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A critique of historicism

In this paper I consider some of the basic tenets of classic historicism as developed by thinkers such as Dilthey and Spengler, and find serious incoherencies with it as an epistemology. I then inquire as to whether this theory fares better when combined with pragmatism and the “linguistic turn”, as advocated by Richard Rorty, and find that his proposal merely compounds the incoherencies rather than solves them.

'n Kritiek van historisme

In hierdie bydrae ondersoek ek enkele grondtrekke van die klassieke historisme soos wat dit ontwikkel is deur denkers soos Dilthey en Spengler, en identifiseer die ernstige gebreke wat dit as 'n epistemologie bevat. Daarna ondersoek ek die aanname as sou hierdie teorie beter vaar wanneer dit met die pragmatisme en die “taalwending” verbind word, soos voorgestaan deur Rorty. My bevinding is egter dat gebreke soos onsamehangendheid daardeur vererger word eerder as wat dit 'n oplossing bied.

Although the Hegelian and Marxist forms of historicism are now out of fashion, scholars in a variety of fields are presently endorsing new forms of the theory.¹ In fact, the influence of historicism has spread with such amazing rapidity that the concomitant relativism is fast becoming the “HIV” of the contemporary philosophical scene.

The central claim of historicism is that all theories, traditions, interpretations, as well as most — if not all — concepts, are nothing more than cultural artefacts of a particular time and place. Since they are all human creations, none of them may claim to be true in the sense of corresponding to reality. In this view, virtually everything, from reports of present perception to the equation $1 + 1 = 2$, is taken to be *in toto* historically conditioned artefacts of human culture.

This essay will first examine some of the key claims of historicism as a theory of knowledge and offer a critical response. It will do this selectively rather than in great detail, considering only the claims that lie at the heart of all varieties of historicism, and demonstrate them to fail. It will then focus on one of the most virulent varieties, namely, the combination of historicism and pragmatism, as advocated by Richard Rorty. The combination will be examined and shown to be as internally incoherent as the older versions.

1. Two senses of the term “history”

It is a tautology that everything (other than God) is history, if “history” is used to mean the totality of all that has been and will be in time. But in that case the word would — confusingly — mean the same as “the universe,” and historic-*ism* would not comprise an interesting or informative theory about human experience and knowledge. The only way it may be a genuinely interpretative hypothesis is if the term “historicism” derives from another meaning of history, one which connotes the human power to form culture and which is the subject of the discipline called history. The historian does not study everything that has ever happened, for two simple reasons: to do so would take as long as the past took to

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unfold, and most of what has happened is unimportant. Unimportant, that is, to the development of a given culture — which is therefore a more precise description of what the study of history is about. This is why a historian wants to understand the conditions, causes, and effects of, say, Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon or the bubonic plague of the thirteenth century, but not of whether you or I got a salary increase last year. This may be very important to us and our families, but made no difference to the direction of the development of our culture.

At bottom, then, culture means any product of the human power to control the environment. It includes control over others so as to give form to their social existence, and control over nature, so as to give new form to the materials, sounds, colours, and so forth, that already exist (cf Dooyeweerd 1997: 198). In this sense, languages, social organisations, sciences, technology and the arts, as well as all artificial objects, are cultural products — and history is the study which aims to explain their development. With this distinction between the two senses of “history” in mind, we may say that Historicism is the theory which claims that history in the narrower sense, the sense of culture-formation, is the sole interpretative standpoint from which history in its all-encompassing sense is to be understood. This is why Maurice Mandelbaum (1967: 24) has characterised the theory as “a genetic model of explanation which attempts to base all evaluation on the nature of the historical (culture-forming) process itself”.

Early in the last century, Wilhelm Dilthey praised this theory as “the last step in the liberation of man”. He said:

The historical consciousness of the finiteness of every historical phenomenon, every human or social condition, and of the relativity of every kind of belief, is the last step in the liberation of man.

By its means man attains to the sovereign power to appropriate the contents of every experience, to throw himself entirely into it, unprejudiced, as if there were not any system of philosophy or belief which could bind men. Life becomes free from conceptual knowledge; the mind becomes sovereign with regard to all the cobwebs of dogmatic thought. Here we are confronted with something that cannot be spirited away. And, in contrast to relativity, the continuity of the creative force asserts itself as the most essential historical fact.²

2 Quoted in Dooyeweerd 1997: 206.

The liberation of which Dilthey speaks in this quotation is the same as that sought by Kant: liberation from the advances of the natural sciences that seemed to threaten human beings with becoming merely cogs in the great cosmic machinery. For if human beings are wholly determined products of random natural causes, then their alleged freedom of thought and will, their creativity, and their moral responsibility are but illusions. The way to defeat the threat of such naturalistic determinism, says Dilthey, is to see concepts and sciences as human cultural products. Thus, whereas the threat is that we are the creation of blind natural forces, historicism's solution is to turn the tables. It claims, with respect to both God and nature, that it is we who have made them, and not they who have made us. In this way Dilthey presses as far as possible towards the goal of concluding that experience and knowledge are never of any independently existing reality, but only of cultural forms which we have created.

Dilthey's historicism is therefore best understood as (yet) another version of Kant's transcendental idealism. In place of categorical concepts which humans unconsciously impose on sensation so as to create the world we experience, he holds that these concepts too are our own creations. So instead of having to defend a particular set of concepts as privileged because they are necessary and beyond our control, historicism holds that it is only the human power of control ("the continuity of the creative force") which is in a privileged position "in contrast to relativity". It is the one exception because it is the force which creates all concepts of the natural world, the social world, the sciences, the arts, religious beliefs, and so on, as well as all other competing epistemological hypotheses about how to interpret the nature of experience and knowledge.

2. A critique of historicism

But one has only to state such a theory to see at once that it generates the most serious difficulties. As noted above, historicism welcomes the result that all statements of belief are products of the human power to create them. It holds this not just in the obvious and trivial sense that our concepts and beliefs have been formed by us, but in the vastly different sense that — so far as we can ever know — their content is wholly our invention. Thus even mathematics, physics and biology are reflections of our own desires, needs and preferences, rather than discoveries of the way the world is. Historicism welcomes this because if human cul-

tural activity produces its objects (the way Kant's categories did), no concept of natural order may be thought to compete with human beings and determine what they are. Consequently human freedom is preserved.

But such a position also entails that no belief, or statement of a belief may be known to be true in the sense of corresponding to reality, so that every opinion has the same ground as any other. Indeed, Dilthey himself saw this clearly when he said:

The historical world-view has broken the last chain not yet broken by philosophy and natural science. Everything is flowing, nothing remains. But where are the means to conquer the anarchy of opinions which threatens us? (cf Dooyeweerd 1997: 207).

In fact, this difficulty is even more crucial than Dilthey seems to have realised. For in attempting to save human freedom from the domination of "conceptual knowledge" and the "cobwebs" of dogmatic theories, each and every belief is relativised to the human power to form it. The difficulty with this is that if all beliefs are on an equal footing because none can be known to correspond to reality, this would have to apply to the theory of historicism itself! Historicism, too, according to historicism, is just one more concept we invent without ever having any way to know whether it does, or does not, correspond to reality. Thus historicism fails as a theory of human experience and knowledge because it is self-referentially incoherent in the strongest sense: when applied to itself, it requires that it cannot be true in precisely the sense in which it claims to be true.

Of course a defender of historicism may try to face this difficulty head-on by arguing that while all other claims to knowledge are cultural artefacts constructed for our own purposes, the assertion of historicism alone is not. Perhaps Dilthey had this rejoinder in mind when he said that the creative force stands in contrast to all that is relative; perhaps he meant to except not only the force itself but also the belief that it is what creates all else. But what could possibly be said to defend this claim that would not be forced to assume many other types of statements as true in the very sense which historicism denies? Any argument for it would have to regard the logical principles of reasoning, statements about the natural world, number beliefs, and much about the rise and nature of language as also corresponding to reality. For example, it would have to be able to assert that there is only one statement which is not

historically relative (the statement of the historicist claim), and the fact that there is only one would have to be allowed to entail, logically, that there are no others. If such beliefs are tacitly assumed rather than explicitly defended, historicism then avoids self-referential incoherence only at the price of being self-assumptively incoherent: the unstated assumptions of the argument would be incompatible with the claim the argument is defending. Thus historicism is either false because it cancels itself, or false because any defence of it has to assume what it denies.

In fact, I know of no version of historicism that does not admit into itself beliefs which it takes to correspond to reality. It is mainly by smuggling such incompatible facts, claims, and their evidence, as well as by equivocating on the two senses of “history” distinguished at the outset of this essay, that historicism has managed to disguise its intrinsic incoherence. It acquires a deceptive plausibility by making use of non-historical knowledge and passing it off as historical in the trivial sense that our acquisition of it has a history, rather than in the crucial sense that it is, wholesale, the product of the historical process. In other words, at least part of what historicism throws out at the front door with great fanfare is smuggled back in through the servant’s entrance without so much as an acknowledgement. The smuggling integrates into what is supposed to be a purely historical account of knowledge, other sorts of knowledge which are relied on as true, independent of the process of culture formation. It is then cloaked by declaring that the other kind of knowledge is also historical. But, as I said, the trick is that this is true only in the trivial sense that it arises in a cultural context rather than in the radical historicist sense of being nothing more than a cultural artefact. The result is that the additional sorts of knowledge are utilised under the pretext that they are nothing but history, while they are actually treated as though they correspond to reality in just the way that historicism denies we can ever know anything to correspond to reality — with the possible exception of our own power to create culture.

Consider but one outstanding example of this smuggling, that of the historicist Oswald Spengler. Spengler declares scientific knowledge to be entirely dependent on, and determined by, the morphological characteristics of each culture:³

3 Quotations are from *The Decline of the West* as cited in Dooyeweerd 1997: 218, 219.

... in the eyes of the historically-minded there is only a history of physics. All its systems do not appear to him as right or wrong, but historically, psychologically conditioned by the character of the period and more or less perfectly representative of it.

The same holds true for mathematics as for physics, says Spengler:

There are more arithmetical worlds than one because there are more kinds of culture than one. In the course of history we find systems of number that differ from civilization to civilization [...] each [...] symbolizes a particular kind of validity that is, also scientifically, exactly restricted to this type of culture.

First, I cannot resist the observation that, historically, the latter claim is factually false. That people have symbolised quantities differently has nothing to do with whether mathematical validity changes from culture to culture. Whether we add 1 and 5 and get 6 with Arabic numerals or add I and V and get VI in Roman numerals, the validity of the quantitative inference is irrelevant to the symbols representing it, and I know of no culture that has ever got a different sum for 1 plus 5. But that aside, note the blatant self-assumptive incoherency of Spengler's claim that there is more than one arithmetic because there is more than one culture: he must use the concept of number ("one") in order to express his claim. So while his claim says that all number concepts are culturally relative, at the same time he also claims to know it is factually true that there is more than one culture!

A similar fate befalls his claim that we cannot know physical reality but only the history of physics. How does he know there are other cultures? How can he know they have distinct histories? Isn't it because physical cultural artefacts and documents have been unearthed? Isn't it because his physical body can travel through space to other places and observe physical houses, roads and clothing, as well as reading the writings of those who live there? But how can he know those things if there is no knowledge of physical objects distinct from his own culturally determined thought?

It is worth noting at this point that historicism also commits a third incoherency which is perhaps more subtle and apt to be overlooked. In addition to being self-referentially and self-assumptively incoherent, the theory is also self-performatively incoherent.⁴ This means that it is

4 These three incoherencies are explained and illustrated in more detail in my book, *The myth of religious neutrality* (Clouser 1991: 68 ff).

incompatible with either a state or an activity of the thinker that is needed to form it. To borrow and recast a Marxist expression, the theory is incompatible with “the means of its production”. The activity in question is the act of abstraction required to differentiate the historicist standpoint for interpreting experience and knowledge from all other rival standpoints. Historicists readily acknowledge that there are rival standpoints, of course, and are at one in rejecting them. Such alternative candidates for the basic nature of experience and knowledge include numbers and their relations (Pythagoras); ideal forms (Plato, Aristotle); physical matter (Hobbes, Smart, Churchland); clear and distinct ideas (Descartes); feelings and sensations (Berkeley, Hume, Mill), and sensory forms plus logical categories (Kant), to mention but a few.

The standard strategy employed by epistemological theories has been to defend a candidate for the essential nature of knowledge in one of two ways. The first is to argue that all knowledge is identical to the kind favoured by the theory, so that there really are no rival candidates. The second allows that there are other kinds of knowledge but argues that the kind of knowledge favoured by the theory is the one on which all other kinds depend. Logical abstraction is obviously indispensable to both forms of this strategy since it is the activity by which the various aspects of experience are distinguished, and thus a precondition for identifying any of them as the sole or basic nature of knowledge. Historicism is no exception to this. From the wealth of all we experience and seem to know, historicism abstracts and postulates culture-forming as the key to understanding it all, and defends that selection by arguing that all its possible rivals are either identical to history or dependent on it.

It appears, however, that the very process of abstraction is incompatible with any claim that all knowledge has only a cultural character, so that the first form of the standard strategy is self-performatively incoherent. This is because it makes no sense to claim that all experience and knowledge are identical to history when the very activity of abstracting it shows there is more to our initial experience than just its historical aspect. If not, from what was culture-formation abstracted? From a purely descriptive standpoint, the objects of experience seem to exhibit many kinds of properties and laws other than the historical, and we seem to have knowledge that corresponds to each kind. For example, we seem to have knowledge of such kinds of properties and laws

as quantitative, spatial, physical, biotic, sensory, logical, historical, economic, aesthetic, and ethical. How could all these be nothing more than the power to form culture if that power can be abstracted and distinguished from them? To put the same point another way: how could anything have a history if everything is history? It appears, then, that historicism could only be plausible in its second form: it would have to argue that while experience and knowledge are multiform, the other kinds of knowledge depend entirely on the historical kind, while the historical does not depend on them.

This hope, however, turns out to be vain. For the act of abstraction needed to distinguish any kind of knowledge as basic to all other kinds is as incompatible with this second form of the strategy as it was with the first. Since the heart of the second form is to show that one kind of knowledge is independent of all others, the claim suggests an obvious experiment in thought: if a particular kind of knowledge is supposed to be independent of all other kinds, let us try to conceive of it in that way. For if we cannot so much as frame the idea of a particular kind of knowledge as independent of all others, then we certainly cannot justify the claim that all the others depend on it. So let us now try to abstract the historical process itself and conceive of it in total isolation from all the other ways of experiencing and knowing. When I try this I find that once we really strip from our idea of history every reference to quantity, space, matter, life, sensation, logic, language, social relations, and values, there is literally nothing left. There is nothing which could have a history, so the very idea of “historical process” itself loses all meaning (cf Dooyeweerd 1997: 209 ff, esp 229).

But if this is right — if we cannot so much as conceive of the historical process and historical knowledge apart from the other kinds of knowledge — how can it be argued that it is really independent of the rest? How can it be shown that the “continuity of the creative force” is the fact to which all (other) beliefs are to be relativised? Once again, it appears that any justification for such a claim would have to appeal to other kinds of knowledge; kinds historicism says do not correspond to reality!

I conclude, therefore, that historicism is self-performatively incoherent in addition to being self-referentially and self-assumptively incoherent. Moreover, these incoherencies appear to lie at the heart of

the historicist claim and do not merely attack dispensable aspects of it or angles peculiar only to a particular version of it. Consequently, I conclude further that historicism fails as an epistemology. It needs to be an exception to its own claim, may only be defended by arguments that assume beliefs incompatible with that claim, and cannot justify the status it confers on the culture-forming power, owing to the very activity of abstraction needed to distinguish that power in the first place. For these reasons, historicism's claim to have found that the essential nature of all knowledge is historical is destroyed. We cannot have any ground for taking it to be either the only kind of knowledge or the kind on which all other forms of knowledge depend.

3. Can pragmatism save historicism?

In recent years Richard Rorty has urged that pragmatism can be combined with historicism in a way that provides a fuller account of knowledge than either can do alone. He thinks that by forgoing any attempt to determine truth, and substituting the idea of what is practically beneficial, pragmatism corrects what has been wrong with philosophy and science from their inception. This leads him to reassert the non-correspondence thesis in a stronger form. Whereas, for Dilthey, no statement can be known to correspond to reality except that of historicism, Rorty (1982: xvi, xvii) extends the claim to every statement:

For the pragmatist, true sentences are not true because they correspond to reality, and so there is no need to worry about what sort of reality, if any, a given sentence corresponds to — no need to worry about what 'makes' it true [...] He drops the notion of truth as correspondence with reality altogether, and says that modern science does not enable us to cope because it corresponds, it just plain enables us to cope.

Thus:

There is no method for knowing when one has reached the truth, or when one is closer to it than before (Rorty 1982: 165, 166).

In conjunction with the pragmatist substitution of usefulness for truth, Rorty also advocates what he calls the "ubiquity of language". By this he means two things: that language is entirely our own creation, and that we experience and know only what language makes possible. He says:

The ubiquity of language is a matter of language moving into the vacancies left by the failure of all the various candidates for the position of 'natural starting-points' of thought, starting-points which are prior to and independent of the way some culture speaks or spoke (Rorty 1982: xx).

In this connection he cites with approval thinkers he calls "prophets of the ubiquity of language" who make such remarks as: "Human experience is essentially linguistic" (Gadamer), and "... all awareness of abstract entities — indeed even of particulars — is a linguistic affair" (Sellers) (Rorty 1982: xx). At even greater length he quotes Peirce's assertion that

... man makes the word, and the word means nothing that the man has not made it mean [...] But since man can think only by means of words or other external symbols, these might turn around and say: You mean nothing we have not taught you (Rorty 1982: xx).

The consequence of this is clear, says Rorty (1982: xli): in this view,

... criteria are seen as [...] temporary resting-places constructed for specific utilitarian ends. On the pragmatist account, a criterion (what follows from the axioms, what the needle points to, what the statute says) is a criterion because some particular social practice needs to block the road of inquiry, halt the regress of interpretations, in order to get something done.

Thus, there can be:

... no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions (Rorty 1982: xlii).

To accept such a radical view is no easy task, as Rorty (1982: xxxix) admits:

Can the ubiquity of language ever really be taken seriously? Can we ever see ourselves as never encountering any reality except under a chosen description [...] as making worlds rather than finding them?

It should be clear even from these brief comments that Rorty thinks historicism can succeed by appealing to pragmatic needs as the motivating reasons for culture creation, and to language as the means by which the creation is accomplished. So, while the first part of his position reasserts the old pragmatist claim that the notion of truth is to

be replaced by that of usefulness, the latter part takes the form of a hypothetical syllogism about language: if all we ever experience and know is determined by language and if language itself is our own creation, then all we ever experience and know is our own creation.

Let us examine the argument about language first. The first premise of the argument is what Rorty calls the “ubiquity of language,” which he expresses by the phrase “language goes all the way down”. There are, I think, good reasons to suppose this claim is false. Take, for example, a case in which you and I are in the woods collecting mushrooms. You have explained to me how to tell the poisonous ones from the edible ones, and we are picking only the edible ones and putting them into a basket. The whole while, however, we are discussing Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony so that our language exchange is completely occupied with the innovative nature of that composition — say, its introduction of trombones in the last movement. The fact that this is possible shows that I have acquired a logical concept of the difference between edible and non-edible mushrooms that is not identical with words, and that I am employing that concept while engaging in a linguistic exchange about something entirely different. I am not thinking of the difference between the mushrooms in language; I do not have two conversations running simultaneously — one public and the other private. Rather, I am not thinking any words whatever about the mushrooms, though I am recognising their differences by perceiving them under the guidance of a new logical concept.

There are other examples as well. If I invent a new tune, for example, and compose an accompaniment for it, that does not require me to think in words at all. The tune and its harmonisation depend upon my logically discriminating pitches and conceiving of their arrangement, but not upon my thinking any words. Notice that I am not saying that mushroom selection or tune invention cannot be represented or discussed linguistically. These, like all human activities, have a linguistic aspect to them. However, they also have a nonlinguistic side, which does not depend entirely on language to be experienced.

Thus the claim that language creates our experience appears false. But more than that, it appears incompatible with pragmatism. For how can language create our experience if it was itself invented to satisfy pragmatic needs? Wouldn’t we have to experience and know at least

some of the needs of life in order to develop a language that could deal with them? Or are we to believe that there really are no poisonous or edible mushrooms — that this is only a creation of our language? Don't we learn to discriminate the difference and embody it in language because we've already found that ingesting some mushrooms can prove fatal? More than that: wouldn't people have to have experienced things already, in order to think of the very idea of representing them symbolically? The point is that the central claim of pragmatism — the idea of substituting pragmatic value for truth — presupposes the priority of experience and logical thought to language. For how could people know what their pragmatic needs were, unless they had already experienced them and formed concepts and beliefs about them? And how could they know themselves to be happier with one way of meeting those needs than with another, unless they had experienced and known their own internal states? But in that case, knowing such things would have to have preceded the formation of ways to preserve or alter them, and thus preceded the creation of language as one of those ways.

What is more, both the pragmatic claim and that about the ubiquity of language appear incompatible with Rorty's non-correspondence thesis which claims we are totally unable to know that any belief ever corresponds to reality. (This is aside from the fact that the non-correspondence claim is also self-referentially incoherent since it is supposed to correspond to the real nature of our selves and our experience!) For if nothing we can affirm may be said to correspond to reality, then the ubiquity of language cannot be said to do so, and neither can pragmatism. Rorty himself says that pragmatic value consists in a belief or action making us "happier than we now are". But if we cannot know any statement to correspond to reality, we cannot ever know that we are happy, how happy we are, or how our present happiness compares to that of any other time. Thus the non-correspondence claim is not only incompatible with pragmatism and with the ubiquity of language, but simply appears false: are we really to believe that we may never know our own internal states? Don't I even know that I feel happy or that I feel a pain in my left knee, for example? (How could I possibly be wrong about such things?) Nevertheless, Rorty appears to believe that the ubiquity of language and the non-correspondence thesis support both each other and pragmatism, which in turn supports historicism!

Given the internal quicksand which this theory creates for itself, one is left to wonder what could induce Rorty or anyone else to hold it. How could it possibly be defended? One possible answer might be that this approach is a matter of intuitive insight rather than argument, so that one either sees it or one does not. Interestingly, Rorty flatly rejects this possible defence in his comments on the role of intuition in the debate between himself and the realist. He says:

What really needs debate between the pragmatist and the intuitive realist is not whether we have intuitions to the effect that truth is more than assertability [etc]. Of course we have such intuitions. How could we escape having them? We have been educated within an intellectual tradition built around such claims [...] But it begs the question between the pragmatist and realist to say that we must find a view which 'captures' such intuitions. The pragmatist is urging that we do our best to stop having such intuitions, that we develop a new intellectual tradition.

What strikes intuitive realists as offensive about this suggestion is that it seems as dishonest to suppress intuitions as to suppress experimental data [...] This view [...] presupposes either that, contrary to the prophets of the ubiquity of language, language does not go all the way down, or that, contrary to appearances, all vocabularies are commensurable. The first alternative amounts to saying that some intuitions, at least, are not a function of the way one has been brought up to talk, of the texts and people one has encountered (Rorty 1982: xxx).

Here we hit a bedrock metaphysical issue: can one ever appeal to non-linguistic knowledge in a philosophical argument? [...] That is just the issue about the status of intuitions which [...] is the real issue between the pragmatist and the realist (Rorty 1982: xxxvi).

There are no fast little arguments to show that there are no such things as intuitions — arguments which are themselves based on something stronger than intuitions. For the pragmatist [...] the only argument for thinking that intuitions [...] should be eradicated is that the intellectual tradition to which they belong has not paid off, is more trouble than it is worth, has become an incubus [...] A dogmatism of intuitions is no worse, or better, than the pragmatist's inability to give non-circular arguments (Rorty 1982: xxxvii).

The surprise here is that instead of saying that the realist has one set of intuitions while he has another, Rorty speaks as though only the realist has them, while he has liberated himself from them! Thus it is only fair to point out that not only has Rorty left himself no other ground for his historicistic pragmatism as a whole, but that he still appeals to specific intuitions in giving this account of his position. For example, he claims that it would "beg the question" if the realist were

to insist that the job of philosophy is to “capture” our intuitions. But what is wrong with begging the question? Is it wrong because it results in an invalid argument according to the rules of logic? Are not such rules themselves grasped intuitively? (Surely they are not the conclusions of inferences!) It seems, then, that Rorty’s position is not one of eschewing all intuitions and relying only on pragmatic needs in a language-created world. Rather, it is one of accepting his own intuitions about pragmatism and the ubiquity of language.

What is worse in this connection is that it appears that Rorty reserves the intellectual right to appeal to intuitions about logic when it suits him, while denying those same principles to realists whenever this suits him. In fact, this tactic recurs frequently in the form of attempts to defend the “ubiquity of language” thesis not by appealing to its pragmatic usefulness, but by appealing to “facts” — facts which could not be known to be facts if the theses on the ubiquity of language and non-correspondence were true. Even as seemingly unobjectionable a statement as the following does this. The intuitive realist

... may say [...] that language does not go all the way down — that there is a kind of awareness of facts which is not expressible in language and which no argument could render dubious (Rorty 1982: xxxv).

This is part of Rorty’s argument that no one can point to any awareness of anything that is not linguistically determined, and that he can render doubtful any attempt to do so. But note that it assumes that he can, after all, know what he and others are saying in reality, and that his knowing what is being said is not wholly determined by his language, nor accepted as such merely because he prefers to think it will make him happier to do so.

Nor is the rest of the quotation above something we should let Rorty get away with. Why would the intuitive realist have to say what Rorty ascribes to him in order to deny that language “goes all the way down” (creates our experience)? Why should we think that to believe that perceptions and concepts are preconditions for the development of language would imply that our experience of the world around us need be both inexpressible and infallible? Whoever seriously believed perception to be infallible? And why would the realist have to think so in order to hold that language reflects rather than creates the world? Why, in order to hold that there is a nonlinguistic side to our awareness of facts, would

a realist have to say that what is known in that way must be “inexpressible in language?” What we experience by means of normal perception, for example, appears to be just such a direct awareness of facts, an awareness that has non-linguistic aspects as well as a linguistic aspect. Isn't that the whole point of language: that it can and does represent and express symbolically the non-linguistic sides of experience? Besides, don't animals also perceive the world around them? Don't they manage that without language? Or are we really to believe that animals and their behaviours are merely products of the way we have chosen to speak — that we cannot really know there are such beings at all?

At times Rorty seems bent on holding his position in just such an extreme form, a form requiring that all our experience be no more than an internal virtual reality show programmed by our language:

... the only intuition we have of the world determining truth is just the intuition that we must make our new beliefs conform to a vast body of platitudes, unquestioned perceptual reports and the like (Rorty 1982: 13, 14).

... the time may have come to recapture Dewey's 'naturalized' version of Hegel's historicism. In this historicist vision, the arts, the sciences, the sense of right and wrong, and institutions of society are not attempts to embody or formulate truth or goodness or beauty. They are attempts to solve problems — to modify our beliefs and desires and activities in ways that will bring us greater happiness than we now have (Rorty 1982: 16).

Dewey thought that if scientific inquiry could be seen as adapting and coping rather than as copying [...] we would be receptive to notions like Derrida's — that language is not a device for representing reality, but a reality in which we live and move (Rorty 1982: 86, 87).

Taken thus unnuanced, and as the whole story, this view seems to be as internally incoherent as anything one could imagine. Once again: how could language and science arise as tools for solving problems unless problems were already logically distinguished and conceived? How could we judge what would make us happier than we are, unless at least some concepts correspond to reality?

But perhaps Rorty does not mean this extreme form of historico-pragmatism to be taken in this unnuanced way and as the whole story. At times he seems to back away from that position and actually concede that language does not “go all the way down.” For example:

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The great fallacy of the tradition, the pragmatists tell us, is to think that the metaphors of vision, correspondence, mapping, picturing, and representation *which apply to small routine assertions* will apply to large and debatable ones (Rorty 1982: 164, my emphasis).

The way in which a properly programmed speaker cannot help believing that the patch before him is red has no analogy for the more interesting and controversial beliefs which provoke epistemological reflection (Rorty 1982: 165).

This may be a step in the right direction, but it is unclear how it is to be related to the more frequently made claims that all is historically relative (in which case, so is this very concession); that language creates our experience (with which this concession is inconsistent); that no belief can be known to correspond to reality (with which this concession is also inconsistent), and that all beliefs are held only on the grounds of pragmatic usefulness (with which, again, this concession is inconsistent).

In any case, how could this weaker version of his claims be defended? Is it not just as self-referentially incoherent as the stronger version? For example, why should we think that it is only our large-scale theories that are determined by our language, when this claim is itself part of his large-scale theory? Does not the weaker version still insist that large-scale controversial theories cannot ever be known to correspond to reality? And why, then, should we adopt a pragmatic view of the whole of life when that is also a large-scale epistemologically controversial belief and not one of the “small routine assertions” which he concedes may be immune from the radical relativism which he otherwise advocates?

Finally, let us consider one last example of the way in which non-historical knowledge is smuggled into the discussion and taken to correspond to reality. Rorty (1982: 166) says:

There is no method for knowing when one has reached the truth, or when one is closer to it than before [...] If we give up this hope [...] we may gain a renewed sense of community. Our identification with our community [...] is heightened when we see this community as ours rather than nature's; shaped, rather than found; one among many which men have made. In the end [...] what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right.

Notice that these remarks take as more than a linguistic convention, and as corresponding to reality, the fact that we are “huddled against the dark” (even though it starts by saying we can never know we have

any truth). This I take to be a reference to all that is life-threatening. If that is right, then another one of Rorty's intuitions is that the basic facts of biology are not merely products of our linguistic construction, not just "stories we tell ourselves". We really do need air, food, water, and shelter. We really do die. And our survival really does depend on mutual co-operation. In this respect his view is a continuation of Dewey's pragmatism in which biology is accorded both ontological and epistemological primacy. So Rorty (1996: 38) counts himself among the pragmatists who "... start with a Darwinian account of human beings as animals doing their best to cope with the environment — doing their best to enjoy more pleasure and less pain".

The epistemological issue here is obvious: how can we know to pick biology and enshrine it as reality but deny the same status to physics? Why does biology but not mathematics correspond to reality? By what criterion can we claim it is correct to account for knowledge by biological "stories" but not by stories about the covenants of God? There are three reasons why the answer cannot be the traditional pragmatic one: "it works". First, the claim that language makes our experience and concepts — along with the non-correspondence thesis — undermines the claim that our tool-making is subsequent to, and dependent on, a direct encounter with our environment. Secondly, Rorty said that all criteria are our own inventions in order to get done something we want done. In this case the pragmatic criterion, too, will be his own arbitrary invention created in order to bring him "greater happiness" than he would otherwise have. And thirdly, any attempt to show that his view really has practical advantages will also require many non-biological beliefs to be taken as corresponding to reality in order to establish its advantages.

I conclude, therefore, that Rorty's four main theses — pragmatism, the ubiquity of language, the non-correspondence thesis, and historicism — far from being mutually supportive, are related in such a way that if any of them is true, the others cannot be. If pragmatic usefulness is a genuine criterion for belief and action, then what we believe about it must correspond to reality and be more than a linguistic convention or it could not supply our most basic survival needs. At the same time, if pragmatic usefulness is the genuine guide to all thought and belief, it would have to be so for the development of language as well — in

which case language could not be the entity that forms all experience and creates all concepts. At the same time, if language does create all concepts, then historicism itself is no more than a linguistic convention, and no supposed pragmatic value may correspond to any real need. Meanwhile, if the non-correspondence thesis is taken seriously then any claim to pragmatic value, the ubiquity of language, or historicism fails to be the way things really are independent of language.

I therefore find that Rorty has failed to rescue historicism from its inherent incoherencies. Its central claims are still self-referentially, self-assumptively, and self-performatively incoherent, while Rorty's additions to them only compound these difficulties by being mutually inconsistent.

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