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“Rorty on Pragmatism vs Realism”

Richard Rorty believes that there is ultimately one distinction between the two worldviews of pragmatism and realism. It's found in the ways of thinking and imbuing meaning to one's life which he calls solidarity and objectivity. Those who are pragmatist find meaning through solidarity whilst those who are realist give meaning through objectivity. What is meant by solidarity is that a pragmatist finds meaning in relation to the community around him. It is a way of saying that meaning is connected entirely to human relationships. Whilst objectivity is the kind of meaning finding that is connected to non-human entities. The main difference between these ways of thinking and consequently the people who follow these ways is the following: the realist must have a correspondence theory of reality that necessitates a particular metaphysics and epistemology that accounts for it, whilst the pragmatist does not need any of these. A correspondence theory is the theory that things such as truth are related to an objective reality independent of humans. It means that the belief of something exists first in reality and somehow humans can connect themselves to it correctly and at times incorrectly. Defining how this happens and these connections are the work of a realist through metaphysics and epistemology. The reason why pragmatists do not need this is because they set things as agreements between people. What is true is true not because of its existence outside of humans but because humans have collectively decided that it is good, or practical to believe something. And something stops being true when something that is better can be believed. Another difference between these modes of thinking is how they distinguish between knowledge and opinion. For the realist, their correspondence theory allows for only one thing to be knowledge at

a time relegating all false thought or thought that is not yet corroborated to be in the objective reality as opinion. On the contrary, solidarity makes the same distinction by referring to knowledge as the kinds of beliefs that are widely accepted whilst opinions are the ones that are less prone to communal agreement. An example of this is that in a given context in times past it was knowledge that the sun wanted human sacrifice as a means to gain favor. The same descendants later would find this knowledge as an out of touch opinion because better beliefs have come into the conversation that have been justified well enough. This justification is not the kind that the realist does with truth, and “what is right” being thrown around whilst the pragmatist is looking for convenience and overall practicality for the community.

The first reason why this is important for Rorty is because he believes that to follow the realist way is going to leave everyone with the need to prove their communities’ beliefs as true. If all people are realists, but we clearly have groups of people that believe different things, one group will always justify their beliefs over the others. Or it is up to realists to justify both beliefs produced by the cultures. Rorty believes realism begets ethnocentrism whilst pragmatism has an outlook that is cohesive and inclusive of all these beliefs. Basically, the pragmatists can justify their beliefs by saying, well everyone in my community believes this is good too. The prohibition of murder is no longer one of the Ten Commandments from a deity rather it is the practical agreement communities have taken in this time through a shared trust in one another. The second reason why it is important, and following the ideas from the first implication, is that realists are doomed to get it wrong. Beliefs change and they can no longer be supported by the same metaphysical and epistemological claims, because they only work for the phenomena, we account for them justifying. Part of why he believes this because of Nietzsche’s arguments that

the kinds of frameworks built before ended up failing too. When these frameworks are used by realists in the sciences, we get people that try to justify political stances and moral judgements. Realism usually leans on science as its God that has bestowed upon humans some ability to know truth and have perfect moral senses. On the other hand, the pragmatist has the same justification that is fluid throughout history and will always be solid as the foundation for making claims on truth, when truth is defined in the pragmatic way.

John Dewey lays out two ways that we might attempt to change the world. The first way that Dewey believes we undertake changing the world is through action. He relates this to celebration through a big festival to commemorate something special. What changing the world through action does is make practical and sensible evidence for something. So, in the case of the festival, to say one is happy is best explained by doing things in the world that one interprets, and others interpret to be a happy person. This is to be in the world presently acting out to create some kind of stability in relation to the world. While the attempt to change the world through thought is more of an inward based way of making peace with the chaotic and sometimes unknown world. Contrary to the festivity being the more real and better form of being happy and knowing one is happy, Dewey talks about inward devotion. Instead of being happy in the world one is happy on the inside in a kind of nirvanic state that is purely intellectual and has no relation to the world. And both of these ways are different in the manner they affect our collective approach to knowledge, truth, and reality.

The method of action looks like the empirical, the experimentation and the ways of getting knowledge based on senses. However, the method of idea is inward and is more akin to

those concepts of rationalism and theoretical approaches to knowledge, truth, and reality. This means that the method of action has told us experiential evidence is less certain than theoretical and logically true arguments from reason. And it means that we have sometimes followed thoughts about immovable and unchanging truths like those argued for by Plato. Because of these modes of changing, we have made a hierarchy of what kinds of knowledge are high knowledge or true knowledge while relegating the other to opinion. An example of this is that physics which is mostly theoretical is considered foundational and the truer. The way that Dewey talks about it is that we have thought that certainty is in knowledge and that knowledge is in the theoretical, logical, idea approach whilst secondary and possibly supportive knowledge and opinion is found through the practical, action-based approach.