

“Experience or Language? Choosing Pragmatism's Central Motive”

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I. INTRODUCTION

Today I raise a simple question: which term, “experience” or “language,” best expresses the central motivation of pragmatism? Which would you choose?

Something about the choice *matters*—and perhaps we *should* choose. But which term—and why? What are the stakes?

Thirty years ago, Richard Rorty published *Consequences of Pragmatism*. One consequence has been that the “experience” vs. “language” choice is clearer and starker. Today, one definite approach to pragmatism—dare we call it “neopragmatism”?—has chosen “language” as its focus and motive, and has deemphasized or excluded “experience.” Still, many others working with pragmatist themes choose to retain “experience” as central.

This conference provide a unique opportunity to imagine various paths that pragmatism might take in the 21st century. We’re not just here to report on pragmatism, but to persuade one another about our interpretations--interpretations being, after all, practical expressions of our values. I believe that choosing between “experience” and “language” is a value choice ingredient to pragmatism’s future.

To begin, I’ll simply state the values I take as central to pragmatism. Pragmatism is the view that philosophy’s most important role is to criticize and improve the conditions of human life, broadly considered. Philosophy becomes “pragmatic” when it foreswears, as marks of success, metaphysical absolutes and epistemological certainties, and nominates the practical as a better way to philosophize about a range of human endeavors: morality, art, religion, learning, politics, etc. Stress upon the practical is an avowal of a starting point; it does not recommend extinguishing or denigrating abstract thought’s valuable

functions. (After all, without abstraction, pragmatism would have no tools with which improve life.)

The central question I’m raising, then, is whether pragmatism’s mission is more effectively advanced by “language-centered” or “experience-centered” approaches.

While I won’t attempt to hide my preference--it’s for experience--I want to lay out strengths on both sides. My purpose, then, will not be to *prove* anything—or offer more than a sketch of the various philosophers mentioned—but to provide points we can grab on to and debate.

First, I’ll begin with some common ground between both sides.

Second, I’ll examine the “linguistic” side. I discuss Rorty, Brandom, and Price.

Third, I’ll examine the “experience” side. I discuss (mainly) Bernstein, Shusterman, and Margolis.

Last, I’ll offer a few summary thoughts.

II. Common Ground

Quite a bit of common ground exists between the two approaches.

All repudiate the attempt to know, with certainty and universality, the framework Hilary Putnam labelled “metaphysical realism”: a reality that is complete, determinate, and radically external to inquiry. All agree, instead, that philosophical inquiries presume a naturalistic conception of reality and deny that beliefs work by representing or corresponding to transcendent entities. (Quine expressed this in “Ontological Relativity” when he said, “With Dewey I hold that knowledge, mind, and meaning are part of the same world that they have to do with, and that they are to be studied in the same empirical spirit that animates natural science. There is no place for a prior philosophy.”)¹

All accept some form of “fallibilism,” roughly the notion that even highly warranted

¹ Quine, W.V.O. “Ontological Relativity” in *Ontological relativity and other essays*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 26.

beliefs can be revised or replaced. This fallibilism derives from the recognition that a belief's epistemic adequacy depends upon how well it functions relative to specific contexts and purposes, rather than by possessing some mystical correspondence to a static and supra-human reality.

The issue of language vs. experience is joined, then, by how best to oppose metaphysical realism—how best to accomplish the goals of anti-representationalism and fallibilism.

III. Linguistic pragmatists

Rorty

Rorty's most famous celebration of language as the route to anti-representationalism and fallibilism can be traced to *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Targeting traditional epistemology, he called the holism and pragmatism of “Sellars's attack on ‘givenness’ and Quine's attack on ‘necessity’” were, he wrote,

“the crucial steps in undermining the possibility of a ‘theory of knowledge’... because these steps] “when extended in a certain way...let us see truth as, in James's phrase, ‘what it is better for us to believe,’ rather than as ‘the accurate representation of reality.’”²

Rorty's pragmatism translated older problematics into ones involving language. “To know the nature of something,” Rorty writes, “is not a matter of having it before the mind, of intuiting it, but of being able to utter a large number of true propositions about it.”³ In later years, Rorty highlighted the importance of imagination for human progress, but imagination, too, was framed in terms of language, a Romantic “realization that a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change.”⁴ Eventually, Rorty attacked not just epistemology but theoretical and systematic

2 Rorty, Richard, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton U.P. 1979, p. 10)

3 Rorty, Richard “Contemporary Philosophy of Mind,” *Synthese*, 53(2), pp. 323-48, p. 331.

4 Rorty *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 7.

philosophizing, generally. In 1995 he exclaimed “I linguisticize as many pre-linguistic-turn philosophers as I can, in order to read them as prophets of the utopia in which all metaphysical problems have been dissolved, and religion and science have yielded their place to poetry.”⁵

Along the way, Rorty denigrated “experience,” eliminating the notion from his pragmatism. He viewed reliance on experience by pragmatists like Dewey and James as regrettable; they either lapsed into bad faith (offering substitutes for substance, mind, etc.) or were simply impotent to escape philosophical dead ends because a linguistic strategy was still unavailable. Rorty writes,

“Dewey’s and James’s attempts to give a ‘more concrete,’ more holistic, and less dualism-ridden account of experience would have been unnecessary if they had not tried to make ‘true’ a predicate of experiences and had instead let it be a predicate of sentences.”⁶

Progress in pragmatism, then, comes to mean eliminating “experience” altogether because, in Rorty's view, pragmatist accounts have never succeeded in talking about experience without *re-enacting the tradition's pernicious* representationalism. (Rorty insisted that Dewey's account of experience implied “panpsychism” and was “inchoate,” “confused,” and “disingenuous.”)⁷ The linguistic approach, on the other hand, lets us see that

“The point of language is not to represent either reality or ‘experience’ accurately, but, once again, to forge more useful tools. . . . Cutting out the intermediary—experience—between the causal impact of the environment and

5 Rorty, “Reponse to Hartshorne,” in *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, edited by Herman J. Saatkamp (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995), 35.

6 Rorty, “Dewey between Hegel and Darwin,” in *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Volume 3*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 298

7 “Dewey Between Hegel and Darwin, p. 297.

our linguistic response to the environment is an idea whose time has come.”⁸

In exchanges with John McDowell, Rorty states that rejection of experience is, more generally, a rejection of what McDowell calls our “answerability to the world.” By rejecting the demands of “answerability,” pragmatism reveals its core identity: as an “anti-authoritarian” philosophy.

Brandom

Robert Brandom’s “inferentialism” follows Rorty in important ways. Brandom’s project is to construct an inferential role semantics derived from pragmatics—the normative commitments and entitlements implicit in human discursive practices. In other words, our linguistic and social practices (e.g., of making, challenging, or evaluating assertions) provide the background necessary for explaining why notions like “true” or “refers to” are meaningful but *not* representational.

Like Rorty, Brandom eliminates experience from his account. He writes,

“Rorty and I both think that Sellars’ critique of the myth of the given shows the notion of experience as simply outmoded. I agree with Rorty] that there is no useful way to rehabilitate the concept of experience. We just need to do without that.”⁹

Rorty recognizes and celebrates Brandom’s turn against experience:

“Brandom can be read as carrying through on ‘the linguistic turn’ by restating pragmatism in a form that makes James’s and Dewey’s talk of experience entirely obsolete....In Making it Explicit] Brandom tells] a story about our knowledge of objects that makes almost no reference to experience....The term ‘experience’ does not occur in the...index to Brandom’s 700-page book;

⁸ Rorty, “Afterword: Intellectual Historians and Pragmatism,” in Pettigrew, *A Pragmatist’s Progress*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, p. 209.

⁹ Interview with Robert Brandom, Heine A. Holmen, interviewer, *Filosofisk Supplement* 1, 2005, p. 5

it is simply not one of his words.”¹⁰

Thus, the lesson of the linguistic turn as Brandom understands it is that philosophy does not need to describe, analyze, or theorize about experience at all because, as he puts it, “pragmatists who have made the linguistic turn take it that the most important feature of the natural history of creatures like us is that we have come...to engage in distinctively linguistic practices and to exercise linguistic abilities.”¹¹

Price’s Linguistic Paradigm

The linguistic paradigm also informs the work of Huw Price who, like Rorty, wants to dismiss the metaphysical puzzles that arise whenever philosophy tries to place notions like “truth” and “mind” in the world depicted by science. Pragmatists, Price writes, favor “more practical questions about the roles and functions of the *matters in question* in human life.” Note, please, that by the “matters in question” Price explicitly means “the words, concepts, and thoughts in terms of which...we talk and think *about* such things and properties....Pragmatism thus has a second-order, or ‘linguistic’ focus.”¹²

Note also that Price’s pragmatism has not only a linguistic “focus” but a linguistic *beginning or starting point*. He writes,

“[P]ragmatism *begins*...with phenomena concerning the *use* of certain terms and concepts, rather than with things or properties of a non-linguistic nature.”¹³

This emphasis and starting point allows pragmatism to operate, Price says, “without feeling the pull of the metaphysical questions—without wanting to ask what we are talking *about*.” Price in Misak book: 97] This approach, he thinks, is the only way to avoid what

10 Rorty, “Robert Brandom on Social Practices and Representations,” in *Truth and Progress*, p. 122.

11 Brandom “From German Idealism to American Pragmatism, and Back” text for lecture given at Cambridge, UK, May 31-June 1, 2012. p. 26. Document file downloaded from <http://www.pitt.edu/~brandom/index.html>

12 Price, Huw, “Truth as Convenient Friction.” In Robert Talisse and Scott Aikin, eds. *The Pragmatism Reader* (Princeton University Press), p. 94.

13 Price, “Truth as Convenient Friction,” p.95, emphasis on “begins” is mine.

he calls “our predecessors’ mistake” of following a “representationalist path...into the cul-de-sac of metaphysics.”¹⁴ “Pragmatism,” he says, “is...a no-metaphysics view.”¹⁵

We see, then, in these three figures several advantages of the linguistic turn: language requires no transcendental referents (antirepresentational); the homogeneity of language removes unjustified hierarchies between, for example, science and art; finally, the supposed clarity of a linguistic medium displaces the confusion and metaphysical baggage of “experience.”

III. Experience pragmatists

Turning to experience, I’ll now highlight several figures who find advantages in experience-based pragmatism.

Pragmatists stressing the centrality of experience typically agree that pragmatism finds its *raison d’être* in meliorism—in improving the conditions of life. Connecting with life requires embracing an *approach* to philosophy that avoids starting with theoretically-loaded (or “aprioristic”) starting points. As Dewey put it, “We must go behind the refinements and elaborations of reflective experience to the gross and compulsory things of our doings, enjoyments and sufferings”¹⁶. This proposal, common to classical pragmatists, was not a theory about what “experience is really like,” as Rorty worried, but a proposal for how to make practice primary without setting philosophy “against theory” itself.

Bernstein and Misak: Epistemic Check of Experience, Wider Range of Philosophical Subject Matter

Richard Bernstein argues that when it comes to inquiry, “*redescription, no matter how*

¹⁴ Price, “Truth as Convenient Friction,” p. 97.

¹⁵ Price, “Truth as Convenient Friction,” p.98.

¹⁶ Dewey, John. *Experience and Nature*. Vol. 1 of John Dewey: The Later Works, edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, p. 74, pp. 375-76.

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imaginative, is not enough.”¹⁷ We learn what works—and what doesn’t—by paying attention to what frustrates our words and deeds. This is experience, but it’s neither a “Raw Given” nor a thin echo of self-enclosed subjectivity. Peirce taught us, Bernstein writes, that “Experience involves bruteness, constraint, ‘over-and-againstness’. Experience is our great teacher. And experience takes place by a series of surprises.”¹⁸ Without this element, Bernstein argues, there is no friction to our experiments:

“Acknowledgement of this bruteness—the way in which experience ‘says no!’ — is required to make sense of the self-corrective character of inquiry and experimentation. Experiments must always finally be checked by experience. Peirce would have been horrified by Rorty's claim that the the *only* constraints upon us are ‘conversational constraints.’ To speak in this manner is to ignore the facticity, the surprise, shock, and brute constraint of our experiential encounters.”¹⁹

Dewey made this Peircean point in his *Logic* by pointing out how language becomes senseless when disconnected from a situation:

Linguistic “d]istinctions and relations,” he wrote, “are instituted within a situation; *they* are recurrent and repeatable in different situations. Discourse that is not controlled by reference to a situation is not discourse, but a meaningless jumble.”²⁰

Cheryl Misak is another pragmatist who cites the constraint of experience as an indispensable epistemic value, especially for moral inquiry. She writes,

"Clearly, if we want true beliefs, we should expose them...to experience and

17 Bernstein, Richard, 2010, *The Pragmatic Turn*. Polity, p. 214.

18 Bernstein, *Pragmatic Turn*, p. 132.

19 Bernstein, *Pragmatic Turn*, p. 134.

20 Dewey, John. *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. Vol. 12 of John Dewey: The Later Works, edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, p. 74.

argument that might overturn them....Those engaged in moral or political deliberation who denigrate or ignore the experiences of those with a certain skin color, gender, or religion are also adopting a method unlikely to reach the truth.”²¹

In Misak and Bernstein we see a concise articulation of the connection between “experience” and meliorism. Life is improved by inquiry, and inquiry relies on the “check” of experience. That “check” is one advantage of experience.

Experience also provides another, more general, advantage for Bernstein—the diversity of philosophical subject matters. Linguistic pragmatism shrinks “what we consider to be a legitimate topic for philosophical investigation.”²² He writes,

“A ‘linguistic pragmatism’ that doesn’t incorporate serious reflection about the role of experience in human life...not only] loses] contact with the everyday life world of human beings and fails to do justice to the ways in which experience (Secondness) constrains us... b]ut even more seriously...it severely limits the range of human experience (historical, religious, moral, political, and aesthetic experience) that should be central to philosophical reflection.”²³

The Aesthetics of Experience: Alexander and Shusterman

Let’s turn, now, to aesthetic experience. Both Richard Shusterman and Thomas Alexander cite encounters with music and art as vivid illustrations of why experience can be neither eliminated nor reduced to linguistic formulae. Both chafe at Sellars’ assertion that “all awareness is a linguistic affair” insofar as that has exempted philosophy from dealing with

21 Misak, Cheryl. “Making Disagreement Matter: Pragmatism and Deliberative Democracy,” in Robert Talisse and Scott Aikin, eds. *The Pragmatism Reader* (Princeton University Press), p. 476.

22 Bernstein, *Pragmatic Turn*, p. 141.

23 Bernstein, *Pragmatic Turn*, p. 152.

the nondiscursive.²⁴ Neglect of nondiscursive experience indicates to Shusterman philosophy’s preoccupation with justificational epistemology—but such an assumption, he writes, “is neither self-evident nor argued for.”²⁵

In Dewey, both find a contrary approach *urging* that philosophical attention be paid to nondiscursive (or primary) experience. Such experience comprises the living and meaningful world from which symbols and arguments derive purpose and sense. Primary experience is our living starting point; by remaining humbly mindful of it, we gain what Dewey called “a doctrine of direction” insofar as “it tells us to open the eyes and ears of the mind, to be sensitive to all the varied phases of life and history.”²⁶ It is, in Alexander’s words,

“a method for aesthetic receptivity and openness”²⁷ that “attempts to make us fully *aware* of the world *beyond* our ‘ideas’ of it...[It] is meant to contextualize the *cognitive* interests of philosophy within the *noncognitive* scope of life...and so [it] aims at *reminding* philosophy] of its *origins* in a prereflective world as well as of its *obligations* to make life more meaningful and value-rich.”²⁸

Shusterman uses Dewey’s account of nondiscursive experience to broaden the domain of what we might call “art” while pushing philosophy to engage with the body:

“Dewey] always insisted that our most intense and vivid values are those of on-the-pulse experienced quality and *affect*, not the abstractions of discursive

24 Paraphrased from Shusterman, Richard, “Dewey on Experience: Foundation or Reconstruction,” *Philosophical Forum* 26, no. 2 (Winter 1994), p. 140.

25 Shusterman, “Dewey on Experience,” p. 140.

26 Alexander, Thomas, “Dewey’s Denotative-Empirical Method: A Thread Through the Labyrinth.” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2004, p. 251.

27 Alexander, Thomas, “Dewey’s Denotative,” p. 251.

28 Alexander, Thomas, “Dewey’s Denotative,” p. 254.

truth."²⁹ By "affirming and enhancing the continuity between soma and psyche, between nondiscursive experience and conscious thought" Dewey thought philosophy could enrich and harmonize how we live.³⁰

Shusterman proposes extending Dewey's insight by "critically examining popular] body practices and their attendant ideologies" and even "integrating]...bodily disciplines into the very practice of philosophy." In this way, they will be seeing "philosophy not simply as a discursive genre" but as "search for truth and wisdom...pursued not only through texts but also...acute attention to the body and its nonverbal messages" so as to "heighten somatic awareness and transform how one feels and functions"³¹

The Continuity Thesis: Margolis and Johnson

One last advantage provided by experience is found in recent work by Joseph Margolis and Mark Johnson. Linguistic pragmatists, Margolis argues, have provided no evidence for their assumption that language deserves primacy *at the exclusion* of experience. Margolis asks,

"Why must we suppose, even if judgments, beliefs, reasons, and intentions are, paradigmatically, "verbal," that there are no evolutionarily plausible animal analogues of any and all such cognitive elements, inferable...from the behavior of nonlinguistic creatures?"³²

Indeed, Margolis asks, why must concepts *be specifically* linguistic? Pragmatist accounts of experience can facilitate explanations of learning among higher animals and language acquisition among infants. One can tell a naturalistic story of an experiential continuum that does not imply panpsychism!³³

29 Shusterman, "Dewey on Experience," p. 135-36.

30 Shusterman, "Dewey on Experience," p. 139.

31 Shusterman, "Dewey on Experience," p. 143-44.

32 Margolis, Joseph, "Dewey's and Rorty's Opposed Pragmatisms." Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society, Vol. 38, No. 1, p. 124.

33 See Margolis, "Present doldrums, pleasant prospects : Philosophy early in the new century."

Work by **Mark Johnson** and **Daniel Stern** explores this further. Linguistic "meaning-making" has a natural genesis in "patterns of experience" which begin in youth and continue throughout life. There are, Johnson writes,

“pervasive patterns of feeling that make up an infant’s emerging sense of self and world. Human experience has a feeling of flow, and differences of pattern in this flow are the basis for different felt qualities of situations.”³⁴ “What [psychiatrist] Stern identifies as being at the heart of an infant’s sense of itself and the meaning of its prelinguistic] experience also lies at the heart of meaning in an adult’s experience....We never abandon or transcend our early meaning-making ways; we only extend and build upon them.”³⁵

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, my objective hasn’t been to *prove* whether language or experience should be *the* central motive for pragmatism; instead, I have sketched various motives important to linguistic and experiential pragmatists.

Let me make three tentative observations:

First, the linguistic approach always seems to push us beyond language. As Bjørn Ramberg noted,

“any philosophical characterization of a vocabulary...will embody a proposal for conceiving of our interests in a certain way, a plea for seeing them that way and for assigning them a certain weight.”³⁶

Philosophy Social Criticism 2007 33: 15, p. 21.

34 Johnson, Mark. *The meaning of the body: aesthetics of human understanding*. University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 43.

35 Johnson, *Meaning of the Body*, p. 44.

36 Ramberg, Bjørn T., "Language, Mind, and Naturalism in Analytic Philosophy," in *A Companion to Pragmatism*, Blackwell, 2007, p. 222.

Those pleas, I take it, are about "how to live" and that is distinct from "how to talk."

Second, despite all the attendant problems, our need to appeal to experience (or some cognate term) is not going away. As Bernstein puts it,

"there is something about this signifier that gives it a power, a lure, an intensity that makes it irresistible. ...we cannot escape appealing to experience...in our irrepressible attempts to make sense of our being-in-the-world."³⁷

Third, and finally, the language-experience tension might be relieved by rejecting the dichotomy altogether. Bernstein might be right when he suggests that a forced choice between language and experience is "obfuscating and sterile" and that

"a pragmatic orientation demands a thoughtful and nuanced understanding of the meaning and significance of experience" while also seeking to "integrate the linguistic turn with a subtle appreciation of the role and varieties of experience."³⁸

Again, I'm interested in *your* thoughts. I believe that discussing the "experience or language" issue enriches a healthy dialogue about which purposes and priorities are best for the future of pragmatism.

THANK YOU FOR LISTENING

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READING COUNT: 3019 = 22 minutes, approximately.

³⁷ Bernstein, Richard. 2006. "The Ineluctable Lure and Risks of Experience." *History and Theory* 45:261–75, p. 275.

³⁸ Bernstein, *Pragmatic Turn*, p. 128-29.