Naturalizing Idealizations: Pragmatism and the Interpretivist Strategy

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Following Quine, Davidson, and Dennett, I take mental states and linguistic meaning to be individuated with reference to interpretation. The regulative principle of ideal interpretation is to maximize rationality, and this accounts for the distinctiveness and autonomy of the vocabulary of agency. This rationality-maxim can accommodate empirical cognitive-psychological investigation into the nature and limitations of human mental processing. Interpretivism is explicitly anti-reductionist, but in the context of Rorty’s neo-pragmatism provides a naturalized view of agents. The interpretivist strategy affords a less despondent view of constructive philosophical activity than Rorty’s own.

Let us say, with Quine, Davidson and Dennett among others, that a person’s language and psychological attitudes have their identities fixed with the theories generated by an idealized interpreter of that person (Quine 1960; Davidson 1984, 1986a, 1986b, 1989a, 1990a, 1990b; Dennett 1978, 1987a, 1991a). A reason for saying this is that it will help us see how the capacities to entertain attitudes and to communicate linguistically can be natural capacities, capacities we may happily attribute to creatures who fall squarely within the scope of evolutionary biology. This, at any rate, is Rorty’s principal reason. The interpretivist strategy permits us, Rorty suggests, to give an account of persons which introduces

    no breaks in the hierarchy of increasingly complex adjustments to novel stimulation — the hierarchy which has amoebe adjusting themselves to changed water temperature at the bottom, bees dancing and chess players check-mating in the middle, and political revolutions at the top. (Rorty 1991b, 109)

How does it do this? I will develop an answer emphasizing the naturalistic motivations of the interpretivist strategy, an answer that is also intended to
draw out and situate some of the commitments underpinning the view of philosophy that Rorty has worked out over the last thirty-five years (1967, 1979, 1982, 1989, 1991a, 1998b, 1999). While this combination of constructive polemic and metaphilosophical commentary makes for a long paper, the view of Rorty’s pragmatic philosophy that I want in this way to make vivid can be stated briefly. Rorty’s thought represents a dialectical transformation of naturalism. As he brings naturalism to bear fully on the project of philosophical reflection itself, Rorty finds himself fundamentally changing the requirements we impose upon our thinking whenever we seek to assume a naturalistic philosophical stance toward some subject matter. To appreciate the naturalizing capacity of the interpretivist strategy is to understand how Rorty’s naturalistic critique of philosophy alters the nature of naturalism itself.

There is an ulterior purpose behind this indirect approach to Rorty’s pragmatism. Rorty laments the tendencies toward “decadent scholasticism” of contemporary professionalized philosophy. (Rorty 1993a, 1995b) The response he advocates has been, on the whole, the complete overthrow of the vocabularies in which much contemporary professionalized philosophy is carried out. The vocabularies of epistemology, of content-oriented philosophies of mind and language, the vocabulary of meta-ethics, these are all, to Rorty’s ear, corrupt beyond redemption. However, it seems to me that Rorty would give up nothing of substantive importance, and indeed be better placed to reclaim some useful fortifications from which to combat the decadent scholasticism that he often astutely exposes, if he were less revolutionary inclined toward the historically developed vessels within which much philosophy is presently conducted. Rorty could afford, for instance, to be less reticent than he has so far been about invoking notions like ‘rationality’ and ‘norms of reason’. Now, the differences in the respective depictions of the concept of rationality in Rorty (1989) and Rorty (1999) indicate movement in the direction I would urge; the former is dismissive (e.g. 1989, 47), whereas the latter cautiously suggests that ‘rationality’ is a reconstructible notion that can be made to do useful work. I think the point generalizes to pretty much all the terms that in philosophical contexts arouse Rorty’s deep suspicions; “knowledge,” “truth,” “content,” and the like. As I see it, the best remedy for decadent philosophy is to conduct an aggressive campaign of pragmatizing reappropriation of just those terms that traditionally have been employed to express ahistoricist and essentialist conceptions of reflection. If this essay were successful it would lend illustrative support to this claim, and help pave the way for an invigorated, assertive, historically self-conscious brand of pragmatist philosophical reflection that I like to think of as Revisionist Rortyanism.