

Mark Okrent

THE METAPHILOSOPHICAL CONSEQUENCES OF PRAGMATISM

I. A RECENT ACCOUNT OF THE HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY

Let us consider a certain story about the history of philosophy and the evolution and nature of contemporary philosophy. The story begins with Sellars's 'bland' definition of philosophy: "seeing how things, in the largest sense of the term, hang together, in the largest sense of the term".¹ Well, what is it to see how 'things hang together'? According to our story, since Plato this question has tended to be answered with what Rorty calls "the archetypical philosophical fantasy . . . of cutting through all description, all representation, to a state of consciousness which, *per impossibile*, combines the best features of inarticulate confrontation with the best features of linguistic formulation."² To 'cut through all representation', according to this story, has been traditionally thought to involve the ability to describe things in terms which are ideally suited to describe things as they 'really are'. This 'fantasy' thus involves two sides, a certain picture of what is to be seen and a certain picture of what it is to correctly see. First, what is to be described, things as they really are, has been taken to be things 'in themselves', that is, things as they are apart from their being affected or referred to by any human agency or cognition. Second, for terms to be ideally suited to describing things as they really are means that those terms are capable of giving us a description of things which mirrors, without distortion, those things in themselves. Such terms are nature's own terms because they refer to those types of entities which 'really do' exist and ascribe the kinds of properties to those entities which they 'really do' possess.

So far, the philosophical fantasy gives us a general picture of knowledge and being, but it doesn't provide a determinate conception of a special discipline, which is both distinct from other types of knowledge and

is philosophical. According to Sellars's definition interpreted in terms of Plato's fantasy, all descriptions which show us how things really hang together are philosophical. At best, philosophy *per se* might be distinguished from, for example, biology, by its greater scope. Given that ideally any type of thing can become the object of a special science, philosophy would be either the union of all such special sciences or, perhaps, a super science which treats the relations among all of the special sciences.

But, according to the tale we have been telling, something extraordinary began to happen in the seventeenth century which determined a dominant modern conception of philosophy which is different from either of these alternatives. The birth of modern physics marked the rise of a discipline which was so successful at knowing its class of things, things which are capable of motion and rest, that, given Plato's fantasy, it became difficult to doubt that the language and method of physics was the long hoped for 'Nature's Own Vocabulary'. At this point a new question arose. Among the things which are human beings, and among the things which human beings do is 'understand' things. If physical science supplies us with the language of nature, then it should be possible to give a scientific account of how it is that science itself occurs. What is required is a science of science, or of knowledge: a new role became open to philosophy; the role of providing a scientific account of knowledge itself. Philosophy became epistemology.

According to our story, philosophers so conceived quickly broke into several groups. One group began to ask what it was about the successful sciences, and in particular physics, which made them successful. This led to a formal inquiry into the nature of representation in general, of what it is for mind or language to mirror the world at all. From this group ultimately emerged those, like Dummett, who see philosophy as concerned with meaning, or with the relation between words and the world, and hope to give a general formal account of the nature of all word-world semantic connections. A second group kept in the forefront of their work the notion that physical science is the language of nature and thus emphasized the hope that it would become possible to give a physicalistic account of science, knowledge, and representation. From this group there ultimately emerged those, such as Quine, who want to 'naturalize' epistemology.

Our story of how contemporary philosophy evolved is not quite finished, however. In the nineteenth century a new element was added. After a long gap, the special sciences which treat human beings and what they do began to develop and change. It began to appear as if the various vocabularies with which human beings speak about the world, and in particular the language of physics, were radically contingent and admitted historical and sociological explanations. In addition to epistemological

questions concerning the justification of talk about the world there were a whole range of genealogical questions concerning the origin and adoption of such talk. The first fruit of this development were the great nineteenth-century systematizers, Marx and Hegel. But an even more important consequence arose when this emphasis on the historicity of knowledge was combined with a development in the specifically philosophical study of language and representation. This is the move which Rorty labels 'pragmatism'.

According to our story, pragmatism, as it first developed at the end of the nineteenth century, undercuts the foundations of Plato's fantasy by denying that understanding or knowing something consists in picturing how things are in themselves. As such, it is a position which is similar to Kant's, and which depends upon Kant's Copernican Revolution. Pragmatism differs from Kant, however, in at least three important respects; it does not make Kant's sharp distinction between the matter and form of cognition, it dispenses with the notion of the thing in itself entirely, and it replaces Kant's emphasis on the activity of transcendental synthesis with an emphasis on real, overt, activity.

For pragmatism, the philosophical task of understanding how things hang together can no longer be thought to consist in correctly modeling or picturing how things are in themselves, or in the epistemological variant of discovering the form of representation itself by examining the structure of the uniquely adequate example of accurate representation, physical science. That this philosophical self-understanding is in error follows from the pragmatic view of language. The essentials of the pragmatic view of language can be expressed in five propositions. The first three are taken directly from Rorty, the last two are implicit in much of his work.

"If there is one thing we have learned about concepts in recent decades it is that (1) to have a concept is to be able to use a word, (2) that to have a mastery of concepts is to be able to use a language, and (3) that languages are created rather than discovered",³ (4) that languages are created in order to help us reach various goals and to realize various purposes, and (5) that languages are intersubjective tools whose use is regulated by social procedures which determine the conditions when it is appropriate to use particular terms or to assent to particular assertions.

If this view is correct, then to think or to talk about the world should be understood as more like a practical activity than like mirroring an independent object. For a claim to be true is more like an activity being successfully performed than like a picture picturing what it pictures.⁴ If this is the case, then it is also wrong to think that (1) there is anything distinctive about physical science which makes it better at describing how things 'really are' (it isn't better at doing this, it is merely highly successful at achieving the ends for which it is designed) and (2) that there is a special

structure of representation, or method, which physical science embodies, and which captures the nature of knowledge itself.

The tale we have been telling says that seen from this perspective philosophy as epistemology loses its possibility and its point. Philosophy becomes just one more way in which human beings cope with the world, and the language of philosophy just one more tool which is more or less successful in helping us reach the ends for which it is designed. Given the diversity of vocabularies and self-ascribed tasks of those who have called themselves, and been called, philosophers, it would be better to say that philosophy is just the variety of things which people who are called philosophers do and the modes of discourse which they engage in in doing these things. If there is any unity to philosophy it is merely the institutional unity provided by the fact that there are intersubjective procedures which serve to determine who is to count as a philosopher and what is to count as philosophy. This final point is supposed to follow from the general pragmatic understanding of concepts applied to the concept of 'philosophy'.

This story of the nature and history of philosophy should be familiar. It is roughly the story which Rorty has been telling for approximately the last decade. I find much of this story quite persuasive. In this paper I want to focus on one aspect of this story, the conception of language and representation which is expressed in the five propositions which I isolated above. I don't mean to ask the question here of whether this account is true. Rather, I merely intend to ask concerning the status of this view of language: what sort of view is it, how would we know if it were true, what sort of evidence is relevant to deciding if it is true? It is my contention that if we seriously raise these issues we will see that the metaphilosophical conclusions which Rorty draws from pragmatism are not quite correct, even if we grant the truth of pragmatism. We will see that philosophy has not only an institutional unity, but also a unity which is provided by a specific problem, the problem of how to give a formal account of representation as such, the problem of what I will call 'transcendental semantics'. We will also see, however, that Rorty's answer to this problem makes that question far less important for other disciplines, or even for the question of how things in the largest sense hang together in the largest sense, than it traditionally has been thought to be.

II. PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE AND METAPHILOSOPHY

Before we can do any of this, however, we must examine more carefully the inference which was drawn above from the pragmatic conception of lan-

guage to the metaphilosophical conclusion that contemporary philosophy has merely an institutional unity. As stated above, this inference is plainly invalid. To see that it is invalid consider the example of the concept of addition.⁵ Let us assume for the sake of the example that there is something right about the pragmatic conception of language which Rorty proposes. In that case, that some particular operation counts as an act of addition 'depends', in some ultimate sense, upon the fact that a group of human beings are disposed to assent to the assertion 'That's addition' or 'She's adding', or something like that, about that operation. Similarly, that a particular addition is correctly performed, 'depends upon' the acceptance of that answer by some human group.⁶ The force of the word 'depend' here is that the only ultimate criterion for determining that some act properly counts as (correct) addition is the linguistic practice of some community; there is nothing about acts themselves which some acts possess and others don't which naturally divides acts of addition from the others, and which can be used to justify treating some acts as additions. The reason for this is that, as Kripke points out, every novel addition problem admits of a wide variety of responses which are perfectly consistent with all former practices of addition. And, because of this, the 'rule' for addition, 'proceed in the same way that you have proceeded in the past while adding', which presumably gives us the meaning of 'to add', is indeterminate among a wide range of potential responses.⁷ It's just that some assertions that an act is an addition are acceptable to our sisters and brothers and others aren't and that some answers to addition problems are acceptable and others aren't. That a certain addition is correctly performed, then, rests upon the criterial and justificatory 'foundation' of the social acceptability of the response to the problem which has been set. That there is a uniquely correct answer to the problem depends upon the fact that only that answer is socially acceptable.

This doesn't imply, however, that the practices which determine whether or not an act is a correctly performed addition are totally arbitrary or entirely unconstrained. In fact, there are two sorts of constraints on such practices. First, some social practices, if followed, lead, as a matter of contingent fact, to the success and survival of those who engage in them. On Darwinian grounds such practices tend to survive, others don't, so the usefulness of a style of asserting provides a constraint on that style. Second, it is also the case that some linguistic practices are so ordered that, contingently, it is socially proper to assent to a particular assertion or to perform an operation in a certain way if and only if some initial condition, a condition which can be described in some way semantically unrelated to 'the conditions under which it is socially appropriate to do or say *x*', is present. There are such regularities governing the practice of addi-

tion and discourse using the word 'addition', for example. We can provide rather good algorithms for what does and what does not count as correct answers to addition problems. These algorithms are so good, in fact, that we can use them to program computers in such a way that we are tempted to treat the computer's responses as definitive standards of correctness. And this is the case regardless of the supposed fact that the ultimate criterion for correctness remains our acceptance. In cases like this it seems uncontroversial to say that there is a certain 'unity' to the activity of addition, or that all acts of addition share something in common, the unity or condition expressed in the rule given by the algorithm. The fact that the criterion for whether that rule or algorithm has been fulfilled in any given case is once again social practice is beside the point if we can cash in our assent to its fulfillment in purely mechanical terms.

There is thus no direct way to go from the pragmatic conception of language to the metaphilosophical claim that philosophy "has only a stylistic and sociological unity".⁸ As Wittgenstein pointed out, there are certainly some words, such as 'game', for which it is impossible to state necessary and sufficient conditions for appropriate use. At most, various games display a 'family resemblance'. The pragmatic conception of language allows for such cases by specifying that it is social practice which ultimately determines correct usage, rather than any immanent feature of the situation in which it is correct to use a word. As we have just seen, however, it doesn't follow from this conception that every word is like 'game' in lacking independently storable conditions of correct use. The word 'philosophy', may be more like 'addition' than it is like 'game', in which case there is a perfectly straightforward sense in which there is more than 'stylistic and sociological unity' to philosophy.

It is nevertheless clear that those who wish to argue in favor of a merely institutional identity of philosophy do use the pragmatic view of language as a premise in their arguments. We soon see what role this view plays in Rorty's metaphilosophy if we recall the notion of philosophy which he is arguing against, namely philosophy as epistemology. It is this epistemological concept of philosophy which the recent pragmatic developments in philosophy of language have supposedly rendered at least implausible, and perhaps incoherent.

According to the Rortyan story, that there can be a science of science presupposes that there is some real difference between science, or real knowledge, paradigmatically conceived as natural science, and other pseudo-disciplines. Given Plato's fantasy, this difference is supposed to be that physical science correctly mirrors the world, while pseudo-science fails to do so. So philosophy as epistemology is that field which inquires into the nature and possibility of correct representation of the world, that

is, into what it is about science which allows it to be true representation and into how, in general, such representation is possible. The results of these inquiries conducted by philosophy are that science provides a 'neutral matrix' of representational language and that such a use of a neutral scheme is able to correctly mirror the world insofar as such use adequately expresses the nature of reason, mind, or language themselves, and thus adequately embodies the form of representation itself. That is, philosophy as epistemology discovers that "... the 'mind' or 'reason' has a nature of its own, that discovery of this nature will give us a 'method', and that following that method will enable us to penetrate beneath appearances and see nature 'in its own terms'." The supposed structure of natural scientific discourse and method, is supposed to supply us with a standard for judging what is rational and a consistent application of rationality will result in real knowledge, a true representation of the world.

But if the pragmatic conception of language is correct, then there is no secret to the success of natural science to be discovered. There are two reasons for this. First, science is not true in virtue of correctly mirroring the world, so there is no secret to its ability to do so. It is merely a highly successful technology which has proved to be greatly helpful in achieving a certain rather restricted class of ends having to do with prediction and control. Second, the mind or representation or language have no nature in themselves; the 'right' way to discuss these intentional phenomena is just the way which proves to be useful for dealing with whatever problems we happen to have. So, if philosophy is the field whose unity is supposed to be provided by the attempt to give an account of how science can correctly mirror the world and in the process of doing so attempts to uncover the real form or essence of mind and representation, then philosophy ceases to have a unified subject matter. At most it might have a peculiar style of dealing with whatever questions happen to arise and an institutional matrix which certifies who is to count as a philosopher and what is to count as an act of philosophizing. The modern notion of philosophy as epistemology would have supplied a unified rule or decision procedure for determining and justifying what is philosophy, but it turned out not to be viable. So, the pragmatic argument concludes, 'philosophy' is more like 'game' than 'addition' after all.

There are two serious problems with this reconstruction of a Rortyan argument for connecting pragmatism with metaphilosophy. First, it completely accepts the epistemologist's own self-conception of what it is that they are up to. This argument thus presupposes that because on this account there is nothing in common between analytic philosophy and say Hegel or Heidegger there is in fact nothing in common between them. But just because the epistemological account of the unity of philosophy turns

out to be erroneous it does not follow that there is no unity to philosophy; presumably the collapse of the epistemological definition of 'philosophy' leaves open the question of whether philosophy has some other unity.

Second, there is an odd sort of self-contradiction in the structure of the argument linking pragmatism with Rorty's metaphilosophy. The reason that there can be no science of science is that the pragmatic analysis of language shows us that there is no 'secret' to correct representation and that there is no form or nature to intentionality itself which can be used to discover the necessary structure of scientific knowledge of the world. There is no secret because on the pragmatic account language doesn't mirror, truth isn't correct mirroring, and there is no essence or form of mind because which things are, and what they are, depends upon how the world is dealt with in language. As Rorty puts it, "... pragmatism... is simply anti-essentialism applied to notions like 'truth', 'knowledge', 'language', 'morality', and similar objects of philosophical theorizing."¹⁰ But this anti-essentialism leads directly to a second objection to Rorty's discussion of philosophy. What is the pragmatist account of language if not an account of what it is to be a language? It is only because all language is supposed to have the pragmatic character detailed in the five propositions discussed above that we have grounds for throwing out the Platonic fantasy. But isn't this pragmatic conception itself supposed to show us what it is to represent, even if it doesn't provide us with a neutral linguistic matrix within all meaningful language or provide a foundation for the pretensions of natural science? And doesn't this amount to an attempt to detail a view in regard to the essence of language, an essence which on Rorty's grounds language is not supposed to possess?

We will deal with the first issue, the possibility of alternative unities for philosophy, through dealing with the second set of questions. What kind of claims are the pragmatic assertions in regard to language, and how do they help to justify the rejection of the constellation of notions connected with Plato's fantasy? And how can they do so without in that very act reconstituting that fantasy?

III. RELATIVISM AND THE PROBLEM OF PHILOSOPHICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

It is clear that the second problem which I pointed to above arises out of a variation in a common philosophical move. Rorty's metaphilosophy seems to be based upon a kind of relativism, and, as is well known, relativism is a self-defeating doctrine. What is not immediately apparent is the

type of relativism Rorty is being accused of, or at exactly which point relativism is supposed to enter into Rorty's account.

In general, relativism is the doctrine that the truth of a proposition is a relational predicate with one more place than it is usually thought to have. On the standard correspondence view of truth, to say that an assertion is true is to assert a relation among that statement, the language in which that assertion appears, the context of utterance, and the way the world is. Since the relations among the assertion, the context of its utterance, and its language just serve to fix which proposition a given assertion signifies, the truth of a proposition is a function solely of the way things are. A view of truth is relativistic, on the other hand, if it claims that the truth of a proposition involves a relation among that proposition, the way the things specified in the proposition are, and some third factor, e.g., the set of social practices the asserter engages in or the social utility of the proposition if taken to be true. The key element in relativism, then, and the aspect which gets it in trouble, is the claim that one and the same proposition can be both true and false, even if there is no change in the state of affairs referred to in the proposition, because the truth of the proposition varies as a function of some other, apparently extraneous, factor. Any view which asserts that the *meaning* of an assertion is a function of some such apparently extraneous factor, and for that reason holds that truth is 'relative' to that factor, may be relativist in regard to meaning, but is in no crucial sense relativist in regard to truth. In this case, two *apparently* identical assertions can differ in truth value depending on utility, etc., but because *meaning* is seen as varying as a function of that factor, it is not one and the same proposition which is true and false, but rather two different propositions.

Now, as Rorty quite correctly points out, there is nothing in the pragmatic view of language which implies relativism in any vicious sense in regard to what might be called 'first order' propositions. For pragmatism, the language which is being spoken determines the domain of objects which is being referred to and constitutes the members of that domain as objects. Because of this, two assertions which appear to be similar, but which function within different realms of discourse or 'vocabularies', can differ in truth value, but they can do so only insofar as they in fact refer to different objects and have different meanings. Within a given vocabulary whether or not an assertion is true is wholly objective; it is determined solely by the way the world is, that is, by the specific facts concerning the objects of the discourse in which the assertion has a meaning. This is for Rorty the proper way to interpret what is correct about the correspondence view of truth. The world doesn't come prearranged into objects with natures which it is our business as truth seekers to picture accurately,

but given a language and a view of the world, objects do have determinate characters about which we can be objectively right or wrong:

Given a language and a view of what the world is like, one can, to be sure, pair off bits of language with bits of what one takes the world to be in such a way that the sentences one believes true have internal structures isomorphic to relations between things in the world. When we rap out routine undeliberated reports like 'This is water', 'That's red', 'That's ugly', 'That's immoral', our short categorical sentences can easily be thought of as pictures, or as symbols which fit together to make a map. Such reports do indeed pair little bits of language with little bits of the world.¹¹

For pragmatism, given a language or vocabulary, it is just false to say that any belief or assertion is as good as any other.

Yet, pragmatism is relativistic at a 'higher' level. For, it seems possible to raise the question concerning which vocabulary is the correct one. This is precisely the question which epistemology has traditionally asked. This question is composed of three related but distinct questions. First, is language such that there is some one vocabulary which is 'true', i.e., uniquely capable of giving us the world as it really is, and if so, which language is it? Second, is there some way the world is in itself which grounds the uniquely proper way in which beings should be interpreted and which demands a certain privileged vocabulary for its depiction? Third, how can we know which vocabulary we should adopt? The major metaphilosophical consequences of the pragmatic view of language are that no language is true non-relativistically, that this is correlated with a negative answer to the second question, and that there is no non-circular way to answer the third question which does not presuppose some concrete end to be obtained through the use of language. Pragmatism in regard to language implies a negative answer to the question of whether the world in itself uniquely determines our ultimate choice of vocabulary because for pragmatism it is not the role of language to correctly picture the world, but to help us actively deal with it. And to deal with the world is to interact with it for some determinate end or purpose. So the 'correct' vocabulary varies as a function of the end to be attained and the ability of a linguistic practice to help us attain that end. The philosophical attempt to ground some theory or vocabulary non-pragmatically as the uniquely required language of nature is just so much wasted effort.

James and Dewey are, to be sure, metaphilosophical relativists, in a certain limited sense. Namely: they think there is no way to choose, and no point in choosing, between incompatible philosophical theories of the typical Platonic or Kantian type. Such theories are attempts to ground some element of our practices on something external to those practices. Pragmatists think that any such philosophical grounding is . . . pretty much as good or as bad as the practice it purports to ground.¹²

There is nothing which 'supports' our practices, linguistic or otherwise, for philosophy to discover. The question of which language is true, in the sense of corresponding to the world, is irrelevant to the choice of a vocabulary, and the language of action is more appropriate to the discussion of language choice than the language of knowledge or theory.

What, then, is the status of the claims which comprise linguistic pragmatism? It is precisely at this point that the basic problem emerges for pragmatism and Rorty's metaphilosophy. There appear to be two alternatives. Maybe the pragmatic view of language stands as a first order theory about its domain of objects, language and linguistic acts, within a well defined set of linguistic practices in which the theory can be judged to be true or false. The only possible such vocabulary would be the metaphysical philosophical language out of which pragmatism arises and which it confronts. Pragmatism seems to be a view in regard to what it is for a proposition to be true, and thus a view in regard to the 'nature' of language and knowledge. But if Rorty's view of pragmatism is right, there is no unity of philosophical discourse and the vocabulary in which pragmatic claims are stated is not well defined; the 'objects' which that language sets up, 'truth', 'knowledge', 'mind', 'language', etc., which are supposed within philosophy to regulate the truth of philosophical discourse, have no natures which by themselves are capable of determining the truth values of philosophical assertions.

This leaves us with the second alternative. Considered on its own grounds, pragmatism is a recommendation in regard to a way of speaking. It suggests that there is no point in searching for the essence of truth, mind, language, etc., and thus no point to the traditional philosophical game. Pragmatism is the application of the philosophical position of anti-essentialism to the objects of philosophical discourse themselves. But, then, given Rorty's rejection of the first alternative pragmatism itself must be seen as a recommendation in regard to a practice of speaking concerning language, knowledge, and being themselves. If that linguistic practice which constitutes pragmatism is itself to be justified it must be justified pragmatically, i.e., in relation to some end which it helps to realize, and for it to be 'true' can only mean that to speak in a pragmatic way serves some such worthwhile end.

The conflict between traditional philosophy and Rorty's pragmatism, then, is as much over what it would be for one of these views to be true or commendable as it is an argument concerning which view is true or commendable. For the consistent Rortyan pragmatist, the metaphilosophical attempt to ground a kind of philosophical discourse must be seen as much a question of whether a certain practice of doing philosophy is 'good' or 'bad' as is the analogous attempt to ground other theoretical

vocabularies. For the traditional philosopher it is the nature of being, knowledge, and especially language which determines whether it is correct to look for 'nature's own vocabulary'. But insofar as a pragmatist tries to base his metaphilosophy upon an analysis of 'what language is', it seems that he is implicitly contradicting his own pragmatism.

Rorty himself frequently says that he knows of no argument which necessitates the adoption of the pragmatic view. As we have just seen, however, for there to be no conclusive theoretical consideration in favor of pragmatism does not imply that there are no considerations which could weigh in its favor. There are reasons which are relevant, the same sort of considerations which are relevant for deciding other practical issues. Such reasons can be of two sorts. If opponents agree as to the end to be obtained, then the question of which tool or method is to be preferred is the instrumental question of which is most likely to bring about that end. Any consideration relevant to deciding that issue is also a reason for adopting some tool or method of action. If there is disagreement concerning ends, then the practical relations among those ends, and others which the opponents may have, become relevant, as does what Dewey calls the empirical question of whether an end, if obtained, would prove satisfactory, as well as satisfying, desirable as well as desired.¹³

If it is assumed that linguistic pragmatism is correct, then given Rorty's metaphilosophy we have reason to think it correct only if there are some value considerations which speak in its favor. Now, if Rorty were willing to break with the whole constellation of purposes, practices, values, and forms of life which constitute what we call Western Civilization, and in particular with its discursive core in those practices and modes of thought which are typical of inquiry and science, then the second sort of value consideration which we mentioned above would become relevant. But Rorty is not willing to do so. In fact, he expresses anxiety that "the *practical* question of whether the notion of 'conversation' *can* substitute for that of 'reason'"¹⁴ may be answerable only negatively. And this in turn leads to the anxiety that the pragmatic vocabulary will turn out to be insufficient to motivate the attempt to preserve the cardinal virtues of Western Civilization, virtues the preservation of which he clearly takes to be a principal end. So Rorty agrees with his metaphilosophical opponents in regard to the ends of philosophical discourse: motivating a certain style of inquiry and preserving certain civic and intellectual virtues which are related to that form of inquiry. He also recognizes, however, that by and large the traditional philosophical vocabulary has done an excellent job of meeting these objectives and that pragmatism might be incapable of doing so.

For better or worse, the Platonic and Kantian vocabularies are the ones in which Europe has described and praised the Socratic virtues. It is not clear that we know how to describe these virtues without those vocabularies.¹⁵

He does not seem to realize, however, that on his own grounds, in admitting this much he is also admitting that there is no reason to prefer the pragmatic view of language to the traditional one. If Rorty's form of linguistic pragmatism is true, it is false. If the questions of metaphilosophy and of which vocabulary to adopt in discussing language, truth, and being are practical questions, then if one accepts our own culture the practical considerations weigh against pragmatism. Nor should we think that Rorty could appeal to the inductive evidence supplied by the historical failure of philosophy to discover the essence of truth, etc., as he sometimes attempts to do. By our own lights it is better to believe that philosophy in the old sense is possible, that is, continue to attempt to do philosophy in the traditional manner, regardless of whether it is possible to come to philosophical knowledge, than it is to speak pragmatically at the cost of abandoning the Socratic virtues. As Plato has Socrates say in the *Meno*:

... one thing I am ready to fight for as long as I can, in word and act—that is, that we shall be better, braver, and more active men if we believe it right to look for what we don't know than if we believe there is no point in looking because what we don't know we can never discover.¹⁶

Rorty, on his own grounds, should only agree.

In Rorty's form, pragmatism is thus a self-defeating doctrine insofar as it continues to uphold the traditional values of Western Civilization. The only possible grounds, under these circumstances, for adopting the pragmatic view of language is for it to be true non-relatively to value considerations, for it to tell us something about what language, knowledge, and being are. But how can pragmatism claim this while remaining pragmatic, in regard to language? In the next section we turn to this issue.

IV. PRAGMATISM AND TRANSCENDENTAL SEMANTICS

The problem with the status of pragmatism arises out of a dilemma. On pragmatism's own grounds that a given assertion is justified means either that there is a well-established practice of linguistic usage which licenses the assertion, or, when it comes to assertions of the appropriateness of entire sets of such practices, justification depends upon the considerations which give us reason to believe that a particular way of speaking is better (for the ends of human life) than others. Now, Rorty is fond of saying that pragmatism itself does not involve a theory but merely the negative claim that there can not be such theories. Nevertheless, he is willing

to assert, and must be willing to assert if pragmatism is to have any content, propositions such as "to have a concept is to be able to use a word" and "languages are created rather than discovered". The dilemma emerges for pragmatism when it is asked, 'What is the status of the assertions which compose pragmatism itself?'. Either pragmatism is a claim within an already defined language game about well constituted objects or it is a suggestion concerning how to speak, about which practices to adopt. But it is part of the point of pragmatism as Rorty understands it that it does not want to be a new contribution to traditional metaphysical-epistemological philosophy, but rather its end. So the assertion of pragmatic principles isn't merely a move within philosophy, justified by the canons of ordinary philosophical argument. On the other hand, there is a notable lack of pragmatic, value based arguments favoring pragmatism. Aside from the rather inflated early twentieth-century rhetoric of Dewey and James lauding the virtues of America and technology, and Rorty's own more tentative efforts, there is little which could count as attempts at a value based justification of philosophical pragmatism. It seems more plausible to read the history of Western Civilization as many realists do, as the long struggle, and tenuous victory, of rationality against the irrational forces ranged against it, forces which now are given inadvertent support by pragmatism itself, which takes value considerations to be relevant to theory choice rather than thinking that that choice is constrained by the world itself.

Is this dilemma a fair one and are the alternatives offered exhaustive? It is the contention of this section that pragmatism is in fact a move *within* the traditional philosophical game, but that this game is misdescribed when it is taken as the epistemological attempt to ground science or any particular way of speaking. Rather, philosophy is better seen as the attempt to discover formal necessary conditions on the use of our words 'language', 'mind', 'truth', etc. So understood, pragmatism is a philosophical position which happens to imply that philosophy has few if any epistemological or ontological consequences. And, as a philosophical position, pragmatism must be justified, if it is to be justified, according to the usual canons of philosophical debate, according to which value considerations are of very secondary importance.

In order to see the sense in which pragmatism is simply a rather ordinary kind of philosophical view, let us consider some of the ways in which philosophers have attempted to argue in favor of linguistic pragmatism. Perhaps we can discover the status of pragmatic assertions if we discover the range of evidence which has been thought relevant to their justification. The considerations and arguments which have actually been advanced in favor of pragmatic style positions, whether by Quine, the late

Wittgenstein, Davidson, Dewey, Nietzsche, or the early Heidegger tend to begin in the same way.¹⁷ They all start with a question of the form: 'What is someone doing when they say something intelligible?' or 'Under what conditions would one be warranted in saying that someone was speaking a language?' or 'How could we know that someone meant something by an action or that some action had semantic content?' In all of these cases what is called into question is the use of our word 'language', or, alternatively, the use of our words 'understanding' or 'meaningful' or 'intelligible' when applied to linguistic performances.

Consider, for example, a Quinean or Davidsonian argument in favor of the principle of charity, a principle which Rorty considers crucial to pragmatism insofar as it can be used to show that the Kantian split of experience or language into formal and material parts is an error.¹⁸ The base step of the argument involves noting that at least part of what it is to recognize that what another group is doing in using a language is to assign linguistic meaning and semantic content to their various performances. But the only way this can be done is if we can discover that there are conditions under which various 'assertions' are assented to by the members of the group. If we couldn't do this, we would have no reason to think that they were speaking a language. The argument proceeds in two steps. First, given holistic considerations concerning the way in which linguistic connections among various assertions can affect assertibility, one can in general only assign such conditions for a whole structure of assertions at once. In general, we have reason to believe that a particular performance type has a particular semantic content only insofar as we have reason to believe that it is part of a system of performances which themselves have identifiable semantic content, that is, that there are conditions under which they are acceptable and conditions under which they are disallowed. Second, for us to recognize such a correlation between assent and conditions for assent, it is necessary that we be capable of recognizing the regularity of conditions governing the linguistic usage of the others. We are entitled to assert that the sentence 'Gavagai', has a meaning, specifically the meaning expressed by our sentence 'Lo, a rabbit.', only if the aliens genuinely assent to 'Gavagai', in general, only when there really is a rabbit present. That is, we are entitled to assign the semantic content of 'Lo, a rabbit.' to 'Gavagai.' only if we would consider most of the aliens uses of 'Gavagai.' true. Combining this result with holism we reach the conclusion that in order for us to have reason to think that what an alien group is doing is using language most of what they utter must be interpretable as (on our lights). And, if we assume that others are speaking a language we also must assume that most of what they say is true. This is the principle of charity.

This is a rather 'high level' argument in that it presupposes a variety of necessary conditions on something being recognizable as a language, conditions which, for example, point towards holism and the need to see what our interlocutor is doing as being done for the purpose of imparting the truth. This argument merely adds another condition to a list which Quine and Davidson already acknowledge. It shows us conditions which must be fulfilled if we are to be warranted in saying that something is a language. These conditions are necessary formal conditions on what it is to be a language, or alternatively, necessary features of the use of our word 'language'. Much of modern philosophy is composed of similar claims concerning 'truth', 'knowledge', etc., and there are reasonably well defined practices for justifying such assertions. In general the arguments advanced in favor of these assertions are, like those given here, in form quite similar to the kinds of arguments Kant gave for his positions concerning the necessary conditions on the possibility of experience. In short, this argument, and others similar to it, are transcendental arguments concerning the necessary conditions for the possibility of languages.¹⁹

As far as I can tell, all of the arguments which have been advanced in favor of the five propositions which constitute linguistic pragmatism, including Nietzsche's, Heidegger's, and Rorty's own, have been transcendental in form. It is typically argued that it is only correct to call something a language if certain conditions are met, most notably, if it is possible to assign semantic content to utterances. But, it is argued, we can assign semantic content to the actions of an agent only if we can assign understanding of something as something to that agent, which in turn we can only do if it is possible to assign purpose to that behavior. The pragmatist then argues that this indicates that it is appropriate to see language as a tool, from which, together with some other premises, it is supposed to follow that to have a concept is knowing how to use a word, and so on.

Before we look at the implications of this account of the arguments in favor of pragmatism for the dilemma we forced upon Rorty, and thus advance to a consideration of the status of pragmatism itself, it is necessary to deal with two possible objections to this account itself. First, doesn't this account of pragmatism's argument structure contradict pragmatism's own account of what it is to have a concept? Second, why should this enterprise of examining the conditions of appropriate use of *our* word 'language' have more than parochial interest?

The answer to the first question is straightforward. The properly pragmatic position that the ultimate criterion for the correct application of a word is social practice does not imply that no words have necessary conditions for their correct use which can be stated independently of a mere reiteration of that practice. The pragmatic position tells us what is in-

involved in a word or assertion being used correctly, the conditions tell us when the word is used correctly. Now, perhaps contrary to what Wittgenstein thought, the practice of most of Rorty's heroes indicates that the pragmatists in general have treated the words 'language', 'truth', 'representation' etc., as if they are rather more like 'addition' than like 'game'. That is, the pragmatists' actual philosophical practice implicitly commits them to the view that there are necessary conditions on the use of the philosophically crucial words, conditions which can be uncovered by transcendental argument. To be sure, a pragmatist must be a nominalist; but this need not imply that there are no features the absence of which would as a matter of fact make it improper to call some thing an *x*.

There are two sorts of answers to the second objection concerning the importance of pragmatism if true: the first response has to do with the practical consequences of pragmatism, the second with the scope of pragmatism as a philosophical position. First, the cluster of notions composed of 'language', 'understanding', 'knowledge', etc. is an especially central one in our language. On the one hand, only those beings who are capable of using language, or of understanding, are appropriate candidates for being treated as 'one of us', as persons in the full moral, social, and psychological sense. So, since the use of the terms of philosophical inquiry is closely tied to our primary moral notions, an adequate account of these terms should be helpful in actual moral disputes. On the other hand, the semantic vocabulary is the basic conceptual instrument of reflection concerning what it is we are doing when we know or speak truly. An improved discussion of what is involved in using a language can thus have important immediate consequences on our self-conceptions as knowers and persons and indirect consequences for our practices as investigators.

The second reason for the importance of pragmatism has to do with the way in which the words philosophy deals with actually function. They, so to say, transcend their original context of use. To count as using a language, beings must act in such a way that their acts can be interpreted as having semantic content, as making assertions which can be true and false. But if pragmatism is right, this can only happen if the behavior of a group of beings is regulated in such a way that some actions are allowed and others rejected; that is, if those beings themselves treat each other as if what they were doing had semantic content, i.e., treat each other as having a language in our sense. So whether or not we can identify a specific element in an alien language which translates as our word 'language' (or 'truth', etc.) we know, a priori, that, if it does have a language, the group will interact as if it had the concepts of truth, language, etc. available to them, e.g., they will distinguish the true from the false and the linguistic from the non-linguistic. So in discovering the conditions for the appropri-

ate use of our words 'language' etc., we are also discovering the structure of all possible languages.

What, then, is the status of pragmatism? Is it a recommendation to adopt a new way of speaking about the objects of philosophical concern or is it a theory about those objects which presupposes an already given way of talking? As it turns out, all attempts to justify pragmatism have had one of two forms. Either it is argued that there are pragmatic grounds on which to adopt pragmatism or pragmatism is defended on transcendental grounds as expressing certain necessary conditions on the use of the words 'language', 'truth', etc. But we have seen that the first alternative is precluded by the inherent weakness of the purely pragmatic considerations favoring pragmatism itself. This suggests that whatever grounds there are for accepting pragmatism must arise within the already established philosophical vocabulary. And, as a matter of fact, insofar as pragmatism in regard to language has been defended, it has been defended on philosophical, and in particular, transcendental grounds. Given the failure of pragmatic justifications for pragmatism it seems clear that, on its own grounds, if pragmatism is true it is true as a philosophical theory and, given the actual way in which it has been defended, pragmatism is best seen as comprised of transcendental claims concerning necessary conditions on language, truth, and semantic content. As such, it consists in a series of reflective comments directed towards our practices for determining if a system counts as a linguistic system, or if a being understands what is going on, or if someone is speaking truly. It presupposes both an already established object language, the ordinary language in which we call and treat utterances as true and false, and call what we thereby do 'speaking a language', and a rather well developed set of procedures for talking about that language: the procedures included in the historical practice of philosophizing.

Given the way in which pragmatism is in fact justified, and the ways in which it can not be justified, it seems clear that, on its own grounds, if it is to stand any chance of being true, it must be treated as a philosophical position after all, rather than a recommendation that we stop doing philosophy in the traditional sense. But if this is the case, we are left with two puzzles. First, if pragmatism is a philosophical position which presupposes the tradition of philosophical argumentation, how can it be a radical displacement and rejection of that tradition and practice, as it has always taken itself to be? Second, how should we describe that tradition of philosophizing which pragmatism arises out of? What is philosophy anyway, such that pragmatism is both a philosophical position and an alteration in the way in which philosophy understands itself?

V. THE UNITY OF PHILOSOPHY

The Rortyan story which we told at the beginning of this paper has a number of crucial aspects. Perhaps the most central is the claim that traditional philosophy can be defined by a particular answer to the question regarding truth. Philosophy, in the grand old sense, is seen as the practice which attempts to further determine what is involved in a claim, intuition, representation, sentence, or other intentional element being true, when it is presupposed that such truth ultimately consists in a correspondence between that representation and what is entirely independent of human agency.²⁰ The various traditional preoccupations of philosophy are seen to arise out of this primary task. Because there is only truth where there is correspondence with the real, it is important to know what the reality of the real, its being, consists in: hence metaphysics. Because representations are that which are true and false, it is important to know what it is to be a representation: hence philosophy of mind and philosophy of language. With the rise of physical science in the seventeenth century, it was taken as certain that physics comprised a privileged domain of certain truth and philosophy became concentrated on questions concerning the nature and possibility of scientific knowledge: hence the rise to preeminence of classical modern epistemology.

Pragmatists such as Rorty reject the primary notion of truth upon which this entire development and practice is supposed to be based. For Rorty, the key move is the rejection of the traditional picture of language as a system of pictures. As the picture we have been describing is taken to be definitive of philosophy, pragmatism's rejection of these central notions of truth and being is thus taken to represent the end of philosophy as a unified endeavor. All that remains is the institutional matrix which was historically established for the practice of philosophy and certain styles of dealing with arguments which initially arose as tools for dealing with philosophical issues. The issues themselves which gave unity to the practices and a point to their exercise are simply in the process of disappearing. In Rorty's well-worked analogy, philosophy is well on the way to becoming like theology.

What this story and its presupposed definition of philosophy fail to recognize, however, is that there has always been an alternative tradition *within* what has generally been called philosophy. What are we to make of figures such as the Sophists or the Pyrrhonian Sceptics, who reject the Platonic ideas concerning truth, knowledge, and being? What, too, are we to make of those embarrassments to analytic philosophy departments, the historicists and German Idealists of the nineteenth century? If such figures are to be considered philosophers, and I see no alternative to ordi-

nary usage in doing so, then 'philosophy' is a rather broader term than our story would admit. It includes all those enterprises which take a stand on what it is 'to be true', or what it is to know or to be a language, regardless of whether that stand accepts the Platonic fantasy or not. In short, philosophy is the field of discourse in which the necessary formal character of discourse itself, and with it semantic content, meaning, truth, and knowledge, are called into question. It is the discipline which is concerned to discover necessary features and concomitants of systems which have semantic content. As such, it may be characterized as 'transcendental semantics'. So understood, pragmatism fits rather well into the traditional discipline of philosophy. Instead of being seen as the rejection of philosophy, as Rorty tends to see it, pragmatism should be seen as a philosophical movement which uses philosophical procedures and modes of argument to make philosophical points which attack one of the dominant traditions within philosophy, the tradition which is characterized by acceptance of the Platonic fantasy.

Why, then, do pragmatists such as Rorty persist in seeing pragmatism as the end of philosophy as a coherent, unified whole? I would suggest that in an odd way they have accepted too much from their philosophical opponents. In particular, their definition of philosophy has simply accepted the Platonic-Kantian position on the nature of philosophy. For traditional Platonic thought, the ultimate point of philosophy has been to determine the nature of reality itself. The modern form of this enterprise has been to determine the character of what is by determining the essential necessary character of what can be known. This in turn is determined through an analysis of knowledge itself. Perhaps the clearest statement of this strategy, which is common to neo-Kantians and positivists, phenomenologists and analysts, is contained in Kant's Highest Principle of Synthetic Judgment, where he says that the necessary conditions on the possibility of experience are also the necessary conditions on the possibility of the objects of experience. So this sort of philosophy is structured as the attempt to determine what kinds of things there are, and what it is for them to be, by analyzing the nature and structure of knowledge, representation, or language. In other words, this kind of modern philosophical argument has contained two stages. First, one engages in a transcendental investigation of the necessary conditions on language, etc., so as to give a formal account of what it is to be a language. Second, this account is used to set a priori constraints on the objects of knowledge and thus, ultimately, on what can be. Philosophical epistemology serves an ontological end.

This strategy evolved to the point, however, that finally in the late twentieth century the distinctive ontological function of philosophy dissolved. If what is is what can be known, and what is knowable are the

objects which the sciences assert to exist, then what exists is just that which can be known to be by science. For pragmatism, if knowledge and language have a form, it is merely the form which they acquire in virtue of operating within the context of human practical activity, so pragmatism asserts that the test of a science is ultimately a practical one. Science determines ontology, and practice is the test, and point, of science. In other words, the transcendental analysis of language and knowledge in its pragmatic incarnation provides constraints on the objects known which are so loose and general that for pragmatism the formal analysis of language ceases to play a distinctively ontological role. Philosophy ceases to tell us anything substantial concerning which things are or about which categories are the appropriate ones for understanding reality; it merely suggests that practical criteria are the only ones relevant to deciding these issues. If in order to fulfill some purpose it is necessary to talk about persons as beings who possess intentional states, then persons have intentional states. But this should not be taken to mean that there is something about human beings which eludes physical description. There may be other purposes for which the language of physics is just what we need for dealing with humans.

But if philosophy is defined by its ontological function, pragmatism ceases to be a philosophy, or if one accepts pragmatism, philosophy ceases to have any point; its primary function is entirely usurped by the sciences. Once again, however, the crux of the argument which leads to this conclusion is the assumption that the function of philosophy is and must be the Platonic function of providing a neutral matrix, an a priori form, which is applicable to the knowledge of anything which is because it mirrors the necessary formal structure of being. But if we give up the notion that transcendental semantics must have this ontological point in order to be philosophical, in other words if we give up the Platonic self understanding of philosophy, we also give up the notion that transcendental semantics without substantive ontological implications must be non-philosophical.

I think that it would be possible to show that much of contemporary philosophy, as well as much of the history of philosophy, has the unity I have suggested, the unity of being concerned with what I have called transcendental semantics. To actually show this in detail would require at least an additional paper; but it is at least plausible to see contemporary philosophy, in all of its diversity, as unified by a common interest in what it is to be a language, for a system to have semantic content, and for there to be acts which are 'true'. And this, I would argue, is just the unity philosophy has had since Plato.

NOTES

1. W. Sellars, 'Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man' in *Science, Perception, and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 1.
2. Richard Rorty, 'Method, Social Science, and Social Hope' in *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 194.
3. R. Rorty, 'Philosophy in America Today' in *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, 222.
4. This metaphor needs to be fleshed out. In particular, pragmatism needs to give an account of the general notion of the 'success' of an action.
5. cf. Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
6. In fact, the practical linguistic criteria here need to be far more complex than these simplified examples would suggest. As the proponents of this view recognize, it is a whole inferential net of assertions, and the conditions of their acceptance, which is relevant to the propriety of any given use of an assertion.
7. Kripke, 8, ff.
8. Rorty, op. cit., 217.
9. Rorty, 'Method, Social Science, and Social Hope' in *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, 192.
10. Rorty, 'Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism' in *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, 162.
11. Ibid., 162.
12. Ibid., 167.
13. cf. John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1960), 254ff.
14. Rorty, op. cit., 172.
15. Ibid., 172.
16. Plato, *The Meno*, translated by W. K. C. Guthrie in E. Hamilton and H. Cairns, eds. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 371, 86 b.
17. I argue this claim in detail for Heidegger in my book, *Heidegger's Pragmatism: Understanding, Being, and the Critique of Metaphysics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).
18. The version given here is a generalization of specific formulations of the argument which appear throughout the writings of Quine and Davidson. In particular, cf., Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1960), chapter 2 and Davidson, 'Radical Interpretation' in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 125-140.
19. Notice that in general this type of argument is inadequate to discover sufficient conditions for something being a language, etc. Also, it is significant to note that there are crucial differences in regard to the status of the conclusions to this type of argument among those who attempt to use them. Whether such claims are analytic, or synthetic a priori, or merely ordinary scientific synthetic a posteriori judgments is a source of important disagreement among twentieth-century philosophers. I treat this issue at length in 'Relativism, Context, and Truth,' *Monist* 67 (July 1984), 341-358 and in chapter 8 of *Heidegger's Pragmatism*.
20. cf. Rorty, *The Consequences of Pragmatism*, xxvi.