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The Neopragmatist Turn[1]

by David L. Hildebrand

There is a general consensus that pragmatism's twenty-year renaissance produced two readily identifiable versions. One is typically called "classical" pragmatism (or simply "pragmatism"), the other "neopragmatism" (which I will call "linguistic pragmatism"). This newer form of pragmatism may be assessed by answering three questions:

1. How does linguistic pragmatism "update" classical pragmatism?

2. Why does linguistic pragmatism reject "experience" as a useful philosophical notion?

3. Why is linguistic pragmatism wrong about "experience"? I.e., why is experience indispensable to pragmatism?

My contention is that experience is methodologically inseparable from pragmatism, and linguistic pragmatism may neglect or extirpate experience only at the cost of rendering pragmatism overly theoretical, quarantined from practical action. Thus, linguistic pragmatism would revise pragmatism by eliminating the very features that explain the renewed and widespread enthusiasm for it.

Linguistic Pragmatism

The development of linguistic pragmatism may be principally, if not exhaustively, attributed to Richard Rorty. In 1995 Rorty wrote,

> I linguisticize as many pre-linguistic-turn philosophers as I can, in order to read them as prophets of the utopia in which all metaphysical problems have been dissolved, and religion and science have yielded their place to poetry.[2]

For many outside the American philosophical community, Rortyan pragmatism has become virtually synonymous with pragmatism itself; given this fact, and the limits of this paper, I shall treat Rorty's formulation of linguistic pragmatism as a type rather than a token.

Linguistic pragmatism revises pragmatism in three basic moves. First, one applauds pragmatists such as James and Dewey for repudiating a variety of methods and goals in traditional philosophy. Second, one renounces their attempts to reconstruct what should not be reconstructed. Finally, once one accepts the idea that only language is available to furnish philosophy's materiel. This step complete, one can create freely, even poetically, to serve whatever ends seem best.

Rather than rehearse pragmatism's well-known critiques of the tradition, let us move forward to consider linguistic pragmatism's renunciations. Pragmatism went awry, the story goes, by reconstructing such traditional ideas as "experience," "reality," and "inquiry" —the very philosophical projects it sought to debunk. Had pragmatists left such sterile projects alone, they could have made a more persuasive and enduring case against the tradition. Rorty's fix for this problem is to split Dewey into good and bad halves. Good Dewey was *critical*: of certainty,

of foundationalism, and of hosts of dualisms. Bad Dewey was the backsliding Dewey, concocting positive metaphysical accounts of "inquiry," "situation," and perhaps worst of all, "experience." Rorty writes,

> [Dewey] was never to escape the notion that what he himself said about experience described what experience itself looked like, whereas what others said of experience was a confusion between the data and the products of their analyses. …But a nondualistic account of experience, of the sort Dewey himself proposed, was to be a true return *to die Sache selbst*.[3]

I defend Dewey against this charge in the next section. What is important for linguistic pragmatism is the claim that these essentializing moves (typical of several classical pragmatists) could be avoided by utilizing the "linguistic turn." Rorty writes,

> [A]nalytic philosophy, thanks to its concentration on language, was able to defend certain crucial pragmatist theses better than James and Dewey themselves…. By focusing our attention on the relation between language and the rest of the world rather than between experience and nature, post-positivistic analytic philosophy was able to make a more radical break with the philosophical tradition.[4]

Rorty's solution to the problem of incommensurable philosophical vocabularies, then, is the adoption of a linguistic vocabulary (serving, one assumes, as a metaphilosophical *lingua franca*). Somehow this vocabulary would be devoid of any metaphysical baggage of its own. Rorty writes,

> "Language" is a more suitable notion than "experience" for saying the holistic and anti-foundational things which James and Dewey had wanted to say. This…[is] because the malleability of language is a less paradoxical notion than the malleability of nature or of "objects." By taking…"the linguistic turn" and emphasizing that no language is more intrinsically related to nature than any other, analytic philosophers such as Goodman and Putnam have been able to make the anti-realist arguments common to Dewey and [T.H.] Green more plausible than either of the latter made them.[5]

Linguistic pragmatism, then, eschews philosophical terms that refer to non-linguistic entities or effects; instead, it asks how we can "reweave beliefs" by using new and better "vocabularies." For example,

> All talk about doing things to objects must, in a pragmatic account of inquiry "into" objects, be paraphrasable as talk about reweaving beliefs. Nothing but efficiency will be lost in such translation…[6]

This interpolation by a linguistic vocabulary would simplify matters by insisting that referents be expressed in the same vocabulary. The effectiveness of language is measured with *more language*—not by dividing the world into "things" and "contexts," or into "hard lumps and squishy texts." [7] "Reweaving a web of beliefs," Rorty says, "is…all anybody can do."[8]

Had Dewey taken the linguistic turn, Rorty contends, he could have avoided fruitless searches for typological differences between inquiries and refrained from trying to depict some "best" method. He would have realized that scientific progress results not from improved "method" (itself, a dubious notion) but from the "development of particular vocabularies."[9]

Assessment of linguistic pragmatism

Linguistic pragmatism clearly has an allure. It promises to strip philosophy of heavily freighted terms, facilitate communication, and dissolve old conundrums. It also promises adequacy to new experience—since everything is characterized in language, language *must* be adequate to experience. Before defending experience as an ineliminable part of pragmatism, let me conclude this exposition of linguistic pragmatism by indicating what I take to be its main shortcomings.

First, there is the move from (an understandable) skepticism about finding an ultimate ground for warrant to the dubious postulate that language is ubiquitous. In *Consequences of Pragmatism* Rorty interpreted Derrida, Wilfrid Sellars, Gadamer, Foucault, and Heidegger as all agreeing

> that attempts to get back behind language to something which "grounds" it, or which it "expresses," or to which it might hope to be "adequate," have not worked.[10]

But then Rorty immediately makes the following claim:

> The ubiquity of language is a matter of language moving into the vacancies left by the failure of all the various candidates for the position of "natural starting-points" of thought, starting-points which are prior to and independent of the way some culture speaks or spoke.[11]

In one hurried leap, Rorty moves from the empirical observation that no one has achieved an objective standpoint for language-to-world comparisons to the metaphysical assertion that language is ubiquitous—i.e., that "it is contexts all the way down" and one "can only inquire after things under a description."[12] This inference is unwarranted. As Hilary Putnam observed, if Rorty is right that comparing language and thought with reality is an *unintelligible* project, it is *also* unintelligible to claim it is *impossible* to do so. Yet Rorty does precisely this. In Putnam's view, "Rorty remains blind to the way in which his own rejection of metaphysical realism partakes of the same unintelligibility.[13]

Whether the comparison is "unintelligible" is a difficult question. Of greater concern for pragmatism is the fact that the starting point of Rorty's linguistic pragmatism is theoretical and not practical. By "theoretical" I mean this: all of Rorty's declarations—that (1) language is *ubiquitous*, that (2) *everything* is contexts, (3) that *nothing* extra-linguistic can be appealed to in philosophical arguments—fail to follow as empirical generalizations from experience. Instead, their plausibility relies on their *presumption in advance of inquiry*. Rorty rightly calls traditional starting points "failures" but his view that language can now move "into the vacancies" reveals his tacit acceptance of a traditional, theoretical approach. In my view, the adoption of that approach, in lieu of an experimental and practical one, is *the* fundamental error of linguistic pragmatism.[14] And it all begins with the extirpation of experience from Deweyan pragmatism.

Why Linguistic Pragmatism Rejects "Experience"

Before defending Dewey's reconstruction of experience, it is worth remembering two reasons it was rejected by linguistic pragmatists and others. Some, given very different worldviews, found it incomprehensible; others mistook it for a traditional metaphysical notion meant to authorize an absolute description of reality. Rorty holds the latter view, arguing that experience was Dewey's theoretical way of dissolving intractable philosophical dualisms. Rorty writes that for Dewey

> there must be a standpoint from which experience can be seen…which…will make it impossible for us to describe it in these misleading ways which generate the subject-object and mind-matter dualisms… This viewpoint...would resemble traditional metaphysics in providing a *permanent neutral matrix* for future inquiry.…[saying] "here is what experience is really like, before dualistic analysis has done its fell work."[15]

On Rorty's skeptical reading, experience was a substitute for the hopeless notion of substance, and Dewey "should have dropped the term *experience* rather than redefining it [looking]… elsewhere for continuity between us and the brutes."[16] That he did not was unfortunate, Rorty believes, because his effort diverted crucial momentum netted by his criticisms of the tradition. Taking the linguistic turn would have helped Dewey refrain from anchoring justification in experience and allowed him to recognize that, as Rorty puts it, "we can eliminate epistemological problems by eliminating the assumption that justification must repose on something other than social practices and human needs."[17] Pragmatists should also see that all inquiry needs is "the attainment of an appropriate mixture of unforced agreement with tolerant disagreement". [18] In short, pragmatists should replace Objectivity with Solidarity.

Why "Experience" is Indispensable to Pragmatism

Having discussed linguistic pragmatism's methods, I shall now defend experience as integral to pragmatism. Dewey's writings on experience were extensive and revolutionary. He pushed philosophers toward recognizing the somatic (or non-discursive) dimension of experience;[19] he expanded aesthetics and ethics by directing discussion away from static values toward the ongoing function of valuation. Concerning today's topic, linguistic pragmatism, experience is crucial because of its relation to philosophical method.

A defense of experience may begin by noting that it is phenomenologically earnest. The intended meaning is quite ordinary. *Pace* Rorty, "experience" is not intended as "a permanent neutral matrix for future inquiry," nor as any other theoretical intermediary between appearance and reality. Experience is to be taken as synonymous with everyday things and events. Dewey writes,

> The plain man, for a surety, does not regard noises heard, lights seen, etc., as mental existences; but neither does he regard them as things *known*. That they are just things is good enough for him. …[H]is attitude to these things *as* things involves their *not* being in relation to mind or a knower. (MW 6: 108)[20]

To update the point, substitute "linguistic" for "mental." The average person doesn't regard noises, lights, or cars as "bits of language" or "moves in a language game." As had, they just are *as* they are experienced. As R.W. Sleeper put it, "it is not experience that is experienced, but things and events, an environing context that we can 'cope' with… through *transactional* inquiry."[21] "Experience" is radically empirical by not being radical at all. It points to what Ortega y Gassett called "my life," a continuum of things, events, relations, and transactions. My life is havings, doings, sayings, *and* knowings, and while I can refer to my life (as in the melancholy rumination "So *this* is my life") I cannot stand behind or above it while I do.

The recognition of this continuum constitutes another way experience is earnest: in that it tacitly recommends a method that neither offers nor authorizes *wholesale* accounts that

permanently abstract concepts from their practical contexts—e.g., "color" into "vibrations," "pain" into "brain states," or "talk about objects" into "talk about beliefs." As method, experience guides philosophical energies away from spectatorial definitions toward an engaged and conscientious *denotation* of what is concretely present.

> The value… of the notion of experience for philosophy is that it asserts the finality and comprehensiveness of the method of pointing, finding, showing, and the necessity of seeing what is pointed to and accepting what is found in good faith and without discount. (LW 1: 372)

What Dewey does find "in good faith and without discount" is that experiencing occurs in ways both "had" (or "undergone") and "known."

> [I]n the process of living both absorption in a present situation and a response that takes account of its effect upon…later experiences are equally necessary for maintenance of life. …[S]ituations are immediate in their direct occurrence, and mediating and mediated in the temporal continuum constituting life-experience. (LW: 14.30)

Now, these two crucial ideas—that philosophy should start with denotation rather than theoretical supposition and that observation indicates a generic difference between reflective and non-reflective experiencing—are both anathematic to linguistic pragmatism. But both have been widely misunderstood.

Some saw Dewey's emphasis upon the denotative starting point, as simplistic—how can reality just be pointed to? Dewey elaborated that denotation "is not so simple and direct an affair as pointing a finger--or tapping on a table" but is rather "having such ideas as point and lead by use as methods to some directly experienced situation." (LW 3: 82-83)

The second, more tenacious objection (from both realists and linguistic pragmatists) is that "experience" is a foundationalist notion. This misapprehension unfolds from the conviction that any attempt to describe "had" or non-discursive experience requires a privileged (i.e., extra-experiential) standpoint. But such a standpoint would violate Dewey's naturalism, putting it in what Douglas Browning calls "the phenomenological paradox." Browning writes,

> [H]ow can [Dewey] adequately describe our immediately lived, pre-reflective experiences without assuming a stance for surveying them which, being reflective and retrospective, cannot help but disclose them, not as they were experienced in the intimacy of our living through them, but as "objects" which we are viewing externally?[22]

Being itself a reflective (linguistic) act, description must color any pre-reflective subject matter it describes; since philosophy—pragmatism included—comments *only* by means of reflective symbols it *cannot* illuminate this level of experience (if it can even be shown to exist). Insofar as Dewey did this anyway, he was in bad faith. This accusation strikes at the core of Dewey's pragmatism and may be the most important issue to clarify and defend.

This defense could begin by citing a lesson from "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism." There, Dewey argues that a thing's reality is not solely a matter of what it is known to be; other modes of experiencing are no less important in the constitution of reality. (Revulsion, while it is an experience that resists precise characterization, is no less real than a theory of rights.) Once a critic acknowledges Dewey's point (the equal reality of non-rational modes of experiencing), they must then admit that Dewey need not choose between offering

either a precise and final anatomy of the non-discursive *or* none at all. Characterization of such experiences may proceed empirically: observe, propose, test, and revise. It is given, Dewey believes, that we never exhaustively define primary experiences—their fullness passes with their moment—but we may approximate them, conscious of the fact that approximations stand or fall based upon their instrumentality to a particular inquiry.

The larger point is that even metaphysical inquiry can be done pragmatically, that is, without axiomatic premises. Dewey, Sleeper reminds us, "was trying to work out a metaphysics of *existence* on the basis of the successes of inquiry already in practice."[23] All inquiries begin *in media res*; pragmatist metaphysics can serve as a guide "only *after* the territory has been explored, and only *after* you have made [the guide] can it serve… further explorations."[24]

If this connection between inquiry and metaphysics is taken to heart, it becomes clear that experience is *not* the keystone to some secret foundationalism of Dewey's; it is *not* what Wilfrid Sellars called a "self-authenticating nonverbal episode," (i.e., one more candidate for certainty). Rather, for Dewey, epistemological warrant doesn't *rest* or *repose on* experience, it *draws from* and *submits to* it for experimental verification. Moreover, a proposition is warranted if it "agrees" with its issue, but linguistic pragmatists must remember that this is warrant-through-action not warrant-though-intersubjective-discourse. The "agreement," Dewey writes, "is agreement *in activities*, not intellectual acceptance of the same set of propositions. …A proposition does not gain validity because of the number of persons who accept it." (LW 12: 484, emphasis mine.) While Dewey does not draw a categorical distinction between language and action (language is a clearly a species of action for Dewey), he leaves little room for the linguistic pragmatists' restricted notion of warrant-as-intersubjective-agreement-within-an-ethnos. Norms of warrant are shaped by cultural and historical circumstances, experienced situations are their ultimate measure, and such situations always overflow present formulas.

These arguments will not convince linguistic pragmatists to endorse experience unless they make a fundamental, methodological shift: they must inhabit a practical standpoint. Contemplation of Dewey's position isn't sufficient—they must be *invited* to try it out and see how it *plays out*. "All intellectual knowing," Dewey writes, "is but a method for conducting an experiment, and…arguments and objections are but stimuli to induce somebody to try a certain experiment—to have recourse, that is, *to a non-logical non-intellectual affair*". (MW 10: 325 n.1, emphasis mine.) The fact that experience comes in varieties—aesthetic, moral, discursive, nondiscursive—is neither unnatural nor exclusively the product of linguistic practice. But because habits of description and categorization are so deeply ingrained, the linguistic pragmatist chafes at the idea that language is constrained by a description-defying world, and perhaps even doubts that world altogether. This predicament—the incommunicability of the non-linguistic—Dewey says,

> *is inherent, according to genuine empiricism, in the derived relationship of discourse to primary experience*. Any one who refuses to go outside the universe of discourse…has of course shut himself off from understanding what a "situation," as directly experienced subject-matter, is. (LW: 14.30-31)

If pragmatism adopts a linguistic starting point, it will begin to shun the practical arena where terms must ultimately sink or swim. Avoiding such verification is unpragmatic because it blocks the road of inquiry.

Conclusion: Experience a Redirection for Philosophical Method

Life, as we live it, is largely beyond our control. It foists upon us the good, the bad, the beautiful, and the ugly. Since we have significantly greater control over theories than over experience, we develop a penchant to have them to limn our wishes. Against this, experience commits pragmatism to radical fallibility; it defies totalizing appraisals declaring "it's contexts all the way down" or "*all* experience is a linguistic affair" or "reweaving a web of beliefs is…all anybody can do." It forbids neither realism nor legitimation, but insists that they be advocated, as Joseph Margolis puts it, "*in* a relativistic, historicized, anti-universalistic spirit."[25] If one subscribes to the philosopher-as-gadfly ideal, it follows that she can only fulfill that obligation if she's *not* tangled in endless scholastic disputes. A gadfly must be free to follow the horse. Experience as method encourages this ideal with the recurring admonition to address social and political issues, helping to ensure that "the distinctive office, problems and subject matter of philosophy grow out of stresses and strains in the community life … and that… its specific problems vary with the changes in human life that are always going on and that at times constitute a crisis and a turning point in human history." (MW: 12.256.)

NOTES

[1] This paper is an abbreviated and revised version of "Avoiding Wrong Turns: A Philippic Against The Linguistification of Pragmatism" which was presented at the Behavioral Research Council's conference "John Dewey: Modernism, Postmodernism and Beyond" (Great Barrington, MA, July, 2001) and is forthcoming in *Dewey, Pragmatism, and Economic Methodology*, edited by Elias L. Khalil (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003).

[2] Richard Rorty, "Response to Hartshorne." In *Rorty and Pragmatism : The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, edited by Herman J. Saatkamp (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995), 35.

[3] *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays: 1972-1980*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 79-80.

[4] Rorty, "Comments on Sleeper and Edel," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 21, no. 1 (Winter 1985): 40.

[5] "Comments on Sleeper and Edel," 40. Despite, however, Rorty's dubiety regarding the concept "experience," he is nevertheless willing to assign language the task of enriching it. In "Response to Hartshorne" Rorty says,

> Hartshorne defines a necessary truth as one "with which any conceivable experience is at least compatible." My objection is that we do not yet have any idea what is and what is not a conceivable experience. *Because I think of the enrichment of language as the only way to enrich experience, and because I think that language has no transcendental limits, I think of experience as potentially infinitely enrichable.* ("Response to Hartshorne" in *Rorty and Pragmatism*, 36, my emphasis.)

[6] Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 98.

[7] *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 98.

[8] *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 101.

[9] "Comments on Sleeper and Edel," 41.

[10] *Consequences of Pragmatism*, xx.

[11] *Consequences of Pragmatism*, xx.

[12] O*bjectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 99-100. The claim that language adequately captures experience is shared by others like Wilfrid Sellars ("all awareness is a linguistic affair") and Hans-Georg Gadamer (who emphasizes "the essential linguisticality of all human experience of the world"), and Jaques Derrida (there cannot be a "hors-texte," "a reality…whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language.") See Sellars, *Science, Perception, and Reality* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), 60; Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 19; and Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158. These passages were brought to my attention by Richard Shusterman's "Dewey on Experience: Foundation or Reconstruction?" in *Dewey Reconfigured: Essays on Deweyan Pragmatism* (New York: SUNY Press, 1999), 210.

[13] Hilary Putnam, *Words and Life. Edited* by James Conant (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994) 299, 300.

[14] Thus linguistic pragmatism shares territory with the epistemologies Dewey had set himself against. "Modern epistemology," Dewey wrote, "leads to the view that realities must themselves have a theoretic and intellectual complexion—not a practical one." (MW 4: 127)

[15] *Consequences of Pragmatism* 80, my emphasis.

[16] "Dewey between Hegel and Darwin" in *Rorty And Pragmatism*, 7.

[17] *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 82.

[18] O*bjectivity, Relativism, and Truth* 41.

[19] See, for example, Bruce Wilshire "Body-Mind and Subconsciousness" in *Philosophy and the Reconstruction of Culture*, ed. John J. Stuhr (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 266; see also Richard Shusterman "Dewey on Experience: Foundation or Reconstruction?" in *Dewey Reconfigured: Essays On Deweyan Pragmatism*, ed. Casey Haskins and David I. Seiple (New York: SUNY Press, 1999).

[20] From volume 6 of *John Dewey: The Middle Works*, 14 vols. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois U. Press, 1976-88), 108. Further references to Dewey's works will use the abbreviations MW or LW. LW refers to *John Dewey: The Later Works*, 17 vols. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois U. Press, 1981-91).

[21] "Rorty's Pragmatism: Afloat in Neurath's Boat, But Why Adrift?" *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, vol. XXI, no. 1 (Winter, 1985): 14-15.

[22] Manuscript, page 29. Forthcoming as the "Introduction" to the reissue of John Dewey's *The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003).

[23] Ralph W. Sleeper, "Rorty's Pragmatism: Afloat in Neurath's Boat, But Why Adrift?" *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, vol. XXI, no. 1 (Winter, 1985): 17.

[24] Sleeper, "What Is Metaphysics?" *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 28, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 184.

[25] Joseph Margolis, "A Convergence of Pragmatisms" in *Frontiers of American Philosophy, Vol. 1*, ed. by Robert W. Burch and Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1992), 38.