

Contemporary Pragmatism
Vol. 11, No. 1 (June 2014), 57–68

Editions Rodopi
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A Dialogue on Relativism: Rorty and Feyerabend

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In this article, I first explore the strategies proposed by two authors to escape or evade relativism: Richard Rorty and Paul Feyerabend. I then present Rorty's ethnocentric position and Feyerabend's anthropological version, with the ultimate goal to evaluate pros and cons of both points of view. Are Rorty or Feyerabend escaping relativism, evading relativism, or are they *simply* offering us an uncomfortable dilemma?

1. Introduction

In contemporary philosophy, the charge of “relativism” is directed generally against any position that challenges canonical values of the tradition – namely, truth, objectivity, rationality. This paper explores the strategies proposed by two authors to escape or evade relativism: Richard Rorty and Paul Feyerabend. These two approaches to the problem of relativism are better understood following Hilary Putnam's criticism. If Rorty denies a kind of ultimate convergence of inquiry and Feyerabend supports the notion of incommensurability, then neither of them could admit the existence of rational discourse outside their own community without falling into paradox or self-refutation.

As we shall see, neither Rorty nor Feyerabend claim to be relativists in this specific sense. Both promote an alternative vision that is summarized in Rorty's ethnocentric position and Feyerabend's anthropological version. For Rorty ethics will be the basis of research, while Feyerabend supports the idea that every culture is potentially any other. Both authors assume that relativism is an epistemological position because it is associated with a certain way of understanding knowledge, truth and rationality. And to the extent that these authors discuss the relevance of these epistemic assumptions, both avoid the debate. Finally, I will present some problems with Rorty and Feyerabend's proposals.

2. Rorty

2.1. All that is solid melts into air

Throughout his work, Rorty struggled to dissociate his position from the charge of relativism. To illustrate his strategy, I have focused on two related arguments that explain why ethnocentric position is not relativism.

The first argument enforces the idea that pragmatism distinguishes between things that are worth talking about and things that are not. Broadly speaking, it is worth talking about research practices *here* and *now* which commit “citizens” to anticipate and create a better future. That situated discursive practice is not justified by appealing to ultimate reasons as foundationalist philosophies (Platonic or Kantian) do. Let us see how the argument goes. In *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Rorty writes:

Traditional, Platonic, epistemologically-centered philosophy is the search ... for the way in which one can avoid the need for conversation and deliberation and simply tick off the way things are.¹

This traditional philosophy works against democratic practices, and it avoids participation, responsibility and commitment. In contrast, according to Rorty, pragmatism implies acceptance of conversational rules. A pragmatist makes alliances with the community, not with nature. This alliance is a shared creation, not an encounter with something fixed or discovered. Loyalty is read in terms of loyalty to other human beings as William James wanted – that is, the challenge of partaking in human, fallible and contingent projects.

On this view, the conversational and community shift is not committed to timeless instances that support them. In a nutshell, this situated feature of dialogue is taken by the critics as a sign of relativism. For these critics relativism means that every belief is as good as any other. Is pragmatism a form of relativism? It depends. The ambiguity involves a confusion that Rorty discloses: the critics ignore the pragmatic difference between philosophical theories and *real* theories. Once this distinction has been made, we must ask, what is the difference? Pragmatists like Dewey and James are relativists meta-philosophically: the choice between rival philosophical theories – e.g., Kant vs. Plato – is impracticable and futile. You may be Platonist or Kantian because nothing is won or lost in this second level of purely verbal dispute. These discrepancies are merely philosophical attempts to justify some element of practices with something external to them. However, Rorty argues, this foundation does not play any role in the actual functioning of the practice in question. It is, ultimately, a contest between rivals not committed to *doing* but to an ascetic reflection about that *doing*. The game is very simple: you propose an epistemological view, then an opposite one comes up; you make some universal standards explicit, then these standards are discussed from a rival normativity.

The emergence of a foundationalist project implies the advent of another which is also foundationalist. For Rorty, this game is too simple because philosophical theories have no cost. Is there any work that qualifies as difficult for a pragmatist? Of course, explanatory theories formulated by scientists, or “the societies which developed the moralities and institutions in struggle and pain.”² These are the *real* theories and in building them, the Platonic or Kantian philosopher limits himself to appropriating and giving foundation to what was previously developed by others. We can draw an analogy between the philosopher criticized by Rorty and a Marxist idea: that philosopher behaves as the capitalist appropriating the surplus labor of others in order to accumulate “foundationalist” capital.

Needless to say, the pragmatists are not relativists as far as *real* theories are concerned. At this point, Rorty argues, “relativism” becomes most arguable since it applies to the product of *praxis*, which implies alternative cosmologies or political proposals. The emergence of concrete alternatives demands a discussion that does not appeal to categories or principles for resolution; it requires an analysis of the specific consequences that would follow from choosing one or the other. This idea of debate and elucidation of eventual actions evokes intuitions of common sense – as citizens we do not demand grounds *sub specie aeternitatis* to settle our views. We reshape our beliefs, change our minds, and intervene into a given community to which we commit. All the philosophical additions in the form of proven truths and abstract needs are what prevent philosophy from becoming nothing more than a laughing matter.

In a sense, being a philosophical relativist (or metaphilosophical relativist) does not need more clarification than those provided in *Consequences of Pragmatism*. However, being a relativist about *real* theories that *do* matter is a serious thing that requires a rebuttal. Why? First, because these theories involve human existence: the policies, the effects of technology on human lives can lead us to ruin or to improve our community. Second, because of Rorty’s intellectual allegiance to following the Socratic conversation. This conversation is the project that we are here and now. It is also an activity whose purpose lies in itself, not in the desire to find consensus at the end of the road. Consensus is a fundamental part of the conversation but not its purpose. The teachings of James and Dewey only amount to some recommendations to change our lives. Finally, all this is connected to the Rortian defense of democracy as a more important issue than philosophy. In an interview he said:

Philosophy seems to us absurd when trying to exceed its obligations instead of renewing the cultural climate and encouraging the growth of those institutions that would minimize suffering and would increase happiness. We should not miss the major critical theories more than we miss the great theological theories.³

2.2. "I have an option, Hilary: I want to be an ethnocentric guy."

The second argument combines two considerations: (a) the inappropriateness of the demand for an "objective subject-matter" in order to resolve contentious issues; and (b) the resulting choice between solidarity or objectivity. In an essay published in his *Truth and Progress*, Rorty tries to have a "friendly" conversation with Hilary Putnam. There Rorty discusses, among other things, Putnam's idea that the lack of the possibility of ultimate convergence corrupts Rorty's philosophy. Rorty attempts to prove that Putnam cannot get out of the trap of the couple realism/relativism. Eventually, Rorty avoids the trap by declaring himself an ethnocentrist but not a relativist.

Putnam and Rorty agree on a specific point – namely, that relativism and realism make the same mistake because both try to be inside and outside their own language at the same time.⁴ According to Rorty, ethnocentrism does not share the same pretension. Rorty says that to reform our standards of warranted acceptability we do not turn to a previous and independent standard. We simply consider that actual standards are better than previous ones. Putnam protests: Relativism! And he can do it because Rorty does not appeal to any "objective subject-matter" to settle which world is better, the possible world where the Nazis win and the possible world where they lose and we are reasonable. Rorty says, it is true, I cannot appeal to any objective subject-matter, but the internal realist cannot either. This situation is similar to one in which a species doomed to extinction wonders if it or the rival species deserves to occupy the disputed ecological niche. Could it appeal to an "objective subject-matter"? Our chances are reduced to the comparison of our current version of ourselves with the version of us in a future situation in which we justify today's reforms. Convergence is not an ultimate state of affairs independent of any community. We should think of it in terms of the future community which we will become if we insist. Does Putnam offer finally a notion of objectivity that allows overcoming these Darwinist instances? Rorty believes that Putnam fails in this. I agree. Up to a point, Putnam's search looks like the Platonic and Kantian epistemological quest that tries to find a basis beyond practices to avoid falling into relativism. Rorty suspects that Putnam is driven by the desire for objectivity – a desire that seems at odds with pragmatism.

Regarding consideration (b), this relation between desires and pragmatism was developed in *Solidarity or Objectivity*?⁵ There are two ways, Rorty suggests, in which human beings give meaning to their lives. We tell stories or describe a peculiar relationship to reality. In the first case, we tell the story of our belonging to a community in terms of our contribution to it. This exemplifies the desire for solidarity. However, the second description promotes understanding based on our relationship to a non-human reality. This denial of any relationship with a community represents the desire for objectivity, a desire that goes through the Western tradition and revolves around the idea of truth. Yet it implies the relentless pursuit of a timeless point beyond any temporal

corruption. This is called Reality, from Greek philosophy to the Enlightenment. The pragmatist's achievement is having proceeded the other way round: objectivity is reduced to solidarity. William James spotted this strategy when he affirmed that "truth is what it is good for us to believe." The definition *obviously* caused the realistic reaction and the consequent prosecution – that is, Pragmatism is Relativism.

The full scope of this Jamesian sentence further reinforces the difference between possible senses for the word "relativism." A first sense refers to the claim that every belief is as good as any other. The second sense holds that truth is an ambiguous term. Besides, truth is not separated from the justification processes so that these processes are the only thing we can evaluate. The third meaning considers the idea that there is nothing to say about truth or rationality apart from our descriptions of procedures of justification that a given society deploys in a specific area. This third meaning is the ethnocentric viewpoint of Rorty's pragmatism. Rorty says that it is not correct to call this "relativism." To be considered a relativist, the pragmatist should defend the thesis that something is always relative to something else, but:

He is, instead, making the purely *negative* point that we should drop the traditional distinction between knowledge and opinion, construed as the distinction between truth as correspondence to reality and truth as a commendatory term for well-justified beliefs.⁶

Why does the realist insist on calling this view "relativism"? Because:

he [the realist] cannot believe that anybody would seriously deny that truth has an intrinsic nature. So when the pragmatist says there is nothing to be said about truth save that each of us will commend us true those beliefs he or she finds good to believe, the realist is inclined to interpret this as one more positive theory about the nature of truth: a theory according to which truth is simply the contemporary opinion of a chosen individual or group.⁷

However, the pragmatist does not have a theory of truth, *ergo*, he cannot be a relativist. The Rortian strategy is revealed: provided that the pragmatist does not have an epistemology compatible with an idea of truth as correspondence, he has no relativistic version of knowledge. Rather, solidarity means a human cooperative project whose basis is ethical (neither epistemic nor metaphysical). A relativist must accept the realist arena – namely, he must accept that inquiry into the non-human nature of truth, rationality and knowledge throws light upon our problems. The relativist would be positioned as the reverse of this picture, arguing that inquiry into the nature of truth, rationality and knowledge suggests that all three are related: the subject, society, the instruments of inquiry, etc. However, the pragmatist refrains from passing judgment on the outcome of such

investigation. And this is not because the results are different from the realist and relativist ones, but because pragmatists believe it is irrelevant to our practices to discuss what truth, reason and knowledge are. Moreover, despite the realist and relativist efforts, the problems remain. What problems? Maybe, just one: the choice between solidarity or objectivity. Thus, realists and relativists are trapped in the same net of desire for objectivity and in this net one is the counter-face of the other. Pragmatism chooses to fish in other waters and it seems that it is sufficient that these waters are deeply ethnocentric:

To be ethnocentric is to divide the human race into the people to whom one must justify one's beliefs and the others. The first group – one's *ethnos* – comprises those who share enough of one's beliefs to make fruitful conversation possible. In this sense, everybody is ethnocentric when engaged in actual debate, no matter how much realist rhetoric about objectivity he produces in his study.⁸

That rhetoric (of the realist and relativist) hinges ultimately on a fear of the death of our community, the Nietzschean notion reminiscent of the idea of escaping from time and change. The ethnocentric viewpoint, in contrast, accepts contingency and therefore the finite.

3. Feyerabend

Hilary Putnam also fought against certain theses of another provocative author, namely the anarchist Paul Feyerabend. And it was Rorty, multifaceted champion of several fights, who attempts a defense of both: of himself and of the rogue Feyerabend. This attempt was made despite Feyerabend's self-description as a relativist.

The first step of Putnam's attack is to connect incommensurability to the idea that it is impossible to accept that other human beings (those who do not share our tradition) produce unintelligible sounds. Feyerabend cannot explain *why* cultures interact and engage in rational dialogue. Putnam proposes an answer: there must exist a minimum of rationality that runs through all cultures, thus reinforcing the thesis of ideal convergence on the truth. In turn, Feyerabend specifies his differences with the ideas of unity and convergence; proliferation and diversity are the cure for an ill-conceived rationality. In Rorty's terms, Feyerabend did something important, a romantic, poetic and hopeful attempt to transform present images of the world and of ourselves into something open, transformable and even dispensable. Rorty praises this move, but nonetheless criticizes Feyerabend for bringing Protagoras on to the scene again.

An old story holds that Otto Neurath declared to John Dewey, "I swear I do not believe in protocol sentences," in order to secure Dewey's participation in the *Encyclopedia of Unified Sciences*. I have my own story with Feyerabend as the first actor. In my story, Paul Feyerabend is having breakfast while

watching *Good Morning America* and thinking about what to say to intellectuals like Rorty. Paul says ironically, “Come on Rorty, I am not a relativist! I swear that was a joke!”

Intellectuals have very peculiar feelings and seem to think they are the only legitimate representatives of the human race, which in practice means being representative of other intellectuals... They are not scientists. They are not philosophers either, but may have undercover agents in that field. Thomas Nagel is one, Rorty is another ... This community began to show a slight interest in me, which means it raised me to their height, looked at me for a while and dropped me again. It made me look more important than I ever thought, it listed my faults and put me back to my place. That really confused me.⁹

Rorty, the undercover agent, dropped Feyerabend when the anarchist said RELATIVISM! But, in my opinion, this was the crucial moment when both could have taken the same boat. To account for this assertion I will concentrate on two arguments by Feyerabend that move in a Rortian direction. The first one is displayed in his book *Science in a Free Society* and the second is developed in a text from 1994, “Potentially Every Culture is All Cultures.”

In a discussion about how to relate reason and praxis, Feyerabend refers to an old problem – how to establish the primacy of one of the two. Traditional responses have ranged over the two extremes: either reason gives sense to practice, or else any established practice is the measure of its own functioning. Feyerabend proposes an alternative called “pragmatic philosophy.” It describes reason and practice as an interaction between traditions since Feyerabend thinks that reason is a tradition among others. This interaction is exemplified for example, in revolutions: “These [revolutions] have not only transformed the practices that they promoters wanted to change, but those very principles by which they sought to carry out the transformation.”¹⁰ When we confront an interaction between traditions, there are two possible kinds of questions: those posed by the observer, and those posed by the participant. The first refers to the subject of the interaction, offers an explanation of it and perhaps tries to formulate laws that apply to every interaction. Observers want to know what happens. They describe a life that is not theirs; their perspective seems, but only *seems*, objective.

The participant’s questions speak better to what praxis is. They refer to the attitude and taken by members of a practice or tradition “in the face of a possible intrusion (possible) from another one.” The participant intends to organize her life, to know how to react, and what actions should be taken when confronted with things that try to influence her. Pragmatist philosophy is the philosophy behind this attitude. This method is only possible if traditions or facts are viewed as temporary arrangements and not as definitive components of thought and action. The pragmatist is like a traveler who visits different

countries: in order to choose a place to settle down she must consider not only the details of each country but her own ability to change her expectations regarding what she sees. This process challenges her “nature,” or what is the same, her tradition could be disrupted in the process. In short, the pragmatist is participant and observer at the same time, a difficult and rare practice:

It is very difficult to see in perspective our beloved ideas, to consider them as part of a changing and perhaps absurd tradition. Moreover, this inability not only exists, but it is also stimulated as the proper attitude of those who are committed to studying the perfection of man, society, knowledge.¹¹

Religions are a brutal enemy of pragmatic philosophy because they consider themselves to be something outside the traditions that can act on them. Rationalism is another case, as it is a secularized form of the belief in the power of the word of God. Both religions and rationalism share the idea that there is something objective beyond all traditions. Reason and practice, in this context, are two things hierarchically ordered.

The idea of the existence of the “objective” is reinforced by the formulations of participant responses – e.g., “theories must be falsifiable” and “charity is good.” These linguistic expressions suppress reference to the individuals or communities that generated those responses as well as the hidden desires behind them. The participant attitude defends “objectivity” because she uses her tradition but she does not analyze it. This approach to objectivity proceeds unilaterally causing the separation of what is connected dialectically: legality and malleability. The idea that we can be both participants and observers implies, among other things: a) that traditions are neither good nor bad, they just are; b) the desirability of a tradition only becomes visible in the light of comparison with another tradition; and c) that a and b imply a Protagorean relativism in that it accepts a plurality of traditions and values but not chauvinism.

According to this view, Feyerabend is a political relativist but not a philosophical relativist. The difference is interesting because it is similar to Rorty’s ethical perspective. In a free society, Feyerabend assumes, equal rights should be granted to the different traditions that give meaning to people’s lives within a community. This claim is what he calls political relativism. It is a relativism that exceeds and surpasses the gap opened in Plato’s time between those who see everything in terms of truth and falsity, and other traditions (the old quarrel between philosophy and poetry). Political relativism is associated with a fundamental attitude – the idea of belonging to a relativistic society that promotes the granting of rights to its members regardless of the traditions to which they belong. Philosophical relativism, by contrast, is the doctrine that all traditions are equally true. “Nowhere in this work,” Feyerabend says, “do I defend this form of relativism.” Feyerabend holds that the judgment “Aristotle is

right” presupposes a tradition that could change and alter its judgment. After all, there are no objective value judgments; they have the appearance of being objective just because subjectivity is omitted. In a relativistic society interactions between traditions take place all the time; to appeal to objective criteria that are above those interactions is a meaningless rationalist claim. A free society means open interactions and this practice denies the enclosed order which is ascribed to incommensurability. This point brings me to Feyerabend’s second argument.

More than ten years after arguing in favor of a pragmatic philosophy, Feyerabend writes an article where he believes to have found an Archimedean point from which to dissolve the dispute between “objectivism” and “relativism.” The clue is a cultural collision between Homeric Greece and the Greek philosophers. The cultural interaction reveals itself when Achilles speaks about honor in the *Iliad*. Indeed, this case illustrates a crossroads of traditions: on one hand, the vast Homeric tradition that embodies social, cultural and conceptual wealth, and on the other, the emerging philosophical search for the essence behind change, culture and appearances. This interaction shows that the nascent Western culture finds its way from abundance to the conceptual poorness. But then again, the blooming culture opposed to the Homeric world was only possible through dialogue, not always friendly, between the two rival worldviews. And this new culture is also explained because, although the cores of alternative visions are incomparable, they are neither clear nor distinct. On the contrary, worldviews and their contents are ambiguous and therefore open. As Feyerabend explains,

If we abandon the artifice of closed domains, as advised by common sense, we must also abandon the artifice of precise meanings, since words and statements are ambiguous ... and they change depending on the situations in which they are used. The interactions between cultures, linguistic domains and professional groups are constantly occurring and, therefore, it is absurd to speak both of objective and of relative meaning within well-defined margins. Objectivism (and the idea of truth that accompanies it) and relativism pose limits that are not found in practice... Objectivism and relativism are chimeras.¹²

The differences between languages, communities, artistic expressions, theories, etc., only mean that these differences are related to situations that do not reflect unequivocal, clear and immutable cultural essences. Rather, Feyerabend argues, *every culture is potentially any other*.

The consequence of this hypothesis about the actual interaction between different traditions is twofold: first, it affects the actions that we will take when faced with murder, repression and torture; and second, it promotes reflection about philosophy. Regarding the first point, we are faced with the possibility of intervening in different traditions. Any intervention involves extended contact

with the culture which demands changes, like anthropologists do: taking into account the views of those who participate in that culture. Concerning the philosophical aspect, Feyerabend asks into the role of intellectuals in a free society, in case they can still claim any. And here his proposal is clear: once we put aside the attitude of the observer and her supposed objectivity, we must learn from those who actually are generating changes. This is something he had already said in *Against Method*: my place is on the side of worldviews creators: poets, playwrights, etc. And now he says that he must learn from feminism, theology of liberation, etc.

4. Conclusion

I believe that the elusive strategies of both philosophers have a lot more in common than it may seem at first glance. I also believe that both offer solid reasons to rule out the kind of relativism that is attributed to them from criticism. However, there is one point I want to emphasize here. It relates to the kind of residual problems that exist once the “objectivist” language is ruled out. As Feyerabend said, the acceptance of some kind of (non-epistemic) relativism commits us immediately to sincerity in our position. Since it is not possible to appeal to objective reasons as a further instance for judgment, we must recognize that the debate is contaminated by idiosyncrasies and interests. Rorty chooses to defend not only solidarity in the abstract, but his own culture in particular, a gesture that to Feyerabend’s eyes looks like part of the game of “relativistic” sincerity. The point is, in what sense does this attitude change, encourage, generate alternative conditions of existence?

On this point Rorty turns to empathy, but Feyerabend turns to the recognition of the equality between all traditions within a society, and to our disposition to be changed and not only to change others. At this point, the difference, if any, is subtle: Feyerabend insists more than once that pragmatic philosophy will necessarily lead us to be changed. Because there is no way to participate in another tradition without putting into question our own. Can Rorty say the same? Maybe not. Rorty thinks that the hope for a better future is the motor of change. Feyerabend appeals to the recognition of something above us which forces us to rethink otherness. For him, the results of anthropological inquiry and his own reconstruction of European culture show the fanciful and ideological side of our Western construction. After all:

Considering how much the cultures have learned one from each other and how cleverly they have transformed the materials thus assembled, I have reached the conclusion that every culture is potentially all cultures, and that special cultural characteristics are interchangeable manifestations of a single human nature.¹³

The existence of a human nature or “Being that can be seen in many ways,” shows the fortuitous features of our existence. We are, maybe, an anomaly in a sea of anomalies. But the sea exists. This last turn is not like Rortian contingency: Feyerabend has found a lifeboat to avoid strengthening the *Weltanschauung* to which he belongs. Rorty, I’m afraid, uses his own *Weltanschauung* as a lifeboat. Isn’t the boat too small?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is sponsored by the research program “The Reconstruction of Experience: Pragmatism and the Contemporary Criticism of Knowledge” (MINECO/Spain, FFI2012-38009-C02-02). I express my sincere thanks to Ángel Faerna and Chris Voparil for suggesting very valuable modifications to this work.

NOTES

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2. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
3. Richard Rorty, “Entre Liberalismo y Filosofía: Entrevista a Richard Rorty” interview with Joaquín Fortanet, trans. Manuel Bellmunt, in *Astrolabio: Revista Electrónica de Filosofía* (May 2005): 1–7.
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7. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
9. Paul Feyerabend, *Matando el tiempo* (Madrid: Editorial Debate, 1995), p. 140; Paul Feyerabend, *Killing Time. The Autobiography of Paul Feyerabend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
10. Paul Feyerabend, *La ciencia en una sociedad libre* (Madrid: Siglo XXI Editores, 1982), p. 15; Paul Feyerabend, *Science in a Free Society* (London: New Left Books, 1978).
11. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
12. Paul Feyerabend, “Potentially Every Culture is All Cultures,” *Common Knowledge* 3.2 (1994): 16–22.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

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