Introduction to International Symposium on Richard Rorty

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We introduce the articles in this special issue about Richard Rorty, as an intellectual and a person, on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of his death. Scholars came together in 2013 in Buenos Aires for a symposium to honor the memory of Rorty in the presence of former students, friends, colleagues, and scholars of his work, from Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Mexico, Norway, Peru, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, the U.K., and the U.S.

This issue of Contemporary Pragmatism is devoted to reassessing the figure of Richard Rorty, as an intellectual and a person, on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of his death. In May 2013 in Buenos Aires a diverse group of scholars came together for a symposium organized by Graduate Program of Philosophy and the History of Science at the Universidad Nacional de Tres de Febrero (UNTREF), which we had the honor to coordinate, along with Michael Williams, the invaluable help of César Lorenzano and Verónica Tozzi, and the support of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy (SAAP).

The symposium was an opportunity to honor the memory of the author of Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature in the presence of former students, friends, colleagues, and scholars of his work, from Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Mexico, Norway, Peru, Poland, Slovakia, Spain, the U.K., and the U.S. In a spirit that Rorty himself would have appreciated, also paramount was a critical engagement with his work and its importance both within and outside philosophy for nearly 50 years. This issue contains some of the contributions presented at the symposium and evidences the ongoing relevance of Rortian ideas and texts for a wide range of philosophical areas, including epistemology, political philosophy, ethics, philosophy of language, aesthetics, and philosophy of science, to name only a few. Rorty continues as a great heir of classical pragmatist tradition and its philosophical spirit of not being tied to fashion or committed to excessive specialization.

The articles that follow are organized into two sections, one directed toward epistemological issues, and one attuned to topics of practical philosophy, with emphasis on political philosophy, ethics, philosophy of history and the
links between literary and philosophical activity. What follows is a brief outline of the articles.

The first section opens with Richard J. Bernstein’s, “‘So Much the Worse for your Old Intuitions, Start Working up Some New Ones,’” the newest entry in the series of theoretical interventions that the author of Beyond Relativism and Objectivism has been developing since at least the 1980’s on the work of his friend and former colleague at Yale. This time, Bernstein focuses on Rorty’s critique of the foundational role of intuitions, as pre-linguistic entities that serve as epistemological givens and as basic beliefs that allow for resolving philosophical disagreement. Bernstein deploys his analysis of these critical arguments and resumes his interrogation of Rortian antirepresentationalism, which claims a needless all or nothing choice between two conceptions of rationality, an algorithmic one and an incommensurabilist one.

In “Rorty and Dewey on Warrant,” Ángel Faerna traces similarities and differences between the thought of Rorty and John Dewey, whose work was always considered by the author of Contingency, Irony Solidarity as an essential background of his project but with whom he also remained in disagreement on some specific insights. The text stresses the Rortian ambivalence with Dewey, but also emphasizes the nodal points of coincidence that both philosophers have about the concept of epistemological warrant. Faerna’s dialectical strategy is to bring both philosophers together through a questioning of Robert Brandom’s criticisms of classic pragmatism.

In “How to Be a Pragmatist Without Surrendering to Naturalism,” Eleonora Crespo presents the various ways in which Rorty is assumed to be a naturalist and draws attention to the possibility of reaching, from Darwinian premises, an uncritical form of naturalism that embodies serious difficulties for an account of the phenomenon of rationality from a first person point of view. Consequently, she defends the idea that there is a sense in which it is true that reason cannot be naturalized, and that it can be deployed from a pragmatist perspective perfectly compatible with Rortian antirepresentationalism.

In “The Experience Not Well Lost” Daniel Kalpokas questions the way in which Rorty sought to overcome modern Cartesian epistemology by abjuring the notion of experience. According to Kalpokas, Rorty makes an incorrect leap from rejecting the idea of experience as an epistemic intermediary to denying the possibility of a reconfiguration of that notion in order to understand that in experience there is direct contact with the world. He argues in line with McDowell that a view that considers the link between the subject of knowledge and the world as constituted only by causal relations introduces a number of paradoxes into Rortian pragmatism.

Aurelia Di Berardino’s “A Dialogue on Relativism: Rorty and Feyera-bend” deals with reconstructing the various ways in which these two philosophers have overcome the recurring criticisms they received that accuse them of falling into self-refuting relativistic positions. Di Berardino examines the Rortian ethnocentric strategy and the Feyerabendian anthropological output, and