TWO DOGMAS OF RORTY'S PRAGMATISM

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Abstract: Here I discuss two controversial distinctions that have an essential role in Rorty's pragmatism: the distinction between descriptive and normative discourses, and the distinction between the private and public dimensions of human life. Neither of them is Rorty's novelty, but the way he stresses them is unique. The first is a central presupposition of his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), while the other is the argumentative base of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989). I will argue that the distinctions provide metaphilosophical tools for Rorty's pragmatism, and that our stance towards the latter depends on the plausibility of them.
Keywords: Rorty; pragmatism; normativity; descriptivity; private; public.

Rorty's Pragmatism and the Philosophical Distinctions

As far as traditional philosophical problematic is concerned, Richard Rorty is famous for stressing the critical and non-constructive traits of pragmatism. For example, in an early article "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism" he describes pragmatism as "breaking with the Kantian epistemological tradition altogether" and the three ways he characterizes it are done in negative terms (see Rorty 1982, 160-6). Rorty's own philosophical position can be captured, as Ramberg (2007) does, in terms of antiessentialism, antifoundationalism and antirepresentationalism: characterizing the attitude of not willing to accept constructive efforts in regard to certain traditional philosophical issues. Antiessentialism says that traditional notions—i.e. truth, knowledge, morality, etc.—do not possess general traits to be open for a philosophical analysis. Antifoundationalism says that there are not 'foundations of knowledge', and that there is no need for seeking such things. Antirepresentationalism says that we should not view knowledge—or mind or language—in terms of having a representational relation to reality. These ideas, even though having a theoretical bias, have a tremendous effect on Rorty's views on varying subject matters in order to what he is able to say *as* a philosopher. The effect is mostly seen in his claimed 'antiphilosophical' views with which Rorty has been odd not just with his old colleagues within analytic tradition, but also with his simpatico readers within humanities and even with fellow pragmatists, who have raised doubts of Rorty's right for using the label of pragmatism.

If we look more precisely what does it mean in philosophical praxis to be 'antiessentialist', 'antifoundationalist' or 'antirepresentationalist' in a Rortyian sense, one way is to *withdraw* oneself for using certain philosophical distinctions as the base of one's contribution in a given issue. Rorty thinks that what Quine says in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (Quine 1953, 20-46)

is enough to abandon the use of the distinction between the truth by meaning and the truth by experience, and what Sellars says in "Empiricism and Philosophy of Mind" (Sellars 1963, 127-96) is enough to get rid of the distinction between the given and the postulated—the tenets once logical positivists took for granted. Rorty would also follow Davidson of "On the Very Idea of Conceptual Scheme" (Davidson 1984, 183-98) that the whole dualism between the conceptual scheme and empirical content is to be abandoned. In his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) Rorty writes off the moral of these critiques and draws the inevitable metaphilosophical implications. Rorty was—even though he claims just following the model of such "peripheral" thinkers as Dewey, Heidegger and Wittgenstein—first to draw the consequences what does it meant for a constructive philosophical enterprise for giving up such distinctions. By dropping the distinctions, and thereby denying their use, philosophy was working for a self-destruction[1].

The idea of giving up certain distinctions should not allow us to make the conclusion that one should go along without any conceptual distinguishing activity. Naturally this is not either the idea that Rorty is trying to argue for. Already in (1979) there is a distinction Rorty uses as a premise in his arguments. This is a distinction between *normative* and *descriptive* discourses—between, by using the metaphor he addresses to Sellars, and is nowadays familiar by the use of John McDowell (1994), "space of reasons" and "space of causes". In his later writings, starting in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989), there is another distinction that seems to enjoy almost a similar theoretical importance. This is the distinction between *private* and *public* spheres. Neither of these distinctions is any Rortyian novelty, but the way he stresses them, argues along them, draws consequences of them, is—I would claim—unique.

In what follows, I first introduce the use and of the scope of the distinctions, then discuss of their nature and of their relation to each other, and finally make few critical comments insofar as the use of them is related to pragmatist tradition. However, even though I reckon the distinctions being highly controversial—and in certain cases, difficult to draw—my discussion is not critically oriented, but to enlighten their *metaphilosophical* role in Rorty's neo-pragmatism.

The First Dogma: Space of Reasons vs. Space of Causes

The problem of the distinction of 'two spaces'—as is with the other as well—is the triviality of its content; what is difficult is to keep its moral in mind, and further, to really grasp and respect the extensions this insight would lead us into. Think of a case of court where a person is accused for a murder. A criminal act can be explained by, say, the use of alcohol or psychological or sociological reasons, but however this explanation, no matter how well it does enlighten the causal factors to drive the person to commit the crime, will never justify the murder itself. The causal story to be told of the cause that led to the act (i.e. alcohol, a social pressure) can never be used as a reason to make the act legitimate. Of course, certain 'causes' can be used as a means of the defence to make her client not responsible for the murder (he was 'out of his mind') but in this case these are brought in to discuss to be if the accused is a sane enough to be considered qualified to legal sphere of justified actions, not the justification of the act itself. Here the causal story is the one which covers the 'space of causes', while the discussion concerning the nature of the act, if it is justified or not and under what conditions, including the status of the causal story (disputed by the defence and offence in a court room) is that of 'space of reasons'.

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[1] This argument is examined in detail in my dissertation (Vuorio 2009).

It is basically the moral draw from such a situation Rorty applies in (1979) to a traditional framework of epistemology. The way to justify the correctness of particular beliefs goes by describing how those beliefs are acquired—a causal story to be told by in terms of 'theory of knowledge'. In this theory, a perception enjoys a crucial role—the empiricists would even make the claim that it should as a foundation for all the knowledge concerning empirical world. But as Sellars (1963, 1969) writes:

> In characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says.

Rorty takes the moral of the Sellars's hint of the *irreducible* nature of the epistemic discourse by interpreting it in thoroughly social practice account of justification. The result could be called a sort of 'Copernican Turn' in Epistemology:

> Explaining rationality and epistemic authority by reference or what society lets us say, rather than the latter by the former, is the essence of what I shall call "epistemological behaviourism", an attitude common to Dewey and Wittgenstein (1979, 174).

Applied to our example, the epistemically relevant is solely the practice going on in a court room; if the evidence is treated as valid or not, is up to the discussion by the lawyers (in accordance to the laws), and, finally, to the judges to judge. There is no other authority to appeal to ask justice to one's beliefs about the guiltiness of the person in question than what the court finally declares. Rorty asks us to change the intuitions of the nature of justification by suggesting the metaphor of conversation to replace the old metaphor of mirror, as he sees the traditional account of knowledge to be.

It might sound strange to claim that philosophers commonly have not thought knowledge in terms of concrete practises; more plausible is to think that the traditional attitude have been that this *cannot* be the *whole* story. We have an intuition that there is a truth, a matter of fact—no matter what a court decides—if a person *is* a guilty or not. Rorty (1999, 23-46) does not deny the existence of intuition of this kind, but does not put much weight for it. He does not either accept the pragmatic theory of truth in a sense that the notion of truth can be *conceptually* without a loss changed into Dewey's warranted assertability or to Peirce's and Putnam's justification in ideal conditions. He thinks, as far as knowledge goes, context-dependent justified belief is all we have—and of *it*, the pragmatic notion of warranted assertability is an adequate account. What he is up to is to remove unneeded pieces—the talk of correspondence to reality, and with it, philosophical realism of any kind, much motivated by the thread of epistemological sceptic—out of the picture. Rorty claims that all one can do is to take part in the practice; Putnam-like he thinks that there is no 'god's point-of-view' or 'view from nowhere' to the practice outside of itself. As his preferable formulation of the doctrine of pragmatism says, "there are no constraints on inquiry [i.e. scientific practise] save conversational ones" (Rorty 1982, 165).

But to really appreciate the moral of the difference between the normative and descriptive discourses—between (a) taking a part in discussion by accepting certain norms to be followed in order to have a contribution, and (b) trying to describe why certain event happens by the effect of the other one—is to draw metaphilosophical implications. Rorty's view is that philosophical problems are based on confusing these together, so seeing the irreducible nature of both realms resolves the traditional philosophical problematic. Now let us briefly look at the realms separately, how they are to be seen if treated on their own.

The realm of 'space of reasons' is trivial, open business, and does not provide a topic for philosophers to make theories about; philosophically speaking, there is nothing 'essential' going on—philosopher does not have more to say than what he might say in a court (that would not differ by nature from what other participants could say). The whole attempt to capture something essential or general of the whole discourse or practice would be an urge to provide a 'foundation'—go to the territory of 'space of causes'.

The radical feature of Rorty's antifoundationalism is seen by comparing his views to the thinkers who are relatively close to Rorty's own thinking. Like Rorty, Jürgen Habermas thinks that the open and free discussion is a necessary requirement for justified beliefs to arise. But Rorty thinks that making the requirement possible is a concrete matter, to be achieved by practical means. Habermas shares this attitude, but unlike Rorty, he feels that that this not enough; the requirement of freedom itself needs a theoretical base. For this Habermas (1984) constructs his theory of 'communicative rationality', for example, to justify the basic principles of democratic society. In Rortyian eyes, Habermas is a foundationalist and unnecessarily following Kant by thinking that transcendental approach—without turning into descriptive empirical stories—is needed (see Rorty 1989, 61-8). In fact, if we seek—*pace* Rorty—normative approach to the practice and resist the process of naturalization, it looks like the Kantian transcendental solution is perhaps the best there is (taking that 'stronger' metaphysical resources are out of our scope). For example, other influential neo-pragmatist, Hilary Putnam, can be seen using Kantian arguments to defend the irreducible notion of rationality in his classical "Why Reason Cannot Be Naturalized" (Putnam 1982, 227-47).[2]

There is not much substantive to be said of the realm of 'space of causes' either. If treated in terms of its own, this would mean to be 'naturalist' and 'historicist' in a rejected Rortyian sense (see Rorty 1989; 1991, 113-25; 1998, 290-306; 2007, 147-59); Rorty treats them alike, because both (1) address causal explanation, and (2) neglect any normative account (to capture in philosophical terms what should count as a 'rational reconstruction'). So the stories concerning 'the atoms and the void' are equal to the stories concerning people building up the societies, and learning new ways of using words, and there is nothing to be added to those what an empirical research might come up with. We can take these stories into a court room of space of reasons as a part of arguments used there but we can not treat them as premises leading to the conclusions to constrain the space of reasons. For example, Rorty's discussion of early modern philosophy in (1979) is a narrative of those causal conditions that drove the intellectuals of the day to think in a way that resulted in a form of certain philosophical problems that are still puzzling us today. It is a causal, descriptive story but also a contribution to the debate concerning the nature of philosophy, to be discussed in a 'court room' of metaphilosophy.

Over-all, the philosopher's role is to remind of not making unneeded philosophical remarks. The happenings within space of causes does not need a philosophical foundation not more than those within space of reasons. Most of his early contribution in philosophy of mind is based on making the doctrine of 'eliminative materialism' plausible by clearing out the unneeded philosophical problematic (cf. Tartaglia 2007, 13). Contrary, all forms of reductive naturalism are the confusing the spaces with each other.

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[2] See Pihlström (2003) to read 'Putnamian' pragmatism retaining the normative outlook by marrying transcendental point of view with naturalism.

The Second Dogma: Private vs. Public Spheres

If the idea of the first 'dogma' is easy to comprehend, this is even truer with the second one. But if the idea between private and public spheres is easy to grasp, its practical applicability and, further, where the distinction is to be drawn, proves to challenging—and if consider, for example, the token behind the contemporary feminism that "private is always public" it might be even impossible to draw; there is not area in human life that is free of a public significance.

Rorty, however, is convinced of its utility in clearing out traditional ethical and political issues. He introduces the 'firm distinction' in (1989) in order to make sense of two valuable human motivations—self-creation and solidarity—as two separate projects that seemed to be in odds with each other, and thereby to motivate to urge to capture them under the scope of one theory[3]:

> The closest we will come to joining these two guests [self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity] is to see the aim of a just and free society as letting its citizens be as privatistic, "irrationalist," and "aesthetic" as they please so long as they do it on their own time—causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by those less advantaged… But there is no way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory. The vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange (1989, xiv).

Taking the "necessary" features of these two urges, it is—a metaphilosophical theme familiar from (1979)—a confusion of philosophy (or any theoretical point of view) to think that they could be caught from one theoretical standpoint. Realization of this 'therapeutic' insight provides a (re)solution to many philosophical dilemmas. Rorty's advice could be formulated: try to think the issue as a project that is either (a) a private affair in which you are obliged to answer only to yourself, or (b) a public affair in which you are responsible for the others (see Rorty 2001, 91, 155, 202). The only problem is the criteria that distinguish the private from the public, but Rorty thinks there is a simple solution for it: the utilitarian principle, according to which, one can not cause harm to others. That's the *only* constraint the private sphere has. How the 'harm' is determined is context-dependent, and, thereby, a 'practical' matter.[4] There are 'mechanisms' to control the realm of the public as well—for example, in order to make it more just (not to oppress the marginal groups, etc.). In very last of his writings, Rorty (2007, 3-26) offers "cultural politics" for such role—to discuss what sort of things and terms are appropriated to talk about or to use in public sphere. This, once again, is a *concrete* issue, not to be confused with general issues.

It is interesting where the 'dogma' can be used. Originally Rorty talks the private as a home of 'self-creation', and gives it attributes like 'irrational' or 'aesthetic', a 'pleasure', such as enjoying the wild orchids, reading good books, whatever I am allowed to do in my free time—it is of liberal society to give such a room, and not ask for *justification* for it (a theme we will be soon talk more). But the realm of private is a home of different activities, and sometimes it is a

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[3] In his semi-biographic essay "Trotsky and The Wild Orchids" (Rorty 1999, 3-20) Rorty claims that the urge has also motivated his personal path in philosophy since childhood. It was not until (1989) he found the peace with issue.

[4] This is a feature Rorty is much criticized; see Horton (2001, 24). See also Conway (2001, 78, 85-6n) for good citations of the critique against Rorty's use of the private/public distinction.

sort of shelter, while other times more like garbage. In the first case, he takes poetry—the idea of creating novelties—to be a private affair. Even though there is no 'private language', one can treat language as a private matter; let it go holidays from the ordinary communicative and literal use, and thereby, within the safe of the realm of private is the realm of invention, a 'hatchery' of new way of words (cf. Shusterman 2001, 142). It is very close to distinction between 'thinking' as a private matter and 'speaking' as a public matter. The private realm is like a 'black box' where one can go to be on her own, do whatever one wants, and then come out with her ideas, of which she is *then* responsible for others. Conway (2001, 76-81) suggests that theoretical utopias, even non-liberal ones, could 'tested in private realm before presented to the public sphere where liberal ends are taken for granted[5].

Outside of our personal 'black box', we have other duties: that of being a good and a just citizen, that is, to be loyal to one's community and to spread solidarity. Strikingly, Rorty (1991, 35-45) takes scientific community as a paradigm of human solidarity where the "Socratic virtues"—willingness listening one's opponents, persuasion without violence, etc.—are most prevailing. Interestingly, in this sense, he gives credits to analytic philosophy of its style as explicit, argumentative exchange. Contrary, he locates continental philosophy, at least in his personal use, to a private affair as to excite one's imagination (if we view the clarity of Rorty's own pragmatism, he seemingly belongs to 'analytic camp'—and a part of it is to communicate the 'unfamiliar noises' to the community of different kind).

The public/private split offers also a means to take care of metaphysical issues. The questions of what is 'real', Rorty sees, should remain private issues: a private way of giving meaning to one's own life. From this base, Rorty (1999, 157) considers scientific realism analogous to religious fundamentalism as a private project that has "got out of hand" by insisting the others to share the private preferences. Rorty's dealing with religion (Rorty 2007, 3-26) is a straight-forward application of this approach: the core of religion, belief in God, is a thoroughly a private affair, and (even though he recognizes the social aspect of religion by describing religious communities as "semi-private language-games"). The exemplary historical case to confuse the private with the public is Scholasticism: a private faith was transformed into argumentative exchange by fixing Christianity with Greek Science.

It is also this context we can see the *epistemological* feature, and thereby its convergence with the other dogma, of the private/public distinction: as a private issue, theism ("God-talk") does not need justification—to be not 'irrational' by not having acceptable evidence—because all justification is a social, that is to say, a public affair. Thereby, the extensions of the notions of justification and public cover each other. Similarly, the belief on ideals like democracy or solidarity as a goal of one's life is 'unjustified' i.e. private matter, and this way, analogical to religious faith. In defined Rortyian terms, the belief on solidarity is 'irrational'—it does not need public justification (because anything to count as 'rational' is to be based on social agreement). Only causal things inside the realm of privacy—i.e. the causes to make me to more sensitive towards the strangers, for example, by reading good books—can affect into it. In this way the effect of private to public is indirect, and thereby, as Conway (2001, 79) suggests, the barrier between private and public is impermeable only in *one* direction.

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[5] The realm of private is also the realm of irony—an infamous approach Rorty (1989, 73-95) sees unsuitable for the realm of public that is lead by solidarity.

Dogmas and the Claim for Pragmatism

Both distinctions—or 'dogmas' as we call them—enjoy a similar metaphilosophical function: to resolve the old philosophical problematic, and, as we saw, they seem also converge. But few differences need to be noted: the first seems to be absolute distinction—justification is a matter of social practise, and never to be confused with foundationalism and causal explanations. The other dogma, on the other hand, is in a constant process of re-shaping; where the line between private and public is drawn is never fixed, but, as Rorty (2001, 202) says, "fuzzy"; it is relative to the context of how, for example, causing one harm is defined, or how one's self-creation might affect to change the amount of responsibilities to others. In this sense, if the first dogma is like stating a fact of the nature of human knowledge, the second is like giving a norm to organize one's life.

It is controversial if the dogmas have any tight connection with pragmatist tradition—namely it is difficult to find these from the texts of the classical pragmatists. It seems to be more like a co-incidence that Rorty, while having adapted such a lot from James and, especially, from Dewey, is marrying their ideas with them. Thereby, it is safe to say that the dogmas are especially *Rortyian* formulation of pragmatism.

Arguably, the origin of the first dogma comes from Sellars and Wittgenstein, and historically it can be traced at least to Kant (perhaps even to Hume). It could be actually identified as typical *neo*-pragmatist feature—if the difference between the classical and neo-pragmatist schools of thought is drawn in respect to 'linguistic turn'. It could be argued that the emphasis of language is a fruitful source to recognize the normative dimension of human thought (the feature seen in Kant, but it took Wittgenstein to really read it off). In fact, it is peculiar that one of the features Rorty's describes pragmatism in "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism"—over-coming the fact/value distinction, much stressed by James and Putnam—seems to be in a conflict with Rorty's first dogma. Rorty was never eager to maintain it, and on the base we have talked here, he could have been more vocal about it.

As far as the other dogma goes, it is difficult to trace it to have a constructive part not just in pragmatism but in *any* major philosophical edifice.[6] Insofar as the first dogma is epistemological insight in origin, the other derives thoroughly from the practical life itself and of its political discourses. It is almost a trivial, 'non-interesting' distinction in philosophical eyes. Rorty's efficient—and, no doubt, surprising—philosophical use gives it a whole new significance. It is not incidental that with this distinction Rorty (1999, 154) replaces James's distinction between intellectual and passion this very distinction as the base of his argument in "Will to Believe". With this move, he is shaking philosophical concerns with an insight nearer to the level of praxis, and in this sense, following the spirit of pragmatism.

Closing Remarks

It has been said that Rorty's pragmatism with its non-argumentative and dialectical style escapes criticism, but I hope my paper has made this task a bit easier. Whether we argue for or against Rorty's philosophical legacy, it seems that these two tenets are the ones we need to construct an opinion about; they constitute the core of Rorty's pragmatism. Calling them 'dogmas'—and thereby echoing the classical paper by Quine—is based on that there is no

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[6] Haack (1995, 138-9) claims that it is even contrary to fallibilist spirit of pragmatism.

proper argument to be found on Rorty to justify the use of them. Their use is justified by their applicability to clearing up philosophical issues. Outside this pragmatic justification, there is no argument to convince us for drawing them, so the nature of them is exactly what Quine (1953, 37) would call a "metaphysical article of faith", and I am sure Rorty would also see the irony here. Rorty would be first to recognize the unwarranted nature of these insights. We all have those 'blind metaphysical spots' with which we operate in the first place. In case of Rorty, the nature of blind spots, and of their unwarranted philosophical status, is more visible than in most of present-day philosophy.[7]

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[7] Rorty is also accused of using unwarrantedly certain dichotomies, such contrasting knowledge with hope, and this, surely is one 'Rortyian way' to make a point. However, the dichotomies are, as I see it, a rhetorical means or argumentative advice in providing a conceptual change—to describe the issue in a new way. The dogmas are more fundamental to his thinking.

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