

2021 Spinoza Lectures at the University of Amsterdam:

Fetishism, Anti-Authoritarianism, and the Second Enlightenment:

Rorty and Hegel on Representation and Reality

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Lecture One: A Rortyan Master Argument—its premises and development

Handout

“Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Whitehead's *Adventures of Ideas*, and Lovejoy's *The Great Chain Being* gave me a taste for ambitious, swooshy, *Geistesgeschichte* that I have never lost. This taste was gratified in later years by such writers as Étienne Gilson, Hans Blumenberg, and, above all, the later Heidegger. My taste for synoptic narratives has sometimes made me think that my real *metier* was intellectual history, and that I might have been better off in that discipline than in philosophy.”

pp. 5-6 of Rorty's “Intellectual Autobiography” in the Schilpp volume *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty* in the Library of Living Philosophers series (vol XXXII), edited by Randall E. Auxier and Lewis Edwin Hahn [Open Court Publishing, 2007].

Rorty claims that the original source of *foundationalism* in *epistemology* is *representationalism* in *semantics*. His argument for that in *PMN* is not clear. We might reconstruct one along the following lines:

The starting point is the Cartesian idea that if we are to understand ourselves as knowing the world by representing it, there must be *some* kind of thing that we can know *nonrepresentationally*—namely, our representings themselves. On pain of an infinite regress, knowledge of representeds mediated by representings of them must involve immediate knowledge of at least some representings. Our nonrepresentational relation to these representings will be epistemically privileged, immune to errors of misrepresentation. Next is the thought that when we ask about our knowledge of the *relation* between representings and representeds, another potential regress looms if we are obliged to think of *this* knowledge also in representational terms, that is, as mediated by representings of it. On this dimension, too, appeal to immediate, nonrepresentational access to representational relations seems necessary. Along both dimensions, the threat of an infinite regress seems to force a choice between foundationalism and skepticism, depending on whether we invoke something known immediately and nonrepresentationally, or allow that mediation by representings goes all the way down. According to such a picture, the *epistemological* choice between foundationalism and skepticism is already built deeply into the structure of the *semantic* representational model.

“I still believe most of what I wrote in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

But that book is now out of date. ...

I vaguely sensed that the trouble with analytic philosophy was that it had never advanced from Kant's eternalization of the intellectual situation of eighteenth-century Europe to Hegel's

historicism. But I had not yet made myself sufficiently familiar with the post-Hegelian European philosophers who had resisted the temptation to go ‘back to Kant’.” [ibid. 13]

When I use the term “representationalism,” I mean a particular order of semantic explanation. It starts with a notion of representational content (reference, extension) and understands proprieties of *inference* in terms of such already representationally contentful contents. Those content must accordingly be assumed to be theoretically and explanatorily intelligible antecedently to and independently of the role of representations in inference. “Representationalism” in this sense contrasts with *inferentialist* orders of semantic explanation, which begin with a notion of content understood in terms of role in reasoning, and proceed from there to explain the representational dimension of discursive content.

Fetishism is mistaking the products of our own practices and practical attitudes for features of the objective world that are what they are independent of and antecedent to those practices and attitudes.

“There is a useful analogy to be drawn between the pragmatists’ criticism of the idea that truth is a matter of correspondence to the intrinsic nature of reality and the Enlightenment’s criticism of the idea that morality is a matter of correspondence to the will of a Divine Being.

The pragmatists’ anti-representationalist account of belief is, among other things, a protest against the idea that human beings must humble themselves before something non-human, whether the Will of God or the Intrinsic Nature of Reality.”

[p. 257 of “Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 53:1 (207) (1999): 7–20, and In John R. Shook & Joseph Margolis (eds.), *A Companion to Pragmatism*. Blackwell. pp. 257-266 (2006) (My page references are to this version.) Henceforth “PAA.”]

“What Dewey most disliked about both traditional “realist” epistemology and about traditional religious beliefs is that they discourage us by telling us that somebody or something has authority over us. Both tell us that there is Something Inscrutable, something toward which we have duties, duties which have precedence over our cooperative attempts to avoid pain and obtain pleasure.” [PAA 258]

“Dewey was convinced that the romance of democracy, a romance built on the idea that the point of a human life is free cooperation with fellow humans, required a more thoroughgoing version of secularism than either Enlightenment rationalism or nineteenth-century positivism had achieved. As Dewey saw it, whole-hearted pursuit of the democratic ideal requires us to set aside *any* authority save that of a consensus of our fellow humans.” [PAA 257]

“In the end, Rorty’s adamant skepticism and anti-dogmatism are simply ways to be anti-authoritarian and irreverently anti-fetishistic. There is no supreme power that can offer an alibi, warrant, or proof for our claims and beliefs, nothing except fallible human authority. There is no

supreme authority, other than the authority of human justifications and reasons, whose only power is the power of persuasion.”

[Eduardo Mendieta, p. xvii in his Introduction to *Take Care of Freedom and the Truth will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty* [Stanford University Press, 2005].]

In its largest structure, the argument behind Rorty’s subsumption of semantic anti-*representationalism* under the banner of humanistic Enlightenment anti-*authoritarianism* consists of two moves: a Kantian appreciation of the *normative* character of *representational* relations, and a Hegelian social *pragmatism* about *normativity* in general.

One lesson that Hegel learns from Kant is that a representing is *responsible* to what it represents for assessments of its correctness, in a distinctive sense. What is represented exercises *authority* over what count as *representings* of it just in virtue of its serving as a standard they are responsible to for such assessments. This is a radical reconceptualization of the representational relations between representeds and representings as a *normative* relation of authority and responsibility.

As I want to understand Rorty’s late anti-*representationalism* as anti-*authoritarianism* argument, his long-standing *social pragmatism about normativity* comes into play because of this Hegelian *normative* understanding of representation, in terms of the authority of objective representeds over subjective representings of it. Pragmatism in this sense is the claim that normative statuses—paradigmatically responsibility or authority, commitment or entitlement—are always and everywhere features of the role something plays in social practices. Norms are creatures of our practices, instituted by our practical attitudes: how we take or treat things. Apart from their involvement in such practices, there are no *normative proprieties*, only *natural properties*.

“[P]recisely because of his historicism, Dewey was, I believe, the classical pragmatist whose work will have the greatest utility in the long term.” [PAA 260]

The final stage of pragmatism construed as anti-*authoritarianism*, as the completion of a second Enlightenment, is the result of applying social pragmatism about normativity to the ontological realm of objective beings, now themselves construed in normative terms of authority.

According to Rorty’s radicalized version of social pragmatism about norms, the very idea of objective things as exercising epistemic authority over our attitudes—underwritten by the *semantic* idea of representeds serving as normative standards for assessments of the correctness of what count as representings of them just in virtue of being responsible to them for such assessments—is deeply and irremediably confused. *All* authority is in the end communal authority. We can only genuinely be responsible to *each other*, to what we can engage with in conversation, to what we can give justifying reasons *to* and in turn demand justifying reasons *from*.

“Only in a democratic society which describes itself in pragmatist terms, one can imagine Dewey saying, is the refusal to countenance any authority save that of consensus reached by free inquiry complete.” [PAA 265]

“This is because [Dewey] was the most historically minded: the one who learned from Hegel how to tell great sweeping stories about the relation of the human present to the human past. Dewey’s stories are always stories of the progress from the need of human communities to rely on a non-human power to their realization that all they need is faith in themselves; they are stories about the substitution of fraternity for authority. His stories about history as the story of increasing freedom are stories about how we lost our sense of sin, and also our hope of another world, and gradually acquired the ability to find the same spiritual significance in cooperation between finite mortals that our ancestors had found in their relation to an immortal being.” [PAA 262]

As I am reconstructing Rorty’s argument, two of the three principal premises of his anti-authoritarian argument for global anti-representationalism and rejection of the idea of reality as the object of representation that it involves are due ultimately to Kant: the normative analysis of representational relations and the idea that genuine authority involves a correlative responsibility to be responsive to critical demands for reasons. The third pole in the tripod, social pragmatism about normative statuses such as authority and responsibility, I think of as introduced by Hegel rather than Kant.