

## Review essay

# Pragmatism, Neopragmatism, and Phenomenology: The Richard Rorty Phenomenon

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What was it that Nature would say? – R.W. Emerson  
The world does not speak. Only we do – Richard Rorty

Traditionally, the chief function of every civilization has been to orient its members in the world. Time proven ways of getting about and surviving are imparted ritualistically, ways of avoiding confusion, damage, disaster, ways perchance of flourishing. Revolutions of all sorts in the last four hundred years have relentlessly disrupted or destroyed nearly all traditional maps of the world and modes of orientation. The very meaning of “civilization” has become problematical. As has “reason” and “reasonable.” To understand the emergence of pragmatic modes of thinking in the last half of the last century requires an understanding of the ground swell of crisis to which it is a creative response. Also required is a grasp of the connections between pragmatism and phenomenology. I then turn to a current literary phenomenon: Richard Rorty’s so-called neo-pragmatism, and his assiduous avoidance of phenomenology. Finally, a note about the ecological crisis, and how a deeper attunement to the environment calls for a reappropriation of phenomenological impulses in the earlier pragmatism.

Every traditional civilization aims to orient its members within their immediate locality. This is true even when interpretations of local things and events are in terms of a “spirit realm” or “alternate reality” – construals fantastic to contemporary North Atlantic ears. Always a modicum of what we would call “common sense” is discernable, e.g., a tree may be experienced as moving under certain conditions and for certain modes of numinous consciousness, but it is just *that* tree, the one that is always found in the work-a-day-world forty paces in front of the chief elder’s house. Without commonsensical rootage in the local environment, elementary evaluations necessary for the orientation and conduct of everyday life are impossible.

Now it is just this rootage that 400 years of revolutions of all sorts have disrupted. Western industrialization uprooted vast populations from agrari-

an forms of life in which time proven routines and rituals integrated with Nature's regenerative cycles gave life purpose and direction. Euro-American science and technology produce marvels of aggressive movement that very quickly overrun the world, dislocating and destroying countless civilizations, and causing strain and dislocation within Euro-American civilization itself. Technological advances outpace structures of interpretation within which they can be evaluated.

Just a few examples of how traditional guidance systems, rules of thumb and proverbs, become obsolete: "As right as rain." But since the rain in many sections is so acidified from burning fossil fuels that it kills fish in lakes and streams, what is right about it? "Practice makes perfect." But if steroids injected in athletes allow them to outperform others who practice diligently but don't take them, what becomes of our maxim? A psycho-active pill may eliminate grief over the death of a loved one. But what if this also eliminates grieving and its traditional expressions, that closure that opens the way to new birth? Breaking out of the life-ways that allow us to evaluate them, our technological means of control may have gone permanently out of control.

The most cursory notice of the upsurge of modern European science and philosophy in the 17th century reveals the abrupt departure from traditional feelingful, orientation-laden, commonsensical local knowledge. Reach back 2000 years; contrast this to Aristotle. For all his sophistication and intellectual power, he presupposed the commonsensical life-world of the time. To learn about things is to make judgments about those characteristics commonly thought to be essential to them, *and* about those accidental traits which may be altered yet the beings remain themselves: e.g., their location in geo-cultural space they happen to occupy at the time (if they are moveable beings), or their mode of dress, for example, or their more or less passing emotional states – but states typed, understood, and settled from time immemorial.

Contrast this to the skepticism of the 17th century scientist-philosopher Descartes. He assumes that the world is not as commonsense describes its traditional, myth-laden sensorial richness. (How can we trust the senses, Descartes asks, when the sun *merely* appears to move across the sky, and its disc *merely* appears small enough to be covered by a coin held before the eye). For him the physical world is only as mechanistic mathematical physics describes it: a vast collection of contiguous objects exhibiting only such clinical and feelingless properties as extension, shape, mass, acceleration, force. Having thus reduced and objectified the "outer world," he turns "within" and objectifies a non-extended domain which he thinks is mind: private and personal consciousness, a kind of container in which float such personal qualities as feelings, tones, colors, smells, sensations of various kinds, mere appearances. No longer the moral, aesthetic, or spiritual qualities of *things* in

the immediately apparent world, they are reduced to being psychical qualities merely. The gain from this caustic way of thinking repays the loss, he thinks: one *certitude*: I think therefore I am. At least he can know he is “a thing that thinks.”

On every level or parameter – from the most abstruse domain of philosophical and scientific theory to revolutionary political, economic, and world-historical events – modern European civilization shifts off its basis in local, sensuous knowledge and traditional modes of feeling and evaluation. Kant noted with alarm that two essential, intertwining strands of civilization – science and morality – unravelled. If only the observations of mechanistic science reveal the “external” world reliably, and badness or evil are not observable properties of things, then the judgment, say, *Rape is bad* is not really knowledge. It reveals nothing about who we essentially are as beings-human who must find our way and survive and perchance flourish in the vast world, but is merely a venting of our subjective negative sentiments – feelings and preferences that we happen to have been conditioned to feel in a particular culture, but that we might do without.

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Try to imagine the inception of the 19th century: the French Revolution reducing itself to chaos and despotism is just the most obvious disruption of traditional local ways. That century opens with titanic efforts to reweave the fabric of civilization, to conceive the world at such a primal, originative level that science and technology and every other revolution can be reintegrated with local knowledge and emotional-evaluational life – ways of living deeply rooted in the history, even prehistory, of human survival and flourishing on earth. This is the matrix within which pragmatic modes of thought emerged in the second half of the last century.

Schelling and Hegel launch a vast critique of European philosophy. They realize that they root within its flood plain; but its channel must be radically deepened if its wandering currents are to be collected into one sustaining flow. We must, they think, get beyond seventeenth century “scientific realisms” which take for granted bases of judgment that should be thematized and superseded through reflection. Without this, civilization will continue to disintegrate – “facts” coming unhinged from “values” in endless “future shock” – for we will not grasp intertwining principles of thought, action, feeling, and being that are sustaining and orienting in any local environment.

Where does Descartes *stand*, what does he assume, when he objectifies the world in terms of mechanistic physics, takes an aspect of the world for

the whole? And where does he stand when he objectifies mind as a private container full of physical entities, takes the psychical aspect of mental life for the whole? Answer: he stands on the whole processual natural and cultural world, and the whole communal minding and knowing of it within which he was born, and in which he participates every instant, and which allows him to make the objectifications, individuations, abstractions, and reductions that he makes. He assumes the ordinary world in which we live, and this he does not acknowledge.

Hegel in the nineteenth century writes that mind is not like a lens that might fatally distort an “external world;” Descartes’ doubts are concocted, artificial. For to *imagine* a world external to mind is already to *use* the mind! No, for a world to be a *world*, an intelligible whole, minding must be something that the *world* does. The world’s evolution is the development of its ever deepening coming home to itself, its self-comprehension, as that energy which is mind or spirit (*Geist*). As Schelling writes, it is “the holy and continuously creative energy of the world which generates and busily evolves all things out of itself,” comprehending them in the very process of evolving them. It follows that truths, facts, concerning what satisfies the deepest human potentialities and hungers, given our place in the evolving whole, are simultaneously values. With Schelling and Hegel, local, rooted, sense experience and evaluation seem to be rewoven with scientific research and cosmic speculation and reverence; reason achieves a new flexibility, resourcefulness, daring, and civilization seems on the verge of recovery (at least in thought).

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Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey – the paradigmatic American pragmatists – are inundated and deeply rooted in this so-called idealist tradition. They cannot accept the notion of Absolute Mind or Spirit (*Geist*), particularly as Hegel left it: the sanguine belief that since the universe is One, there must be one Mind working in and through it all, and that we can enter into this working and discover its continuously world-creating dialectical logic – philosophizing a reverential act in which “we think God’s thoughts after Him.” But – but – the idealists’ critiques of modern “realisms” are accepted. To allow philosophical thought to make unexamined assumptions in order to begin is to countenance partial views, aspects, and abstractions to pass as the whole, and this is to abet fragmentation, disorientation, frightened and aggressive restlessness. Particularly damaging is Cartesian dualism which pictures Nature as a machine. How could we feeling beings, capable of tradition, ever fit into this? The very time in which Europeans used their mechanical model

and their tools to overwhelm the globe, they lost all sense of being rooted sustainingly in Nature, and all appreciation of indigenous peoples' profound contentments.

How is philosophical thought to begin authentically? It must somehow be self-starting and self-validating. This can only mean that we must start with where we actually find ourselves here and now in the local environment. We find ourselves within the circumpressure of things as they appear to us. Appearing things that can no longer be denigrated as *mere* appearances, for they compose the primal tissue of meaning without which no other meaning can be made, without which all deliberate inquiry, analysis, reflection, research, and technology is impossible. And in fact when we describe these appearances closely we see they hold within themselves connective tissue. Any local environment presents itself within a horizon of the immediately sensible – audible, visible, smellable, touchable – and every horizon points both inwards at this *and* beyond itself to *everything else* – whatever exactly the *universe* might be. The earlier pragmatism retained in broad outline organicist assumptions: at all levels of analysis parts are parts-of-wholes, organs of the whole organism, and their well-functioning is for the sake of the whole. And organisms at all levels are wholes-of-parts that feed back into the parts, feeding and sustaining them for their allotted time within the whole.

That is, 19th and early 20th century pragmatisms are simultaneously phenomenologies, attempts to describe the primal birth of phenomena or appearances within our experience in such a way that the basic categories for weaving together and interpreting the whole world are discerned. For the original pragmatists meaning and truth are “what works” *in the sense* that they function to weave together *a world* in our experience. We *must* believe whatever is necessary to achieve this whole. Pragmatists' idea of what “works” has been, and in many quarters still is, misunderstood, because of a scandalous ignorance of the history of philosophy, of the matrix within which their ideas grow. The misunderstanding at its crassest goes like this: “Pragmatists believe that meaning and truth are whatever makes you happy to believe.”

No, ideas have a life of their own, they are strands of activity that either interweave with the rest of the world as they predict in their very meaning they will, or they do not. How this happens to make us feel as individuals is irrelevant (unless the ideas are *about* our feelings themselves). Misunderstandings of original pragmatism typically spring from Cartesian abstractions from the whole experienceable world that forget this experienceable whole, and, without grasping how *any* objectification is possible, objectify and demarcate minds as private individual containers with ideas and other mental contents – like feelings of satisfaction – floating inside them.

Let us note briefly categories of world-interpretation generated in 19th century pragmatists' phenomenological descriptions of every situation of sensuous experience, every one a womb of meaning. Categories are generated when shown to be presupposed as the conditions of sensuous perception. After trying and failing to come up with a long list of categories in the manner of Hegel, Peirce settles on three, firstness, secondness, thirdness. Firstness is sheer, irreducible, spontaneous, freshly felt quality: redness, say, or a heard tone; to say these are subjective or merely mental is to operate on unexamined Cartesian assumptions. Secondness is the brute, contingent resistance of things, like "running blindfolded into a post." Thirdness is the way one thing is mediated by others to become other than it was; it is development as habit taking: the emergence of lawfulness out of brute encounters. (Thinking as the use of signs is a paradigmatic case of thirdness: a mere thing or event comes to signify something when emerging within a context that mediates its relationship to the rest of the world so that it becomes a sign with an interpretation. Insofar as Peirce thinks the universe has the master habit of taking habits, of becoming ever more mediated and "thirded," we hear echoes of Hegel's idea that the universe's evolution is its developing self-interpretation). For Peirce, innovative interpretation can occur only because of the stability and continuity of the funded habits which compose every meaningful situation, and within which we live, move, and have our being.

Dewey's categorial scheme resembles Peirce's to some extent. We are cultural beings, and culture is habitual modes of interpretation and transformation of Nature, but always within Nature. Every situation for us thinking organisms has an irreducible lived quality which gives it its ambience and possibilities, the meaning without which all deliberate interpretations, analyses, and technical projects would be impossible. Situations can be dangerous, calm, shockingly disrupted, inviting, repulsive, challenging. Categorial features of the world emerge through "instinctive" phenomenological "readings" of situations: for example the paired categories of the stable and the precarious. When we come home to ourselves reflectively we find ourselves already within a circle of categories. When we reflect, we can start anywhere we like within the circle, but we are unable to justify the circle itself, because all justification is in terms of it.

William James is least explicitly categorial, but his emphasis on stable adaptational habits as the pre-given matrix for all innovative action and interpretation plays a categorial role. He pursues assumptions relentlessly, demanding they be "cashed" or clarified in terms of their concrete experienceability. For example, how is truth actually experienced, what is it known-as? This: we navigate through the world, orient ourselves, get where we think we will get (though that may not always please us). True thinking grafts itself fruit-

fully into the rest of the world. Organisms think; there is no gulf between the mental and the physical that is spanned in a “truth relation.” Truth is a species of goodness. He could never be satisfied with reifying an abstraction like proposition or sentence and saying it has the “property” of truth when it “corresponds” to what it purports to be about. Since we define “proposition” as being either true or false then *of course* it must be one or the other; but this trivializes truth. This refusal to reify either propositions or sentences contrasts starkly to what we will see develop in neo-pragmatism.

James’ conception of an authentic beginning for thought, a self-validating starting point, penetrates to a primal level of experiencing in Nature. Phenomena immediately experienced, “hot off the griddle of the world,” are “pure or neutral.” That is, reflection, however rapid, has not yet assigned them to either the “subjectivity” of a personal history, or to the larger so-called “objective” history of the world at large. Take the blue of the sky as we happen to look up into it. We are absorbed in it entrancedly. We haven’t reflected and thought “It would be good to look up and achieve the sight of blue.” A truly phenomenological description would go something like this: Sky-i-fied-my-head-is turned-up-into-the-blue.

Pre-reflective experience is “a much at once,” but we never get enough to fill out our sense of *world, the everything else* beyond the sensory horizon, so we conceptualize to achieve the end of orientation. But no conception, no matter how essential or breathtaking, can substitute for the world’s concrete sensorial richness. James at the end of his life aims to supply the ultimate connective tissue: Science is to be accommodated along with religious experience, indeed the most primal religious experience – shamanic – in which distinctions are not yet drawn between self and other. In which we fuse, at least for a time, with powerful “medicine animals,” say, regenerative presences such as bears, dolphins, snakes, or become one with trees that “nod familiarly to us” (Emerson’s phrase). The *very same* bear that carves out its history in the world also figures in my history – and if deeply enough I “shape shift” and become the bear (in *some* sense that challenges phenomenological description). The very same tree which, for certain purposes, we regard as rooted and immobile, may, for other purposes, be regarded as flooding our lives with its presence and moving with us through the day.

James flirts seriously with Gustav Fechner’s idea of plant or animal “souls,” or even “the Earth soul” – the animating principle of a strangely animate cultural-natural world.

Richard Rorty's "neo-pragmatism" is a current literary phenomenon. A collection of his re-shaped papers and lectures published in 1989 has been reprinted at least eight times, a collection from 1991 at least four. Not since Dewey has an academic philosopher exerted significant immediate influence on the culture at large. He is mentioned in some segments of the popular press, newsworthy and significant figures (for example, the feminist legal scholar Catherine McKinnon) regard him as a kind of guru, many professors in English and literature departments vie to see who quotes him most, etc. Not since William James lectured on pragmatism to a thousand at Columbia ninety years ago have we seen anything quite like it.

The reasons are not far to seek. Many know that there's something about pragmatism that's "distinctly American" and "somehow important." Why not get the latest word on a great quantity of greatly ignored and difficult work done long ago? Beyond this is Rorty's facile and brilliant intelligence and engaging, straightforward style. And beyond this is a voracious but difficult-to-articulate kind of spiritual hunger to which Rorty seems to minister. In an age which for many is a completely de-sacralized world, one where even the most elementary distinctions between right and wrong are toppling, to find a brilliant and courageous thinker who will face the grim reality and still offer *something* to believe in, that's welcome nourishment! (I mean his tenacious and blunt liberalism). Finally, another facet of this dazzling and attractive figure: his delicious ridicule of academic philosophers still caught up in the unexamined assumptions and artificial problems posed by dualizing Descartes and Company over the last four centuries. For the general public, including the undergraduates (ever decreasing in number) who take philosophy courses, most professors of philosophy must seem a quaint and perverse lot.

One of the most obvious and exciting themes of the earlier pragmatism Rorty retrieves is the connection between democracy and truth. Truth is not some occult relation that bridges "a mental domain" and an "outer world," but rather the honorific term we apply to those beliefs that win out in "the market place of ideas" and the tough competition of finding our way about in the world. As Dewey said, the conditions for truth and the conditions for democracy are essentially the same: every idea, no matter how humble its origin, has the right to be considered and tested. The only nobility in America is nobility of accomplishment. Rorty puts it tersely: if the conditions of respect for individuals are established, a truly democratic liberalism set in place, truth will take care of itself.

Another salient feature of the earlier pragmatism retrieved excitingly by Rorty is what *they* called the categorial feature of chance, precariousness, contingency. Talk about return to the local environments we all occupy each second of the day, and the need for solace and some kind of guidance within

them! Even more eloquently than the earlier thinkers – if that is possible – Rorty discourses on “the blind impress of events that all our behaviors bear.” Our vulnerability, our capacity for humiliation and pain, our huddling to a few others in the darkness, is brought home with tremendous poignancy – the “impress of events” very like the crucifixion that some feel the events to be. With great finesse and delicacy Rorty alludes to Freud’s analyses of the defence mechanisms of dissociation, fusion, or reaction-formation, sub-vocal symbolisms we engage in to soften or deflect the impact of a blind and obdurate contingent world. Modes of self-deception they may be, but also they are tactics employed by poets, and Rorty writes endearingly of the spontaneous poetry of the common man and woman.

Carried along in this surging and sparkling stream of words – this ingenious unleashing of communication – many perhaps never realize that vast tracts of the earlier pragmatism are ignored or occluded. Essential, of course, to the earlier thought’s grasp of the local environment is the body – the human organism’s need to cope with the world around it. Now, to be sure, Rorty’s talk of pain and humiliation implies that we are indeed bodily beings, but he does not (as far as I can tell) address the body as we immediately live it each moment, the body that each of us is, the body-self (as I would call it) capable of more than pain. As far as I can tell, only the body objectified by science, or by analytic philosophers speculating about “the mind-body problem,” is addressed by Rorty. But then, ironically, he is left in the Cartesian position of having to account for the point of view from which he makes the objectifications – immediate ongoing bodily experiencing in the world – and he no more than the philosopher he ridicules – Descartes – does he do this. In other words, Rorty completely ignores phenomenology (and the decades of work by phenomenologically oriented philosophers on the American pragmatists), and how phenomenology of one sort or another is the taproot of the categorically structured world views of the earlier philosophers.

At times, Rorty’s naive objectification of the body (posing as scientific) virtually reduces itself to absurdity. Following the tack of certain analytic philosophers, he refers to “neural states of the brain” which somehow correlate to “beliefs and desires,” and these beliefs and desires “in continual interaction redistributing truth values among statements” (Rorty, 1991, p. 123). Minds are composed of statements!?! Moreover, “beliefs and desires” are abstractions that have been reified. What we actually experience moment by moment as bodily beings in environments are believings in states of affairs believed-in, and desirings of things desired. Experience is “double-barrelled,” as James and Dewey said. Moreover, Rorty, following a great crowd of analytic philosophers, limits truth to some (adulatory) property assigned to *sentences* or *statements*. In the earlier tradition’s light this appears artificial and

thoughtless. It deprives truth of “its existential reference,” as Dewey put it, and masks out the palpable fact that it is not just true sentences that navigate us through the world. Silences of certain kinds, images, icons, bodies, scenes, art-works, music, perhaps mystical experiences amplify, clarify, and reveal the world, and can be true, in their own ways.

Praising poetry, and at the same time exhibiting a bald literal mindedness, Rorty declares that only humans speak (Rorty, 1989, p. 6). Immediately Emerson’s words obtrude and contrast: Nature speaks, and this speech is the first teacher of “the American scholar.” The Emersonian tradition in some form lies behind all the earlier pragmatists. Nature as we immediately live, suffer, and enjoy it is silent in Rorty, and it is a silence that does not reveal but conceals. Moreover, it is a silence that, for many urban readers today, probably conceals *that* it is concealing anything. A hobbling of mind and imagination, a rootlessness. What could Rorty possibly make of Dewey’s advice that “we emulate animal grace?”

For all his courage, Rorty fearfully overreacts to the dangers of talking about Nature in the way that some traditional rationalistic *or* empiricistic philosophers talked about it. That is, as a domain of things with fixed essential characteristics (Essences) that determine and limit our behavior. This, he thinks, obscures our freedom: the power of individuals and cultures to freshly interpret the world.

Now no doubt this power is great, but he exaggerates it, I think, not only revealing the uprootedness of ever spreading North Atlantic civilization, but contributing to it. “Socialization goes all the way down,” he writes. The old pragmatists never said anything like that! They perpetually stressed the interactive, interfusing, reciprocal organism-rest-of-Nature weaving of influences. Culture is not made out of whole cloth, but as Dewey for one maintained, culture is human organisms’ distinctive alteration of Nature, but always within Nature. Rorty is a self-styled ironist: “Anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed” (*CIS*, p. 73). Maybe. But that won’t make it *true* that it is really good or bad, that, if good, it really promotes growth in the long run for beings essentially culture-and-Nature involved, *human* beings.

Ungrounded in any description of life as we immediately live it in actual interactions in various environments, devoid of any phenomenology, Rorty writes in a kind of feverish reaction-formation to any notion of a determinate physical universe. Lacking any sense of matrix, of connective tissue beyond human associations for purposes of liberal agendas, he is thrown into a series of unmediated distinctions and oppositions. These help hurried readers catch hold, but they produce a partial, uprooted, eccentric, and unnecessarily lonely and anxiety producing interpretation of the world. For example, his slogan,

“Truth is made, not found” (Rorty, 1989, p. 3). But the truth plainly is, Truth is *co-created, co-made*, by humans and the rest of the world.

Contrasts and oppositions are helpful only when mediated, and they are this only when emerging in systematic descriptions of our lived situations. Lacking the connective tissue of phenomenological insight – any feel for the kinship any meaningful contrast presupposes and partially conceals – Rorty’s picture of the world fractures. We are treated to a *diareisis* of unmediated distinctions, e.g., knowledge as *either* “a useful tool” *or* as “fitting the world” (p. 19). But “useful tools” “fit the world” in some sense or they wouldn’t be useful. Or, self-knowledge is not “discovery” but “self-creation” (p. 20). But self-creation that amounts to anything must *discover* body-self’s tendencies or potentials for fruitful growth. Or again, the “universal” *or* the “concrete” (p. 34). But where is the “concrete universal,” as Hegel put it, the actual nexus of habitual or institutional practices in particular situations? Yet again, philosophers, we are told, are *either* “foundationalists” or “conventionalists” (p. 28). But the earlier pragmatists he is supposed to be reviving can be fitted into *neither* side of the dichotomy.

Now look again at his poignant allusions to the “blind impress of events that all our behaviors bear,” and to “sheer contingency.” But “sheer contingency” is no guide for living, because it is unmediated, that is, simplistically opposed to something like “blind mechanical necessity.” Peirce with his three categories phenomenologically grounded had a much better idea of “sheer contingency.” Certainly it exists – “secondness” exists. Part of what we *mean* by categorial thinking is that we must find the categorial trait in our experience of the world – at least as long as the present epoch of the world lasts. But “firstness,” sheer sensed quality also exists, as does “thirdness,” habits of interaction and interpretation that are relatively *stable*, and may allow us to cope with and bear (or fruitfully enjoy) the element of contingency.

Rorty dismisses categorial thinking as a regressive or atavistic element in otherwise valuable bodies of thought (Rorty, 1982, e.g., “Dewey’s Metaphysics”). But Rorty inadequately grasps the metaphysics of *pragmatism*. It is just, for example, Dewey’s “commonsensical metaphysical” categories of “the stable and the precarious” that could save Rorty’s thought from chronic instability and eccentricity. For perhaps the prime example, Dewey’s category of stability turns our attention to the stabilities of Nature. Our “instincts,” for example, and I *don’t* mean necessarily some phony contrast to something like “fundamental immobility” (Rorty, 1989, p. 25, fn.), but just “the habits we are born with.” Even if we mean, for example, the genetic structure that determines that normal females can conceive, bear, and give birth to new human beings, and that given cultural or personal factors a particular woman may be disgusted or frightened by her reproductive powers, she *will* have

to deal with the actuality of this capacity in a way a man will not. Yes, and given personal or cultural factors particular men may be more nurturing than many women, but they will not lactate when the baby cries. Which is not an insignificant element in the mix of our lives.

Tellingly, Rorty ends his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* with his version of liberal “ethnocentrism:”

What takes the curse off this ethnocentrism is not that the largest such group is “humanity” or “all rational beings” – none, I have been claiming, *can* make *that* identification – but, rather, that it is the ethnocentrism of a “we” (“we liberals”) which is dedicated to enlarging itself, to creating an ever larger and more variegated *ethnos*. It is the “we” of the people who have been brought up to distrust ethnocentrism.

There is something tragic or at least pathetic in this eloquent meta-ethnocentrism. For he is so excessively wary of anything suggesting an “essence” of humanity that he “bereaves himself of auxiliaries,” as Emerson put it – auxiliaries, allies, for his challenging quest. Rorty sees no need of bonding with far flung living kindred of earth, whether human or not. The heroic contemporary corporate individual, “we liberals,” will stand alone.

I believe what Dewey believed: that, if one looks with a sufficiently synoptic eye, one can discern universal human needs. One of these is to be a respected member of one’s group, and this involves the correlative need to empathize profoundly with others, to introject their bodies mimetically into one’s own. But we need an existential phenomenology to really understand this bonding, and here Rorty is empty handed.

Certainly, this capacity to identify empathically with others can be overridden or limited by contingent factors, e.g., that people have not been prepared to cope with foreigners. But the mimetic capacity exists as a stable inheritance from Nature, and it is just its enlightened development that will probably make the difference between Rorty’s closing vision being a pipedream and being a lure to approximate in practice.

The most lamentable element in Rorty’s thought is his failure to address the reality of Nature (if urbanites prefer give it a lower case “n”). This means Rorty cannot enlist whatever aids there are in our instinctual, archetypal-communal, or artistic nature to convert market place commerce – at its present rate environmentally disastrous – to an ecological commerce (see Hawken, 1993). If the environment disintegrates, all liberal visions of a community of humankind will disintegrate along with it.

In the end, Richard Rorty spends too much time conversing with philosophers moulded in the very analytical tradition he so severely criticises –

Quine, Davidson, Sellars, etc. He may be appreciated by some of them, but he could do much more to develop the fundamental thinking of the original pragmatists. His sparkling vision is limited and distorted by an ethnocentrism that he perhaps cannot acknowledge: *his* professional academic specialty, his plainly ethnocentric specialty, as a constructivist master of words and logical analysis.

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At the close of his first essay in radical empiricism, “Does Consciousness Exist?” James writes, “The ‘I think’ which Kant said must be able to accompany all my objects, is the ‘I breathe’ which actually does accompany them.” James always adopts a polemical attitude toward Kant. But he is making some profound points. First, James does not think that the “I think” is in fact capable of accompanying all our objects of thought. For stretches of time we are too absorbed in the pre-reflective “much at once” of the perceptual field. Second, breathing is integral to feeling of self, and to psychical and spiritual life.

To really affirm something’s existence is not just to perform a “mental act inside a consciousness’ or “inside language” (a “propositional attitude”?). It is to allow the thing to exist with us in the same world, to allow it to be at a place in the world that I and others might share, that is, to allow it to compenetrates and interfuse one’s body. One willingly takes its presence into one’s body through the inhaling, inspiring breath. To deny is the reverse. Feel the dissonance as you try to simultaneously deny something’s existence and inhale.

James’s descriptions of religious experience and his phenomenology of the breathing body join at this point, recalling how spiritual arts were once called pneumatic. Note a contemporary’s experience. Conger Beaseley (1990) recounts accompanying an official of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game in an expedition on the Bering Sea. The goal was to shoot four seals so that biologists could analyze blood and tissue samples for toxics, trace minerals, and parasites. Revolted by the experience, Beaseley clutches for some redeeming qualities in it. After a seal is shot, its blood boils up around it in the icy water. But the redeeming feature is there: for the first time he realizes viscerally his consanguinity with seals. He is bonded to a fellow animal. As they open up the seal’s abdomen and extirpate its vital organs, Beaseley notes,

I developed an identification with the animal that carried far beyond mere scientific inquiry . . . the abdomen of an adult harbor seal is approximately the size of an adult human male's. Each time I reached into the tangled viscera, I felt as if I were reaching for something deep inside myself. As I picked through the sticky folds of the seal's heart collecting worms, I felt my own heart sputter and knock.

As they extirpate the seal's vital organs, Beaseley realizes viscerally, that "the physical body contains functional properties, the proper acknowledgement of which transforms them into a fresh order of sacraments." Coiled intestines intertwine resonantly with coiled intestines of all animate things. Visceras interfuse and bond in experience. In the recoiling intake of air, in the body's gasp of awe, we pay tribute to the wilderness mana and taboo energies that our bodies share with all animals. In the gasping intake of breath we let these creatures into our being. The sacrament is the involuntary acknowledgement of our kinship and our common preciousness – an acknowledgement that resonates, nevertheless, through our voluntary consciousness and career. It is sacrifice in the sense of sacrifice of ego: the acknowledgement of all that we do not know and cannot control, and upon which we depend. It names the sacred.

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