, a group of physicists is more likely to react the same way than a group of literary critics (ORT, 84).

In this sense, Rorty believes he avoids the subjective retreat from the real world the idealists have been charged with. He believes that he is fully in touch with reality, because he believes in the utility of assuming that it is not merely our ideas that create the world. As he remarks his “lively appreciation of the utility of expression like “the world’s causal power” and “Look out, you’re about to be hit by a truck!”” is enough to keep him “in touch with reality” (RP, 224). Rorty fully believes that “there are objects which are causally independent of human beliefs and desires” (ORT, 101).

This is not to claim that looking at reality, we can ascertain causal relations. It is merely to claim that “we do in fact describe most objects as causally independent of us, and that is all that is required to satisfy our realistic intuitions” (ORT, 101). It’s not merely that we engage in this sort of description, but that this sort of understanding of causal indepence of the world is “one of her more central, difficult-to-image-revisibl beliefs”. This understandind of causality, so the argument goes, is still contingent but so deeply tied to our way of percieving and acting in the world that relinquusting the ideas of representation will not make us “free from pressure from outside, no more tempted to be ‘arbitrary,’ than anyone else” (ORT, 101).

This appreciation of the “world’s causal power” is reflected in Rorty’s use of evolutionary and tool-using metaphors. He wants to think of language use “as tool using, of language as a way
of grabbing hold of causal forces and making them do what we want, altering our self and our environment to suit our aspirations" (ORT, 81). In this sense, language use allows us to cope with reality, rather than picturing reality correctly. Coping with reality, thinks Rorty, is a philosophical orientation well suited to talking about reality merely in causal terms and not representational ones.

This "coping with reality" is one of the ways Rorty identifies himself as under the influence of Darwin. He thinks that all we need to direct inquiry and our lives in general is a healthy notion of whether beliefs are useful to us or not. And so, the "test of a belief, on a Darwinian view, is its utility to us" (RP, notes 229). This usefulness is often contextual. Beliefs, like tools and specialized bodily organs "can become obsolete, and eventually vanish -- but they have survival value in their niche at their time" (RP, notes 230).

He wants to think of this coping as merely a causal question, not a representational one. We cope well when things go our way, not when we get reality right (which then results in things going our way). He wants to think of the "relations between human organisms, their beliefs, and the rest of the universe in merely casual terms, rather than dragging in representational relations in addition to causal ones"; and in this sense the issues about "realism and anti-realism will not arise" (RP, 193). Rorty is not trying to collapse the external world into our beliefs or social practices pertaining to that world, but rather trying to move us from "continued worry about realism versus antirealism" to "benign neglect of traditional religious and philosophical topics" (RP, 195) by a focusing on "coping with reality". He thinks that we can accept the "causal independence of the gold or the text" without thinking that that means we "can or should perform the impossible feat of stripping . . . [the] chosen object bare of human concerns, seeing it as it is in itself, and the
seeing how our belief measure up to it” (ORT, 83).

In conclusion, Rorty hopes that this sense of “coping with reality” is all we really need to keep behaving as we do today. In the same way that Rorty sees Representationalism as an optional, and therefore redundant and extraneous part of our everyday sorts of behavior, he sees Realism as an optional, and therefore redundant and extraneous, part of our everyday sorts of behavior. He thinks that “most of our practices (notably those of expert cultures such as natural science) swing free of the glosses which philosophers put upon them” (RP, 194). By retaining an appreciation of the “world’s causal power”, we can still react to the world and our beliefs the same as we have always done. We won’t be floating our way off into a solipsistic idealism.