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A CRITIQUE OF HISTORICISM

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Although the Hegelian and Marxist forms of historicism are now out of fashion, scholars in a variety of fields are presently endorsing new forms of that theory. In fact, the influence of historicism has spread with such amazing rapidity that its concomitant relativism has become the HIV infection of the contemporary scene.

The central claim of historicism is that all theories, traditions, interpretations, and most —if not all— concepts, are nothing more than cultural artifacts of a particular time and place. Since they are one and all human creations, none of them can claim to be true in the sense of corresponding to reality. On this view, virtually everything from reports of present perception to $1 + 1 = 2$ are taken to be en toto historically conditioned artifacts of human culture.

This essay will first examine some of the key claims of historicism as a theory of knowledge, and offer a critical response to them. It will do this selectively rather than in great detail, considering only the central claims that lie at the heart of all its varieties so that it is the more significant that these claims are found to fail. It will then focus on one of the most virulent of its varieties, namely, its combination with pragmatism as advocated by Richard Rorty.

Two Senses of the Term "History"

It is a tautology that everything (other than God) is history if "history" is used to mean the totality of all that has been and will be in time. But in that case the word would —confusingly— mean the same as "the universe", and historic-*ism* would not comprise an interesting or informative theory about human experience or knowledge. The only way it can be a genuinely interpretative hypothesis is if the term "historicism" derives from another meaning of history, one which connotes the human power to form culture and which is the subject of the discipline called history. The historian does not study *everything* that has ever happened for the simple reasons that: 1) to do so would take as long as the past took to unfold, and 2) most of what has happened is unimportant. Unimportant to what? To the development of a given culture, which is therefore a more precise description of what the study of history is about. This is why a historian does want to understand the conditions, causes, and effects of, say, Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon, or the bubonic plague of the 13th century, but not of whether you or I got a raise last year. Whether we got raises is very important to us and our families, but made virtually no difference to the culture in which we live.

At bottom, then, culture means any product of the human power to control the environment. It includes control over other persons so as to give form to their social existence, and control over nature so as to give new form to the materials, sounds, colors, etc., that already exist.[1] In this sense languages, social organizations, sciences, technology, arts, as well as all artificial objects, are cultural products

[1] Cmp. Dooyeweerd's remarks in *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, vol. II, Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co., Philadelphia, 1955, p. 198.

and history is the study which aims at explaining their development. With this distinction between the two senses of "history" in mind, we may say that Historicism is the theory which claims that history in the narrower sense, the sense of culture-formation, is the sole interpretive standpoint form which history in its all-encompassing sense is to be understood. This is why Maurice Mandelbaum has characterized the theory as "a genetic model of explanation which attempts to base all evaluation on the nature of the historical (culture-forming) process itself".[2]

Earlier in this century, Wilhelm Dilthey praised this theory as "the last step to the liberation of man". He said:

> The historical consciousness of the finiteness of every historical phenomenon, every human or social condition, and of the relativity of every kind of belief, is the last step in the liberation of man.
>
> By its means man attains to the sovereign power to appropriate the contents of every experience, to throw himself entirely into it, unprejudiced, as if there were not any system of philosophy or belief which could bind men. Life becomes free from conceptual knowledge; the mind becomes sovereign with regard to all the cobwebs of dogmatic thought [. . .] Here we are confronted with something that cannot be spirited away. And, in contrast to relativity, the continuity of the creative force asserts itself as the most essential historial fact.[3]

The liberation of which Dilthey speaks in this quote is the same as that which had been sought by Kant: liberation from the advances of the natural sciences that seemed to threaten humans with being but little cogs in the great cosmic machinery. For if humans are wholly determined products of random natural causes, then their alleged freedom

[2] See Maurice Mandelbaum, "Historicism", in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vols. 3 & 4, Macmillan Co., 1967, p. 24.

[3] Quoted in Dooyeweerd, op. cit., p. 206.

of thought and will, their creativity, and their moral responsibility, are but illusions. The way to defeat the threat of such naturalistic determinism, says Dilthey, is to see concepts and sciences as human cultural products. So whereas the threat is that we are the creation of blind natural forces, historicism's solution is to turn the tables. It claims with respect to both God and nature that it is we who have made those forces, and not they that have made us. In this way historicism presses as far as possible toward the goal of concluding that all experience and knowledge are never of any independently existing reality, but only of cultural forms we have created.

Historicism is therefore best understood as (yet) another version of Kant. In place of categorical concepts which humans impose unconsciously on sensation so as to create the world we experience, historicism has it that these concepts too are our own creations. So instead of having to defend a particular set of concepts as privileged because necessary and beyond our control, historicism holds that it is only the human power of control —"the continuity of the creative force"— which is in a privileged position "in contrast to relativity". It is the one exception because it is the force which creates all concepts of the natural world, the social world, the sciences, the arts, religious beliefs, etc., as well as all other competing epistemological hypotheses about how to interpret the nature of experience and knowledge.

A Critique of Historicism

But one has only to state such a theory to see at once that it generates the most grievous difficulties. As noted above, historicism welcomes the result that all statements of belief are products of the human power to create them. But it holds this not just in the obvious and trivial sense that our concepts and beliefs have been formed by us,

but in the vastly different sense that —so far as we can ever know— their content is wholly our invention. Thus even math, physics, and biology, are reflections of our own desires, needs, and preferences rather than discoveries of the way the world is. Historicism welcomes this because if human cultural activity *produces* its objects (the way Kant's categories did), no concept of natural order can be thought to stand over against humans and determine what they are. Thus human freedom is preserved.

But such a position also entails that no belief or statement of a belief can be known to be true in the sense of corresponding to reality, so that every opinion has the same ground as any other. Indeed, Dilthey himself saw this clearly when he said:

> The historical world-view has broken the last chain not yet broken by philosophy and natural science. Everything is flowing, nothing remains. But where are the means to conquer the anarchy of opinions which threatens us?[4]

In fact, this difficulty is even more critical than Dilthey seems to have realized. For in this way of attempting to save human freedom from the domination of "conceptual knowledge" and the "cobwebs" of dogmatic theories, *every belief whatever* is relativized to the human power to form it. The difficulty with this is that if all beliefs are on equal footing because none can be known to correspond to what they purport to be about, this conclusion would have to apply to the theory of historicism itself! Historicism, too, according to historicism, is just one more story we invent without ever having any way to know that it does or doesn't correspond to reality. And in that case historicism fails as a theory of human experience and knowledge because it is

[4] Dooyeweerd, op. cit., p. 207.

self-referentially incoherent in the strong sense: when applied to itself it requires that it cannot be true in precisely the sense in which it claims to be true.

Of course it is open to a defender of historicism to try to meet this difficulty head-on by arguing that while all *other* claims to knowledge are cultural artifacts constructed for our own purposes, the assertion of historicism alone is not. Perhaps Dilthey had this rejoinder in mind by when he said that the creative force stands in contrast to all that is relative; perhaps he meant to include not only the force itself but also the *belief* that it is what creates all else. But what could possibly be said to defend this claim that would not be forced to assume many other types of statements as true in the sense historicism denies? Any argument for it would have to regard the logical principles of reasoning, statements about the natural world, number beliefs, and much about the rise and nature of language as also corresponding to reality. For example, it would have to be able to assert that there is only *one* statement which is not historically relative (the statement of the historicist claim), and the fact that there is only one would have to be allowed to *logically entail* that there are no others. If such beliefs are tacitly assumed rather than explicitly defended, historicism can avoid self-referential incoherence only at the price of being self-assumptively incoherent: the unstated assumptions of the argument would be incompatible with the claim the argument is defending. Thus historicism is either false because it cancels itself or false because defenses of it have to assume what it denies.

In fact, I know of no version of historicism that does not admit into itself beliefs it takes to correspond to reality; it is mainly by smuggling such incompatible facts, claims, and evidences into their accounts, and by equivocating on the two senses of "history" distinguished at the outset of this essay, that historicism has managed to disguise its intrinsic

incoherency. It acquires deceptive plausibility by making use of nonhistorical knowledge and passing it off as historical in the sense that *our acquisition of it has a history*, rather than in the sense that it is wholesale the creation of the historical process. In other words, at least part of what historicism throws out the front door with great fanfare, it smuggles back in through the servant's entrance without so much as an acknowledgement. The smuggling integrates into what is supposed to be a purely historical account of knowledge, other sorts of knowledge which are relied on as true independently of the process of culture-formation. The smuggling is cloaked by declaring that the other kind of knowledge is part of history but, as I said, the trick is that this is only shown in the trivial sense that it *arises* in a cultural context rather than demonstrated for the radical historicist sense of being *nothing more than a cultural artifact*. The result is that the additional sorts of knowledge are utilized under the pretext that they are nothing but history, while they are actually treated as though they correspond to reality in just the way historicism denies we can ever know anything to correspond to reality —with the possible exception of our own power to create culture.

Consider but one outstanding example of this. The historicist Oswald Spengler declared scientific knowledge to be entirely dependent on, and determined by, the morphological characteristics of each culture:[5]

> in the eyes of the historically-minded there is only a *history of physics*. All its systems do not appear to him as right or wrong, but historically, psychologically conditioned by the character of the period and more or less perfectly representative of it.

[5] Quotes are from *The Decline of the West* as cited in Dooyeweerd, op. cit., vol. II, pp. 218–219.

The same holds true for math as for physics, says Spengler:

> There are more arithmetical worlds than one because there are more kinds of culture than one. In the course of history we find systems of number that differ from civilization to civilization [. . .] each [. . .] symbolizes a particular kind of validity that is, also scientifically, exactly restricted to this type of culture.

First, I cannot resist the observation that *historically* the latter claim is factually false. That people have symbolized quantities differently has nothing to do with whether mathematical *validity* changes from culture to culture. Whether we add 1 + 5 and get 6 with Arabic numerals or we add I and V end get VI in Roman numerals, the quantitative truth obtained is irrelevant to the symbols representing it and I know of no culture that ever got a different sum for 1 + 5. But that aside, notice the blatant self-assumptive incoherency of Spengler's claim that there is more than one arithmetic because there is more than one culture: he must use the concept of number ("one") in order to express his claim. So while his claim says that all number concepts are culturally relative, he also claims to know there is more than *one* culture! A similar fate befalls his claim that we cannot know physical reality but only the history of physics. How does he know there are other cultures? How can he know they have distinct histories? Isn't it because physical cultural artifacts and documents are unearthed? Isn't it because his physical body can travel through space to other places and observe physical houses, roads, clothing, and read the writings of those who live there? But how can he do those things if there is no knowledge of physical objects which is distinct from *his* own culturally determined thought?

It is worth noticing at this point that historicism also commits a third incoherency which is perhaps more sub-

tle and apt to be overlooked. In addition to being self-referentially and self-assumptively incoherent, the theory is also self-performatively incoherent.[6] This means that it is incompatible with either a state or an activity of the thinker that is needed to form the theory. To borrow and recast a Marxist expression, the theory is incompatible with "the means of its production". The activity in point is the act of abstraction required to differentiate the historicist standpoint for interpreting experience and knowledge from all other rival standpoints. Historicists readily acknowledge that there are rival standpoints, of course, and are at one in rejecting them. Such alternative candidates for the basic nature of experience and knowledge include: numbers and their relations (Pythagoras), ideal forms (Plato, Aristotle), physical matter (Hobbes, Smart, Churchland), clear and distinct ideas (Descartes), feelings and sensations (Berkeley, Hume, Mill), sensory forms plus logical categories (Kant), to name but a few.

The standard strategy employed by epistemological theories has been to defend a candidate for the esssential nature of knowledge in one of two ways. The first is to argue that all knowledge is *identical* with the kind favored by the theory, so that there really are no rival candidates. The second allows that there are other kinds of knowledge but argues that the kind of knowledge favored by the theory is the one all other kinds *depend* on. Logical abstraction is obviously indispensable to both forms of this strategy since it is the activity by which the various aspects of experience are distinguished, and is thus a precondition for identifying any of them as the sole or basic nature of knowledge. And historicism is no exception to this. From the entire

[6] These three incoherencies are explained and illustrated in more detail in my book, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*, Notre Dame Press, 1991, p. 68ff.

welter of all we experience and seem to know, historicism abstracts and postulates culture-forming as the key to understanding it all and defends its selection by arguing that all its possible rivals are either identical with history or dependent on it.

It appears, however, that the very process of abstracting is incompatible with any claim that all knowledge has only a cultural character, so that the first form of the standard strategy is self-performatively incoherent. This is because it makes no sense to claim that all experience and knowledge are *identical* with history when the need for the activity of abstracting presupposes there is more to whatever is initially experienced than anything that can be abstracted from it. If not, from what was culture-forming distinguished? From a purely descriptive standpoint, the objects of experience seem to exhibit many kinds of properties and laws other than the historical, and we seem to have knowledge of each kind. For example, we seem to have knowledge of such varying kinds as quantitative, spatial, physical, biotic, sensory, logical, aesthetical, and ethical. How could all these be *nothing more* than the human power to form culture and that power still be logically distinguishable from them? To put the same point another way: how could anything *have* a history if everything *is* history? It appears, then, that historicism can only be plausible in its second form: it will have to argue that while experience and knowledge are multiform, the other kinds of knowledge depend entirely on the historical kind while the historical does not depend on them.

But the act of abstraction needed to distinguish the kind of knowledge that is basic is as incompatible with the second form of the strategy as it is with the first. The argument is a follows. Since the heart of the second form is to show that one kind of knowledge is independent of all others, this claim suggests an obvious experiment in thought (a

"Gedanke"): if a particular kind of knowledge is supposed to be independent of all other kinds, let us try to conceive of it that way. For if no such independence can as much as be conceived then it certainly cannot be justified. So let us now try to abstract the historical process itself and conceive of it in total isolation from all the other ways of experiencing and knowing. When I try this I find that once we really strip from our concept of history every reference to quantity, space, matter, life, sensation, logic, language, social relations, and values, there is literally nothing left. There is nothing which could *have* a history, so the very idea of "historical process" itself loses all meaning.[7]

But if this is right —if we cannot so much as conceive of the historical process and historical knowledge apart from the other kinds of knowledge— how can it be argued that it is really independent of the rest? How can it be shown that the "continuity of the creative force" is the fact to which all (other) beliefs are to be relativized? Once again, it appears that any justification for such a claim would have to appeal to other kinds of knowledge, kinds historicism says do not correspond to reality!

I conclude, therefore, that historicism is self-performatively incoherent in addition to being self-referentially and self-assumptively incoherent. Moreover, these incoherencies appear to lie at the heart of the historicist claim and not merely to attack what is dispensable to it or peculiar only to this or that version of it. So I further conclude that historicism fails as an epistemology. It needs to be an exception to its own claim, can only be defended by arguments that assume beliefs incompatible with that claim, and cannot justify the status it confers on culture-forming power owing to the very activity of abstraction needed to

[7] Dooyeweerd, op. cit., vol. II, p. 209ff., esp. p. 229.

distinguish that power in the first place.[8] For these reasons, historicism's claim to have found that the essential nature of all knowledge is historical is destroyed. We cannot have any ground for taking it to be either the only kind of knowledge or the kind on which all other forms of knowledge depend.

Can Pragmatism Save Historicism?

In recent years Richard Rorty has urged that pragmatism can be combined with historicism in a way that provides a fuller account of knowledge than either can do alone. He thinks that by forgoing any attempt to determine truth, and substituting the idea of what is practically beneficial instead, pragmatism corrects what has been wrong with philosophy and science from their inception. This leads him to reassert the non-correspondence thesis in a stronger form. Whereas for Dilthey no statements could be known to correspond to reality *except that of historicism*, Rorty extends the claim to every statement whatever:

> For the pragmatist, true sentences are not true because they correspond to reality, and so there is no need to worry about what sort of reality, if any, a given sentence corresponds to —no need to worry about what "makes" it true [. . .] He drops the notion of truth as correspondence with reality altogether, and says that modern science does not enable us to cope because it corresponds, it just plain enables us to cope.[9]

[8] The three senses of incoherency so briefly appealed to here, are applicable to epistemologies generally. They have been applied to materialism and phenomenalism, e.g., as well as historicism. See *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*, pp. 69–73, 191–193; and *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, vol. I, pp. 34–56, 272–275, 290–302.

[9] *Consequences of Pragmatism*, University of Minnesota Press, 1982, pp. xvi–xvii. All other quotes from this work will be cited by page number in the text rather than in notes.

Thus

> There is no method for knowing *when* one has reached the truth, or when one is closer to it than before. (pp. 165–166)

In conjunction with the pragmatist substitution of usefulness for truth, Rorty also advocates what he calls the "ubiquity of language". By this he means two things: 1) that language is entirely our own creation, and 2) that we experience and know only what language makes possible. He says:

> 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. (p. xx)

In this connection he cites with approval thinkers he calls "prophets of the ubiquity of language" who make such remarks as: "Human experience is essentially linguistic" (Gadamer), and "[. . .] all awareness of abstract entities —indeed even of particulars— is a linguistic affair" (Sellers). (p. xx) At even greater length he quotes Peirce's assertion that "man makes the word, means nothing that the man has not made it mean [. . .] But since man can think only by means of words or other external symbols, these might turn around and say: You mean nothing we have not taught you [. . .]." (p. xx) The consequence of this is clear, says Rorty:

> [On this view] criteria are seen as [. . .] temporary resting-places constructed for specific utilitarian ends. On the pragmatist account, a criterion (what follows from the axioms, what the needle points to, what the statute says) *is* a criterion because some particular social practice needs to block the road of inquiry, halt the regress of interpretations, in order to get something done. (p. xli)

Thus:

> [There is] no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions. (p. xlii)

To accept such a radical view is no easy task, Rorty admits:

> Can the ubiquity of language ever really be taken seriously? Can we ever see ourselves as never encountering any reality *except under a chosen description* [...] as making worlds rather than finding them? (p. xxxix)

It should be clear even from these brief comments that for Rorty historicism can succeed by appealing to pragmatic needs as the motivating reasons for culture-creation, and to language as the means by which the creation is accomplished. So while the first part of his position reasserts the old pragmatist claim that the notion of truth is to be replaced by that of usefulness, the latter part takes the form of a hypothetical syllogism about language: if all we ever experience and know is determined by language, and if language itself is our own creation, then all we ever experience and know is our own creation. Let's examine the argument about language first.

The first premise of the argument is what Rorty calls the "ubiquity of language", and expresses by the phrase "language goes all the way down". There are, I think, reasons to suppose this claim is false. Take, for example, a case in which you and I are in the woods collecting mushrooms. You have explained to me how to discriminate the poisonous from the edible ones, and we are picking only the edible ones and putting them into a basket. The whole while, however, we are discussing Beethoven's 5th Symphony so that our language exchange is completely

occupied with the innovative nature of that composition —say, its introduction of trombones in the last movement. The fact that this is possible shows that I have acquired a logical concept of the difference between the edible and nonedible mushrooms that is not identical with words, and that I am employing that concept all the while our linguistic exchange is about something entirely different. I am not thinking of the difference between the mushrooms in language; I do not have two conversations running simultaneously —not even one that is public and the other private. Rather, I am not thinking any words whatever about the mushrooms, though I am recognizing their differences by perceiving them under the guidance of a new logical concept which enables us to pick out differences I *find* in them.

And there are other examples as well. If I invent a new tune, for example, and compose an accompaniment for it, that does not require me to think in words at all. The tune and its harmonization depend upon my logically discriminating pitches and conceiving of their arrangement, but not upon thinking any words. Notice that I am not saying that mushroom selection or tune invention *can't* be represented or discussed symbolically. They, like all human activities, have a linguistic aspect or side to them. But they also have a nonlinguistic side, a side that does not depend entirely on language to be experienced.

Thus the claim that language creates our experience appears false. But more than that, it appears incompatible with pragmatism. For how can language create our experience if it was itself invented to satisfy pragmatic needs? Wouldn't we have to experience and know at least some of those needs in order to develop a language that could deal with them? Or are we to believe that there really are no poisonous and edible mushrooms, but that this is only a creation of our language? Don't we learn to discrimi-

nate that difference and embody it in language because we've already *found* that some mushrooms cause death? More than that: wouldn't people have to have experienced things already in order to think of the very idea of representing them symbolically? The point is that the central claim of pragmatism, the idea of substituting pragmatic value for truth, presupposes the priority of experience and logical thought to language. For how could people *know* what their pragmatic needs are unless they already experienced them and had formed concepts and beliefs about them? And how could they know themselves to be happier with one way of meeting those needs than another unless they experienced and knew their own internal states? But in that case, knowing such things would have to precede the formation of ways to preserve or alter them, and thus precede the creation of language as one of those ways.

What is more, *both* the pragmatic claim and that about the ubiquity of language appear incompatible with Rorty's non-correspondence thesis which claims we are totally unable to know that any belief ever corresponds to reality. (This is aside from the fact that the non-correspondence claim is also self-referentially incoherent. Isn't *it* supposed to correspond to the way we and our experience really are?) For if nothing we can affirm can be said to correspond to reality, then the ubiquity of language can't be said to do so, and neither can pragmatism. Rorty himself says that pragmatic value consists in a belief or action making us "happier than we now are". But if we cannot know any statement to correspond to reality, we cannot ever know that we are happy, how happy we are, or how our present happiness compares to that of any other time. Thus the non-correspondence claim is not only incompatible with pragmatism and the ubiquity of language, but simply appears false: are we really to belive that we can *never* know our own internal states? Don't I even know that I'm happy

or that I feel a pain in my left knee, for example? (How could I possibly be wrong about such things?) Nevertheless, Rorty appears to belive that the ubiquity of language and the non-correspondence thesis support both one another and pragmatism which in turn supports historicism!

Given the internal quicksands this theory creates for itself, one is left to wonder why Rorty —or anyone else— holds it. What could induce acceptance of a theory which, because of its own central hypotheses, cannot produce any reasons for thinking it is true? One possible answer could be that this approach is a matter of intuitive insight. Perhaps he means to suggest that one either sees it or one doesn't, but seeing it is not a matter of arguments. But in fact Rorty flatly rejects this answer in the comments he makes about the role of intuition in the debate between himself and the realist. He says:

> What really needs debate between the pragmatist and the intuitive realist is *not* whether we have intuitions to the effect that "truth is more than assertability" [etc.]. *Of course* we have such intuitions. How could we escape having them? We have been educated within an intellectual tradition built around such claims [. . .] But it begs the question between the pragmatist and realist to say that we must find a view which "captures" such intuitions. The pragmatist is urging that we do our best to *stop having* such intuitions, that we develop a new intellectual tradition.
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> What strikes intuitive realists as offensive about this suggestion is that it seems as dishonest to suppress intuitions as to suppress experimental data [. . .] This view [. . .] presupposes either that, contrary to the prophets of the ubiquity of language, language does not go all the way down, or that, contrary to appearances, all vocabularies are commensurable. The first alternative amounts to saying that some intuitions, at least, are *not* a function of the way one has been brought up to talk, of the texts and people one has encountered. (p. xxx)

> Here we hit a bedrock metaphysical issue: can one ever appeal to nonlinguistic knowledge in a philosophical argument? [. . .] *That* is just the issue about the status of intuitions which [. . .] is the real issue between the pragmatist and the realist. (p. xxxvi)
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> There are no fast little arguments to show that there are no such things as intuitions —arguments which are themselves based on something stronger than intuitions. For the pragmatist [. . .] the *only* argument for thinking that intuitions [. . .] should be eradicated is that the intellectual tradition to which they belong has not paid off, is more trouble than it is worth, has become an incubus [. . .] a dogmatism of intuitions is no worse, or better, than the pragmatist's inability to give noncircular arguments. (p. xxxvii)

The surprise here is that instead of saying that the realist has one set of intuitions while he has another, Rorty speaks as though only the realist has them while he has freed himself from them! Thus it is only fair to point out that not only has Rorty left himself no other ground for his historicist-pragmatism as a whole, but that he also appeals to specific intuitions in his own account of his position. For example, he claims that it would "beg the question" if the realist were to insist that the job of philosophy is to "capture" our intuitions. But what is wrong with begging the question? Is it wrong because it results in an invalid argument according to the rules of logic? But are not those rules themselves grasped intuitively? Surely they are not the conclusions of inferences. It seems, then, that Rorty's position is not one of eschewing all intuitions and resting only on pragmatic needs in a language-created world. Rather, it is one of accepting his own intuitions about pragmatism and the ubiquity of language.

What is worse in this connection is that it appears Rorty reserves the intellectual right to appeal to intuitions about logic when it pleases him to do so, while denying those same principles to realists whenever it pleases him to do

that. In fact, this tactic recurs frequently in the form of attempts to defend the ubiquity of language thesis not by appealing to its pragmatic usefulness, but by appealing to "facts" —facts which could not be known if the ubiquity of language and the non-correspondence theses were true. Even as seemingly unobjectionable a statement as the following does this:

> [The intuitive realist] may say [. . .] that language does not go all the way down —that there is a kind of awareness of facts which is not expressible in language and which no argument could render dubious [. . .] (p. xxxv)

This is part of Rorty's case that no one can point to any awareness of anything that is not linguistically determined, and that he can render doubtful any attempt to do so. But notice that it assumes he can, after all, know what he and others are saying *in reality*, and that his knowing what is being said is not wholly determined by his language nor being accepted as such merely because he prefers to think it will make him happier to do so.

Nor is the rest of that quote anything we should let Rorty get away with. Why would the intuitive realist have to say what Rorty ascribes to him in order to deny that language "goes all the way down" (creates our experience)? Why think that believing perceptions and concepts are preconditions for the development of language implies that our experience of the world around us need be both inexpressible and infallible? Who ever seriously believed perception to be infallible? And why would the realist have to think so in order to hold that language reflects rather than creates the world? Why, in order to hold that there is a nonlinguistic side to our awareness of facts, would a realist have to say that what is known in that way must be "inexpressible in language"? What we experience by perception, e.g.,

appears to be just such a direct awareness of facts, an awareness that has nonlinguistic sides as well as a linguistic side. And isn't that the whole point of language: that it can and does represent and express symbolically the nonlinguistic sides of experience? Besides, don't animals also perceive the world around them? Don't they manage that without language? Or are we really to believe that animals and their behaviors are merely products of the way we've chosen to speak —that we can't really know there are such beings at all?

At times Rorty seems bent on holding his position in just such an extreme form, a form requiring that all our experience is no more than an internal virtual reality show programmed by our language:

> the only intuition we have of the world determining truth is just the intuition that we must make our new beliefs conform to a vast body of platitudes, unquestioned perceptual reports and the like. (pp. 13–14)
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> the time may have come to recapture Dewey's "naturalized" version of Hegel's historicism. In this historicist vision, the arts, the sciences, the sense of right and wrong, and institutions of society are not attempts to embody or formulate truth or goodness or beauty. They are attempts to solve problems —to modify our beliefs and desires and activities in ways that will bring us greater happiness than we now have. (p. 16)
>
> Dewey thought that if scientific inquiry could be seen as adapting and coping rather than as copying [. . .] we would be receptive to notions like Derrida's —that language is not a device for representing reality, but a reality in which we live and move. (pp. 86–87)

Taken neat, and as the whole story, this view seems to be as internally incoherent as anything one could imagine. Once again: how could language and science arise as tools for solving problems unless problems were already logical-

ly distinguished and conceived? How can we judge what would make us happier than we are unless at least some concepts correspond to reality?

But perhaps Rorty does not mean for this extreme form of historico-pragmatism to be taken neat and as the whole story. There are places where he seems to back away from such a position and actually concedes that language does not "go all the way down". For example:

> The great fallacy of the tradition, the pragmatists [say] is to think that the metaphors of vision, correspondence, mapping, picturing, and representation *which apply to small routine assertions* will apply to large and debatable ones. (p. 164; emphasis mine)
>
> The way in which a properly-programmed speaker cannot help believing that the patch before him is red has *no* analogy for the more interesting and controversial beliefs which provoke epistemological reflection. (p. 165)

This may be a step in the right direction, but it is unclear how it is to be related to the more frequently made claims that all is historically relative (in which case so is this concession), that language creates our experience (with which this concession is inconsistent), that no belief can be known to correspond to reality (with which this concession is inconsistent), and that all beliefs are held only on grounds of pragmatic usefulness (with which this concession is also inconsistent).

Anyway, how could this weaker version of his claims be defended? Is it not just as self-referentially incoherent as the strong version? For example, why should we think that it is only our large-scale theories that are all determined by our language when this claim is itself part of a large scale theory? Is not the weaker version still insisting that large-scale controversial theories cannot ever be known to correspond to reality? And why, then, should we adopt

a pragmatic view of the whole of life when that is also a large-scale epistemologically controversial belief and not one of the "small routine assertions" which he concedes may be immune from the radical relativism he otherwise advocates?

Finally, consider one last example of the way nonhistorical knowledge is smuggled into the discussion and taken to correspond to reality. Rorty says:

> There is no method for knowing *when* one has reached the truth, or when one is closer to it than before [. . .] If we give up this hope [. . .] we may gain a renewed sense of community. Our identification with our community [. . .] is heightened when we see this community as *ours* rather than *nature's*, *shaped*, rather than *found*, one among many which men have made. In the end [. . .] what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right. (p. 166)

Notice that it takes as more than a linguistic convention and as corresponding to reality, the fact that we are "huddled against the dark" (even though it starts by saying we never know we have any truth). This I take to be a reference to all that is life threatening. If that is right, then another one of Rorty's intuitions is that the basic facts of *biology* are not merely our construction, not just "stories we tell ourselves". We really do need air, food, water, and shelter. We really do die. And our survival really does depend on mutual cooperation.

The epistemological issue here is obvious: how then can we know we are right to pick biology and enshrine it as reality but reject the same status for physics? Why does biology correspond to reality but not mathematics? By what criterion can we count on biological "stories" but not on those about the covenant God made with Abraham? The answer cannot be the traditional pragmatic one, "it works",

for two reasons. First, because Rorty said that *all* criteria are our own inventions to get done something we want done. In that case the pragmatic criterion too will be his own arbitrary invention created in order to make his theory look better. And second because any attempt to show his view really has practical advantages will have to require many other pieces of information and many other beliefs be taken as true —not just useful— in order to establish that it has those advantages.

I conclude, therefore, that Rorty's four main theses pragmatism, ubiquity of language, non-correspondence thesis, and historicism —far from mutually supporting one another are related so that if any one is true the others can't be. If pragmatic usefulness is a genuine criterion for belief and action, then what we believe about *it* must correspond to reality and be more than a linguistic convention or it could not supply our most basic survival needs. At the same time, if pragmatic usefulness is the genuine guide for *all* thought and belief, it would have to be for the development of language also —in which case language could not be the creator of all experience. At the same time, if language does create all experience, then historicism itself is no more than a linguistic convention, and no supposed pragmatic value could correspond to any real need. Meanwhile, if the non-correspondence thesis is taken seriously then every claim to pragmatic value, the ubiquity of language, and historicism all fail to be the way things really are. Therefore I find that Rorty has failed to rescue historicism from the incoherencies native to it. Its central claims are still self-referentially, self-assumptively, and self-performatively incoherent, and Rorty's additions to them only compound the difficulties by being mutually inconsistent.

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RESUMEN

En este artículo estudio algunas de las versiones más influyentes del historicismo: la teoría de que todos, o casi todos, nuestros conceptos y creencias están determinados completamente por nuestra cultura. En mi opinión, esta teoría es errónea. Enseguida, estudio el intento de Richard Rorty por defender el historicismo combinándolo con el pragmatismo, y descubro que esto sólo empeora las cosas. En contra tanto del historicismo como del pragmatismo, defiendo el punto de vista de que en efecto tenemos conceptos y creencias que corresponden a la realidad. No obstante, aunque éstos siempre aparecen en un ambiente cultural, y muestran la influencia de éste en su forma de expresión y uso, también contienen información que puede ser, y es, reconocida transculturalmente.

[*Traducción: Claudia Chávez A.*]