

Dewey and Rorty: Pragmatism and Postmodernism

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Introduction

My job has been made easier tonight, given that Larry Hickman has already done most of the ‘heavy lifting’ for me. I think his paper is an excellent and convincing intervention into this debate, and one of the problems for me in constructing my talk has been that our discussions have forced me to rethink what I wanted to say. Given my Continental biases, I had expected to come out on Rorty’s side; in writing this paper, however, things have become more complicated. So let me here thank Larry for both at once making my job tonight easier, and much to my chagrin, surprisingly difficult.

What I want to suggest, in contrast to what you’ve just heard, is that the neo-pragmatism of Richard Rorty is not wholly inconsistent with Dewey’s pragmatism – or, at least, with a ‘thin’ version of Deweyian pragmatism. As we shall see, while the differences between Dewey and Rorty on the status of metaphysics are in all probability irreconcilable, Rorty’s reclamation of a ‘thin’ Dewey can be read as consistent with at least the *spirit* of Dewey’s work. I will try to make the stronger case that this reconciliation is possible according to the letter of Dewey’s philosophy as well, and the interrelated issues of method and social hope will serve as the avenues for this investigation. Given my audience, I imagine that what I’m about to say will be fodder for some interesting conversation, and so, in the spirit of Rorty’s thought, let me get on with my paper.

Metaphysics

I would be rather remiss if I did not mention the issue of metaphysics here. One of the obvious problems in reconciling Dewey and Rorty is their respective attitudes towards metaphysics; in particular, it would seem that Rorty’s pronounced distaste for the

naturalistic metaphysics offered by Dewey in works like *Experience and Nature* would preclude him from a philosophical position analogous to Dewey's. Such is the reading offered by a number of prominent Deweyans, including Thomas Alexander,¹ James Gouinlock,² and John Stuhr.³ This, of course, is really the crux of the difference between Dewey and Rorty, and we can best understand it in terms of Jean-François Lyotard's oft-cited comment about the death of the metanarrative.

As Larry Hickman has correctly noted elsewhere,⁴ if we understand Lyotard to be proclaiming the death of any systematic metaphysics that claims to account for all reality and experience, then both Dewey and Rorty are postmodern thinkers insofar as both deny the efficacy of any traditional Western metaphysics. However, there is a second way to interpret Lyotard's comment – Lyotard might be taken to claim that any metanarrative whatsoever, and thereby any metaphysics whatsoever, is illegitimate and wrong-headed. This reading of Lyotard's thesis is entirely consistent with Rorty's discussion of the 'contingency of language,'⁵ his dismissal of the viability of metaphysics,⁶ and his valorization of what he calls 'liberal ironism.' But this is decidedly *inconsistent* with Dewey's reconstruction of metaphysics in *Experience and Nature*, and with the central role played by his naturalistic metaphysics in his various reconstructive efforts.⁷

¹ Alexander, Thomas. "Richard Rorty and Dewey's Metaphysics of Experience." *Southwestern Philosophical Studies* (1980). Vol. V, pp.24-25.

² Gouinlock, James. "What is the Legacy of Instrumentalism? Rorty's Interpretation of Dewey," in *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, ed. Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr. Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1995.

³ Stuhr, John J. "Dewey's Reconstruction of Metaphysics." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* (Spring 1992). Vol. XXVIII, #2. pp. 161-176.

⁴ Hickman, "Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism," 3-7.

⁵ See CIS, ch. 1, for a full account of Rorty's discussion of the inability to step outside of language games, his dismissal of the representational capacity of language, and the disconnection between truth and world.

⁶ It may well be that in his latest work, Rorty has come to recognize the contemporary turn towards a kind of process ontology, or an ontology that critically reconstructs traditional substance metaphysics through the turn towards a thoroughgoing relationalism. After linking Whitehead and Derrida as allies in this turn, Rorty says the following: "My hunch is that the twentieth century will be seen by historians of philosophy as the period in which a kind of neo-Leibnizian panrelationalism was developed in various different idioms – a panrelationalism which restates Leibniz's point that each monad is nothing but all the other monads seen from a certain perspective, each substance nothing but its relations to all the other substances." (PSH, 70) While Rorty retains the language of substance in this passage, we can perhaps see here in Rorty's anti-essentialism and his anti-realism something of a recognition of the viability of a relational ontology not terribly different from Dewey's – and, oddly enough, perhaps Deleuze's event ontology.

⁷ For Dewey, the empirical or naturalistic metaphysics outlined in *Experience and Nature* is not merely a "permanent neutral matrix for future inquiry," (CP, 80) as Rorty describes it. Rather, Dewey begins with lived experience, with the reality of experience being at once precarious and stable, and proceeds from there to construct a kind of 'ground-map' or set of generic traits of experience culminating in his denotative

At this point, it would seem that any sympathetic reading of Rorty's appropriation of the Deweyian legacy would be bankrupt. Given the way in which Rorty misreads and misuses Dewey's naturalistic metaphysics, it is indeed difficult to see precisely how Rorty's project could be Deweyian in the least, especially in light of the strong continuity Dewey draws between his work on democracy and education and his metaphysics. The question, however, is this: do we really need a 'thick' Dewey to do justice to his educational and social project, or will a 'thin' Dewey – a Dewey invested in a historical and sociological critique that is ultimately ungrounded in any metaphysics – do the job? I think the answer, at least from a Rortyan position, is that Dewey's project does not suffer in the least if it is read in a 'thin' way. And I will try to make the case that this is so on the basis of certain features in Dewey's own thought. A comparison of Dewey and Rorty on two interrelated points – method and social hope – will make this clear.

Method

One of the great virtues of James Gouinlock's essay "What is the Legacy of Instrumentalism? Rorty's Interpretation of Dewey" is that it clearly highlights the differences between Dewey's instrumentalism or experimentalism and Rorty's ironism, or a 'thick' Dewey and a 'thin' Rortyan recasting. Perhaps the crux of Gouinlock's argument consists in this: by denying the strong link in Dewey's work between, on the one hand, instrumental inquiry and the metaphysics undergirding it, and on the other, Dewey's social theory, Rorty's 'social hope' is but a weak misreading of the stakes of both the method and aim of Dewey's vision of democracy.

So what does Rorty say about method in Dewey? In his response to Gouinlock, Rorty says that "I am not sure that Gouinlock and I disagree about as much as he thinks we do. ... it may be that our only disagreement is about the utility of the notion of

method. This metaphysics does not look beyond experience to locate what is Real; instead, as Dewey said in 1917, while "no theory of Reality in general, *überhaupt*, is possible or needed... the only way in which the term reality can become more than a blanket denotative term is through recourse to specific events in all their diversity and thatness." [MW 10.39 ("The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy")] Dewey's metaphysics does not attempt to provide an extra-experiential, systematic metaphysics, but offers an explanation of our thick, funded experience of the world and our interaction (and continuity) with it. It does so through an empirical consideration of the generic traits of that experience, and importantly, this consideration both justifies and emerges from his critical reconstruction of the untenable dualisms so prevalent within the history of Western thought.

‘method.’ I do, indeed, find this notion pretty useless.”⁸ Now this is a rather strong statement – one could read this passage, and others like it, as emblematic of Rorty’s extreme relativism, where what is true would merely be what most of our fellow language-game users would assent to.⁹ But Rorty consistently denies that his position slides into a vicious form of relativism, and insists throughout his corpus that his position retains a kind of objective knowledge of objects and relations. The question to ask here is this: how is it that knowledge of objects can be objective for Rorty, given his rejection of the primacy of the method of inquiry that is often found in Dewey’s work? And in light of this dismissal of method, how can Rorty justifiably claim to be following Dewey in his project?

In order to work through this question, it is critical to look briefly at just how the method of inquiry works in Dewey’s experimentalism. For Dewey, inquiry does not begin *ex nihilo*; rather, inquiry is the response to a problematic situation, and is directed towards the successful resolution of that situation. Our inquirer does not approach the situation empty-handed – inquiry always occurs within a context, and we should take the role of context here to mean both the specific potentialities of the situation and the various habitual modes of knowing that are provided through social existence.¹⁰ The inquirer resolves the situation through a kind of controlled experimentation resulting in an intelligent mediation of the situation effecting its resolution. As Dewey defines it in his 1938 *Logic*, “[i]nquiry is the controlled or directed transformation¹¹ of an

⁸ Response, 91, 92.

⁹ Putnam, for example, (incorrectly) holds this view of Rorty. For Rorty’s response, see his essay “Solidarity or Objectivity?” (ORT, 21-34)

¹⁰ The emphasis upon the contextualization of the concrete situation can be seen most clearly in Dewey’s seminal “The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology,” (EW 5.96-109; ED 2.3-10) where Dewey highlights the organic unity of the situation (and thus contrasts the dynamic circuit with the arc) in the proper characterization of stimulus/response and learning.

¹¹ The issue of transformation is critical in this respect, for one of the more radical implications of Dewey’s theory of inquiry lies in the way that the object itself is transformed through the process; or, better put, the object as experienced changes through inquiry. That objects of knowledge can be ‘altered’ through inquiry, and thus through our concrete relation to them, is central to the soft incommensurability of various language-games in Rorty, and for the following reason: as we shall see, even if we grant Dewey a baseline method of inquiry emerging from the generic traits of experience, the possibility of an incommensurability between two language-games would seem to entail the corresponding possibility of encountering two different objects, especially in light of the manner in which the context of inquiry is heavily sedimented by socially derived knowledge.

indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole.”¹²

With his denial of the utility of method, I do not take Rorty to deny the efficacy of this model of reflective thought at its most basic level. Rather, his concern lies in the importance that Dewey, and Deweyians, attribute to it. He fails to see what is gained in describing these basic traits of reflective thought or inquiry as constitutive of a hard and fast method. In his introduction to volume 8 of the Later Works, Rorty turns to a passage from the revised *How We Think* to clarify this point. The passage Rorty has in mind runs as follows: “*Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends* constitutes reflective thought.”¹³ Presumably, according to Rorty, this reconstructed method of inquiry is what allows for progress in reasoning, for the ‘becoming more reasonable’ of ends and meaning; and yet, it is difficult to see how this method of intelligent inquiry differs from the method used by any number of thinkers in the tradition to generate the dualisms that Dewey wishes to eradicate. Certainly, to use Rorty’s example, there are great differences between the positions of Scotus and Darwin, but as he says, “it is not clear that, apart from having different goals and therefore different criteria of relevance, they *thought* differently...”¹⁴ We can sum up Rorty’s point by asking whether or not Dewey’s method is any different from the baseline mechanisms of intelligent thought that anyone of sufficient intellect or age uses in creatively resolving problems. If not, any strong claim in favor of the primacy of method in Dewey’s instrumentalism would seem difficult to maintain. As Rorty says in his response to Gouinlock, “‘Critical intelligence’ is as good a name as any for being experimental, nondogmatic, inventive, and imaginative, and for ceasing to expect, or try for, certainty. But nobody should expect to be taught a *methodical* way of being inventive and imaginative.”¹⁵

In this way, Rorty’s rejection of the primacy of method might seem to preclude him from being able to adjudicate the competing claims of various methods of inquiry,

¹² LW 12.108.

¹³ LW 8.118.

¹⁴ LW 8.xvi

¹⁵ Response, 92.

between various resolutions to concrete situations, or between competing interpretations and objects of knowledge – in short, it would seem to preclude the possibility of any objective knowledge, and push him towards a thoroughgoing relativism. However, following Thomas Kuhn and Michel Foucault, Rorty introduces the notion of the paradigm or *epistémé* – the ‘final vocabulary’ in Rorty’s consideration of the liberal ironist – as the vehicle for the reconstruction of objectivity. Let me briefly sketch what is at stake in this move.

Given the manner in which thought always begins from a thoroughly funded position, from a perspective that is always already contextualized in terms of sedimented knowledge and socially produced habit, it becomes fairly clear that for both Dewey and Rorty, there is no ‘god’s eye view’ from which to neutrally adjudicate between competing knowledge claims. Our knowledge of objects does not emerge from any strong correspondence¹⁶ between the world and our knowledge of it; rather, for Rorty (and I think for Dewey), there is no way to escape our specifically situated perspective, both physical and social, and this inability to do away with the constraint of habit and context bears important implications for our ability to adjudicate competing means and ends of inquiry. Dewey raises issues similar to these in *Human Nature and Conduct*, where he says that

[t]he sensations and ideas which are the ‘stuff’ of thought and purpose are alike affected by habits manifested in the acts which give rise to sensations and meanings... distinct and independent sensory qualities, far from being original elements, are the products of a highly skilled analysis which disposes of immense technical scientific resources. To be able to single out a definitive sensory element in any field is evidence of a high degree of previous training, that is, of well-formed habits.¹⁷

While Dewey is in this passage thinking of the kinds of habits that are formed through social interaction and education, it is not difficult to expand this point to something

¹⁶ Gouinlock helpfully clarifies this point, citing Dewey’s comment to the effect that “I hold that my type of theory is the only one entitled to be called a correspondence theory of truth.” (LW 14.180) Gouinlock suggests that this correspondence is akin to the idea of a key as fulfilling the conditions set by a lock, such that the correspondence is between the problematic situation and the methodological reconstruction effected by inquiry. (Rorty & Pragmatism, 217) There is nothing in this revision of correspondence, however, that does not cohere with Rorty’s position – provided we relativize Dewey in the manner suggested in this paper.

¹⁷ MW 14.25

resembling Rorty's position. In introducing the effects of Kuhn's paradigms and the Foucauldian *epistémé* into reflective thought, such that the specific norms and justifiable ends of inquiry are specified according to the prevalent rationality within a local group or community of language-users, Rorty thinks that we arrive at a rich – and entirely Deweyian – account of the very real epistemic and moral disagreements we face in our struggle with a recalcitrant world and with incredulous Others.

If there is no neutral perspective, no way to escape the mediation of language¹⁸ and local norms and standards of justification, it is easy to see how members of different 'language-games' or competing paradigms of rationality might determine fundamentally different objects in inquiry, even granting that every inquirer would proceed according to the same baseline mechanisms of reflective thought.¹⁹ Adjudication between better and worse ends would *not* be lost in this reading, and Rorty's position would not devolve to an untenable relativism. Rather, once we recognize that inquiry is guided by local narratives and norms of justifiable resolution or fixing of ends – in short, Kuhnian paradigms or Rortyan 'final vocabularies' – we can reconstruct the meaning of objectivity in Rorty's position. Objectivity does not stem from correspondence to the world, but from coherence to the norms and standards that govern specific rationalities.²⁰ Objects and ideas can be better and worse, true and false, to the degree that they embody

¹⁸ Although I do not have time to fully discuss this here, let me also point out that Rorty's positing of communication or shared language as the 'repository' of these paradigms, or language as (in effect) bearing the traces of the effects of local norms and criteria in description and inquiry, is not merely a remnant of his analytic training, but is more or less consistent with what Dewey says about communication in *Experience and Nature*. "Language is similarly not a mere agency for economizing energy in the interaction of human beings. It is a release and amplification of energies that enter into it, conferring upon them the added quality of meaning. The quality of meaning thus introduced is extended and transferred, actually and potentially, from sounds, gestures and marks, to all other things in nature. Natural events become messages to be enjoyed and administered, precisely as are song, fiction, oratory, the giving of advice and instruction. Thus events come to possess characters [nb. this is roughly Dewey's definition of the object as objective]; they are demarcated, and noted. For character is general and distinguished." (LW 1.137-8)

¹⁹ Incidentally, I think this is why Rorty rejects the possibility of any hard incommensurability, especially in combination with his appropriation of elements of Davidson's thought.

²⁰ On both Dewey and Rorty's account, the inquirer reconstructs habit and knowledge continually in inquiry, but these particular habits are strongly resistant to wholesale alteration. [Whether or not paradigms or *epistémés* are unconscious remains somewhat unclear (at least for me) – they are, in any event, pre-reflective. I am also unclear as to how Dewey might respond to this introduction of Kuhn into his pragmatism, and this is one of the areas that requires further attention in my argument.] 'Epochal shifts,' or 'scientific revolutions' in Kuhn's terminology, are always possible, but rare.

or contradict the local vocabulary. Rorty's description of the 'ironist'²¹ fits the requirements of this reconstructed model of objectivity and inquiry to a tee. Ironists recognize the contingency of their particular narrative, the specificity of the norms and standards that govern the selection of possible ends within a situation. They are 'ethnocentric' in precisely this sense.

The important thing here is that, if my reading is correct, nothing that Rorty has said in relation to his portrait of the ironist is inconsistent with Deweyian thought, or, to put it more precisely, the 'thin' Dewey that emerges through the rejection of his metaphysics. Once we *relativize* Deweyian method, such that we come to recognize the fundamental role played by something like Kuhnian paradigms within reflective thought, the critical importance of Dewey's reformational tendencies, his historical and sociological reconstruction of the tradition, can clearly be seen. Far from rejecting the link drawn by Dewey between scientific method and the method of inquiry – as Gouinlock charges²² – Rorty's postmodern neo-pragmatism can embrace Dewey's tendency towards scientism as fundamentally viable in relation to the specific context in which Dewey writes, and in which we live. Western rationality is imbued with the same governing norms and standards that we find in science; from our perspective, it makes perfect sense to link the two, and indeed, we generally do proceed in inquiry along something resembling scientific lines. But there is nothing to justify the valorization of science beyond the idea that *we* find it useful – scientific method, taken as the model for our kind of successful inquiry, provides ends that we find useful, and objects that do real work, but it does not follow from this that users of other inherited vocabularies are any less rational in the pursuit of different ends.²³ This is the sense in which Dewey, like

²¹ "I shall define an 'ironist' as someone who fulfills three conditions. (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her current vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists... see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off the old." (CIS, 73)

²² Gouinlock, 87.

²³ One might say that the Azande in E.E. Evans-Pritchard's famous study (*Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976.) are no less rational in their attributing misfortune to witchcraft and their consultation of poison oracles than are those of us who put our faith in Western medicine when we fall ill. The crucial difference is one of the guiding local narrative – while the Azande

Foucault, is seen by Rorty to be ‘beyond method’ – “they agree that rationality is what history and society make it... that there is no a-historical structure to be discovered.”²⁴ While a Dewey who is ‘beyond method’ is a ‘thin’ Dewey indeed, it is not apparent that Dewey suffers in the least here in terms of the work that his thought does.

Social Hope

The real test of my reading comes when we turn to the issue of social hope. Given the pressing reality of time constraints, my remarks here must be briefer than I’d like, but much of the required background for understanding Rorty’s description of social hope as ‘ungrounded’ has already been covered in terms of the discussion of his rejection of method. The question, this: if Rorty is right and we all are ‘ironists’ in this respect, how can we be liberals? Can ironism provide the means for the positive reconstruction of democracy and democratic practice offered in Deweyian thought?²⁵ And perhaps most

are certainly not scientific, they do seem to approach situations with the same kind of baseline method of reflective thought that Dewey attributes to scientific methodology. I am aware that Dewey contradicts this reading of primitive beliefs in magic (MW 14.22, where he attributes belief in magic to the attempt to grapple with a situation in lieu of any ‘intelligent control of means’), but I am unclear as to precisely how Dewey can come to his conclusion. Everything hinges on the issue of intelligence, and what I am suggesting is that Rorty’s hybridization of Dewey and Kuhn allows us to see that what passes for intelligent control of means is a function of the guiding narrative which contextualizes inquiry. Otherwise, it is difficult to see, following Rorty’s gloss on this, what we gain by turning the creative, imaginative processes operative within reflective thought into a set methodology in anything other than a very thin baseline sense of the term.

²⁴ CP, 204. For a fuller account of what it means to be ‘beyond method,’ see Rorty’s “Method, Social Science, and Social Hope” (CP, 191-210), and also “Pragmatism without Method” (ORT 63-77).

²⁵ Although I cannot go deeply into Dewey’s position on democracy and democratic progress because of time constraint, I do have space in the footnotes. Thus... Consider, for example, the intimate link forged by Dewey between his metaphysics and the possibilities for democratic progress. In his 1939 essay, “Creative Democracy – The Task Before Us,” he described democracy as “a way of personal life controlled not merely by faith in human nature in general but by faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished.” [ED 1.342, LW 14.226/7. (“Creative Democracy – The Task Before Us.”)] Implicit in this passage is the idea that there is something about the very nature of the human organism that would allow, given the proper conditions, for democratic progress. Because the method of critical intelligence, and intelligent inquiry, emerges from the generic traits of experience described in his metaphysics, Dewey’s notion of democratic reform as a ‘way of life’ is deeply rooted in his metaphysics. As he said in the same essay,

democracy is belief in the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness. ... [it is] the sole way of living which believes wholeheartedly in the process of experience as end and as means; as that which is capable of generating the science which is the sole dependable authority for the direction of further experience and which releases emotions, needs and desires so as to call into being the things that have not existed in the past. For every way of life that fails in its democracy limits the contacts, the exchanges, the communications, the

importantly, can Rorty offer such an account from a position that coheres with Dewey's own?²⁶ This is no small matter, and a number of commentators have railed against Rorty on this point. [I can't resist passing along here what I find to be one of the best lines in recent criticism. In describing Rorty's vision of social hope, John Stuhr describes the Rortyan position with this *bon mot*: "Rorty is the Milli Vanilli of liberalism, merely lip syncing the old Elvis refrain: 'Don't be Cruel.'" ²⁷ Gorgeous!] Certainly, we can grant that Rorty does not attend to the intimate link forged by Dewey between his metaphysics and the possibilities for democratic progress. But does this mean that Rorty's 'ungrounded social hope' cannot be reconciled with Dewey's own position?

[As we have just seen, in relativizing Dewey's method, and reconstructing the central role of habit in the funding of experience and in the production of local strictures on what counts as valid ends of inquiry, Rorty's neo-pragmatic or postmodern return to Dewey incorporates most all of Dewey's discussion of method and inquiry. I think the same thing can be said about Rorty's vision of social hope. Relativizing Dewey's program for democratic progress does not require that we abandon its guiding ideals, nor its potential for effective progress and social transformation. How so?]

Perhaps the clearest articulation of what is at stake here is provided by Rorty in the final chapter of *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*. He says that "[t]he fundamental premise of this book is that a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance."²⁸ The point, I take it, is this: historical circumstance, or the paradigms or vocabularies that structure the legitimacy of ends or

interactions by which experience is steadied while it is also enlarged and enriched. The task of this release and enrichment is one that has to be carried on day by day. Since it is one that can have no end till experience itself comes to an end, the task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute. [ED 1.343, LW 14.227(?)]

In other words, given the fundamental features of human experience, and given that democracy consists in something akin to a freeing of the organism to flourish within an environment through cooperative reconstruction, it is nearly impossible to pull Dewey's metaphysics and his social theory apart.

²⁶ By necessity, I omit certain key issues in this sympathetic reconstruction of Rorty's position, most notably the strong contrast between Rorty's public/private split and Dewey's denial of the efficacy of such a division. This point is, I think, the weakest in the Rortyan chain, and I'm not sure how to reconcile the two positions on this matter.

²⁷ Stuhr, 169.

²⁸ CIS, 189.

outcomes of inquiry, does not deprive us of the binding moral imperatives that Dewey draws from his metaphysical grounding of democracy and democratic progress. Our recognition of ourselves as members of a community of language-users – as Americans, *we* Americans – entails that we find ourselves subject to the moral principles that are implied in that vocabulary.²⁹ More importantly, we do not lose the Deweyian emphasis on the individual as the site, so to speak, for effecting that progress. If growth is truly the only moral end, as Dewey has it in *Reconstruction in Philosophy*,³⁰ it is incumbent upon the individual to produce the kinds of environments that foster the possibility of growth, and for both the individual and for the community. The teleology of that growth, the legitimate selection of specific ends, depends entirely upon the governing paradigms of ethics and social justice that one accepts as valid. Our idea of America and American democracy entails that we be less cruel, more inclusive, cognizant of the quest for equality and the reduction of bigotry and bias. Dewey, influenced as he was by Emerson and Whitman³¹ – both of whom contributed to our vocabulary through their words – wrote his books and dreamed his democratic dreams under much the same paradigm of democracy. Historicizing his democratic ideals does not diminish their power, nor their persuasiveness. Rorty’s social hope is only ‘ungrounded’ in the sense that it lacks metaphysical backing, but it is thoroughly grounded in the governing logic of our paradigm for democracy. As he says in his reply to Gouinlock,

I think that an ungrounded hope, the sort that Jefferson, Whitman, and Dewey had for the American of their various days, is the best sort of moral commitment to have. For to regard such hope as ungrounded is simply to recognize, as these men did, that nothing is on the side of this hope except the energies and intelligence that those who share it devote to it.³²

²⁹ I am not sure that what I am saying here is not functionally equivalent to Althusser’s discussion of interpellation. But this would require some work to unpack and verify.

³⁰ MW 12.?

³¹ PSH, 25f. Rorty cites a passage from Dewey where this link is fairly expressly made: “Emerson, Walt Whitman, and Maeterlinck are thus far, perhaps, the only men who have been habitually, and, as it were, instinctively aware that democracy is neither a form of government nor a social expediency, but a metaphysic of the relation of man and his experience in nature.” (MW 6, “Maeterlinck’s Philosophy of Life”)

³² Response, 91.

Especially in light of the events of the last few days, Rorty's vision of an ungrounded social hope more clearly than ever puts the onus on *us*, on we Americans, to take charge of *our* democracy, to make it less cruel and more just, to hope that change is for the better. In this, Rorty remains true to the spirit of Dewey's commitment to moral and social progress. Today, especially today, we would do well to heed their words.

Thank you.

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