

Probing Pragmatism: Rorty, Reforms, and Responsibility

Jon A. Levisohn

[in *Philosophy of Education 2004*, Chris Higgins, ed.]

In “On Taking a Pragmatic Attitude toward Truth,” Chris Hanks argues that underneath the intramural debates among pragmatists about questions of truth and realism lies a basic, and identifiable, “pragmatic attitude.” He argues, moreover, that this basic attitude is “useful” for education, in particular ways, in contrast to the somewhat different version of pragmatism as presented by Richard Rorty. In fact, it seems that his inquiry is *motivated* by a reaction to Rorty – the sense that Rorty’s positions are quite right in some respects, and yet profoundly troubling in other respects. Since I am sympathetic to this general view,¹ my response will try to sharpen the issues a bit, by focusing on one aspect of the debate between Rorty and Hilary Putnam.

Hanks opens with Rorty’s standard rhetorical position: there is nothing to truth beyond justified belief. What about justified beliefs that turn out to be wrong? Well, the standard cases of erroneous justified belief are standard cases *to us* because the beliefs no longer pass *our* standards of justification. Rorty does not mean that our justification of a belief makes a belief true (or even true-within-our-paradigm). Instead, he relentlessly emphasizes that we have no way of determining truth other than through our standards of justification: “it is not clear in what respects a true belief is supposed to differ from one which is merely justified.”² Therefore, we ought to stop employing language – e.g., language about the way the world *really* is – that

¹ I do have a specific concern about Hanks’ claim that the pragmatic attitude supports a “rich and effective pedagogy”; in my view, we ought to be exceedingly cautious in presenting claims about the direct relationship between philosophical positions and classroom practices.

² Rorty, “Truth without correspondence to reality (1994),” in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (Penguin, 1999), p. 32.

implies that we do.³ This is not to say that Rorty wants to forbid the use the term “truth” itself. But it *is* to say that our use of the term is rather less significant than philosophers typically assume. “*The only point in contrasting the true with the merely justified,*” he writes, “*is to contrast a possible future with the actual present.*”⁴

This orientation towards the future bolsters Hanks' analysis: “[Rorty] thinks that the idea of hope is powerful enough to serve as a centerpiece for a new orientation to social life.” The possibility that the future may be different, epistemically as well as socially and morally, is grounds for hope.⁵ Notably, however, when Hanks returns to the point, he is more critical of Rorty: “it is the retention of a meaningful sense of truth [by pragmatists other than Rorty] that gives substance to the hope offered by pragmatism.” To understand why, consider the debate between Rorty and Putnam about the notion of reform.⁶

Putnam opens the debate by offering a series of theses to try and determine where exactly Rorty and he differ. His fifth thesis is as follows: “Our norms and standards of *anything* – including warranted assertibility – are capable of reform. There are better and worse norms and standards.”⁷ A simple relativist would be hard-pressed to endorse this statement, but Rorty is not a simple relativist. In another context, Rorty had argued that we certainly may agree that there are better and worse norms and standards, “not better by reference to a previously known

³ Thus, “philosophers should explicitly and self-consciously *confine* themselves to justification” (ibid.).

⁴ Ibid., p. 39; emphases Rorty’s. Cf. his cautionary use of truth in his “Is truth a goal of inquiry? (1995),” in *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge, 1998) and elsewhere.

⁵ This is so in general, even though the specific future awaiting us may be disruptive of present beliefs.

⁶ See Putnam’s *Realism with a Human Face* (Harvard, 1990) and Rorty’s 1993 article “Putnam and the Relativist Menace,” published in *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge, 1998). The ideas of reform and truth are inter-connected; Putnam’s point is not just about “reform” as a free-standing concept but rather about the idea of reforming our norms and standards of anything, including justification.

⁷ Putnam, *Realism*, p. 21.

standard, but just better in the sense that they come to seem clearly better than their predecessors.”⁸ Thus, Putnam imagines that Rorty will say something similar about the notion of reform.

But to *whom* will these norms and standards come to seem better? To whomever happens to dominate the culture in the future? If this is what reform means, then it loses its normative impact. Rorty responds by going ethnocentric: better standards are standards that come to seem better to *us*. Who is included in this *ethnos*? Obviously, it includes those of our contemporaries who are like us in the relevant sense, but it also includes “language-users whom we can recognize as better versions of ourselves.” And what does *that* mean? It means that we

recognize them as people who have come to hold different beliefs from ourselves by a process which we, by *our present* notions of the difference between rational persuasion and force, count as rational persuasion.⁹

Standards that will come to seem clearly better than their predecessors to such people are what we mean by reforms.

It is clear what Rorty is denying: he is denying that the criteria for a reform could possibly exist outside of us and our culture, that the normative force of the concept could have its source in something external to us (e.g., the Good). But at the same time, he needs to account for that normativity, the way in which we will not accept just any change as a reform. So this pushes him to deflect the locus of normativity from the norms and standards *themselves* to the process of *arriving* at them. But this doesn’t get around the problem. After all, if we were really to imagine a standard which will come to seem better to our grandchildren because of a process that we,

⁸ Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. xxxvii.

⁹ Rorty, “Relativist Menace,” 54.

now, deem legitimate – that we can envision, presently, as a process of rational persuasion – then why wouldn't we hold this standard ourselves? How is it possible to imagine an admittedly persuasive – not just reasonable, but *persuasive* – argument for a position differing from one's own and not be persuaded? Rorty's solution only works at the level of abstraction where it's a *theoretical possibility* that people might end up in a situation where, retrospectively, they call something a reform of norms and standards. But when we talk about the potential for reform, we mean something more than that.

To put the point another way, Rorty will always say that the only way that we can say that a norm or standard is better is by the familiar rational processes that we already use. Saying, in effect, "this reform might not *really* be an improvement," makes perfect sense as an expression of fallibility about the epistemic future – but there's no way to articulate what it would mean for our standards to improve or degenerate except to say that our successors will claim that they have done so. This is correct so far as it goes, as an empirical depiction of the idea of reform and of how we actually argue for reforms, but it fails to account for the normativity of the concept. Indeed, it is insufficiently *responsible* to our actual usage of the concept.¹⁰

This is why, as Hanks says, "it is the retention of a meaningful sense of truth [by pragmatists other than Rorty] that gives substance to the hope offered by pragmatism." Or equally, we might now say, a meaningful sense of reform. Meaningful, here, means a sense of these concepts that respects and is responsible to the work that they do in our language and in our lives, the roles that they play – a role that extends further and deeper than simply affirming that the future *might*

¹⁰ Rorty will respond to this by saying, in effect, that to the extent that our actual usage of the concept is bound up with a muddled metaphysics, we ought to abandon it. "Let me just grant that, in some suitably broad sense, I *do* want to substitute new concepts for old" (Rorty, "Relativist menace," p. 55).

differ from the past, in a purely hypothetical way, in a way that demonstrates not genuine doubt but the philosophical doubt that Peirce decried.

We hope for *real* reforms, not just reforms that will seem real to us or to language users whom we can recognize as better versions of ourselves. We aspire to *real* truth in our inquiries, not just something that will come to seem true.¹¹ To see this is to achieve the self-understanding that Hanks described: “to see oneself as working in the context of a robust engagement with truth as a meaningful concept.” Educational contexts should embody such engagements. But in addition to this, a further educational implication of the fissure within contemporary pragmatism involves the idea of *responsibility* itself.¹² Hanks is correct to recommend what he is calling the pragmatic attitude as opposed to Rorty’s version. But beyond the reasons that he cites, beyond the usefulness of the pragmatic attitude that he depicts, the pragmatic attitude also exemplifies a deeper sense of responsibility.

In his recent book *The Threefold Cord*, Putnam offered the following justification of his project.

If, as I believe, there is a way to do justice to our sense that knowledge claims are responsible to reality without recoiling into metaphysical fantasy, then it is important that we find that way. For there is, God knows, irresponsibility enough in the world ... and it belongs to the vocation of the thinker, now as always, to try to teach the difference between the two.¹³

If it is the vocation of the thinker to teach the difference between responsibility and irresponsibility, then surely it is the vocation of those who think about education to adopt this goal as well.

¹¹ This kind of talk drives Rorty to distraction. ‘What can you possibly mean,’ he might say, ‘with this talk of *real* truth? How would you know the difference between real truth and some other kind?’ And in addition, he would dismiss the implicit appeal to intuitions here (see, e.g., the introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism*).

¹² The worry about irresponsibility, I believe, is what motivates much of the reaction to Rorty – but note that there is no need to extrapolate from intellectual irresponsibility to moral or political irresponsibility.

¹³ Hilary Putnam, *The Threefold Cord: Mind, Body and World* (Columbia Univ. Press, 2001), p. 4.