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On the Apparent Differences between Contemporary Pragmatists: Richard Rorty and the New Pragmatism

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Abstract: Throughout its history pragmatism has been criticised for failing to account for the roles truth and objectivity play in our lives and inquiries. Pragmatists have long sought to guard against this objection, but recently some proponents have identified a form of pragmatism which they think is deficient in the manner identified by its critics. This has led them to claim that pragmatism should be understood as falling into two distinct varieties, and to argue for the superiority of the one over the other. In this paper I argue that behind the apparent differences between contemporary pragmatists lies greater agreement than is commonly thought. Taking Richard Rorty to represent what some find unattractive in their philosophy, I claim that there is little if any substantive difference between pragmatists about the concepts of truth and objectivity. Further, Rorty's work shows that it is misleading to distinguish pragmatists in terms of whether they highlight the constraints imposed by social practices or whether they seek to free us from such constraint; properly understood, freedom and constraint are a necessary condition of one another.

Keywords: pragmatism; objectivity; truth; freedom; constraint; Richard Rorty

1. Introduction

Pragmatism's claim that philosophical concepts should be understood in terms of the role they play within social practices has been the subject of sustained criticism. These criticisms have been leveled from different perspectives, but they share the concern that pragmatism leaves us to the contingencies and vagaries of everyday life with no standpoint from which critically to evaluate or revise our practices for the better. A century ago the British idealist F. H. Bradley wrote that for pragmatists,

“Our sense of value, and in the end for every man his own sense of value, is ultimate and final. And, since there is no court of appeal, it is idle even to inquire if this sense is fallible” [1]. In our own time, Thomas Nagel cautions us against theories such as pragmatism which “don’t regard [objectivity] as a method of understanding the world as it is in itself” [2]. Nagel is concerned that such theories threaten our capacity to pursue serious inquiry: “To the extent that such no-nonsense theories have an effect, they merely threaten to impoverish the intellectual landscape for a while by inhibiting the serious expression of certain questions. In the name of liberation, these movements have offered us intellectual repression” [3].

Throughout its history, pragmatists have maintained that their philosophy does not lead to these undesirable consequences. Charles Sanders Peirce argued that, far from entailing the subjectivism against which Bradley warns us, pragmatism insists that inquiry is constrained by the external world. Peirce founded pragmatism with the aim of allying philosophy with the experimental method of the natural sciences, the ‘fundamental hypothesis’ of which he took to be that “[t]here are real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them” [4]. At the same time, Peirce thought that some pragmatists had presented a position which was legitimately the subject of critics such as Bradley. This is the case with William James. Rather than emphasising the impersonal constraints identifiable by the methods of the sciences, James’ focus was on the role of pragmatism in the lives of individuals. When he wrote about natural science, his interest was principally to show how pragmatism might provide a way for religious believers to reconcile science with their faith. For him, pragmatism demonstrated that religious belief is compatible with science, and its propositions true in exactly the same way: “*If theological ideas prove to have a value for concrete life, they will be true, for pragmatism, in the sense of being good for so much*” [5]. Peirce was sceptical of this application of pragmatism, viewing it as falling away from the sober insights of his own formulation. In a letter from 1907 he wrote that: “Professor James remodelled the matter, and transmogrified it into a doctrine of philosophy, some parts of which I highly approved, while other and more prominent parts I regarded, and still regard, as opposed to sound logic” [6].

Pragmatism has grown as an approach to philosophy since the time of Peirce and James, but this has not seen a diminution in the differences between its proponents. In the introduction to their recent collection *The Pragmatism Reader*, Robert Talisse and Scott Aikin differentiate between pragmatists in terms of what they think “the world of human practice is like” [7]. Some pragmatists focus on the resources social practices offer for re-description and self-creation. Others see practice primarily in terms of communication, and examine the optimal conditions in which reasons might be given and exchanged. For still others, practices are important because they provide the means for inquirers to get things right. At the heart of the differences outlined by Talisse and Aikin is the issue exemplified by the dispute between Peirce and James: Are our responsibilities owed solely to ourselves and the particular communities to which we belong, or must we adhere to standards of truth and objectivity which exist independently of those communities? Increasingly, the differences between pragmatists on this matter are taken to be so great that it is appropriate to speak in terms of different varieties of pragmatism. Cheryl Misak has distinguished “neo-pragmatists” from those she calls “new pragmatists” [8]. Neo-pragmatists think that the purpose of inquiry is to secure agreement among members of social practices, whereas new pragmatists hold that those practices contain norms of truth and objectivity which are not reducible to such agreement. In his work, Nicholas Rescher proposes that pragmatists

can be understood in terms of whether they seek to emphasise the constraints social practices impose on inquirers, or whether they see their philosophy as freeing them from such constraint. The sensible conservatism Rescher associates with the first leads him to label it the “pragmatism of the right”, a position which he contrasts with the imprudent radicalism he finds in the “pragmatism of the left” [9].

Misak and Rescher differ on the details of their understanding of pragmatism and of the reasons why it has come to be a divided tradition. For Misak, the issue concerns the nature of the constraints faced by inquirers, whereas for Rescher it turns on how far pragmatists recognise constraint at all. However, they share the view that this division is so great that it is appropriate to speak of pragmatism as having become divided into two distinct forms; as Rescher puts it, “Although they share a common label, the two approaches represent diametrically opposed tendencies of thought” [10]. My purpose in this paper is to challenge this view. By examining the work of contemporary pragmatists, I suggest that on the issues on which they are taken to be divided—specifically, the concepts of objectivity and truth—there is much greater agreement than is commonly thought. Further, I will show that the contrast that some have drawn between freedom and constraint is misleading; the constraints imposed by our social practices also provide the means by which we might exercise freedom.

My argument will focus on Richard Rorty’s work. Rorty is famously sceptical about the concepts of truth and objectivity as they have often been understood, regarding them as illegitimately laying claim to authority over how we might think and behave. He presents pragmatism as *anti-authoritarian*, holding that the only source of authority which we should recognise is that of our fellow human beings and the social practices in which we participate; as he sees it, pragmatism rejects any “source of normativity other than the practices of the people around us” [11]. Rorty locates pragmatist anti-authoritarianism as following up on the advances made by the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment’s importance lies in the way in which it challenged traditional forms of authority, such as that of revealed religion, holding that all claims to authority require validation through the exercise of reason. Rorty believes however that the anti-authoritarianism the Enlightenment set in process must be supplemented with the Romantic emphasis on the importance of imaginative re-description of ourselves and our societies.

Rorty’s opposition to authoritarian forms of constraint such as those presented by traditional understandings of truth and objectivity make him what Rescher, Misak and others take to be the principal exponent of the kind of thinking they take to be flawed. Their writings are motivated in part to show that pragmatism need not have the consequences they take Rorty’s position to entail; Misak claims that such is his influence that “the first task for any other kind of pragmatist is to wrest the label from him” [12]. In this paper I argue that there is no need to wrest pragmatism from Rorty, and that “new pragmatists” turn out to be closer to him than Misak and others allow. In making my argument I hope to take some of the heat out of recent discussion of pragmatism, the polemical tone of part of which is unedifying and unhelpful. This paper seeks to go some way to remedying this situation by showing that no pragmatist is committed to the kind of damaging position critics such as Bradley and Nagel attribute to them, and that, correctly understood, theirs is a philosophy which can properly lay claim on our attention.

2. Objectivity as Solidarity

The principal issue taken to divide contemporary pragmatists is that of objectivity. Objectivity is traditionally thought to be a matter of correspondence between what Nagel calls “the world as it is in itself” and our descriptions of that world. The idea of the world as it is in itself, independent of the particular descriptions we might give of it, has been labelled by Hilary Putnam “the God’s-eye view”. Pragmatists hold that such a viewpoint is unavailable, for the reason that there is no perspective outside of the particular descriptions we give. Putnam explains why this is the case with the illustration of the status of the Euclidean plane. If we think of points on the plane, the question arises as to whether these are *parts* of the plane or *limits* of the plane. Putnam argues that this question only makes sense within some particular theory; within a theory, that question can be given definite content. There is however no issue of whether that theory *itself* reflects the way things are in themselves. As he remarks, “My view is that God himself, if he consented to answer the question, ‘Do points really exist or are they mere limits?’, would say ‘I don’t know’; not because His omniscience is limited, but because there is a limit to how far questions make sense” [13].

Pragmatists hold that there is no standpoint beyond those of human beings located in particular contexts responding to the specific issues that arise within them. As Putnam puts it, “[t]here is no God’s Eye point of view that we can know or usefully imagine; there are only the various points of view of actual persons reflecting various interests and purposes that their descriptions and theories subserve” [14]. Pragmatists insist, however, that the unavailability of the God’s-eye view does not preclude objectivity, and have sought to show how that concept can co-exist with the thoroughgoing acceptance of our being social creatures located in changing circumstances. They do so by offering what Jeffrey Stout has called “a social theory” of objectivity. This theory holds that objectivity is a matter of intersubjective agreement; Stout writes that “both objective ethical norms and the subjectivity of those who apply them are made possible in part by social interactions among individuals” [15]. Humans get together to pursue their various ends, and, within the practices that they produce, standards emerge by which members of those practices hold one another to account for the rightness of their assertions and behaviour. In his discussion Stout focuses on ethics, but he takes the point to be entirely general, that in every area of human life objectivity exists and can be understood in terms of intersubjectivity.

Stout provides a way to understand the apparent difference between “new pragmatists” and “neo-pragmatists” on the issue of objectivity. Rorty is the foremost neo-pragmatist, presenting pragmatism as anti-authoritarian in its denial that humans are responsible to anything other than each other. This idea is captured in his preferred definition of pragmatism, “the doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones—no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers” [16]. In Stout’s terms, Rorty makes no allowance for the qualification “in part”, for he regards objectivity to be *solely* the product of social interaction. As he puts it in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, “our only useable notion of ‘objectivity’ is ‘agreement’ rather than mirroring” [17]. Knowledge is not a matter of representing items and events in the world but rather of agreement between participants in conversation: “The crucial premise of this argument is that we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it as

accuracy of representation” [18]. In subsequent work, Rorty develops this point by proposing that objectivity should be thought of as a matter of securing “solidarity”.

The claim that inquiry aims exclusively at securing solidarity amongst members of communities of inquiry marks a major point of contention in contemporary pragmatism. Rescher speaks for many when he criticises Rorty’s understanding of pragmatism for “its abandonment of the idea of objectivity—its dismissal of the traditional theory of knowledge’s insistence upon judging issues by impersonal or of at any rate person-indifferent standards” [19]. Against this interpretation, I want to argue that solidarity allows for everything by way of objectivity that a pragmatist could want—or is entitled to expect.

Let’s begin by examining the presuppositions that Rorty takes to inform the concept of objectivity when it is seen as a matter of representing the world as it is in itself. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* he describes how Descartes founded modern philosophy by offering a description of the mind in epistemic terms. Descartes saw the mind as a private sphere separate from the external world. He argued that knowledge is a matter of representations, with mental ideas representing the contents of the world. Locke departed from Descartes by denying that rational reflection alone can establish knowledge, and yet he retained Descartes’ central point, the picture of the mind as an inner arena striving accurately to represent items in the world. Rorty presents Locke as having in this way kept faith with the Platonic “quest for certainty” by seeking to identify *privileged* representations, representations which are not open to doubt because they “are automatically and intrinsically accurate” [20]. For Locke, such privileged representations result from an object having causally impressed itself upon the mind: true propositions “are certain because of their causes” [21].

Rorty argues that modern epistemology rests on an important confusion, the “confusion between justification and causal explanation” [22]. It is central to pragmatism as he understands it that justification and causation are two different things, and the one cannot play the role of the other. To explain why, he draws on Wilfrid Sellars’ distinction between “the space of causes” and “the space of reasons”. The space of causes is the world of objects in motion, bouncing against each other in response to physical laws. In contrast, the space of reasons is a normative space. Moving around in that space is not a causal matter, the kind of thing studied by the natural sciences, but a normative affair in which people make assertions about what they think is the case and seek to justify those assertions to others. Rorty thinks that the assumption that something might occupy a place in both the space of reasons and the space of causes is “the basic confusion contained in the idea of a ‘theory of knowledge’” [23]. The confusion lies in thinking that the world itself provides us with reason to describe it in any particular way. Against this, Rorty claims that reasons can only be given by those within the space of reasons. As he remarks, “The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only other human beings can do that” [24]. For this reason, the idea of objectivity as a matter of the accurate representation of the world as it is in itself must be given up as incoherent. If we are to retain the concept of objectivity, Rorty argues that it must be re-conceived as a matter of solidarity among inquirers.

New pragmatists share Rorty’s objections to representationalism; anti-representationalism is as we have seen the consequence of Putnam’s criticisms of the God’s-eye view. But they refuse to go on to conclude that objectivity is exclusively a matter of what can be justified to a community of inquiry.

This is sometimes taken to amount to giving up on any sense that inquiry is constrained by the world. It is because they take Rorty to give up on such constraint that some think him a linguistic idealist, someone who believes that things exist only insofar as we speak of them; Rescher objects to Rorty that “[w]hether the key opens the lock or jams it or whether the mushroom nourishes or [sic—‘or’] kills us is not dependent on the predilections of people but on the *modus operandi* of impersonal nature in a way that is in practice determinable by anyone and everyone” [25]. It is important to see, however, that Rorty’s argument in no way denies the existence of the external world or the causal pressures it exerts on us. Indeed, he *insists* that those pressures must be taken into account if we are successfully to cope with the world. The point, however, is that these pressures, though a necessary condition of knowledge, are not sufficient. This is because there is “a sharp line between experience as the cause of the occurrence of a justification, and the empiricist notion of experience as itself justificatory” [26]. The causal pressures of the world lead us to create vocabularies to cope with them, but Rorty’s claim is that the *authority* of those vocabularies and of the claims made using them are matters of the reception they receive from our conversational peers: “Empiricism’s appeal to experience is as inefficacious as appeals to the Word of God unless backed up with a predisposition on the part of a community to take such appeals seriously” [27].

The assumption made by many writers is that the only constraints worthy of the name are *causal*; this explains why Rescher attributes to Rorty “a free and easy ‘anything goes’ parochialism that casts objectivity to the winds” [28]. However, Rorty’s suggestion is that we can meaningfully speak of *conversational* constraints, the constraints imposed by our fellow inquirers (which themselves result from our shared interaction with the world). It is not that “anything goes”; rather, what goes has to pass the test of communities of inquiry. Rescher writes that “relativised to matters of individual taste, pragmatic efficacy is [for Rorty] viewed as a matter of either personal preference or social convention—the mores of the tribe” [29]. But this and related objections miss what is entailed by the pursuit of solidarity. Solidarity is indeed a matter of securing agreement with one’s fellow inquirers, but in their capacity as members of social practices bound by shared norms. Natural scientists, historians, lawyers, and so on, are not well described as “tribes”, but rather as expert practitioners doing their best to get things right. There is nothing trivial about seeking solidarity among such people, and it is only by employing a series of negative terms and phrases (“tribe”, “personal preference”) that it can be made to appear by turns sinister and insubstantial.

Rorty suggests that if we reject the God’s-eye view, then there is nothing that objectivity can be other than securing solidarity in the light of the world. It seems to me that pragmatists should not object to this view. The reason some do so is because they think that, having defined objectivity as solidarity, we lose the capacity to distinguish between two different goals. In the previous paragraph I spoke of inquirers seeking to get things right, but new pragmatists question whether Rorty can acknowledge that goal. Stout thinks that Rorty’s refusal to distinguish between solidarity and getting things right a particularly unfortunate one for him: “The irony is that this mistake is itself an especially dangerous form of authoritarianism, because it collapses objective norms into group conformity” [30].

It is certainly the case that in some of his essays Rorty expresses scepticism about the idea of getting things right. However, he came to amend his position in a way which would seem to bring him into line with new pragmatists. In a sympathetic commentary on Rorty, Bjørn Ramberg argues that it is quite consistent to deny that sentences try to describe the world as it is in itself while affirming that

sentences try correctly to describe particular objects and events [31]. The former is a question that invokes representationalism—it suggests that there is a God’s-eye view which we may or may not accurately represent. But this is very different from the latter, which is a question asked *within* a particular vocabulary: If our subject matter is “snow”, this commits us to affirming statements such as “is coloured white”, “will melt at temperatures above zero degrees”, *etc.* Rorty came to agree with Ramberg on this point, accepting that giving up on representationalism does not and should not entail giving up on the idea that inquirers try to get such things right. Spelling out the moral of Ramberg’s argument, he writes that: “There is no such thing as Reality to be gotten right—only snow, fog, Olympian deities, relative aesthetic worth, the elementary particles, human rights, the divine right of kings, the Trinity, and the like” [32]. The norms of particular disciplines can be followed more or less correctly, and the results of inquiries can be correct or incorrect independently of whatever a community might affirm.

Rorty came to agree with new pragmatists that the point of inquiry is to get things—snow, particles, deities—right. However, his acceptance of this point has not led to a diminution of the criticisms that his position has attracted, or to the suggestion that the distinction between neo-pragmatism and new pragmatism is overdrawn [33]. The reason for this is that he does not take his amendment in the light of Ramberg’s argument to impact on his view that objectivity means nothing more than solidarity. New pragmatists think that if Rorty is serious in his acceptance that inquiry seeks to get things right, he must give up defining objectivity as solidarity, because doing so amounts to nothing more than group consensus. Stout remarks that, “The idea of *getting one’s subject matter right* that Rorty embraces at Ramberg’s urging does not boil down to the idea of getting ‘as much intersubjective agreement as possible’”. [34].

I suggest that while new pragmatists are correct to insist that getting things right is the goal of inquiry, Rorty is right to maintain that this goal is not separate to the attempt to secure solidarity. For inquiry can equally and accurately be described either way. If we set ourselves the goal of getting something right, the only way to go about doing so is to engage in inquiry by subscribing to the norms which constitute the discipline of which we are part. Scientists can only claim to have got something right if they validate their claims through experiments and respond to challenges that call their findings into question; judges must decide cases based on statute law and precedent; and so on [35]. If in contrast we take our aim to be that of securing solidarity with our peers, that too requires that we subscribe to the norms and standards of the discipline of which we are members. And, as Rorty points out, the purpose of doing so *is* to try to get things right [36].

3. Truth and Its Role in Inquiry

On inspection, the apparent differences between neo-pragmatists and new pragmatists on the issue of objectivity do not hold up. Rorty agrees with new pragmatists that in order to secure objectivity (or solidarity) inquirers must take account of the causal pressures of the world, and also recognises that the purpose of inquiry is to get things right. However, there remains a further difference between pragmatists. By thinking inquirers can do no more than seek to justify themselves to one another with a view to securing solidarity, Rorty is led to make perhaps his most notorious claim, which is that truth

is not a goal of inquiry. Here again I want to question how firm this apparent difference between pragmatists actually is.

For a time, Rorty endorsed Peirce's view of truth as that which would be agreed upon at the "end of inquiry" [37]. But he gave up this idea, arguing that we have no idea what the end of inquiry might look like, or know whether we had reached it. According to him, Peirce's view represents a half-way measure which recognises the problems of the correspondence theory and yet fails to set them aside; it merely relocates the idea of correspondence to what would be secured at the putative end of inquiry. Having given up on Peirce's account, Rorty writes that in his work he tends to "swing back and forth between trying to reduce truth to justification and propounding some form of minimalism about truth" [38]. The problem with the first approach is that it falls foul of the difficulty that a belief, however well justified, may turn out to be untrue. So his considered position came to be the minimalist one that there is but one indispensable sense of truth, which is the *cautionary*—a well-justified belief may yet be untrue [39].

The cautionary view of truth is minimalist because it provides no particular direction for action. Just as the aim of getting something right is indistinguishable in terms of our practices of inquiry from the aim of securing solidarity, so too Rorty thinks that aiming at truth is indistinguishable from seeking justification. This latter claim is one that he takes up from Donald Davidson [40]. Following Davidson, Rorty points out that while we can tell when we have justified our beliefs—we can secure agreement about them in the light of the available evidence—we possess no additional means of establishing whether or not such beliefs are true. This thought leads him to claim that truth is not a goal of inquiry:

If I have concrete, specific doubts about whether one of my beliefs is true, I can resolve those doubts only by asking whether it is adequately justified—by finding and assessing additional reasons pro and con. I cannot bypass justification and confine my attention to truth: assessment of truth and assessment of justification are, when the question is about what I should believe now, the same activity [41].

Many pragmatists are critical of Rorty's minimalist approach to truth. They agree with Rorty's criticisms of the correspondence theory of truth, but think that truth still has a significant normative task to perform. It is for this reason that new pragmatists such as Misak and Huw Price maintain that truth is a distinct goal of inquiry [42]. I want now to suggest that this apparently clear difference is a false one.

To see why, let's try to get clear what Rorty's claim that truth is not a goal of inquiry does—and does not—entail. Misak attributes to Rorty two positions, both of which she thinks follow from his minimalism about truth and both of which she thinks mistaken: (i) that he *abandons* truth, and (ii) that he *reduces* truth to justification [43]. As I read Rorty, however, he is committed to neither claim. In terms of the claim that he abandons the truth, although this might seem to be the consequence of his view that truth is not a goal of inquiry, Rorty in fact endorses Davidson's argument that it is essential to the very idea of belief to know that our beliefs can be true or false [44]. And in terms of his supposed reduction of truth to justification, although he argues that truth is not a goal of inquiry because it is impossible for us to know that we have reached it, Rorty nevertheless insists on the cautionary use of truth precisely in order to contrast it with what is currently justified [45].

It is then not the case that Rorty's denial that truth is a separate goal of inquiry commits him either to abandon truth or reduce it to justification. But the point can be pressed further, for it is interesting that new pragmatists turn out on inspection to be offering a position on truth remarkably similar to his.

This is the case with Misak. Misak takes herself to follow Peirce on truth, but she focuses on a formulation of his position which can I think be seen to take her towards Rorty's. Various commentators have noted that Peirce's idea of the 'end of inquiry' is problematic; Bertrand Russell pointed out that it entails the obviously false consequence that if the world ends tomorrow our current beliefs would all be true [46]. Misak agrees with this objection, but notes that this is not the only formulation of his position, and argues for an alternative (which Peirce also employed): "a better characterisation is that a true belief is one that would withstand doubt, were we to inquire as far as we fruitfully could on the matter. A true belief is such that, no matter how much further we were to investigate and debate, that belief would not be overturned by recalcitrant experience and argument" [47].

Misak minimalises one formulation of Peirce's position (truth is what would be believed at the fated end of inquiry) and advocates another (truth is indefeasible). The latter avoids the problems of the former: If the world ends tomorrow, Misak's view will escape Russell's charge because it will not be the case that inquiry will have been pursued as far as it could fruitfully go. However, in taking up the idea of indefeasibility, I suggest that Misak moves a long way towards Rorty's cautionary view of truth. She is clear that indefeasibility is a condition that we can never be sure we have reached: "We might in fact believe all sorts of truths, but we cannot know when we are in such a position, precisely because we cannot know when we have a belief which would for ever satisfy our aims" [48]. The reason why she continues to maintain that truth is a distinct goal of inquiry is because she is careful to contrast it with justification. It is in order to allow for that contrast that she deliberately leaves the conditions of "fruitful inquiry" unspecified, for the reason that any specification of those conditions is open to the criticism that inquirers are doing nothing more than reifying current standards of inquiry. She writes that

the new formulation [of truth] does not require the pragmatist to attempt the doomed task of saying just what is meant by the hypothetical end of inquiry, cognitively ideal conditions, or perfect evidence, whatever these might be. Any attempt at articulating such notions will have to face the objection that it is a mere glorification of what we presently take to be good [49].

Here we see how Misak's position has moved towards neo-pragmatism, for these are exactly the reasons that led Rorty to abandon Peirce's account of truth and to adopt his cautionary alternative. Like him, Misak is concerned to argue that truth is not reducible to justification, and yet is not a goal that we can ever be sure that we have reached.

Misak's amended Peircean understanding of truth turns out to be very similar to Rorty's cautionary view [50]. But she is not alone in criticising Rorty's minimalism. John McDowell shares Rorty's anti-representationalism, but thinks that he mistakenly takes this to squeeze out the perfectly innocent—and pragmatically acceptable—view that inquiry is, as he puts it, answerable to the world. The difference is explicated by McDowell in the following illustration: "There is a norm for making claims with the words 'Cold fusion has not occurred' that is constituted by whether or not cold fusion has occurred; and whether or not cold fusion has occurred is not the same as whether or not saying it has occurred will pass muster in the current practice" [51]. This norm is provided by the truth, which is

viewed not as acceptability within current practice but as a matter of the way things are: “the thought that some claim is true is not ... the thought that it would pass muster in the relevant claim-making practice as presently constituted. It is the thought that things really are a certain way: for instance, that cold fusion really has not occurred” [52]. For McDowell, Rorty simply has a blind spot when it comes to this norm.

It will come as no surprise that Rorty was not persuaded by McDowell’s attempt to cure this supposed blind spot. He argues that the problem with claims such as McDowell’s is that we have no way of knowing how in practice we might follow the supposedly distinct norm of truth:

The need to justify our beliefs and desires to ourselves and to our fellow-agents subjects us to norms ... But there seems no occasion to look for obedience to an *additional* norm, the commandment to seek the truth. For ... obedience to that commandment will produce no behavior not produced by the need to offer justification [53].

Rorty can readily agree with McDowell that the question “Has cold fusion occurred?” is different to the question “Does everyone in the current practice agree that cold fusion has occurred?” The first question asks whether or not a particular event has taken place, whereas the second asks about the views of a particular community about that event. But the different *meanings* of these questions does not entail a difference in the *norms* that enable us to answer them. For, as Rorty points out, “anything that helps you decide to answer either question in the affirmative will, assuming that you yourself are a participant in the current practice, let you answer the other question in the same way” [54].

The concern that animates writers such as McDowell and Misak is that Rorty’s cautionary view of truth denies an important use of the term, which is that truth acts as a constraint upon our behaviour. Rorty’s claim is that this constraint is not one that we can detect in our behavior—there is no separate norm of truth identifiable and identifiably different to the norm of seeking justification. Huw Price has sought to identify that norm. Price argues that conversation among members of social practices contains three distinct norms, which he labels sincerity, justification, and truth. The norm of sincerity is a matter of asserting that which one believes to be the case. The norm of justification goes further: It is the norm of asserting what one is warranted in so doing in the light of the reasons and evidence one possesses. And the norm of truth holds that when one makes an assertion one asserts what one believes to be correct, thereby taking those who think differently to be mistaken. This third norm is said to be necessary for us to be able to make sense of ourselves as participants in inquiry, something which Price thinks Rorty is unable to account for: “What is missing—what the third norm provides—is the automatic and quite unconscious sense of engagement in common purpose that distinguishes assertoric dialogue from a mere roll call of individual opinion” [55]. Without the norm of truth in addition to the norms of sincerity and of justification, we have no way of explaining disagreement, and no way of accounting for our desire to improve our beliefs in the light of it.

Rorty’s suggestion, to recall, is that although there is a difference between justification and truth, it is not a difference that makes a difference to our practices. Price claims to have identified a difference. He asks us to imagine a community of speakers who, though they criticise each other for insincerity and for lacking sufficient ground for their assertions, do not regard differences of opinion as indicating error. He names this community “Mo’ans”, after their form of speech which is “merely-opinionated assertion”. Mo’ans “criticise each other for insincerity and for lack of coherence, or personal warranted

assertibility. But they go no further than this. In particular, they do not treat a disagreement between two speakers as an indication that, necessarily, one speaker or another is mistaken—in violation of some norm” [56]. By not thinking that differences in belief amount to error, the Mo’ans cannot adequately explain our practices of communication. To do that, Price claims that we need to account for the fact that “disagreement itself be treated as grounds for disapproval, as grounds for thinking that one’s interlocutor has fallen short of some normative standards” [57]. For that we need the third, distinct, norm of truth.

Here again I think there greater agreement between pragmatists than might appear to be the case. We can see this if we note that Price has a different understanding of justification to Rorty. For Price, justification is justification by one’s own lights—the Mo’ans criticise each other, but only for lacking sincerity or for failing to secure coherence among their own beliefs. If, however, they wish to do more and hold that those beliefs get something right, then they are said to be committed to the norm of truth. In contrast, Rorty thinks that justification cannot merely be justification by one’s own lights, but necessarily entails openness to critical appraisal by one’s peers: “One cannot justify by one’s own lights if one does not know what it is to justify by the lights of others” [58]. Justification is necessarily intersubjective. For this reason, he takes the Mo’an community to be an impossibility, for any community which claims to respect the norm of justification must hold itself open to justification by intersubjective standards. In Price’s terms, this means that one could not adhere to the second norm without adhering to the third as well.

In a reply to Rorty, Price agrees that the Mo’an community is an impossibility, but thinks that impossibility instructive because it demonstrates the inescapability of the third norm [59]. He maintains that the norm of truth provides the only way for us to account for disagreement, and, in the light of that disagreement, make sense of error and of the idea that the purpose of inquiry is to correct it. However, Rorty thinks that criticism and correction are integral to justification, and that as such they can be accounted for without going on to say that truth is a distinct norm of inquiry. For the mark of that norm—of criticising one another by reference to intersubjective standards—is he thinks precisely what must be adopted if one wishes to have justified beliefs. If this is so, then Rorty’s position allows for everything that Price thinks important without needing to go on to say that truth is a separate normative constraint on belief and inquiry.

However, if we accept that truth does not provide an additional constraint on belief and inquiry, we return to the issue raised earlier, of whether we able to criticise prevailing standards within a community. Is there a perspective from which to say that a belief, however widely held, is mistaken? In response, we should note that like new pragmatists, Rorty is clear that communities are not beyond challenge. Although inquiry seeks solidarity, this leaves fully open the possibility of offering alternative suggestions and the attempt to justify *them*. He notes that “many (praiseworthy and blameworthy) social movements and intellectual revolutions get started by people making *unwarranted* assertions”, assertions that were not justified by the standards and norms of the time [60]. In these cases, the point of such movements was to change those things. This thought leads to Rorty’s suggestion that we shift our attention from metaphysics to what he calls “cultural politics”. Cultural politics focuses on the importance of the conditions required to facilitate inquiry; in particular, that we can speak freely and seek to defend whatever it is we take to be right by submitting it to our conversational partners in open inquiry. “In other words, what matters is your ability to talk to other

people about what seems to you true, not what is in fact true. If we take care of freedom, truth can take care of itself” [61]. In the final section of the paper I turn to Rorty’s understanding of freedom, and its relation to the constraints imposed by social norms.

4. Freedom and Normative Constraint

I have suggested that more unites contemporary pragmatists on the issues of objectivity and truth than is often thought. The reason for this is that the underlying views about the nature of the norms and activities that constitute inquiry are, on inspection, indistinguishable. I want to close by arguing that this commonality is not accidental. I will do so by taking a step back from discussion of objectivity and truth as particular forms of constraint, and turn to examine the idea of constraint in terms of its relation to freedom. As we have seen, Rescher distinguishes between pragmatists according to whether they emphasise the constraints imposed by our social practices or whether they seek to free us from such constraint. Explaining his distinction between pragmatisms of the left and the right, he writes: “The one views the aim of the enterprise as a matter of loosening things up, of overcoming delimiting restraints; the other as a matter of tightening things up, of providing for and implementing rationally acceptable standards of impersonal cogency and appropriateness” [62]. It is clear why Rescher presents pragmatism in these terms. Rorty takes pragmatism to be anti-authoritarian, and has written at length about the importance of the freedom of imagination by celebrating the “strong poet” and the “utopian revolutionary” as “ironists” who offer new descriptions of themselves and their societies. In contrast, pragmatists such as Misak, Stout and Price call attention to the constraints imposed by truth and objectivity. I will show, however, that the seemingly sharp contrast between freedom and constraint cannot in fact be drawn.

To be sure, freedom and constraint may appear opposed to one another, for one seems to be free precisely insofar as one is *not* subject to constraint. This is however not the case, because properly understood the one is a necessary condition of the other. Robert Brandom’s work helps to explain why. Brandom of course allows that the norms of our social practices constrain us—if for example we wish to learn a new language, we have to submit to its vocabulary and grammar. To this extent Brandom is a part of Rescher’s pragmatism of the right. But he also counts as a pragmatic leftist, for he argues that the norms which constrain us also free us to say and do things that we would otherwise not have the resources to do. In his terms, by subscribing to norms we lose some of our *negative freedom* (from constraint by norms) but gain *expressive freedom* (the capacity to do certain things). By accepting the constraints imposed by norms, we are free because we become able to formulate and pursue new ends. As he puts it, “One acquires the freedom to believe, desire, and intend the existence of novel states of affairs only insofar as one speaks some language or other, is constrained by some complex social norms. Expressive freedom is made possible only by constraint by norms, and is not some way of evading or minimising that constraint” [63]. Examples are close at hand: by conforming to the norms of the English language, Brandom was able to compose *Making It Explicit*, a work which expresses ideas previously unavailable to its readers.

If we take up Rorty’s position in the light of Brandom’s argument, we can see why it is misleading to think that his emphasis on freedom entails a denial of constraint. Brandom shows for example why irony is only possible against a background of shared norms, highlighting that those norms are the

means by which ironic re-description is made possible. This explains why Rorty is clear that there “can be no fully Nietzschean lives, lives which are pure action rather than reaction—no lives which are not largely parasitical on an un-re-described past and depending on the charity of as yet unborn generations” [64].

Brandom’s argument has application not just to Rorty but to pragmatism more generally. It shows that some of the ways in which pragmatism has been characterised are misleading. We saw above that Talisse and Aikin differentiate between pragmatists in terms of the importance they attribute to the world of practice: Is it important because it provides the resources for re-description and self-creation, or for communication, or for getting things right? Talisse and Aikin claim that pragmatists can be distinguished according to which of these things they take to be “the most fundamental” [65]. Drawing on Brandom’s argument, I suggest that these elements necessarily hang together, and that none is more fundamental than any other. Offering re-descriptions of ourselves and others requires the conceptual resources provided by our shared practices. Conversely, one of the reasons why we submit to constraint by the norms of those practices is because in doing so those norms provide us with the freedom to make *novel* claims. And, if we are to get things right, the only way to do so is to participate in conversation with each other (and in so doing, altering that conversation by introducing new candidates for belief).

In this way, we see that the contrast Rescher draws between freedom and constraint will not hold up from either end: by submitting ourselves to constraints we are provided with expressive freedom, freedom that is itself only available to us if we subject ourselves to those self-same constraints. In saying this I am not seeking to deny the different interests that pragmatists have had over the last one hundred and forty years. We have seen for example that Peirce wrote with the aim of aiding the natural sciences, whereas one of James’ aims was to reconcile the findings of science with religious belief. These and other differences have marked pragmatism through to the present day, and Talisse and Aikin are correct to highlight them. But it is misleading to say that these differences in interest should be thought of in terms of which is “most fundamental”. Our interests and purposes, be they that of accommodating ourselves to the latest findings of the natural sciences, co-ordinating social endeavours, justifying the legitimacy of religious belief, and so on, depend on our social practices and the resources and freedoms they provide.

5. Conclusions

This paper has challenged the widely-held view that pragmatists differ to such a degree that it is appropriate firmly to distinguish between them in terms such as new and neo-pragmatism, and between pragmatisms of the left and the right. These contrasts have been seen to overstate matters considerably. Taking Rorty to represent what Rescher, Misak and others find unattractive and damaging in pragmatism, his position turns out on inspection to be very similar to theirs. The attempt to secure solidarity requires that we address the causal pressures of the world and the reasons offered by our peers (themselves arising in response to their own attempts to cope with the world). The purpose of inquiry is properly described as trying to get particular things right, but inquirers can only do that by submitting to the norms of the communities of inquiry of which they are members. New pragmatists such as Misak can be seen to agree with Rorty that while truth is not an identifiable goal of inquiry, it

remains an important concept, allowing us to distinguish what a community thinks at a given time from what we may think is the case. Moreover, viewing pragmatists in terms of how far they are prepared to acknowledge the constraints imposed by our social practices turns out to be a misleading way of summarising the different interests and projects that pragmatists have had; Rorty highlights the desirability of freeing ourselves from traditional forms of authority, but recognises that the means to do so are provided by social practices. Far from threatening meaningful inquiry as Nagel and others have claimed, I hope to have shown that *all* pragmatists provide for robust concepts of truth and objectivity, and that by focusing on our social practices and highlighting the resources they provide, theirs should be seen as a philosophy worthy of serious attention.

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References and Notes

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2. Thomas Nagel. *The View From Nowhere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, 5.
3. *Ibid.*, 11.
4. Nathan Houser, and Christian Kloesel, eds. *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings Volume 1*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992, 120.
5. John J. McDermott, ed. *The Writings of William James: A Comprehensive Edition*. London: University of Chicago Press, 1977, 387, emphasis in original.
6. Nathan Houser, and Christian Kloesel, eds. *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings Volume 2*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998, 448.
7. Robert B. Talisse, and Scott F. Aikin, eds. *The Pragmatism Reader: From Peirce Through the Present*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011, 4.
8. Cheryl Misak. "Introduction." In *New Pragmatists*, edited by Cheryl Misak. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007.
9. Nicholas Rescher. *Realistic Pragmatism: An Introduction to Pragmatic Philosophy*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000, 64–69.
10. *Ibid.* 64.
11. Richard Rorty. *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers Volume 4*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 107.
12. Cheryl Misak. *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation*. London: Routledge, 2000, 12. Among "new pragmatists" are included Misak, Robert B. Brandom, Huw Price, Jeffrey Stout, and Bjørn Ramberg. In contrast, it is not clear that there are any other "neo-pragmatists" besides Rorty himself.
13. Hilary Putnam. *The Many Faces of Realism*. LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1987, 19.
14. Hilary Putnam. *Reason, Truth and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 50.
15. Jeffrey Stout. *Democracy and Tradition*. Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004, 274.
16. Richard Rorty. *Consequences of Pragmatism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982, 165.

17. Richard Rorty. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1979, 337.
18. Ibid. 170.
19. Rescher. *Realistic Pragmatism*. 65.
20. Rorty. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. 170.
21. Ibid. 157.
22. Ibid. 161.
23. Ibid.
24. Richard Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 6.
25. Rescher. *Realistic Pragmatism*. 66.
26. Richard Rorty. *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers Volume 3*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 141.
27. Rorty. *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. 11.
28. Rescher. *Realistic Pragmatism*. 64.
29. Ibid. 65. Putnam makes a similar claim, criticising Rorty for seeking to level down all areas of inquiry such that in ethics, politics and science, “justification is just to be counted as a justification by some bunch of people”. Hilary Putnam. “Richard Rorty on Reality and Justification.” In *Rorty and His Critics*, edited by Robert B. Brandom. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 84.
30. Jeffrey Stout. “On Our Interest in Getting Things Right: Pragmatism without Narcissism.” In *New Pragmatists*, edited by Cheryl Misak. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007, 25.
31. Bjørn Ramberg. “Post-ontological Philosophy of Mind: Rorty versus Davidson.” In *Rorty and His Critics*, edited by Robert B. Brandom. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 361–364.
32. Richard Rorty. “Response to Ramberg.” In *Rorty and His Critics*, edited by Robert B. Brandom. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 375.
33. Rorty’s response to Ramberg was published in 2000. The essays collected together in *New Pragmatists* appeared seven years later in 2007.
34. Stout. “On Our Interest in Getting Things Right.” 18, emphasis in original. Internal quotation from Richard Rorty. *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers Volume 1*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 23.
35. Rorty. *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 80. The point has been pressed very persuasively by Stanley Fish. In the case of the law, Fish captures the interconnection between getting things right and seeking solidarity in the following illustration: “A judge who decided a case on the basis on whether or not the defendant had red hair would not be striking out in a new direction; he would simply not be acting as a judge, because he could give no reasons for his decision that would be seen as reasons by competent members of the legal community”. Stanley Fish. *Doing What Come Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies*. London: Duke University Press, 1989, 93, emphasis in original.
36. Rorty. *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. 98.
37. Rorty. *Consequences of Pragmatism*. 165.
38. Rorty. *Truth and Progress*. 21.

39. Rorty. *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*. 128.
40. In his essay “Truth Rehabilitated”, Davidson writes that: “I agree with the pragmatists that we can’t consistently take truth to be both objective and something to be pursued. But I think they would have done better to cleave to a view that counts truth as objective, but pointless as a goal”. Donald Davidson. *Truth, Language, and History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 7.
41. Rorty. *Truth and Progress*. 19.
42. Misak. “Introduction”, 5. Huw Price. “Truth as Convenient Friction.” *The Journal of Philosophy* 100.4 (2003): 172.
43. Misak. *Truth, Politics, Morality*. 12–13, 57–58.
44. In his writings, examples of propositions held to be true include “ $2 + 2 = 4$ ”, “Bacon did not write Shakespeare”, and “Love is better than hate”. Rorty. *Consequences of Pragmatism*, xiii.
45. Misak’s interpretation of Rorty’s reduction of truth to justification turns on one particular sentence in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, where he writes that truth is “what our peers will, *ceteris paribus*, let us get away with saying”. Rorty. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 176. Cited in Cheryl Misak. “Richard Rorty’s Place in the Pragmatist Pantheon”. In *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, edited by Randall E. Auxier, and Lewis Edwin Hahn. Chicago: Open Court, 2010, 35. This certainly seems to commit Rorty to the reduction of which Misak and others have indicted him. However, it is not his considered view of truth, and he is at pains to distance himself from it in subsequent writings, at one point describing it as “incautious and misleading hyperbole”. Richard Rorty. “Reply to Cheryl Misak”. In *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, edited by Randall E. Auxier, and Lewis Edwin Hahn. Chicago: Open Court, 2010, 45. In the light of his cautionary view of truth, the “incautious” sentence from *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* on which Misak focuses should properly be read not as a *definition* of truth but rather as a *description* of what is *taken* to be true by a community of inquiry.
46. See Cheryl Misak. *Truth and the End of Inquiry: A Peircean Account of Truth*. Expanded paperback edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 67.
47. Misak. *Truth, Politics, Morality*. 49.
48. Cheryl Misak. “Pragmatism and Deflationism.” In *New Pragmatists*, edited by Cheryl Misak. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007, 83.
49. Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*. 49–50.
50. Richard Bernstein notes how far Misak’s view constitutes a departure from Peirce. As he writes: “Misak’s reformulation of Peirce’s account of a true belief avoids any reference to a hypothetical end of inquiry or ideal conditions, but the price she pays is that we are never in a position to assert that any of our current beliefs are actually true. If we take her reformulation literally, we cannot even speak about any actual ‘true beliefs,’ because any of our current beliefs may be overturned in the future by ‘recalcitrant experience and argument’”. Richard J. Bernstein. *The Pragmatic Turn*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010, 115. Bernstein overstates matters to say that Misak’s reformulation entails that we cannot claim that our beliefs are actually true when trying to justify them, but he is correct that any belief might be overturned in the course of future experience, with the result that we can never say with certainty that we have finally reached the truth. This is exactly the position entailed by Rorty’s “neo-pragmatism”.

51. John McDowell. "Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity." In *Rorty and His Critics*, edited by Robert B. Brandom. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 118.
52. Ibid.
53. Rorty. *Truth and Progress*. 26, emphasis in original.
54. Richard Rorty. "Response to McDowell." In *Rorty and His Critics*, edited by Robert B. Brandom. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000, 125.
55. Price. "Truth as Convenient Friction". 169.
56. Ibid. 177.
57. Ibid. 179.
58. Richard Rorty. "Further Remarks." In *Naturalism and Normativity*, edited by Mario De Caro and David Macarthur. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, 255.
59. Huw Price. "Reply to Rorty's Further Remarks." In *Naturalism and Normativity*, edited by Mario De Caro and David Macarthur. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, 256.
60. Rorty. *Truth and Progress*. 50, emphasis in original.
61. Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. 176.
62. Rescher. *Realistic Pragmatism*. 64–65.
63. Robert B. Brandom. "Freedom and Constraint by Norms." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16.3 (1979): 194.
64. Rorty. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. 42.
65. Talisse, and Aikin. *The Pragmatism Reader*. 4.

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