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## Richard Rorty:
## Our guide to a pragmatist organization theory

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# Our guide to a pragmatist organization theory

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# A brief introduction to pragmatism

Pragmatism is usually defined as a philosophical tradition in which words and thought are considered tools for prediction, problem solving, and action. Most philosophical topics – such as the nature of knowledge, language, concepts, meaning, belief, and science – are viewed in terms of their practical uses[1].

One of pragmatism's founders was Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), whom Everett (2019), among others, called "the American Aristotle" – philosopher, logician, mathematician, scientist, and eccentric polymath. He formulated what has been considered the founding doctrine of US pragmatism:

> Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the WHOLE of our conception of the object. (Peirce, 1905: 163)

The other "father of pragmatism" was William James (1842–1910), a US philosopher, historian, and psychologist. Between November 1906 and January 1907, he delivered a series of lectures at the Lowell Institute in Boston. These lectures were turned into a book, which James introduced himself:

> The pragmatic movement, so-called – I do not like the name, but apparently it is too late to change it – seems to have rather suddenly precipitated itself out of the air. A number of tendencies that have always existed in philosophy have all at once become conscious of themselves collectively, and of their combined mission; and this has occurred in so many countries, and from so many different points of view, that much unconcerted statement has resulted. I have sought to unify the picture as it presents itself to my own eyes, dealing in broad strokes, and avoiding minute controversy. (James, 1907/2004: 4)

In his second lecture, James presented a history of the idea of pragmatism. The term was derived from the Greek word *pragma*, which means action or its result (and is more concrete than *praxis*, though they share the same roots); it was first introduced to philosophy by Peirce in 1878 [2]. According to James, "[i]t lay entirely unnoticed by anyone for twenty years" (p. 36), until in 1898 he used it in a keynote address at the University of California in Berkeley. Then it spread, although the idea has long been known under different names:

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1  See e.g., https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pragmatism, accessed 21 October 2021.
2  My previous quote is from a later text in which Peirce is quoting himself, setting "whole" in capitals.

> There is absolutely nothing new in the pragmatic method. Socrates was an adept at it. Aristotle used it methodically. Locke, Berkeley and Hume made momentous contributions to truth by its means. (...) But these forerunners of pragmatism used it in fragments: they were preluders only. Not until in our time has it generalized itself, become conscious of a universal mission, pretended to a conquering destiny. I believe in that destiny, and I hope I may end by inspiring you with my belief. (p. 38)

After this modest introduction, James continued to explain "what pragmatism means":

> Pragmatism represents a perfectly familiar attitude in philosophy, the empiricist attitude, but it represents it, as it seems to me, both in a more radical and in a less objectionable form than it has ever yet assumed. A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action, and towards power. (p. 38)

James had already mentioned John Dewey in his lectures, though Dewey belonged to the next generation of US philosophers. Dewey (1859–1952) was a philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, whose ideas have been influential in education and social reform. In 1925, he wrote a text entitled "The development of American pragmatism", in which he so summarized the difference between Peirce and James:

> Peirce was above all a logician; whereas James was an educator and humanist and wished to force the general public to realize that certain problems, certain philosophical debate have a real importance for mankind, because the beliefs which they bring to play lead to very different modes of conduct. (Dewey, 1925/2007: 232).

It could be added that James was a much better writer than Peirce (obviously a family trait; he was a brother of Henry James) and was better equipped to propagate the pragmatist ideas.

Dewey, an educator himself, formulated a pragmatist manifesto of *active knowledge,* the basis of which was to oppose the idea of a quest for certainty, replacing it with "search for security (...) by means of preliminary active regulation of conditions" (Dewey 1929/1988: 231).

Richard Rorty (1931–2007) began his academic career as an analytical

philosopher, then changed his approach, even as philosophy had been changing. Like other popular philosophers, he met with many criticisms, including the suggestion that he was at odds with other pragmatists, and especially with Peirce. I agree with Giovanni Maddalena (2020) "that Rorty was a legitimate member of the pragmatist family", and I will continue to present him as such.

## Changing fashions in philosophy

At the turn of the 20th century, pragmatist school of philosophy was truly popular, to the point that some European scientists attempted to stop the "pragmatist revolution" (Lorino, 2018: 17). Emile Durkheim designed an entire course at Sorbonne entitled "Pragmatism and sociology" (1914), during which he primarily attacked the pragmatist understanding of "truth". Yet from the late 1940s to early 1950s, pragmatism seemed to be falling out of fashion and being replaced by the analytical philosophy, logical positivism and early Wittgenstein works. It needs to be added, though, that at the outset, positivism was perceived as being close to pragmatism (Gross, 2009).

Rorty started to study philosophy at the University of Chicago in 1949 and was on his way to becoming an analytical philosopher, but

> ...[a]s a scholar with broad training and interests, it would be his
> contribution to point out the thematic continuities and overlaps between
> diverse philosophical traditions, enabling philosophical investigation to
> reach a higher level of synthesis. (Gross, 2009, loc. 3,879)

One example would be Rorty's reconceptualization of empiricism. In its original version, as coined by Locke, developed by Hume, and inherited by logical positivists, there are no a priori concepts nor propositions: The world is knowable only via the senses. Their motto was *Nullius in verba!* (On no one's word). Yet as James (1890/1981) had pointed out, our senses reflect also that which is already in our thoughts and memories.

Thus, analytical philosophy suggested to replace the traditional empiricism with substantive empiricism, which permits the existence of formal *a priori* concepts, but only if they relate to the ways in which ideas interact (as in formal logic). Categorial *a priori* concepts are impossible, as they can be derived only from experience.

William James suggested a move towards a *radical empiricism*: The relationships between things are as real as the things themselves. There are no hidden connections that explain the world and that are inaccessible to experience. (Latour and new empiricists would agree.)[3]

Rorty responded with an idea of an *ethical empiricism*: "On everybody's words!", but:

> [It is] a mistake to think of somebody's own account of his behavior or culture as epistemically privileged. He might have a good account of what he's doing or he might not. But it is not a mistake to think of it as morally privileged. We have a duty to listen to his account, not because he has privileged access to his own motives but because he is a human being like ourselves. (Rorty, 1982: 202)

Rorty continued by saying that social scientists should act as interpreters – in order to facilitate a conversation between groups that do not have the same language. This postulate should be seriously considered by organization scholars.

The quote is from 1982, but pragmatists' ideas were already gaining ground again in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These did not include the entire oeuvres of James, Peirce, and Dewey, but certain aspects of their thoughts compatible with the analytical philosophy. And then came the "new pragmatism".

## The beginnings of the "new pragmatism": *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979)

This book begins with a provocative statement:

> … the notion of knowledge as accurate representation, made possible by special mental processes, and intelligible through a general theory of representation needs to be abandoned. (Rorty, 1979: 6)

What followed was a critique of the correspondence theory of truth – the idea that words can (and should) mirror things – a critique based on Rorty's claim that it is impossible to compare words with the things they denote:

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3        As James commented: "To avoid one misunderstanding at least, let me say that there is no logical connexion between pragmatism, as I understand it, and a doctrine which I have recently set forth as 'radical empiricism.' The latter stands on its own feet. One may entirely reject it and still be a pragmatist." (1907/2004: 5).

> ... to think of language as a picture of the world – a set of representations
> which philosophy needs to exhibit as standing in some sort of
> nonintentional relation to what they represent – is not useful in
> explaining how language is learned or understood. (1979: 295)

Words can be compared only to other words, so instead of wasting time on attempting the impossible – finding words that mirror reality – philosophers should try to understand how language is acquired and how it is possible that people can communicate with one another. The idea that a language can exist that more or less "corresponds" to reality was, according to Rorty, both superfluous and misleading.

The very division between "objective representations" and "subjective opinions" that makes part of the correspondence theory of truth is problematic. An object, by definition, cannot have opinions; only a subject can. Subjects can have opinions about themselves or about another subject, but in such cases the other subject will be an object of their opinions. Here Rorty, like the STS scholars after him (see, e.g., Latour, 2005 [4]), summoned grammar: What is a subject and what is an object depends on their placement in the sentence and on the context of the utterance.

Other concepts criticized in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* were "mental processes" and the very concept of "mind" as a mediator between things and words. The functioning of the body and its organs, brain included, still remains largely a mystery. Thus, the invention of the mind resulted in a duplication of things that need to be explained: not only the brain, but also the mind.

Yet terms such as "objective representations", "mind", and "mental processes" will continue to be used in common parlance, no matter what the pragmatists say. The pragmatists knew that, but they asked if these words worked. Did they help the users to understand anything, or did they complicate the complexity of the world even further? In his book, Rorty recommended a diligent application of Ockham's razor. It was Rorty's belief that myriad tables and equations lose the competition with one sentence by a talented writer, who, with this one sentence, makes readers believe that they understand all of life and the whole world.

The consequences of such reasoning would be revolutionary for all social sciences, but it was philosophy that was at the center of Rorty's interest. One of his targets in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was an ahistorical, universalizing, and privileged stance ascribed to philosophy.

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4        Rorty repeatedly stressed his agreement with many of Latour's claims, as can be seen in his review of Aramis, or the Love of Technology (1996), for example.

For him, philosophy must be relevant for individuals and for societies, and the road toward that goal cannot lead through the construction of hermetic vocabularies that are understandable only by trained philosophers. For him, philosophy ought to be a mixture of poetry and rhetoric, and philosophers should be intent on creating images and circulating them. Upon inspection, that creation and circulation reveal certain regularities, which can be called a genre. Adherents to that genre will strive after a pragmatic theory (view?) of truth and a therapeutic approach to ontology (in which philosophy can straighten out pointless quarrels between common sense and science, but not contribute any arguments of its own for the existence or inexistence of something). (1979: 175)

> Philosophy should not be offering ontological claims. (Nor should social sciences do it.) Whether the cat sits on the mat was an empirical question for Rorty, with the answer to be provided by observers. Philosophers cannot offer absolutist ideas about what is the truth; nor can they decide what should be treated as truth; they can only comment upon the way different people create knowledge about the cat and why they often disagree. The point is
>
> ... [t]o see keeping a conversation going as a sufficient aim of philosophy, to see wisdom as consisting in the ability to sustain a conversation,
>
> (...) to see human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately. (1979: 378)

Could there be a better definition of the role of social sciences in general and organization theory in particular? Yet *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was written mainly to differentiate pragmatism from the analytical philosophy. More distinct formulations of the pragmatist manifesto are to be found in later books.

## Clarifications and some re-formulations: *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982)

*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* caused both enthusiasm and dismay. Accusations of antirealism and/or relativism multiplied. In his next book, Rorty emphasized that pragmatism is antiessentialist but not antirealist. There is no "truth" to be found in an object, but it does not prevent anybody from creating realistic knowledge about it. The value of such knowledge will be tested in practice. The difference between non-pragmatist and pragmatist philosophies, Rorty argued:

> … is not one between "correspondence" and "coherence" theories of
> truth – it is the difference between regarding truth, goodness and beauty
> as eternal objects that we [5] are trying to locate and revel, and regarding
> them as artifacts whose fundamental design we often have to alter.
> (Rorty, 1982: 92).

Even if language and speech are important, they do not deserve a privileged stance within pragmatism. Speaking is a human activity among many other activities: "the activity of uttering sentences is one of the things people do in order to cope with their environment" (1982: xviii). As we say in organization theory, talk is a type of action, and there is no reason to differentiate radically between talk and other actions.

> Another division that the new pragmatism proposed to abolish was the
> one between art and science. Science can be seen as a literary genre,
> whereas art and fiction can be seen as research activities.
> In the end, the pragmatists tell us, what matters is our loyalty to other
> human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting
> things right once for all. (Rorty, 1982: 166)

Freed from the obligation of seeking the truth, philosophers can busy themselves with a topic of great important to themselves and others: solidarity. And we organization scholars could do the same.

## The three main notions in Rorty's pragmatism: *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989)

> In my utopia, human solidarity would be seen (…) as a goal to be
> achieved. It is to be achieved not by inquiry but by imagination, the
> imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is
> not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our
> sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other,
> unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more
> difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves. (Rorty, 1989:
> xiv)

In Rorty's opinion, greater human solidarity is the basis of all moral progress: "The view that I am offering says that there is indeed such a thing as moral progress, and that this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity" (p. 192).

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5    We = the philosophers. In many of his works, Rorty stressed that the use of the first-person plural is allowed only when legitimate – that nobody has the right to say "we", meaning "we humans".

Human solidarity means seeing others, despite their differences, as similar to "us", although only in certain key aspects, such as the ability to feel "pain and humiliation" (ibid).

Rorty added "certain key aspects" because he never claimed that all human beings share a common essence. For him, solidarity was "a matter of imaginative identification with the details of others' lives, rather than a recognition of something antecedently shared" (p. 190).

How can a striving for solidarity be combined with irony? In Rorty's version, irony is, in the first place, self-irony. After all, an ironist has "... radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she [6] currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books that she has encountered" (p. 47).

Ironists have good memories; they remember that they have not always used the current vocabulary and are therefore fully aware that even this one can give way to another – in time. They are well aware of contingency – like historians or cultural anthropologists, they remember the rise and fall of the old truths and humbly expect the same to happen to their truths. After all, there is no final truth that will disperse all doubts once and for all. Thus, the present vocabulary is the best they can – at present – find to talk about things that concern them. But they cannot defend that vocabulary by claiming that it is closer to reality than any other or that an external authority exists that can legitimize it. Once again, Rorty had to defend this argument – with a statement that is among his most quoted:

> We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out
> there and the claim that truth is out there. To say that the world is out
> there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most
> things in space and time are the effects of causes that do not include
> human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say
> that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are
> elements of human languages, and that human languages are human
> creations. (1989, pp. 4–5)

Although contingency and solidarity are usually accepted at present, the use of irony is still debated – in social sciences in general, and in organization studies in particular.

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6       When I read this sentence, I cried, because I understood that for all previous years, I had been reading English texts speaking of "man", "he", and "him" doing a constant if unconscious translation to a form that would include me into the collection of expected readers of the text. Unconsciously, I was harboring a suspicion that the texts were not meant for me. Especially the combination "female ironist" was still an oxymoron in the 1990s... (Author)

In his book, *Ironic Life* (2016), Richard J. Bernstein emphasized that irony is a tool or a technique that allows us to establish some distance from ourselves. At the same time, it allows us to ask ourselves critical questions about our entrenched beliefs and values. In doing so, we become aware of the illusions or delusions about what we believe is right, and, hopefully, gain a perspective that could initiate powerful internal changes.

At the end of his book, Rorty claimed, perhaps overoptimistically, that the present epoch is the first in the history in which many people would be finally able to distinguish between the questions, "Do you agree with us?" and "Do you suffer?" This optimism seems to have vanished or has at least been postponed by a century in the quasi-science-fiction story in Philosophy and Social Hope (1999). Nevertheless, he was always convinced that the purpose of life – for philosophers and non-philosophers alike – is to diminish suffering, not to search for *the* truth.

## Inquiry as recontextualization:
## *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (1991)

In a chapter with the same title as this subheading, Rorty suggested that the time had come to part from traditional hermeneutics, albeit acknowledging its enormous importance in the past. But now it is time to forget such dualisms as nature–culture and mind–body. Further, he expressed doubt as to "methods that should fit the study objects" and did not see as fruitful a division into "natural sciences" and "cultural sciences".

> By getting rid of the idea of "different methods appropriate to the natures of different objects" one switches attention from the "demands of the object" to the demand of the purpose which a particular inquiry is supposed to serve (…) For now one is debating what purposes are worth bothering to fulfill, which are more worthwhile than others, rather than which purposes the nature of humanity or of reality obliges us to have.
> (p. 110)

As to "mind versus body", he reiterated and developed his previous ideas:

> Think of human minds as webs of beliefs and desires, of sentential attitudes – webs which continuously reweave themselves so as to accommodate new sentential attitudes (…) The web of belief should

> be regarded not just as a self-reweaving mechanism but as one which produces movements in the organism's muscles movements which kick the organism itself into action. These actions, by shoving items in the environment around, produce new beliefs to be woven in, which in turn produce new actions, and so on for as long as the organism survives. (p. 94)

Thus it makes little sense to behold the distinction between the mind and the body, but it does make sense to maintain a difference between an actor and an observer. If somebody tells me about their beliefs, I can report only what they have said – not their beliefs, which only they know. This distinction is, of course, of crucial importance in the social sciences, where the mistake of taking utterances for "mental processes" is extremely common.

Much as there are no "natural" dichotomies, some dichotomies or classifications may be useful and therefore worthy of preservation. Among them Rorty counted the Deweyan distinction between a *habit* and an *inquiry* – between that which is taken for granted and that which is questioned or problematized. (Yet no inquiry can concern everything at once; some things must remain "as usual" for the time of a given inquiry.) Of similar usefulness is the distinction between *justification* and *causation* – a legitimate explanation and a link between cause and effect. Nevertheless, such distinctions are merely useful devices; they are not deduced from "ontological differences":

> … the pragmatist (…) recognizes relations of justification holding between beliefs and desires, and relations of causation holding between these beliefs and desires and other items in the universe, but no relations of representation. (p. 97)
> We can draw a line between objects which cause you to have beliefs about them by fairly direct causal means and other objects. In the case of the latter sort of objects, the relevant causal relations are either terribly indirect or simply non-existent. (p. 106)

Weather belongs among the former sort of objects, whereas neutrons belong to the latter sort. But this is merely what we know at present, of course. There may be times when neutrons will cause beliefs and desires more directly than the weather does, and even now, that is probably the case with theoretical physicists.

What is research, then, if not a search for truth and a quest to describe the essences of objects? A sheer recontextualization, Rorty believed, oftentimes a recontextualization "for the hell of it" (1991, p. 110). This should be enough – for scientists as well as for artists. What a lesson in methodology!

# Debates among friends

## *Clifford Geertz and Jean-François Lyotard in "Objectivity, Relativism and Truth" (1991)*

Clifford Geertz was concerned that there were no good prescriptions for a satisfactory way of solving problems created by current developments in increasingly pluricultural societies. After all, "[w]e are living more and more in the midst of an enormous collage (…) the world is coming at each of its local points to look more like a Kuwaiti bazaar than like an English gentlemen's club" (1991: 209). The plea for solidarity could be questioned on the grounds of ethnocentrism, therefore, as solidarity is being defined by Western liberals. Rorty replied:

> These descriptions seem right to me, but I do not see why Geertz thinks that we bourgeois liberals need to change our thinking about cultural diversity in order to deal with this situation. For this is just the sort of situation that the Western liberal ideal of procedural justice was designed to deal with (…) The relevant point is that one does not have to accept much else from Western culture to find the Western liberal ideal of procedural justice attractive (…) You cannot have an old-timey Gemeinschaft unless everybody pretty well agrees on who counts as a decent human being and who does not. But you can have a civil society of the bourgeois democratic sort. (ibid)

Rorty's definition of liberalism was borrowed from Judith Shklar (1989): "Every adult should be able to make as many effective decisions without fear and favor about as many aspects of her or his life as is compatible with the like freedom of every other adult." He saw liberalism as being close to social democracy.

In the same volume, Rorty joined forces with Dewey in answering Jean-François Lyotard's question: "'Can we continue to organize the events which crowd in upon us from the human and nonhuman worlds with the help of the Idea of a universal history of humanity?" He answered it with a yes, "as long as the point of doing so is to lift our spirits through utopian fantasy, rather than to gird our loans with metaphysical weapons" (p. 212). No metanarratives, but first order narratives: "… we want narratives of increasing cosmopolitanism, though not narratives of emancipation. For we think that there was nothing to emancipate (…) There is no human nature which was once, or still is, in chains" (p. 213). It is the ambition of emancipating others – not ethnocentrism – that is arrogant. Ethnocentrism is merely a reminder that all utterances come from some place, from some point in time.

*The pragmatists discuss the ways of reading: "Interpretation and overinterpretation" (edited by Stefan Collini, 1992)*

According to such radical pragmatists as Stanley Fish, with whom Rorty agreed, readers are free to interpret any text as they wish (Collini, 1992: 18). According to Umberto Eco (1992: 64), the interpretations are indefinite but not infinite. They are negotiations between the intention of the reader (*intentio lectoris*) and the intention of the text (*intentio operis*). These negotiations can end with a first-level reading (typical for the semantic reader) or with an overinterpretation (a tendency of the semiotic reader). Most readers end up between the two extremes, and different readers have different interpretation habits.

In response, Richard Rorty noticed that there was an obvious hierarchy between Eco's readers: The semiotic reader is a clever one (probably a researcher), whereas the semantic reader is a dupe (probably an unreflective practitioner). A more useful distinction could be between a *methodical reading* (1992: 106), controlled by the reader and the purpose at hand, and an *inspired reading* (p.107), which changes the purpose, the reader, and the text.

All these options are known to organization researchers; there are semantic and semiotic readers among us, and although we usually read methodically, each of us has likely experienced an inspired reading, a reading that changed – if not our lives, then our work. Neither is there an unlimited variety of idiosyncratic interpretations. In a given time and place, there are dominant and marginal readings of the same text (Marjorie De Vault, 1990), which makes the notion of interpretative communities (Stanley Fish, 1989) extremely useful.

## Answers to the critics

*Feminists: Truth and Progress (1998)*

In *Truth and Progress*, Rorty addressed the feminist critique against pragmatism, which came from two standpoints: The essentialist feminists saw antiessentialism as a stance preventing women from realizing their special needs, whereas the leftist feminists saw pragmatism as reactionary, opting for the *status quo* in place of progress and emancipation.

In his defense, Rorty again mobilized Dewey to his side, claiming that "a pragmatist feminist will see herself as helping to create women rather than attempting to describe them more accurately" (p. 212). The verb "create" does not suggest that women do not exist; it suggests the creation of more than one reality rather than attempting radical interventions (which, short of physical violence, end up either being incomprehensible, or joining the vocabulary of the adversary, thus strengthening it). If there is neither a "true reality" nor a "universal imperative" to count on, women are at the mercy of their own imaginations: "... try to invent a reality of your own by selecting aspects of the world that lend themselves to the support of your judgment of the worthwhile life" (p. 216).

"There is no method or procedure to be followed except courageous and imaginative experimentation" (p. 217). But even individuals of great imagination and courage will not be able to achieve anything alone; their statements must become part of a shared practice. What is needed, again, is solidarity among feminists of both genders: A solidarity that does not require the glossing over of differences and a political unity. After all, experimental ways are many and tortuous.

### Critical social scientists: Philosophy and Social Hope (1999)

Critically minded social scientists were worried that if there are no *a priori*, external criteria permitting a differentiation between the good and the evil, even the Holocaust can be justified as "useful" for somebody's "purpose at hand" (Czarniawska, 2011). To which Rorty answered dryly in his collection of essays meant for the wider public that:

> …it is unfortunate, I think, that many people hope for a tighter link between philosophy and politics than there is or can be. In particular, people on the left keep hoping for a philosophical view which cannot be used by the political right, one which will lend itself only to good causes. But there never will be such a view: any philosophical view is a tool which can be used by many different hands. (Rorty, 1999: 23)

# Is pragmatism a romantic philosophy?
## Philosophy and Cultural Politics (2007)

In his last book, Rorty openly combined pragmatism with romanticism:

> At the heart of pragmatism is the refusal to accept the correspondence theory of truth and the idea that true beliefs are accurate representations of reality. At the heart of romanticism is the thesis of the priority of imagination over reason – the claim that reason can only follows paths that the imagination has broken. (Rorty, 2007: 105)

Reason is traveling the path of past imaginations; the reason of the future will follow the path of that new imagination, which has become a shared practice [7] . Art and literature, but also social sciences and organization studies, are the fields in which versions of other realities and new vocabularies can be tested.

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7       An excellent definition of institutionalization!

As Giovanna Borradori (1994: 21) rightly noted, the new pragmatism offered the dream of a new humanistic solidarity, to be shared by nations, by individuals, and by various disciplines of arts and sciences, based on nothing more than the fact of mortality and acknowledgment of the contingency of their respective vocabularies. Is it enough? Is it too little? Will truth really take care of itself when you take care of freedom (Mendieta, 2006)? And will the new pragmatism survive in the present world?

## Richard Rorty: A model philosopher for the 21st century [8]?

Eduardo Mendieta (2017) wondered what Rorty, who combatted the idea of truth as a mirror of reality, would say about the present post-truth era. His conclusion was that Rorty would most likely point out the difference between "truth" as the goal of science, and "truthfulness" as a duty of both politicians and citizens:

> We may not be able to pin truth to the wall of the really real, or trace
> its roots to the essence of being, but we certainly know that truth is
> essential for our relations with others and ourselves. Truth as a relation
> to others is called democratic truthfulness; while truth as a relation to
> ourselves is called ethical truthfulness. (Mendieta, 2017: 16).

Indeed, it seems that, in the time of post-truth, the need for new pragmatism is greater than ever before. As the 20th century drew to a close, pragmatism was at the center of intellectual attention in a way it had not been since the times of James and Dewey (Gross, 2009, loc.8307).

   To mark the 40th anniversary of the publication of Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, University of Cambridge organized a conference entitled "Philosophy, Poetry, and Utopian Politics: The Relevance of Richard Rorty" on 12–13 September 2019. As written on the website introducing the conference:

> Richard Rorty (…) holds a vital position within the current surge of
> interest in pragmatism and its approaches. Once called "the man who
> killed truth" Rorty was most (in)famous for insisting that we must
> give up the idea of language as a mirror of nature, and with it the idea
> of philosophy as able to provide us with foundational truths. While
> the negating or dismantling aspect of Rorty's work has been intensely
> debated, this conference is motivated by a desire to draw attention to

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8        Santiago Zabala, Los Angeles Review of Books, 2017.

the other, affirmative side of it. It commences from the belief that Rorty's vision of a culture which no longer understands truth as correspondence between word and world might offer narrative and rhetorical strategies that can help us foster a working democratic culture in a "post-truth era".

In an essay entitled "Philosophy and the Hybridization of Culture" (in Ames and Hershock, 2008), Rorty suggested that "the notion of 'cultural difference' may soon be obsolete" (p. 41). In the global cosmopolitan culture, diversity will be a matter of differences among individuals rather than differences among cultures. Instead of contemplating the comparative philosophical question of whether or not Eastern and Western thinkers are addressing the same issues, Rorty suggested that "we would do better to think of philosophy as a genre of cultural politics than as the search for wisdom" (p. 42). When describing world history, "it would be better to say that both West and East are in the process of creating a hybrid culture, one that will transcend and replace all of its predecessors" (ibid). Rorty predicted a hybrid global culture brought on by "superior information technologies", and added:

> We should stop thinking of globalization as producing cultural impoverishment and sterility. There is no reason to anticipate a decrease in human curiosity or creativity as a result of the ubiquity and pace of technological change. The global culture that will be produced . . . may allow more room for individual diversity than is presently provided by the cultures of Western and Asian countries (p. 43).

Perhaps it is worth evoking here another of Rorty's statements from *Philosophy and Social Hope*: "The difference between pluralism and cultural relativism is the difference between pragmatically justified tolerance and mindless responsibility" (1999: 276).

As to the relevance of Rorty's pragmatism for organization scholars, it is hard to disagree with Philippe Lorino's statement at the end of his book on pragmatism and organization studies:

> We are experiencing a pragmatist turn in the social sciences and organization studies in the era of knowledge-based systems, big data, artificial intelligence, and algorithms, because – more than ever – we need to consider situated action as a central object of study, taking seriously the disruptive power of situations and the complexity of collective meaning-making. (Philippe Lorino, 2018: 324)

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