**Pragmatism**

A fair number of scholarly contributions in recent years have done much to establish the distinctive promise of a broadly pragmatist approach to the problems of historical theory. The relationship between pragmatism and history, moreover, is not accidental: the central thread of the leading discussions in contemporary pragmatism is occupied with the problems of re-configuring the relationships between nature and culture as well as language and reason under the presumption that human mind or human cognition must be understood substantially as an artifact of historical human experience. Nevertheless, a sense of a unifying framework for the pragmatist engagement with historical theory still appears to be missing: in large part, because the classical pragmatists, despite having made a number of insightful suggestions about history, have never offered a systematically developed theory thereof.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Still, by focusing on the pragmatist approaches to specific problems pertaining to historical theory, especially the problems of historical interpretive representation, it is possible to discern some principal enabling themes within the tradition that have a distinctive bearing on thinking about history. Pragmatist conceptions of inquiry, experience, language, and learning appear to be particularly important in this regard. Similarly, it is possible to identify some central points of contention; issues that set different currents of pragmatism apart from each other, including the pivotal tension between the traditional pragmatism’s conventional naturalism and Robert Brandom’s more recent rationalist pragmatist approach.

In the course of our narrative, we will examine some of the suggestions made by the

prominent pragmatists with regard to the problem of historical representation: focusing on the relationship between the stories historians tell and their subject matter – the past. Our concern with these proposals will be less with highlighting their particular merits and demerits than with outlining the fundamental assumptions informing the spirit in which they have been advanced. It is commonly understood (among pragmatists) that to be a pragmatist is not to subscribe to some set of specific doctrines. Pragmatism as a tradition has always been "deeply contested,"[[2]](#footnote-2) with no essence,[[3]](#footnote-3) no commonly accepted doctrines,[[4]](#footnote-4) without so much (even) as a common "methodological center."[[5]](#footnote-5) Instead, pragmatist share something like a philosophical "temperament."[[6]](#footnote-6) Developing a feel for this temperament requires grasping some of the pragmatism’s guiding intuitions, concerned primarily with the problem of how situated cognition (in general) operates in the world; and one central anchoring theme in most pragmatist accounts of cognition can be traced back to C.S. Peirce’s original conception of *inquiry*.

*Inquiry*

The prevalent philosophical orientation of classical pragmatism can be described as broadly naturalistic, in two somewhat interrelated senses. First, pragmatists believed philosophy "should take direction from our best scientific understanding of the world",[[7]](#footnote-7) and took science (and reason) to be a “a *natural accomplishment* that is grounded in our problem-solving activity and the problem-solving activity of countless generations that came before us.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Secondly, pragmatists considered the exercise of reason to be, above all, an intelligent mode of *coping* with the world; and were committed, therefore, to understanding "scientific (and nonscientific) rationality as a part of our human, inevitably ethically problematic existence":[[9]](#footnote-9) transforming, over time, both our conception of what knowledge is and of what is worth knowing; altering eventually both our cognitive interests and the structure of our values. The scientific strand of pragmatist thought originates with Peirce, who wanted to replace the *seminary philosophy* with the *laboratory philosophy*[[10]](#footnote-10) by focusing on the analysis of the concrete processes of inquiry and learning.

Peirce programmatically opposed his conception of inquiry (or research) to the Cartesian rationalism of traditional philosophy. The mindset that he criticized oscillated between two equally problematic, correlative tactics: the paper doubts of philosophical scepticism and the abstract intellectual certainties of philosophical a-priorism, intended to provide the final resolution to all doubt. Neither, Peirce argued, is pertinent to the way in which we acquire scientific knowledge about the world. No doubt is worth entertaining unless we are presented with good concrete reasons for doubting; and no foundational certainties are necessary in order to provide a convincing and rational (sufficient) answer to most questions. In fact, the desire for philosophical certainty – for unassailable foundations – stems from the anxiety generated by the skeptical questioning, the legitimacy of which is itself premised on the misguided assumption that certainty (as immunity to further questioning) is required for knowledge. Within the empiricist philosophical tradition, this desire for ultimate ground often takes the form of requiring some form of an unmediated connection to the preconceptual reality (things as they are in themselves). For historical knowledge, such insistence becomes especially problematic, insofar as the actual reality historians intend to represent (i.e. the past) is quite literally always no longer there.

Formulating a more suitable conception of knowledge requires pragmatically amending our conceptions of what constitutes a legitimate doubt and what constitutes an adequate response to doubt. For example, to cast doubt on my claim that a certain manuscript dates from the thirteenth century one can cite legitimately several instances of apparently anachronistic linguistic usage. On the other hand, challenging my claim on the grounds that possibility of forgery can never be entirely ruled out is a paper doubt, unless one can adduce compelling, specific reasons for why forgery seems like an especially plausible explanation in this particular case. Notably, an appropriate doubt always indicates to us some appropriate conditions of its own resolution. Correspondingly, an appropriate response satisfies these conditions, and succeeds at putting the doubt to rest by either adducing compelling reasons of its own or by altering (perhaps even abandoning) the initial statement to reflect the force of reasons that have given rise to doubt in the first place.

Every claim to knowledge (in fact, every warranted assertion) is to be treated as a hypothesis: this is the foundational principle of Peirce’s pragmatist *semantics*. The cognitive import of my statement regarding the date of the manuscript is best understood in terms of its hypothetical inferential implications: what expectations can be rightly formed if this statement were true? To the extent that these inferential expectations match the pattern of available evidence, my hypothesis is vindicated and my assertion of the corresponding statement is justified; to the extent that it does not, it requires amendment and elaboration (potentially, in the form of additional evidence or of supplementary hypotheses). In addition, such an inferential explication of the statement’s meaning indicates further possible lines of questioning, corroboration, testing and evidence-collection. By subjecting the implications of our hypothesis to scrutiny and strategic testing, we not only increase (or decrease) our confidence in its correctness, but develop (in the process) a more accurate understanding of its meaning and scope. Amongst candidate statements, some will turn out to be largely meaningless; others, meaningful but demonstrably untenable or false. The majority will be true under some interpretations but not under others. As Peirce puts it, the "rational purport" of an expression "lies exclusively in its conceivable bearing upon the conduct of life": "if one can define accurately all conceivable experimental phenomena which the affirmation or denial of a concept could imply, one will have therein a complete definition of the concept."[[11]](#footnote-11) The content of an utterance depends on what is believed to follow from it, both logically and empirically; and by further examining its empirical and logical implications, we develop a better grasp of the sense in which this utterance can be true.

This relationship between meaning and the process of inquiry is essential to Peirce’s conception of pragmatism. The idea of rational inquiry, as a process of recurrent hypothesis formation and experimental intervention, allowed the pragmatists to escape the trap of philosophical scepticism, without invoking any privileged epistemic foundations. "Foundations," as Aikin and Talisse point out, "are neither possible nor necessary, since the complete rational reconstruction of knowledge is not an issue that arises in the use and production of knowledge."[[12]](#footnote-12) Instead of the indisputable foundations or a mythical confrontation with reality, pragmatism emphasizes, above all else, the *process* of reasoning which is *self-correcting*.[[13]](#footnote-13) What matters for knowledge is not certainty but the perpetual openness to fair criticism, captured in the attitude of pragmatist *fallibilism*. Fallibilism, the contention that any claim whatsoever – no matter how well established – can turn out to be false, that all results must be regarded as provisional and open to revision (at least in principle), makes susceptibility to questioning and contestation a productive condition of inquiry, rather than an unwelcome liability. Doubt is welcome insofar as doubt arises from within the context of inquiry itself, opening before the researcher a new set of potential problems for investigation. Doubt in other words, sustains the integrity of inquiry instead of undermining its cardinal dogmas. As Sellars once put it science is "rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once."[[14]](#footnote-14) But, in order to be self-correcting, a thought-process must be self-accountable; and in order to be open to testing, it must specify the conditions under which it can be meaningfully tested, leading us back to the pragmatist semantic conception of assertion as a hypothesis calling for the further elaboration of its implied content.

But what is it that our statements are ultimately about, what is it that they are trying to approach or approximate? The usual common answer to this question is *reality* conceptualized as some external state of affairs that our opinions and theories are intended to represent. A pragmatist, however, cannot avail herself of this option since, on the view advanced above, everything meaningful acquires its meaning within the context of inquiry: nothing that stands outside of it, self-contained and pristinely untheorized, can have meaning *for* it since, until theorized (i.e. articulated in language) it can have no determinate consequences or testable implications. Peirce’s widely-known answer to this question is that we should think of *reality* as that which is represented in the point of view theoretically posited at the limit of inquiry, to which all the responsibly conducted investigations must eventually converge. Such a final or “predestinate” opinion[[15]](#footnote-15) serves then as the goal of our inquires: as the theoretical picture the content of which our finite research efforts are aiming to partially match. There are notable problems associated with this proposal, which may nevertheless possess a considerable attraction for an historian: its immediate implication being that, although we are continuously moving *away* from the past, our inquiries may simultaneously be moving ever closer to the true reality thereof, contained in some idealized historical consensus of the future. Nonetheless, this philosophical conception of the ideal limit of investigation, which may never be actually reached and the content of which is not presently available, seems to raise more questions than it resolves.

A pragmatic qualification of this principle aids the matter considerably. First of all, reality must be thought as concrete: hence, as problem- or question- relative. There is (we believe) a real answer to the question of whether Caesar survived the persecutions of Sulla; and this does not oblige us in the least to refer to the whole of reality, as if it were a determinate entity. As Peirce puts it, “We must look forward to the explanation, not of all things, but of any given thing whatever.”[[16]](#footnote-16) But this means that some questions about reality can be settled much earlier than others; in fact, that some of them can already be considered essentially settled, unless some unexpected yet compelling reasons arise for us to reopen them. Secondly, the most important kind of convergence that we aim for is the convergence on the appropriate methods of inquiry. The purpose of all inquiries, according to Peirce, is to adopt the promising modes of reasoning, in the proportion to the “frequency with which arguments of those kinds lead to the truth.”[[17]](#footnote-17) “That which constitutes science, then, is not so much correct conclusions, as it is correct method. But the method of science itself is a scientific result. It did not spring out of the brain of a beginner; it was an historic attainment and a scientific achievement.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Learning how to reason well is the shared goal of all disciplines and branches of inquiry. Logic itself (even), on such a pragmatist view, cannot be finally reduced to a-historical a-priori reasoning: instead, it rests upon "analysis of the best methods of inquiry … that exist at a given time";[[19]](#footnote-19) and it is possible to reach a substantial agreement about appropriate methods and modes of reasoning, without reaching agreement about specific theories and results.[[20]](#footnote-20)

*Experience*

The second, *humanist* or *existentialist* strand of pragmatism focuses on the inevitable situatedness of human cognition,[[21]](#footnote-21) resonating with Richard Rorty's description of pragmatism as, above all, a "philosophy of finitude."[[22]](#footnote-22) Considered from this vantage, pragmatism can be seen as a kind of *philosophical anthropology*, interested in addressing "every philosophical issue in terms of human practices and habits – of human culture, generally speaking."[[23]](#footnote-23) Among other things, it contextualizes cognition, by highlighting the historical social, political, ethical, cultural conditions of all knowledge-production; and, in doing so, it successfully reaffirms the claim that, as finite human beings, we can entertain no *rational* alternatives to the fallible, self-correcting process of inquiry that pragmatism recommends. Such a humanist, existentialist enlargement of pragmatism can be aptly captured by considering John Dewey’s appropriation of Peirce: simultaneously concurring that the rational purport of any statement must consist in its conceivable bearing on the conduct of life, [[24]](#footnote-24) yet construing *conduct* itself in more broadly social, cultural, and historical (rather than strictly scientific or experimental) terms.

Dewey calls himself a naturalist, and his naturalism is most appropriately understood in Darwinian terms. He is deeply invested in the continuity between the natural and the cultural; and, accordingly, his analysis of culture and history often calls upon the metaphors of a natural organism adapting to its environment. In particular, Dewey tends to think of cognition as a strategy of intelligent *coping* with the surrounding world. Of course, he does not envision any kind of simplistic reduction of the cultural to the natural.[[25]](#footnote-25) In fact, he is bent on emphasizing the fact that our own way of being in the world is determined much more by the influence of cultural heredity than "organic structure and physical heredity alone."[[26]](#footnote-26) Even the way that human beings respond to their physical conditions are influenced by their cultural environment.[[27]](#footnote-27) It is natural for human beings to live culturally, in communities bound by language and tradition:[[28]](#footnote-28) and this mode of existence transforms even the basic biological functions, endowing them with new meaning.[[29]](#footnote-29) Human world, in other words, is above all a world of culture, a "dynamic system of meaning, a social memory that endures and changes historically,"[[30]](#footnote-30) determining the constitutive mental habits of its inhabitants. Because of this, many crucial aspects of our social existence can only be properly appreciated within a historical perspective.[[31]](#footnote-31) Therefore, Dewey emphatically qualifies his view as a “cultural naturalism” or a “naturalistic humanism.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

Nevertheless, the Darwinian analogy runs very deep, thoroughly informing Dewey’s central philosophical notion of *experience*. Every sentient organism has a natural propensity to integrate its immediate surroundings with a view to appropriate action or response. Subsequently, it is bound to undergo or suffer the consequences of its own behavior. “This close connection between doing and suffering or undergoing,” according to Dewey, “forms what we call experience.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

The *structuring* of experience begins with what Dewey calls an “indeterminate situation”: some existential impasse in which we feel doubt, distress, desire – in short, an impulse to change, understand, or rearrange things.[[34]](#footnote-34) The situation can be as (apparently) banal as feeling uncomfortable in a room; or as (seemingly) demanding as stumbling over some felt incongruity in an authoritative historical argument. Any attempt at gaining knowledge is thus preceded by an empirical, existential situation which has “its own organization of a direct, non-logical character.”[[35]](#footnote-35) The point of gaining knowledge, accordingly, is to transform the situation into a more satisfactory one, by discerning within it a relational structure susceptible to rational adjustment. The first step in this process requires us to convert an existential impasse (indeterminate situation) into a well-formed problem (a problematic situation). This requires a constructive analysis of the situation, an articulation of the problem’s constituent terms. For example, one might determine that the arrangement of furniture in the room impedes the air flow; or that the account we are reading is at odds with some other reliable account we might have read. Finally, we need to attempt resolving the problem on selected terms; reconceptualizing it anew whenever our progress towards the solution fails to alleviate the existential impasse. A satisfactory solution puts (provisionally) an end to our restlessness and our doubt. We decide that the wardrobe just happens to be too big for the room; or that what we took to be a matter of scholarly consensus is more properly understood to be a matter for scholarly debate.

One can see right away that experience, here, displays the characteristic structure of pragmatist inquiry which is immediately recognizable as a kind of narrative structure. We pass from doubt, to problem formulation, to resolution; from a sense of crisis, to a reflective understanding, to a rational reconstruction. When experience has run its course, it becomes (retrospectively) “an experience” – an episode of living accompanied by a sense of an aesthetic closure,[[36]](#footnote-36) a past situation from which something has been (at least implicitly) learned. History proper is distinguished, for Dewey, by the fact that, instead of dealing with isolated experiences, it concerns itself with the longer *courses* of affairs; nonetheless, the basic narrative structure of *an experience*, as a retrospectively significant episode of living, still remains fundamental to the pragmatist understanding of these longer historical stretches of social and cultural experience.

Dewey says that historical judgments are just "special instances of the reconstructive transformation of antecedent problematic subject-matter" which are formed "with *express* reference of entering integrally into the reconstitution of the very existential material which they are ultimately about."[[37]](#footnote-37) The important point about this tortured utterance is that knowledge necessarily makes a difference to that which is known. Dewey vehemently opposes the doctrine that "the ideal or aim of knowledge is to repeat or copy a prior existence";[[38]](#footnote-38) and, in the case of history, the familiar idea of (re-) presenting the past as it actually occurred.

This impossible notion that intelligent comprehension serves merely as a conduit for an uncognized reality (instead of presenting a particular rendition or an analysis thereof) is responsible (on Dewey’s view) for a covert agnosticism, which employs both sceptical doubt and anxieties about relativism as polemical tools. Meanwhile, knowledge appropriately conceived is not meant to mirror reality. Its principal concern is with problem-solving; and the products of knowledge, therefore, are inevitably (and rightly) conditioned by the terms of the problems we aim to solve. Hence, from Dewey’s perspective, there is simply no rational alternative to accepting the fact that "what we know as past may be something which has *irretrievably* undergone just the difference which knowledge makes."[[39]](#footnote-39) To be clear, the past itself is not *constructed*; but our knowledge, i.e. the stories we tell about it, are. Knowledge starts out by posing questions capable of initiating a disciplined rational investigation; and generic questions about the actuality of the past as such simply do not belong in that category.

Perhaps more controversially, Dewey often opposed the "spectator theory of knowledge"[[40]](#footnote-40) (aspiring to represent reality "as it is in itself") in the name of valorizing the *human interest* that informs and motivates our inquiries. Human interest, of course, is a much broader category than the scholarly interest or a cognitive interest. Here, the naturalist existential strain in Dewey’s pragmatism comes once again to the fore. For a pragmatist, as Robert Brandom explains, *representing* is inseparable from *intervening*, because both are conceptualized as correlative phases in the process of learning as *adaptation*.[[41]](#footnote-41) All inquiry is existentially motivated and, therefore, on top of asking whether our inquiry has adequately solved the problem it has set out to solve, we are entitled to wonder just where the resulting knowledge had gotten us, practically speaking. Knowing, as Hildebrand nicely puts it, is first and foremost concerned with “the active, strategic management of dynamic *transitions*."[[42]](#footnote-42)

Contributions to knowledge, in other words, are only useful to the extent that they constitute a successful adaptation, opening up new possibilities of development, and allowing us to move on to new problems. Whether by putting an old problem to rest or by charting a new horizon, an intellectual contribution must transform our situation for the better: on a pragmatist view, there is no point in shoring up an old truth merely because it happens to be true. The insistence on this intellectual “principle of transition” constitutes, in Dewey’s opinion, Darwin’s most important contribution to philosophy.[[43]](#footnote-43) When applied to history, it results in one of Dewey’s most renowned contentions: because past is “the past-of-the-present, and the present is the-past-of-a-future-living present”[[44]](#footnote-44) all history must necessarily written from the standpoint of the present oriented towards the future.[[45]](#footnote-45) In other words, the writing of history must be essentially *transformational*.

With this statement, of course, we are entering a somewhat dangerous territory. The idea that all cognition is inevitably situated and that the results of our inquiries are conditioned by the terms in which we choose to formulate our research problems is relatively uncontroversial. Nor is there a problem in claiming that the appropriateness of an answer is always relative to the question posed. Such a claim (importantly) does not need to imply that truth itself is relative: only that truth (abstractly conceived) is not an appropriate goal for a concrete inquiry to steer by.[[46]](#footnote-46) An outcome of an inquiry, instead, is justified in terms of a *warrant*: as in “warranted assertion” or “warranted assertability.”[[47]](#footnote-47) A warrant is not truth: it is not meant to map a target statement onto some corresponding substrate of reality. Instead it establishes a *correspondence* between a particular *inquiry* and its *target*, in terms similar to those we employ when speaking of a key answering the conditions imposed by the lock, or a satisfactory solution answering the requirements of a problem. [[48]](#footnote-48) Nor is there an insurmountable philosophical difficulty in determining what may count as an appropriate solution. Legitimate inquiries, Dewey insists, are always conducted by the *communities* of workers. Therefore, every candidate solution must be presented for testing and confirmation to the appropriate community of colleagues and experts.[[49]](#footnote-49)

The trouble starts, rather, when we try to differentiate between cognitive interests and various social and existential interests. It is important, moreover, not to mistake the actual nature of the problem. For example, we are not concerned, here, with the cases of cognitive integrity sacrificed for an ideological gain. Nor is it a problem of various social groups inadvertently misusing the results of a properly conducted historical research. What concerns us, instead, is the way in which social existential interests may be entering into the constitution of legitimate research problems in the first place. For example, consider a claim that gender is not relevant to the analysis of a certain set of social arrangements, meaning that the gender-related variables must be actively excluded from the adequate formulation of the research problems in this domain. How are we to judge the appropriateness of such assumptions? What determines, in the context of research, the legitimacy of certain social existential concerns and the illegitimacy of others? Is the answer simply to surrender every inquiry, including history, to politics?

Acknowledging this possibility may turn out to be a more responsible philosophical option than inventing an artificial strategy to avoid it. Pragmatist naturalism – with its emphasis on accommodating a wide variety of existential interests, with its problem-centered conception of inquiry, which permits alternative (possibly incompatible) conceptualizations of the same material, preferentially valorizing the transitional nature of knowledge and its transformational potential, generally seems to encourage a tendency towards an unbridled perspectivalism. The constraints it imposes on what counts as a valid perspective are those of tolerance and intellectual civility: fallibilism, perspectivalism, principled pluralism, systematic reflection on the historical social conditions of each cultural perspective’s emergence. Sacrificed potentially in this gambit is the criterial sense of responsibility administered by the established norms; mostly because norms themselves are construed as being fluid and always in the process of transition.

*Language*

Richard Rorty, the *enfant terrible* of contemporary philosophy, is generally credited with reviving an interest in pragmatism towards the close of the twentieth century, after decades of relative obscurity.[[50]](#footnote-50) While his own interpretations of the classical pragmatism have be judged, on the whole, to be misleading,[[51]](#footnote-51) Rorty’s strategy of re-casting the tradition’s enabling intuitions in a linguistic form has allowed him to bring pragmatism into conversation with the leading currents of twentieth-century philosophical thought. His linguistic pragmatism is a "pragmatism *without* experience";[[52]](#footnote-52) and although the idea of inquiry (in the form of science) is not totally absent from Rorty’s writings, its conception and role are significantly attenuated in comparison to the two positions discussed above. Situatedness of the human cognition, on the other hand, remains central; complimented by a profound interest in the generative, creative capacity of language to transform our cognitive (and practical) situation. Rorty’s literary flair and his advocacy (and endorsement) of radical interpretive strategies, including strong misreading, have largely shaped his image as a public intellectual. On the side of philosophy, his surprisingly systematic project can be understood as an attempt to combine conventional humanism with a very lean form of a scientistic naturalism common within the analytic philosophical tradition at the time. What results from this project is a *sui generis* naturalistic Darwinian conception of history and culture, substituting for Dewey’s emphasis on experience and adaptation a mechanical picture of spontaneous generation and natural selection.

While most pragmatists subscribed to some generic version of naturalism, of the sort that we have already seen (for example) in Dewey and Peirce, Rorty held to a much stronger doctrine (derived from post-Quinean analytic philosophy), which accorded unconditional primacy to causal explanation, and accepted the causal closure of the physical as its fundamental principle.[[53]](#footnote-53) Interestingly enough, Rorty’s well-known (and rather popular) critique of representation[[54]](#footnote-54) arises specifically from this source. The ultimate structure of reality is causal; the structure of our linguistic exchanges is normative; therefore, a linguistic construction cannot be *isomorphic* to a physical world. There can be no literal correspondence between our sentences and what *really* is out there; no way to provide *the* correct description of our causal dealings with the world in a way that would support the norms of our discursive practices.[[55]](#footnote-55) There is no *right* description because it is impossible to make sense of the very idea of language somehow “fitting” the world;[[56]](#footnote-56) but this should not worry us in the least: there are many different ways to *use* language to *engage* with the world in interesting and productive ways. Paradoxically, the inability to tell the *one real story*, opens up the path to doing any number of useful and fascinating things with the stories that we *can* tell. (This maneuver can be seen as an instance of the pragmatism’s general anti-sceptical strategy.)

This, of course, does not mean that language can operate without any constraint, but the constraints that it meets are contextual, causal and holistic rather than representational."[[57]](#footnote-57) “Pragmatism” says Rorty, “starts out from Darwinian naturalism – from a picture of human beings as chance products of evolution,”[[58]](#footnote-58) designating his favorite perspective on humanity as *biologistic*.[[59]](#footnote-59) Language, in the end, is a complex matter of reacting “to stimuli by emitting sentences containing marks and noises” (which the rest of us call “words”);[[60]](#footnote-60) and, as such, they can never end up being somehow “out of touch” with reality. Admittedly, some noises can help us get along much better than some others; but they do so only as strategies and tools that we use to navigate our environment, not as accurate reflections of some *real* antecedent givens. A simplified map drawn casually on a piece of paper may provide better guidance to a tourist than a detailed satellite image; an exact mirror-image of reality, meanwhile, would be no less confusing than reality itself: all that one would accomplish is a superfluous (and impossible) reproduction. Our most distinctive vocabularies, on this view, are just some of the “many forms of adaptation … of many strategies for coping.”[[61]](#footnote-61) This reduced conception of the fundamental nature of language, in Rorty’s estimate, has the special advantage of being “compatible with a bleakly mechanical description of the relation between human beings and the rest of the universe.”[[62]](#footnote-62) Simultaneously, it frees us to experiment with language and the ways that we think about its varied modes of employment: there is not much of interest to be said about language on the level of physical marks and noises after all.

The problem is that the trenchant naturalism of this sort undercuts (or appears to undercut) the very possibility of the ordinary cognitive legitimation, which requires normative resources beyond those supplied by a successfully emitted noise. Rorty locates the source of all normativity in the social, historical, cultural practice. Properly understood, justification “is not a matter of a special relation between ideas (or words) and objects, but of conversation,”[[63]](#footnote-63) – of “what society lets us say.”[[64]](#footnote-64) Our ideas of what is true, good, and right may change over time; they are not absolute, nor immutable. But, in any given present, we can have no legitimate standard to appeal to, other than our own best (current) ideas of what counts as good, right and true. Establishing one’s claims to knowledge, therefore, should be treated simply as “a matter of victory in argument,”[[65]](#footnote-65) according to the best standard of judgment available at the time. To prove my contentions about Napoleon requires convincing the pertinent experts on the basis of the standards inherent in the currently prevalent historical practice; while persistent attempts to conjure up the original subject for comparative examination would be more appropriately evaluated by the currently prevalent standards of psychiatric medicine.

Social agreement, according to Rorty, is the only relevant ground for cognitive legitimation. The difference between *knowledge* and *interpretation*, on this view, can be understood in terms of the difference between areas of discourse characterized by a strong agreement on the proper practices of inquiry (studied by epistemology), and presently contested, generally unsettled areas (addressed by hermeneutics), where no common agreed-upon standards have as yet been attained.[[66]](#footnote-66) Interpretation, then, primarily operates on the exploratory periphery of inquiry, the existence of which is, more often than not, parasitic upon the stabilized epistemological core of the “normal” discourse.[[67]](#footnote-67) An interpretation, by definition, is a biased, perspectival affair, conditioned by specific intentions. The only pertinent difference in kind, according to Rorty, is one between the interpretations where you know “what you want to get out” of the interpreted material in advance, and those where you want the material to “help you want something different.”[[68]](#footnote-68) Neither is intrinsically superior to the other. Depending on what one intends, it may be “relatively hard or relatively easy to convince yourself or others of what you were initially inclined to say.”[[69]](#footnote-69) Convincing the others remains, in the end, the decisive criterion: there is no pre-existing meaning inherent in the material itself that a successful interpretation must be answerable to. Meaning does not exist outside of a community of interlocutors; hence, an interpretation accepted as the basis of an enduring social consensus is effectively the only thing that we could possibly mean by invoking our (fallible) *knowledge*.

What is the point of encouraging exploration, of inviting alternative interpretations? To be brief, Rorty is interested primarily in the *poetic* function of language – its apparently endless capacity for improvisation, for spontaneously reshaping things by altering the ways in which we think about them. Deploying new metaphors allows us to conceive of “new ways of being human,”[[70]](#footnote-70) thereby fulfilling our obligations to the finite human self which philosophy has been studiously avoiding.[[71]](#footnote-71) Rorty wants to encourage his readers to be simultaneously historicists and nominalists:[[72]](#footnote-72) i.e. to be simultaneously aware of the radical situatedness and contingency of their own point of view, and to favor stories about specific individuals and individual occurrences over the adventures of the more abstract entities, such as species, states, cultures, and races.[[73]](#footnote-73) In this sense, his motivation to call for a ‘poeticized’ as opposed to a ‘rationalized’ or ‘scientized’[[74]](#footnote-74) culture is transparently individualistically humanistic, i.e. concerned with the different productive dimensions of the personal and the private.

The scope of Rorty’s claims should not be overstated. He thinks that poetic language can and must exist alongside the language of problem-solving, and most problem-solving “typically requires the use of familiar, traditional, literal language.”[[75]](#footnote-75) Once again, the exploratory discourse presupposes a settled discourse; and the most adventurous interpretation is obliged to take as its point of departure something that (provisionally) counts as common knowledge. Rorty just happens to be more interested in the former rather than the latter.

With respect to history, this translates into a preference for collections of “cautionary tales” or “anecdotes” over a “coherent dramatic narrative.”[[76]](#footnote-76) Rorty’s naturalism favors individuality and dispersion over unifying integration. The idea is to “keep on spinning edifying first-order narratives” to inspire personal transformation and “lift our spirits through utopian fantasy”;[[77]](#footnote-77) and engagements with the historical narratives (acquainting oneself with “some exotic culture or historical period”) stand on par with just “thinking up” some exciting new words and aims.[[78]](#footnote-78) As Ian Hacking once remarked, Rorty often appears to be more interested in stories than in actual histories.[[79]](#footnote-79) However, while the proliferation of stories is a palpable good, the unchecked proliferation of histories is less evidently so, giving rise to concerns about the appropriate criteria for the selection of worthy candidates.

Regimented selection should not pose much of a philosophical problem in the realm of well-established historical procedures and systems of facts. Innovative approaches and interpretations, on the other hand, cannot always be convincingly vindicated on the (currently shared) terms that they aim to transform. On the level of actual practice, Rorty’s answer is straightforward: which accounts win out is determined by social consensus, by “what society lets us say.”[[80]](#footnote-80) In response to the worries about the normative strength of such a de facto, potentially non-deliberative social agreement, he advises his readers to give up on the outmoded notion that some cultural proposals are intrinsically more significant than others, and that by delivering culture over to the “democratic politics” we might miss out on something conventionally designated by the usual “metaphors of centrality and depth.”[[81]](#footnote-81) Basically, we must accept the fact that what ultimately determines the staying power of the candidate accounts and vocabularies are simply the "the contingencies of some historical situation."[[82]](#footnote-82) Eventual acceptance is what makes the difference between “genius and eccentricity”; and acceptance is a matter of an “accidental coincidence” between a private perspective and a public need.[[83]](#footnote-83)

To explain this nonchalance about “a blind impress” programming our thoughts and our lives,[[84]](#footnote-84) one must turn, once again, to the naturalistic underpinnings of Rorty’s account. “Our language and our culture,” says Rorty, “are as much a contingency, as much a result of thousands of small mutations finding niches” as is the evolution of all (other) natural organisms.[[85]](#footnote-85) It is pointless to ask, whether a novel cultural proposal (say, *The Civilization of the Renaissance Italy*) was accepted for *good* *reasons* or for *purely historical* *reasons* because, from the vantage point of such a naturalist perspective, the line between these two remains always hopelessly blurred.[[86]](#footnote-86) Like all other forms of life, cultural proposals (including the works of history) advance simply in virtue of being viable (or not) under the present circumstances. Advocating the view that the “history of human social practices is continuous with the history of biological evolution,” Rorty substantially equates the role of cultural productions (*memes*, as he calls them) with Mendelian genes: [[87]](#footnote-87) they arise spontaneously, and propagate (or not) depending on the various selection pressures encountered in the cultural milieu. There are no antecedent rules for evaluating the quality of novel proposals, although it is possible to formulate plausible retrospective accounts of why a particular proposal had succeeded (or not) and to put forth some heuristic provisional recommendations for the future. Those who want something more in the way of the norms, therefore, must develop compelling philosophical tools (not reliant on the compromised notion of representation as correspondence) to contain the dispersive, centrifugal tendency of the naturalist impulse construed in selectionist terms.

*Learning*

Linguistic normativity, the rules in virtue of which our arguments and conversations can be said to possess determinable content, has been one of the central themes of Robert Brandom’s extensive philosophical oeuvre. Brandom’s proposal concerning the appropriate modality of meaning articulation – his *inferentialism* – resembles, in important and substantial ways, Peirce’s original conception of pragmatist semantics, insofar as it claims that “at least a substantial part” of the meaning of our statements is generally comprised by “their inferential role: what follows from them, what would be evidence for or against them, what they are incompatible with, and so on."[[88]](#footnote-88) Moreover, for Brandom semantics comes after pragmatics: [[89]](#footnote-89) a theory of meaning merely codifies the structures implicit in the actual use, instead of prescribing the structural norms on the basis of an a-priori logical analysis. Logic, accordingly, is not conceived by him as a study of a "distinctive kind of *formal* inference"; but becomes rather an *expressive* tool: rendering explicit the inferential patterns contained in the ordinary language statements, regimenting them in a way that clarifies their role in argumentative practice – i.e. the *game of giving and asking for reasons*.[[90]](#footnote-90)

For example, within different historical traditions the concept of “labor” may have different logical implications. One potential strategy for dealing with this problem is to argue that there must be some ideally correct definition of “labor” to which every responsible usage must conform, with deviant usages being inaccurate or misleading. Another, (favored by the inferentialist) is to interpret the different usages of “labor” as shortcuts that abbreviate significantly different reasoning strategies, resulting in potentially non-equivalent structures of inference and argumentation. The task of the logical analysis, then, no longer consists in *legislating* which uses should be intrinsically preferred over others, but in *facilitating the exchanges* within and between the perspectives by spelling out the exact entitlements and commitments incurred by deploying the different uses of the concept. From this perspective, the real question that we need to answer in considering an interlocutor’s statement concerns itself with the pattern of cognitive and argumentative responsibility that she assumes in advancing the statement as a true one (as a legitimate statement from which to draw further inferences); with similar-sounding statements often meant to have very different implications.

This raises a significant problem. To the extent that we are conversing with those who share and understand our own norms of appropriate concept application, we should experience relatively little difficulty tracking the commitments implicitly undertaken by them in the process of deploying those concepts. If we are speaking the same (conceptual) language, it becomes relatively easy to see the implications of what has already been said, enabling the interlocutors to keep each other rationally accountable for the statements made in the course of the conversation.[[91]](#footnote-91) The trouble is that our conceptual norms change: because all conceptual norms are instituted and developed in the actual process of their social, historical application.[[92]](#footnote-92) We cannot (for example) reduce our understanding of “labor” to some perennially fixed determinate content, because our understanding of labor has been changing and will continue to change, giving rise to different implications and nuances of meaning. To understand what one may be entitled to mean by “labor”, at this juncture, requires revisiting the history of our thinking about labor. The norms governing the appropriate application of concepts change historically. Brandom, of course, credits Hegel with helping him achieve a conceptual grasp of the historical process by which “concepts themselves develop in the linguistic community."[[93]](#footnote-93)

Thinking about the *change* in conceptual norms (the rules that we use in interpreting the inferential content of cognitively significant statements) forced Brandom to substantially reintegrate (into his later view) an account of *experience*, from which he had actively preferred to distance himself in his earlier work.[[94]](#footnote-94) This adjustment, in turn, brought his stance into a closer alignment with the central themes of the classical pragmatist tradition. Experience, in short, is the process through which our conceptual commitments develop over time.[[95]](#footnote-95) This understanding of experience as something that “essentially involves a principle of *motion*, of *change*, of active, practical *doing*,”[[96]](#footnote-96) enabled Brandom to reconfigure his earlier inferentialism by supplementing it with a diachronic dimension. Concepts no longer perform their inferential roles within a static network of commitments; instead, their determinate content must be understood in the light of “the functional role they play in the *process* of acquiring and revising commitments”[[97]](#footnote-97) – or, as a pragmatist would say, in the process of rational *inquiry*.

The point of thinking is not to arrive at a conceptually frozen “correct” frame of reference. Instead of construing truth as a beatific vision at the end of the process of investigation, Brandom proposes to understand it as an essential property of all rational self-correcting experience, of “truth process,” [[98]](#footnote-98) which secures its warrant through the promise of continuing progress or improvement: in response to experienced friction, experienced discord, of error calling for correction or amendment. Peirce once observed that "all knowledge begins by the discovery that there has been an erroneous expectation;"[[99]](#footnote-99) and Brandom’s revised conception of experience as a vehicle of truth only calls for one *given*: namely, the *possibility of error* – of frustrated expectations and mutually incompatible commitments capable (potentially) of setting a new chapter of inquiry into motion.

The resulting proximity to the classical pragmatist conceptions of experience does not escape his notice. In fact, Brandom compliments the pragmatists on developing the conception of experience that is “situated, embodied, transactional, and structured as *learning*, a process rather than a state or an episode.”[[100]](#footnote-100) However, as we have already seen, the pragmatist emphasis on experience, transitionality, and experimentation tends to generate a threat of (prolific) conceptual scatter, wherein the familiar meaning of concepts and the norms governing their applicability may mutate unpredictably (and potentially, unaccountably) in response to the changing existential pressures and interests (as with Dewey) or inventive linguistic shifts of poetic imagination (as with Rorty).

Such conceptual fissures, resulting in lasting doxastic gaps, may appear to threaten the stability of mutual comprehension and epistemic accountability. To return to our previous example, there is a danger that our conceptions of labor may have come to vary so widely that we can no longer be sure whether we are talking about the same thing. The problem, as Brandom explains, is not one of *representation* (“whose picture can mirror the past better?”) but one of *reference* – “are we not simply talking at cross-purposes due to some irreconcilable differences between our conceptual perspectives?”[[101]](#footnote-101) Can we, in speaking about history (among other things), ever get beyond a collection of interesting variations on some loosely shared themes? Can we integrate (and to what extent) the productions of different theoretical/conceptual perspectives?

Brandom’s *rationalist pragmatism* can be seen as an attempt to contain through *recollection* the conceptual dispersion potentially generated by the more conventional pragmatist naturalism.[[102]](#footnote-102) The latter emphasizes the *continuity* between ourselves and other naturally evolved organisms,[[103]](#footnote-103) stressing the common, shared aspects of experiencing and coping, treating the distinguishing features of human linguistic intelligence “as aspects of the *natural history* of a certain kind of being.”[[104]](#footnote-104) Brandom’s rationalism, on the other hand, focuses on what *separates* the sapient beings from other creatures,[[105]](#footnote-105) foregrounding the *discontinuity* between animal intelligence and the dramatically increased scope of the human cognitive powers.[[106]](#footnote-106) Both animals and humans (of course) possess intelligence; only humans (as far as we know) possess language; and what interests Brandom about human language, primarily, is the special kind of (discursive) intelligence that it gives rise to. This intelligence, which brings about the practices of “drawing conclusions and offering justifications,”[[107]](#footnote-107) raises us “above the indistinct realm of mere tradition, of evolution according to the results of the thoughtless jostling of the habitual and the fortuitous,” and allows us to “enter the comparatively well-lit discursive marketplace, where reasons are sought and proffered."[[108]](#footnote-108) In fact, rationality itself is understood by Brandom not as mere intelligence but, rather, as a distinctive discursive capacity to assume the responsibility for one’s commitments, including the responsibility, when challenged, to defend them by offering reasons and justifications.[[109]](#footnote-109)

Rational responsiveness to reasoned criticism presupposes an awareness of the fact that our beliefs and commitments cannot stand on their own: that they are caught in the web of inferential entailments, characterized by a certain degree of interconnectedness and unity. This idea is reflected in Brandom’s contention that the (Kantian) norms of rationality, when explicitly acknowledged become “the norms of *systematicity*.”[[110]](#footnote-110) Questioning a particular rational commitment requires activating (and potentially revising) a number of inferentially connected (e.g. supportive) beliefs *because* our belief-systems exhibit a certain degree of systematicity, preventing us from assuming (or giving up) individual commitments at will. To be rational (in this sense) is to be answerable (to some extent) to the demands of consistency. In social, as opposed to logical, contexts our statements are not answerable (abstractly) to other statements; instead, we are answerable *for* our statements *to* other qualified interlocutors, who may or may not endorse our supporting reasoning. The problem is that what counts as good reasoning and justification in a social context can (even must) change over time, introducing an urgent need for a new type or strategy for systematic integration of rational commitments.

Brandom draws his inspiration, on this score, from Hegel who (on his reading) succeeds in re-interpreting the relationships of rational integration in terms of the relationships of *reciprocal recognition* embedded within an *historical* *developmental structure*.[[111]](#footnote-111) The point can be explained by considering the pragmatic structure of judgment exemplified in the practice of of *common law*.[[112]](#footnote-112) Here, one’s own interpretation or application of a particular norm is justified by the appeal to the *precedent* set by the previous interpretations of this norm that one regards as authoritative. These authoritative interpretations, retrospectively re-collected, constitute a *tradition*, the authority of which one aims to inherit, and by implicit standards of which one is henceforth prepared to be judged. A tradition, of course, cannot judge: therefore, in subscribing to a tradition, one agrees to accept the judgment (concerning the adequacy of one’s own construal of it) passed by the present and future competent interpreters subscribing to the same tradition. For example, in appealing to Marx in order to justify a particular use of the concept of “labor,” an historian simultaneously claims to inherit the authority inherent in the tradition of Marxist analysis, and submits her own work (or this aspect thereof) to the judgment of experts (present and future) who are working in the Marxist tradition. This, according to Brandom accomplishes "a kind of synthesis by rational integration."[[113]](#footnote-113)

What is more interesting, perhaps, is the actual form of this integrative synthesis: *recollecting* a tradition,[[114]](#footnote-114) according to Brandom, always calls for establishing an *expressively progressive* trajectory:[[115]](#footnote-115) re-connecting and re-aligning the materials recalled with our present best understanding of the relevant subject-matter. Recollection, in other words, is a kind of selective *reconstruction* of a tradition which presents the earlier (authoritative) commitments regarding the issues of concern as attempts at a progressive approximation to how things are understood to be (in the light of this tradition) at present. For example, we would read what Marx actually had to say about labor from the standpoint of what we presently believe he should have said (in the light of the subsequent interpretations and developments of his view). We regard his own commitments as a step towards the disclosure of some truth which we may now be in a better position to discern. The resulting narratives do not claim to offer an accurate historical account of the tradition, but proceed philosophically by tracing the development of the rationally binding elements implicit in the tradition’s historical growth. They picture the past of a tradition as a “cumulative, monotonic process of revelation” – the form characteristic of “triumphalist textbook historiesof science and mathematics."[[116]](#footnote-116) “False starts and wrong turns” are only included insofar as something of a positive (progressive) value has been learned from them.[[117]](#footnote-117)

What exactly is accomplished by deploying this type of an admittedly selective (and biased) recollection strategy? To begin with, it allows us to rationalize past experiences, by contextualizing them as significant contributions to an on-going inquiry, that can retrospectively be seen to display a general structure characteristic of the rational process of *learning*,[[118]](#footnote-118) with our grasp of the pertinent issues within a research tradition improving gradually over time. This learning process, moreover, appears to be comparatively systematic: resulting from the socially and institutionally structured transmission of cognitive authority which retains its principled openness torational correction. Recollection, here, also functions as a form of justification: in retracing the trajectory along which our present commitments could be seen as a rational development of (and improvement upon) the corresponding commitments of our predecessors, we foreground the decisive considerations affecting the formation of our own present theories while exhibiting them as results of a rational learning process.

Simultaneously, this historical narrative strategy tends to stabilize the referents of our theories, giving rise to a sense of a substantially shared subject matter despite the differences in perspective. From the viewpoint of learning, claiming to understand another (say, an earlier) perspective requires presupposing that the commitments of our predecessors capture something (some true aspect) of the reality (or phenomenon) that we presently have in mind. Learning something from an ancient text about the planetary motion is not possible unless the position presented therein can be meaningfully related to what we now know about the planetary motion. We cannot learn about planetary motion from a text that contains nothing but sheer nonsense on the subject or a text wherein the relevant conception of planetary motion bears no relationship whatsoever to our own. We learn about a common subject matter by partially mapping the commitments of the others onto our own commitments.

In determining representational content, Brandom explains, we are basically determining what the speaker's comments would be true of, if they were true.[[119]](#footnote-119) In this sense, one “treats one's currently endorsed conceptions and commitments as presenting the reality behind prior appearances,[[120]](#footnote-120) as pointing most promisingly to the subject-matter that has been driving the discussion all along. However, a mere assertive privileging of our own terms of discussion does not tell us *what* we have learned or *that* we have learned. What an ancient text tells us is not merely a fragment of our present understanding intertwined with misconceptions, fantasies, and lies. It is part and parcel of a different system of beliefs, of a different inferential network, sanctioning patterns of reasoning potentially very different from our own. Hence, the real task of a recollective understanding becomes threefold: to establish the plausibility of claiming that the text has a bearing on the subject-matter at hand by demonstrating how some of its substantial commitments (on the matter) emerge as relevant and insightful by our own lights; to form an appreciation of the differences in perspective by identifying and analyzing the divergent inferential commitments between our own perspective and that of the text; to retrace the historical sequence of experiences, arguments, amendments whereby the text’s perspective has eventually been displaced (for good reasons) with perspectives featuring the inferential commitment structure closer to our own. Completing this task amounts to situating the cognitive contribution of the text within our history of learning about the subject.

A procedure of this sort can be easily misinterpreted by those in the grip of the old representationalist paradigm. Because we employ our own present understanding – our own sense of how matters stand and what judgments are applicable – to calibrate the contributions of the earlier (or alternative) perspectives, it is tempting to conclude that we must thereby assume a substantial correspondence between our own present conception of things and the way something really is “out there” (for example, some scene in the past). But the real claim of a recollective history of learning is somewhat different: namely, that we now have a better understanding of what it is that we have been discussing all along. Mapping out the differences between earlier influential perspectives, finding ways to integrate them into a rationalized story terminating in our presently favored conception of the subject does not bring us face to face with the ineffable: on the contrary, it foregrounds the discursive pivots on which the discussion has turned thus far: its decisive transitions, its defining points of contention. To develop an understanding of *colonialism* is not to witness it or to capture it on a video. Grasping the historical significance of the Spanish *tercio* is not aided dramatically by examining a superbly drawn picture of grunts with pikes. What we need to pay attention to, instead, are the terms in which these phenomena have been discussed; especially when these terms have been contested; especially when our discussions underwent important transformations as a result. This is how we learn what is important, and what is at stake. It is a question of developing a particular form of historical self-consciousness; not a liberating confrontation with the thought-independent externality.

*Conclusion*

From a philosophical point of view, every one of the pragmatist positions discussed above raises serious questions and problems, is provocative and controversial. Within pragmatist community itself, there are on-going vigorous debates regarding the advantages and shortcomings of both the original proposals and the various hybrid configurations of the pragmatist commitments derived from them. Yet, at least from the perspective of historical theory, there is one guiding thread that emerges ascendant in the recent discussions: the relationship between pragmatism’s conventional naturalism and the novel claims of the rationalist pragmatism promulgated by Brandom. Both conceive of knowledge and truth within the perspective of inquiry; both are intimately concerned with the question of how reason and cognition operate under the condition of concrete historicity.

However, the naturalist strand favors inspiration, improvisation, redirection, even splintering of inquiry. It is more concerned with productivity and invention than with the consolidation and transmission of cognitive authority. It is more invested in the transformational capacities of interpretation than the continuity of historical tradition. Its preferred themes are those of experience, experiment, and poetic uses of language. Naturalist pragmatism is anthropologically, existentially oriented towards the conception of intelligence as a means of intelligent coping with the world; and, in that sense, it would always insist that “the space of reasons” must always be placed within the space of a *form* of life.[[121]](#footnote-121) With respect to the stories we tell and theories we form, it would privilege interest and relevance over systematicity and continuity, using fluency rather than logical clarity and rigor as the criterion of proficiency and success.[[122]](#footnote-122) Rationalist pragmatism, on the other hand, insists on the centrality of the possibility of systematic learning to accounting both for the progress of the species, and the cumulative sense of continuously developing proficiency in the major branches of inquiry (including history). Here, systematic articulation – logic rather than metaphor – has the pride of place. Here, the interest in structure prevails over the naturalist interest in plasticity.

We should not be in a rush, perhaps, to construe these as mutually exclusive alternatives. The possibility of (a more or less systematic) learning is fundamental to the pragmatist conception of inquiry. And logical inferential articulation is fundamental to the notion of systematicity. At the same time, recent studies in philosophy of science show that science is usually more concerned with *opportunities* for extending knowledge than with *systematic representation*,[[123]](#footnote-123) suggesting an urgent need for a naturalistic amendment to philosophy’s rationalist pretensions. Plasticity may be no less important to knowledge than a sense of an enduring structure and, of course, the distinguishing features of naturalist pragmatism have been its “flexibility and adaptability.”[[124]](#footnote-124) Hence, a pragmatist may continue to favor natural language over logic as the privileged instrument of cognitive exploration, simply because it can be so “distinctly and conveniently flexible.”[[125]](#footnote-125)

It is worth reminding ourselves, in this regard, that despite his advocacy of recollective integration (exhibiting the past history as a history of learning) Brandom is a pluralist about the creation and co-existence of such histories. The shortcomings and biases of every recollective story can be overcome only by "telling of *more* such stories":[[126]](#footnote-126) instead of attempting to vindicate one tradition, one history, one perspective, we need to learn “to *navigate* and *negotiate* between different perspectives."[[127]](#footnote-127) William James once observed that *rationalism* amounts to a preference for monistic unities, while pragmatist empiricism inclines towards pluralism.[[128]](#footnote-128) The point, said James, was not to deny that unity exists but to accept instead “the legitimacy of the notion of *some*”: some unity, some order, in certain regions; but not everywhere the same and always.[[129]](#footnote-129) Brandom apparently believes he can pay his dues to the notion of “some” by demanding a rational (inferential) integration within each perspective, tradition, or a line of thought, while conceding that there need not be any plausible strategy for a unifying integration in the space *between* different stories, perspectives, and traditions.

Richard Rorty contended that in a culture which replaced the idea of eternal forms with that of the of man-made concepts, history (rather than literature or science) would be at the center of intellectual life."[[130]](#footnote-130) Yet, such history, conceived as a conversation with "the accumulated experience of the species,” on Rorty’s view, could not take the form a “of quasi-scientific inquiry”: it could not be conducted “systematically or rigorously."[[131]](#footnote-131) Rationalist pragmatism is meant to question this latter point; cultural naturalism, to find the resources to productively cope with its acceptance. It may not be implausible to suggest that pragmatism, in the near future, may derive its sense of direction by attempting to find a balance between these alternatives. Pragmatism, thus understood, would be generally preoccupied with the problem of a proper conceptual economy: the right trade-offs between the sense of a rational authority and expressive initiative or experimentation; between the transmission of authority and its subversion and displacement. In other words, it would encourage us to see justification and invention as coordinate species, instead of mutually exclusive options.

1. Joseph Margolis, "Pragmatism and Historicity," *Journal of the Philosophy of History, 13* (2019): 302-324, at pp. 307-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Michael Bacon, *Pragmatism: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), vii; cf. Albert Spencer, *American Pragmatism: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), viii [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sami Pihlström, "Introduction," in Sami Pihlström (ed.), *The Bloomsbury Companion to Pragmatism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 3-36, at p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Robert Talisse & Scott Aikin, *Pragmatism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Joseph Margolis, *Reinventing Pragmatism: American Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This sense of naturalism is outlined nicely in Joseph Rouse, *Articulating the World: Conceptual Understanding and the Scientific Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 27-28 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cornelis de Waal, *Peirce: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 54. *Italics are mine.* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Pihlström, "Introduction," 8 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. CP 1.129. References to Peirce follow the standard scholarly format: CP for Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce,* eds. Hartshorne, Weiss and Burks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932-1958), and EP2 for Charles S. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce, Volume 2: Selected Philosophical Writings: 1893-1913* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. EP2, 332. Experimental phenomena for Peirce are not restricted to empirical phenomena. There are, for example, mathematical and (by extension) logical phenomena. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Talisse & Aikin, 27 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Christopher Hookway, “’The Principle of Peirce’ and the Origins of Pragmatism” in Alan Malachowski, *The Cambridge Companion to Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 17-35, at p. 22 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 79 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. CP 5.407 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. CP 1.405 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. EP2, 76 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. CP 6.428 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1938), 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For a more detailed, contextually and textually sensitive version of the view presented see S. Grigoriev, “Hypotheses, Generalizations, and Convergence: Some Peircean Themes in the Study of History,” *History and Theory*, 56 (2017): 339-361 and “Normativity and Reality in Peirce’s Thought,” *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy,* 6 (2014): 88-106. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Russell Goodman, *American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990),p. 128 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Rorty, *Philosophy as Poetry (Page-Barbour Lectures of 2004)* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 57 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Sami Pihlström, "New Directions" in *Bloomsbury Companion*, 238-254, at p. 254 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. LW 2.4. References to the *Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953* are given as EW for *Early Works: 1882-1898*, MW for *Middle Works: 1899-1924*, and LW for *Late Works: 1925-1953* [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Dewey, *Logic*, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 42 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid. 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid. 57 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Thomas Alexander, "Dewey, Dualism, and Naturalism" in Joseph Margolis and John Shook, *A Companion to Pragmatism* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 184-192, at p. 191 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Dewey, *Logic*, 501. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. LW 12.28 and LW 1.10 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1920), 86 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Dewey, *Logic*, 107 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. MW 10.323 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. LW 10.42 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Dewey, *Logic*, 492 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. MW 4.134 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. MW 4.128 [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. LW 4.19 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Robert Brandom, *Perspectives on Pragmatism: Classical, Recent, and Contemporary* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. David Hildebrand, "Dewey's Pragmatism: Instrumentalism and Meliorism" in *Cambridge* Companion, 55-80, at p.57 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. MW 4.7 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Dewey, *Logic*, 238 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. ibid, 235 [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Cf. Bacon, *Pragmatism*, 90 [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. LW 12.11 and LW 12.15 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. LW 14.179 [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. LW 5.115 [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. See Margolis, *Reinventing*, 2; also, A. Malachowski, “Introduction: The Pragmatist Orientation” in *Cambridge Companion*, 1-13, at p. 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. See Hildebrand, "Dewey's Pragmatism," 76; also, Alan Malachowski, "Imagination over Truth: Rorty's Contribution to Pragmatism," in *Cambridge* Companion, 207-228, 207 [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Richard Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 128 [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Margolis, *Reinventing*, 6-7 [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Michael Bacon (p. 96) correctly identifies anti-representationalism as the trade-mark of Rorty ‘s pragmatism. Rorty’s argument also score resonated significantly with what came to be known as the "crisis of representation" in historiography. See Robert Berkhofer, *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge, MA; Belknap Press, 1997), 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. See Robert Brandom, “Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesizing Naturalism and Historicism,” in *Rorty and His Critics*,ed. Robert Brandom, 156-183 (Blackwell: Oxford, 2000), 161 [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 28 [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Malachowski, "Imagination,” 220 [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Richard Rorty, “Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism,” in Chantal Mouffe, *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (London: Routledge, 1996), 13-18, at p. 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), xxxii [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid., 139 [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Rorty, *Contingency*, 35. Rorty uses the vocabularies of Kant and Nietzsche as his examples [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Ibid., 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 170 [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Ibid., 174 [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Ibid., 156-7 [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Rorty, *Mirror*, 321 [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Ibid. 365 [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Rorty, *Social Hope*, 145 [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Ibid., 142 [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Richard Rorty, “Response to Richard Shusterman” in Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson, *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues* (MA: Polity Press, 2001), 153-7, at p. 154 [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 188 [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Rorty, *Contingency*, xv & 74 [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Rorty, *Contingency*, 101 [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Ibid., 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Rorty, “Response,” 153 [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 240-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 212 [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Rorty, *Mirror*, 360 [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Rorty, *Mirror*, 174 [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. R. Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers, Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 132-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Rorty, Contingency, 37 [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Ibid., 29 & 37 [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Ibid., 35 [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Ibid., 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Ibid., 48-9 [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Rorty, *Truth*, 206 (see also p. 191) [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Robert Brandom, *A Spirit of Trust: A Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2019), 308 [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Brandom, *Perspectives*, 3; cf. Brandom, *Spirit*, 674 [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 11 & 30. Brandom’s inferentialism is concerned with *material* (rather than *logical*) inference, i.e. with a defeasible kind of inference that holds (ceteris paribus) *in practice*. Brandom's example is "If I let loose of the leash, the dog will chase the cat – but not if either one is struck by lightning, a bear suddenly blocks the way," etc. (Robert Brandom, *From Empiricism to Expressivism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 192). In technical vocabulary such inferences are called *non-monotonic* [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. This is the scenario with which Brandom was primarily preoccupied in *Making it Explicit*: focusing on how the linguistic practitioners keep track of the conceptual commitments incurred within a conversation, while taking for granted the (shared) determinateness of the conceptual content. See, Brandom, *Spirit*, 766 [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Brandom, *Spirit*, 638 [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Robert Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 31 [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. "'Experience' is not one of my words," he declared, "I did not find it necessary to use it in the many pages of *Making it Explicit*" (Brandom, *Articulating*, 205 fn. 7) [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Robert Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2009), 99 [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Brandom, *Spirit*, 84 [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Brandom, *Spirit*, 80 [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Brandom, *Spirit*, 102 [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. CP 7.188 [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Brandom, *Perspectives*, 53 [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. See Brandom, *Articulating*, 167 [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Brandom cheerfully admits that Dewey would have considered *rationalist pragmatism* a "*contradictio in adjecto*” (Robert Brandom, "From German Idealism to American Pragmatism – and Back," in *Kant und die Philosophie in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 107-126, at p. 124). [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Brandom, “German,” 121 [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Brandom, *Articulating*, 117. Italics are mine [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Ibid., 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Brandom, “German,” 123 [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Brandom, *Articulating*, 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Ibid., 153 [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Ibid., 80 [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Brandom, *Spirit*, 68 [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Brandom, *Reason*, 66 & 81 [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Ibid., 85 [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. *Recollection* is Brandom’s way of rendering Hegel’s *Erinnerung* [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Brandom, *Tales*, 48 [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Brandom (unapologetically) uses the term *Whiggish histories*; *Spirit*, 438 [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Ibid., 685 [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Ibid., 680 [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Brandom, *Articulating*, 182 [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Brandom, *Spirit*, 437 [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. Joseph Margolis, *Three Paradoxes of Personhood: the Venetian Lectures* (Milan: Mimesis International, 2017), 61 [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Ibid., 51 [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Rouse, *Articulating*, 15 & 28 [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Brandom, *Perspectives*, 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Margolis, *Paradoxes*, 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Brandom, *Tales*, 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Brandom, *Tales*, 109 [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1909), 7-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Ibid., 79 [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Rorty, *Philosophy as Poetry*, 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Rorty, *Philosophy as Poetry*, 60. Italics are mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)