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A Trilemma for Voparil

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Abstract

This short review raises a trilemma for Chris Voparil's reading of Richard Rorty. Voparil must deny one of three things. He must deny that Rorty affirmed a Jamesian approach to metaethics; he must deny that Rorty affirmed a version of Peircean realism; or, he must deny that Rorty treated all domains of discourse roughly the same. Because Rorty is quite clear in his commitment to the first and third theses and far less clear in affirming Peircean realism, I argue that Voparil is forced to give up attributing realism to Rorty or must simply concede that his version of Rorty is incoherent.

Keywords

Metaethics – realism – Richard Rorty – Charles Sanders Peirce – William James

Chris Voparil's *Reconstructing Pragmatism* is an impressive work with an important agenda. The book is impressive not just because of its penetrating analysis of Richard Rorty and painstaking scholarship on the early Rorty, but also because Voparil displays an enviable facility with each of the five classical figures surveyed in the book, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, Josiah Royce, and Jane Addams. Though my contribution here lies in raising a problem for Voparil, I am happy to confess that the world is so much richer for his contribution to our knowledge of Richard Rorty. If, as Voparil insists, the world "still awaits a full definitive intellectual biography" of Rorty (Voparil 2022, 5), his book is arguably the next best thing.

The ambitions of the book are several, and they can be characterized in a variety of ways, but, as I read him, Voparil has two primary aims, both of which are about bridge-building across, between, and among diverse communities of scholars. First and foremost, he seeks to show devotees of classical pragmatism

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that Rorty is not their enemy. Second and somewhat secondarily, Voparil has a message for "those who discovered pragmatism because of Rorty" (Voparil 2022, 2), and that message is that such scholars have "a strong motive to delve deeply into the classical figures" (Voparil 2022, 2). As a person in that second camp – a reader of Rorty who spends little time with most of the classical pragmatists – I felt duly chastised in reading *Reconstructing Pragmatism*. But like a Platonic wrongdoer, I was very happy to be corrected. The book did much to deepen my knowledge of Rorty's relation to the classical pragmatists, and I feel less dismissive of thinkers like Peirce and a little more willing to extend olive branches to contemporary Peirce scholars.

Even though the book was an edifying piece of scholarship that very well may effect the changes sought, I do want to raise a problem for the interpretation of Rorty in *Reconstructing Pragmatism*. The site of the problem lies in situating Rorty in conversations about the nature of ethics. This has been the primary focus of my own exegetical work on Rorty,[1] and it has been a central concern in my attempts to develop a Rortyan metaethics.[2]

The problem can be summed up simply: the following three propositions are in tension.

(A) Ethics is no different from other domains of discourse like science.
(B) Peircean realism is the correct view of reality.
(C) Jamesian ethics is the correct view of ethics.

Claim (A) is something that Rorty expresses in many places in his work. As he said in an early essay, "there is no epistemological difference between truth about what ought to be and truth about what is, nor any metaphysical difference between facts and values, nor any methodological difference between morality and science."[3] Claims (B) and (C) are attributed to Rorty by Voparil. Chapter 1 of *Reconstructing Pragmatism* argues that Rorty espoused (B),[4] while Chapter 2 argues he espoused (C). My first aim is to explain why (A), (B), and (C) are mutually inconsistent. If I succeed on that score, Voparil has four options – but really only three since one is a non-starter. Voparil *could* just say that Rorty's mature view is inconsistent, but that, I take it, is a non-starter. The live options are the following. First, he could deny that Rorty affirmed (A), an

1 See, Raff Donelson, "Rorty's Promise in Metaethics," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 14:3 (2017): 292–306; Raff Donelson, "The Rorty-Dworkin Debate," in *The Ethics, Epistemology, and Politics of Richard Rorty*, ed. Giancarlo Marchetti (New York: Routledge, 2022), 50–63.

2 See, Raff Donelson, "Ethical Pragmatism," *Metaphilosophy* 48:4 (2017): 383–403.

3 Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism," in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1982), p. 163.

4 Voparil's interpretive claim is not just that Rorty espoused (B) at some point. As Voparil explicitly writes, "there is a sense in which Rorty's Peircean realism … remained throughout his career" (Voparil 2022, 71).

obvious move since the book does not spend much time linking (A) to Rorty. Second, Voparil could revise his interpretation of Rorty and forswear claiming that Rorty espoused (B). Third and finally, he could change his interpretation and deny that Rorty held (C). As I explain below, it seems most reasonable to read Rorty as not affirming claim (B).

To see the tension, first I must do some work to clarify the three propositions. (A) is most in need of clarification. At its simplest, claim (A) contends that our ability to make true statements, to have knowledge, to make progress is no less in ethics than in, say, chemistry. Also, in propounding (A), one thinks that the ground rules for conducting ethical inquiry are no different than the ground rules for other fields. Rorty, in particular, makes just this sort of insistence in the face of folks like Simon Blackburn who think that an ordinary kind of realism is appropriate for non-normative discourse, but quasi-realism is needed for normative discourse.[5] Rorty makes this kind of insistence in the face of folks like J. L. Mackie who think that normative claims cannot be true in the way that claims of our best science are (approximately) true.[6] Rorty denies these sorts of claims. Ethics for him is no different than science. Of course, there is a small proviso, one sense in which ethics is different than science: for Rorty, ethics is a sort of first philosophy. All inquiries are ultimately practical; they ultimately concern how we should live and what helps us best to cope with our environment. This claim is not important for our purposes, but I mention it just to avoid misunderstanding.

Having given a deeper characterization of (A), now I turn to discussing (B), the proposition about Peircean realism. To understand this proposition, first we must better understand realism, and then we might understand the Peircean variant thereof. According to Voparil, realism in some domain of discourse entails two claims, "the claim that things or objects in the world… exist

5 Rorty says that those who draw such lines make an "invidious distinction." See Richard Rorty, "Introduction," in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1982), p. xvi. Robert Kraut identifies Rortyan pragmatism as resisting "the bifurcation of language into descriptive and expressive components" that is assumed by Blackburn's quasi-realism program. After bifurcating language, Blackburn and others take it upon themselves to distinguish "which of our well-formed declarative sentences have truth conditions and which ones, though meaningful, are simply the manifestations of attitudes or the expressions of 'stances.'" Robert Kraut, "Varieties of Pragmatism," *Mind* 99 (1990), pp. 157, 158. Huw Price, a pragmatist influenced by Rorty, also finds fault with Blackburn's bifurcation thesis. Huw Price, *Expressivism, Pragmatism and Representationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) pp. 30–31.

6 Rorty, ventriloquizing Donald Davidson, finds fault with Mackie's error-theoretical project in "Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry? Donald Davidson versus Crispin Wright," in *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 30.

and have identifiable properties" (Voparil 2022, 44) and the claim that "these objects and their properties are what they are independently of anything we may believe or perceive about them" (Voparil 2022, 44). Peirce's realism is distinct in that he maintains that the world does not come "carved at the joints"[7] or individuated. As Voparil reads Peirce, "knowledge is in some sense perspectival, dependent upon contingent conceptual and interpretive structures, and pluralistic – only one among many or even an indefinite array of possible structures" (Voparil 2022, 65). To state the view succinctly then, Peircean realism holds that there is mind-independent world, but the contours of that world are made by us and our conceptualizations.

Finally, I turn to (C). There are many facets of what I call, following Voparil, *Jamesian ethics*.[8] One component of the view concerns how to conceive of ethical decision-making. On this view, in making ethical decisions, we are trying to make *good* decisions, but a good decision does not consist in matching some preexisting moral reality. To think that it did consist in that would be to embrace what Rorty and Rorty scholars call *authoritarianism*, the idea that there is a "higher authority to which we owe responsibility than our fellow humans" (Voparil 2022, 108). Instead of the authoritarian route, the proponent of Jamesian ethics contends that something is a good decision insofar as it lives up to the criteria that we, as an inquiring community, make and remake over time by listening to one another. Though justification is, in a certain sense, social, the community as a whole is ideally fallibilist, not because we think our judgments could fail to correspond to preexisting moral reality, but because it is ideally part of our *ethos*. Our ethos is to hold ethical commitments[9] while remaining open, open to "the meanings and experiences of others" (Voparil 2022, 119), open to the possibility that we will later find better arguments that license or prohibit different things. Insofar as the Jamesian abandons the search for some preexisting moral reality, one might call this view *subjectivist*, as Voparil notes at one juncture (Voparil 2022, 130). Jamesian ethics is best understood, however, as operating outside of the objectivist-subjectivist debate. The objectivist thinks that moral judgments are right so long as they have the right relationship with external moral objects, and the subjectivist thinks that moral judgments are right so long as they are licensed (in the right way) by a moral

7 This commonly used phrase appears to have originated in Plato. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 265e.

8 I make no representation about the foregoing as an interpretation of William James. In this paragraph, I spell out the view that Voparil attributes to Rorty, drawing on Voparil's comments as well as my own expository work on Rorty's ethics.

9 As Voparil writes, "both James and Rorty so deep moral commitments as possible amid contingency and human transition or growth" (2022, 115).

subject. The Jamesian view, on my read, ignores both of those, for both of them are authoritarian. Both alternatives seek to underwrite our moral inquiry, but that project is misguided.[10] Of course, in rejecting the project that objectivists and subjectivists share, the Jamesian needs no commitments about the underlying metaphysics. Maybe there is the Form of the Good as the objectivist Plato would tell us; maybe the for-itself creates value as the subjectivist Sartre would tell us.[11] But there is no reason to investigate, even if we could.

With all of this exposition set forth, I can state the inconsistency between (A), (B), and (C) rather succinctly. If one is a Peircean realist and if one is committed to the idea that ethics is a domain of discourse that works much like everything else, one would have to positively *affirm* that there is a moral reality out there. Such an affirmation, however, is flatly inconsistent with the kind of quietism and anti-authoritarianism associated with (C). If this much is so, there is a problem attributing (A), (B), and (C) to Rorty as his mature view. What can Voparil do about this?

The obvious and obviously unsatisfactory answer is accepting that Rorty was in contradiction. That answer should be accepted as a last resort. Voparil and I both think that Rorty offers something rich for contemporary pragmatists and pragmatism-friendly philosophers to consider, so it would be great if, on the best interpretation, Rorty's thought is not plagued by irreconcilable inconsistency.

The next strategy is to deny that Rorty affirms (A). In reading the book, Voparil does not place much emphasis on showing that Rorty held (A),[12] so perhaps he would be willing to part with it. As a substantive matter, I find (A) pretty implausible,[13] but as an interpretive matter, this is a bedrock commitment for Rorty. Stressing the parity between ethics and science, Rorty writes that his pragmatism "sees ethics as neither more 'relative' or 'subjective' than scientific theory, nor as needing to be made 'scientific.'"[14] As various commentators make clear, there is no bifurcation thesis in Rortyan thought, no

10 Donelson, "Ethical Pragmatism," p. 399.

11 As Sartre puts it, "the moral agent … is *the being by whom values exist*." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes. (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), p. 797.

12 Although, Voparil does quote Rorty saying, "On my view, 'ought'-statements about cruelty are true in exactly the same way as 'is'-statements about gravity" (Voparil 2022, 268).

13 Donelson, "Ethical Pragmatism," p. 397.

14 Richard Rorty, "Introduction," in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1982), p. xliii.

important distinction between normative domains of discourse and non-normative domains.[15]

If one (rightly) interprets Rorty as affirming (A), that leaves just two other options besides the non-starter: denying that Rorty espoused (B) or denying that he espoused (C). Between the two, it makes most sense of Rorty's project to find no commitment to (B). For all the reasons offered by Voparil, Jamesian ethics seems to be Rorty's view. But if this Jamesian view is right that there can be ethical truth without ethical truthmakers, what need have we of ethical truthmakers, of moral reality? The idea of moral reality serves no good purpose for the Jamesian. It is, at best, useless, and at worst, a temptation toward authoritarian thinking, toward objectivity and against solidarity. In brief, Rorty's Jamesian ethics means that he cannot positively affirm Peircean realism with respect to ethics. To be clear, this does not mean that Rorty *disavows* (B). Rorty need not go that far; instead, he might accept a kind of *agnosticism* about moral reality. This version of Rorty would leave off any affirmation of Peircean Secondness with respect to ethics, to invoke Peirce's notoriously confusing categories.[16]

I close this short piece with a question that I may not be fit to answer. To get to my question requires reviewing what I have attempted to do. I have tried to rebut the idea that Rorty espouses a claim about the existence of moral reality. On my view, Rorty is quietist about such matters. Now the lingering question can emerge: what does Voparil lose if he should admit that I'm right. I do not just ask after what is literally entailed by my rebuttal. Of course, we should attend to the literal entailments. It turns out that if I am right that Rorty was no Peircean realist about morality and if I am also right that Rorty treats ethics as no different from other domains of discourse, then Rorty is no Peircean realist about anything else. My question, then, concerns the *upshot* of the book if we have a viable argument against reading Rorty as a Peircean realist. In a way, only Voparil can answer that. *Reconstructing Pragmatism* at its most ambitious essentially says that Rorty, far from being an apostate, is a dues-paying member of the Church of Peirce. This radical reading is undercut by my argument, if it is successful. But does the book stand or fall with its most ambitious interpretive claim? I would like to think not. In my estimation, the chief aim of the book was to defuse tensions between rival camps of contemporary pragmatist philosophers. Insofar as Voparil uncovers and contextualizes some important early 1960s pro-Peirce works from Rorty's oeuvre, insofar as he emphasizes

15 See, e.g., Kraut, "Varieties of Pragmatism."

16 For an overview, see Harold N. Lee, "One, Two, Three: Peirce's Categories," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 18:4 (1980): 433–445.

connections between Rorty and other classical pragmatists, and insofar as he justifies Rorty's 'selective' reading strategies, this rapprochement has been set in motion, and my quibbles about metaethics are just that: quibbles.

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