

The Pragmatism of Useful Descriptions

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Hosted by John Wheeler

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The Pragmatism of Useful Descriptions

The American philosopher, Richard Rorty, created a version of pragmatism that focused on hope rather than seeking knowledge of how things 'really' are, and on developing useful descriptions of the world and of ourselves. Guy Shennan will briefly introduce this aspect of Rorty's thinking, though the main focus of his workshop will be a pragmatic one, of useful ways to assist in the development of useful descriptions, of how people might become and of what is already supporting this becoming

WHERE?

On line via Zoom

WHEN?

1:30 to 4:30 Tuesday 29th September 2020

HOW MUCH?

£25.00 payable to John Wheeler Solutions Ltd.
Via Bank Transfer or PayPal on receipt of invoice.

HOW TO BOOK A PLACE Contact John Wheeler on John@johnwheeler.co.uk

Guy Shennan is a solution-focused practitioner and trainer, who has played a large part in the increasing emphasis on description within solution-focused practice, co-authoring the 2011 book chapter, From Solution to Description, with Chris Iveson. Having studied with the Open University, he was awarded a distinction for his masters in philosophy in 2014. Originally trained as a social worker, Guy served as the Chair of the British Association of Social Workers from 2014-18, which rekindled his belief in radical practices, including a campaigning role, leading to his involvement in the recent development of the Solution-Focused Collective and its Manifesto.

Useful descriptions of ourselves

- **Take it in turns to help each other come up with a useful description of yourself in relation to being at your best in this workshop**
- **How might you do this?**
- **What different ways might you go about it?**
- **(There are no 'right' ways of doing it, only more or less useful ones, Richard Rorty might say)**
- ***5 minutes each and 5 minutes preparation/reflection = 15 minutes***

Looking to begin conversations...

- **As a community of inquirers (or, “knowledge is social”)**
- **Conversations outside our communities**
- **An abnormal (& maybe normal) discourse on philosophy & its aims**
- **Richard Rorty & pragmatism**
- **Rorty’s imaginative projects of**
 - **Edification**
 - **Self-creation**
- **Social hope as future hopes**
- **Rorty and social change**

“Our identification with our community - our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage - is heightened when we see this community as ours rather than nature’s, shaped rather than found, one among many which men (sic) have made. 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.”

Consequences of Pragmatism, 1982

“... If Rorty prefers conversational philosophers to analytic ones it’s not only because they are “taking part in a conversation rather than [...] practicing a quasi-scientific discipline” but also because they have replaced the slogan “let’s get it right!” with “let’s try something different.” The future lies in this difference.”

Richard Rorty: Life, Pragmatism, and Conversational Philosophy

2017

- **Gale Miller emphasized the importance of philosophy to the development of SFBT - "there was a very conscious nurturing of this other side that gave SFBT a dimension that made it very different than if it is only about practice"**

EBTA conference, Malmo, 2010

Abnormal discourse!

“Philosophy, like all other studies, aims primarily at knowledge”

*Bertrand Russell, The Problems of Philosophy, 1912
(in the chapter, The Value of Philosophy)*

DOES IT?

“Too much information causes indigestion of the spirit....

True knowledge must be useful for the projects of human action.”

Nietzsche, Thus Spake Zarathustra

“We call it "explanation" but it is "description" which distinguishes us from earlier stages of knowledge and science. We describe better - we explain just as little as any who came before us.”

***Nietzsche, The Joyous Science
(Nietzsche for Beginners, p59)***

“... the earlier stages...”

- “trying to shake off the the influences of the peculiarly metaphysical dualisms which the Western philosophical tradition inherited from the Greeks” (*Philosophy & Social Hope (PSH)*, 47)
- “The most important of these oppositions is that between reality and appearance” (*PSH*, 24)
- “the Cartesian-Lockean picture of a mind seeking to get in touch with a reality outside itself” that, “in Wittgenstein’s words, ‘holds us captive’” (*PSH*, xvii)

Rorty & the pragmatists

- “start with a Darwinian account of human beings... doing their best to cope with the environment” (*PSH*, xxiii)
- No need to model knowledge on vision (*PSH*, 50)
- “Knowledge as a matter of conversation and social practice, rather than as an attempt to mirror nature” (*Philosophy & the Mirror of Nature (PMN)*, 171)
- ... as coping rather than copying
- Language not as representing reality, but words as a tool (*PSH*, 50)

Down with capital letters

- **Rorty made it his mature ambition to abolish the value most cherished by philosophers. He called that value “Truth with a capital T” (*PMN, Afterword, 428*)**
- **“We see both intellectual and moral progress not as a matter of getting closer to the True or the Good or the Right, but as an increase in imaginative power” (*PSH, 87*)**
- **Compare Steve de Shazer: “there was no Theory, no grand design” (*Words Were Originally Magic, 32*)**

“an increase in imaginative power”

- **Edification and edifying philosophy**
PMN, 1979
- **The contingency of selfhood and self-creation**
Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (CIS), 1989

Edification *(Part III, PMN)*

- Rorty proposes idea of normal discourse (a generalisation of Kuhn's normal science) and abnormal discourse
- *Bildung* (education, self-formation) as the goal of thinking, rather than knowledge (Gadamer)
- “To say new and interesting things about ourselves”
- “Making connections between our own culture and some exotic culture or historical period”
- “Or between our own discipline and another discipline which seems to pursue incommensurable aims in an incommensurable vocabulary”
- ““Poetic” activity of thinking up such new aims, new words or new disciplines”
- “Edifying discourse is *supposed* to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings”

Edifying philosophy

- **Some edifying philosophers, eg Wittgenstein, Heidegger, “do not think that when we say something we must necessarily be expressing a view about a subject. We might just be saying something - participating in a conversation rather than contributing to an enquiry”**

PMN, 371

- **“The point of edifying philosophy is to keep the conversation going, rather than to find objective truth”**

PMN, 377

Edifying philosophy

- “To see keeping a conversation going as a sufficient aim of philosophy, to see wisdom as consisting in the ability to sustain a conversation, is to see human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately”

PMN, 378

- “(This) method of philosophy is the same as the method of utopian politics or revolutionary science... to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behaviour which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it”

CIS, 9

Exercise

- **Describe and redescribe solution-focused practice - in new ways!**
- **Keep the conversation going!**

The contingency of selfhood

- Chapter 2 in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*
- “an enlivening conception” of ‘selfhood’, “something self-crafted like a work of art” *
- Uses *Continuing To Live*, Philip Larkin
“And once you have walked the length of your mind, what
Your command is clear as a lading-list”

* <https://aeon.co/essays/richard-rortys-hopes-for-liberalism-and-solidarity>

“Philosophy now appears as a transitional genre, bridging the gap between a religious past... and a fully secular, “literary” culture, in which we will turn to imaginative literature for ideas about the sort of persons to be or the sort of societies to live in”

Michael Williams, in his Introduction to the 2009 edition of Philosophy & the Mirror of Nature (1st published 1979)

Home Is So Sad (Philip Larkin)

Home is so sad. It stays as it was left,
Shaped to the comfort of the last to go
As if to win them back. Instead, bereft
Of anyone to please, it withers so,
Having no heart to put aside the theft

And turn again to what it started as,
A joyous shot at how things ought to be,
Long fallen wide. You can see how it was:
Look at the pictures and the cutlery.
The music in the piano stool. That vase.

A distinctive description!

- Take it in turns to describe your surroundings to each other
- *Distinctively - that show or evoke the uniqueness, or idiosyncrasies, of your selves*
- *And usefully?*
- Assist your partner in making it as distinctively about them a description as possible

The contingency of selfhood

- Continued...
- Nietzsche/Bloom - the strong poet
- “Freud’s account of unconscious fantasy shows us how to see every human life as a poem”
- “Freud democratised genius by giving everyone a creative unconscious” - Philip Rief
- SF democratised it further by giving everyone a creative conscious!

Freud “held that each human life unfolds out of complex, idiosyncratic fantasies, and that the mind is in its very constitution poetic, making all lives interesting when reflected on in sufficient detail. Moreover, he provided a serviceable vocabulary within which anyone’s life might be re-described, by themselves or others, in ways that reveal quirky details of their past, and capture what is distinctive about them.”

<https://aeon.co/essays/richard-rortys-hopes-for-liberalism-and-solidarity>

SF: Clients provide their own vocabularies

Vision metaphor

- **The “mind’s eye” - the Greeks’ modelling of knowledge on vision**

PMN, 38-9

- **“We must get the visual, and in particular, the mirroring, metaphors out of our speech altogether”**

PMN, 371

- ***Hmmm... maybe, maybe not? Could we add more questions into our SF conversations using the other senses though?***

Careful also...

- **With knowledge and knowing?**
- **eg How would you KNOW...?**
- **A quest for certainty?**

- **From 'will' to 'would' to 'MIGHT'**
- **What signs might you notice...?**
- **Maybe?**
- **Other ideas?**

Individual distinctiveness again

How a human being stands or walks or frowns or smiles or laughs or sulks or earnestly entreats, or how he (sic) fries an egg, this is one part of what he is.

*David Wiggins, Sameness and Substance Renewed,
(2001, p234)*

Exercise

- Interviewee - bring to mind a project you are currently engaged in
- Interviewer - ask questions to help your colleague DESCRIBE, in detailed & distinctive ways (but not certain, 'knowing' ways?)
 - Future progress in the project
 - Progress they have made already
- Note down words that jump out at you
- At the end of the interview, assemble some of your interviewee's words (and ONLY their words) to make a poem
- Read it to them (and later share?)

Thanks to 2003 International Narrative Therapy Conference workshop - maybe Jane Speedy's - and to Gaye Stockell for my poem, 9.07.2003

Social hope - future hope

“If there is anything distinctive about pragmatism it is that it substitutes the notion of a better human future for the notions of ‘reality’, ‘reason’ and ‘nature’.”

PSH, 27

Social hope

“Willingness to endure suffering for the sake of future reward was transferable from individual rewards to social ones, from one’s hopes for paradise to one’s hopes for one’s grandchildren”

C/S, p85

“To retain social hope, members of (a modern, literate, secular) society need to be able to tell themselves a story about how things might get better, and to see no insuperable obstacles to this story’s coming true.”

C/S, p86

Exercise

What are your best hopes for your great great grandchildren?

How might you develop a conversation begun in this way?

Have a go?

Rorty and social change

- **“What binds societies together are common vocabularies and common hopes”**

CIS, 86

- **“... there is a difference between knowledge and hope. Hope often takes the form of false prediction, as it did in both documents. But hope for social justice is nevertheless the only basis for a worthwhile human life”**

Failed Prophecies, Glorious Hopes, in PSH, 204

- **“(Marx) makes this demand [to change the world not interpret it] as a philosopher, not just a political activist. He can thus be said to join a distinguished lineage of ‘anti-philosophers’, one which includes Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Adorno, Benjamin, Wittgenstein, and in our own time such thinkers as Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty”**

Terry Eagleton, Marx (1997, p5)

- **“American pragmatism is a diverse and heterogeneous tradition. But its common denominator consists of a future-oriented instrumentalism that tries to deploy thought as a weapon to enable more effective action”**

*Cornel West, The American Evasion of Philosophy
(1989, p5)*

Rorty urges substituting hope for knowledge

“This element of romantic hope, this willingness to substitute imagination for certainty, and curiosity for pride, breaks down the Greek distinction between contemplation and action”. John Dewey insisted ‘on the supremacy of the agent point of view’. “I interpreted this supremacy as the priority of the need to create new ways of being human, and a new heaven and a new earth for these new humans to inhabit, over the desire for stability, security and order.” *PSH*, 88