Language and Its Discontents: William James, Richard Rorty, and Interactive Constructivism

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The discussion in this essay is the result of a dialogue between William Gavin and the Cologne program of interactive constructivism. First, we give an introduction to language in James and Rorty combined with constructivist reflections. Second, we provide an extended and deepened exploration of the relation of language and experience. Here we expand the discussion and also include perspectives from Dewey. Third, we draw conclusions to the important philosophical issues of relativism and arbitrariness as questions to which pragmatism as well as constructivism must give constructive responses.

The discussion in this essay is the result of a dialogue between William Gavin and the Cologne program of interactive constructivism. We indicate this dialogical structure by using abbreviations. We discuss the tension between language and experience as reflected in the works of William James, Richard Rorty and interactive constructivism. This involves an account of classical pragmatist and neopragmatist debates as well as a constructivist interpretation.

This essay draw attentions to the relevance of (neo)pragmatist approaches for understanding language in experience. A special focus in this connection will be on the limits as well as possibilities of linguistic expression. This double focus is likewise important for interactive constructivism. First, we give an introduction to language in James and Rorty combined with constructivist reflections. Second, we provide an extended and deepened exploration of the relation of language and experience and also include perspectives from Dewey. Third, we draw conclusions about the important philosophical issues of relativism and arbitrariness as questions to which pragmatism as well as constructivism must give constructive responses.

1. Language in James and Rorty – an Introduction and Constructivist Reflection

B.G. 1 Civilization, as Freud saw it, was rather a mixed blessing. It brought its own achievements, in terms of long term gain over immediate satisfaction, but
always at a price.\textsuperscript{2} Furthermore, it didn’t seem possible to return to the past, to nature over nurture, desirable as that might sometimes seem to be.

Language, for William James, was a bit like civilization was for Freud. That is, he could not live without it, and yet it seemed at least most of the time to sour whatever it referred to, to change or ossify reality. Percepts were turned into concepts, oftentimes replacing the “pure experience” he longed to expose and highlight. This resulted in a certain amount of “unhappiness” or “discontent.” Let us flesh this out in some detail.

William James did indeed seem to have a love-hate relationship with language. On the one hand he tells us that “Language is the most imperfect and expensive means yet discovered for communicating thought.”\textsuperscript{3} And again, he cries out “What an awful trade that of a professor is, – paid to talk, talk, talk! I have seen artists growing pale and sick whilst I talked to them without being able to stop.... It would be an awful universe if everything could be converted into words, words, words.”\textsuperscript{4} In The Principles he laments the fact that language is too sluggish and too atomistic in nature. “[L]anguage works against our perception of the truth. We name our thoughts simply, each after its thing and nothing else. What each really knows is clearly the thing it is named for, with dimly perhaps a thousand other things.”\textsuperscript{5} These negative statements tend to build in James’s work, and they have ontological implications. James lashes out against “vicious intellectualism,” which, he says, consists in the “treating of a name as excluding from the fact names what the name’s definition fails positively to include.”\textsuperscript{6}

How, we might well ask, did intellectualism become vicious? Is it an intrinsic property of concepts or language that it corrupts or distorts in the very process of being used? James’s answer to this question in complicated and nuanced in nature. He tells us in A Pluralistic Universe that:

Intellectualism in the vicious sense began when Socrates and Plato taught that what a thing really is, is told us by its definition. Ever since Socrates we have been taught that reality consists in essences, not of appearances, and that essences of things are known whenever we know their definitions. So first we identify the concept with a definition. And only then inasmuch as the thing is whatever the definition expresses, are we sure of apprehending the real essence of it or the full truth of it. So far no harm is done. The issue of concepts begins with the habit of employing them privately as well as positively, using them not merely to assign properties to things, but to deny the very properties with which the things sensibly present themselves.... It is but the old story, of a useful practice first becoming a method, then a habit, and finally a tyranny that defeats the end it was used for. Concepts, first employed to make things intelligible, are clung to even when they make them unintelligible.\textsuperscript{7}