Rorty’s Pragmatism and Bioethics

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ABSTRACT

In spite of the routine acknowledgement of Richard Rorty’s ubiquitous influence, those who have invoked his name en route to advancing their case for a pragmatist bioethics have not given us a very clear picture of exactly how Rorty’s work might actually contribute to methodological discussion in this field. I try to provide such an account here. Given the impressive depth and scope of Rorty’s work during the past two decades, I make no pretense of presenting either a comprehensive or novel interpretation of his project. My primary aim here is simply to sketch what I take to be the implications of Rorty’s neopragmatism for our methodological debates within bioethics. I conclude that the yield of Rorty’s pragmatism for current methodological debates in bioethics is primarily negative, knocking the props out from under any pretensions to foundations and universal principles of right and wrong. His “professorial pragmatism” and philosophical trash disposal efforts would clearly sweep away some approaches based upon appeals to nature or universal human dignity, and his deflationary nominalist view of principles would threaten the foundations of some influential principlist approaches to bioethics.

Keywords: bioethics, pragmatism, Rorty

I. INTRODUCTION

How to explain the recent surge of interest in pragmatism within the field of bioethics? A large part of the answer, I think, has to do with the widespread perception that the heretofore dominant method of bioethics – viz., principlism – has outlived its usefulness and fails adequately to address a cluster of serious problems besetting the field, especially those stemming from cultural diversity. The spectacle of the perennial champ wobbling on the ropes has no doubt encouraged the partisans of pragmatism, along with a host of other

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methodological malcontents, to enter the ring. But what accounts for the particular allure of pragmatism at this historical juncture?

The most plausible narrative that I can conjure in response to this question would focus on the pivotal role of Richard Rorty in the recent revival of American pragmatism. The story is a familiar one. The period from the end of the 19th century to the end of World War II represented the salad days of classical American pragmatism. Figures such as C.S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey, G.H. Mead and George Santayana dominated the landscape of American philosophy, and Dewey was often proclaimed as the quintessential American philosopher. Following the war, however, pragmatism’s star began to fade rapidly. Dewey’s positions on crucial issues increasingly failed to engage a new generation of philosophers, most of whom had already begun gravitating towards logical positivism and modes of inquiry that would eventually be lumped under the rubric of analytic philosophy. These philosophers ran out of patience with Dewey – Rorty speculates that they simply became bored with him (1995, p. 70) – and so began the rather long exile of pragmatism from the mainstream of American philosophy. Although some of its central figures continued to attract sporadic attention as cultural icons in American history, and although some die-hard partisans of American pragmatism continued to limp along on the margins of academic respectability, the works of the great pragmatists were generally ignored in most “self-respecting” philosophy departments.

With the publication of Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature in 1979, Richard Rorty began an ambitious and spectacularly successful intellectual reclamation project. In Rorty’s retelling of recent intellectual history, Dewey emerges alongside Heidegger and Wittgenstein as one of the greatest philosophers of our century. Downplaying Dewey’s enthusiasm for scientific method and his metaphysics of experience, while upgrading Dewey’s rejection of dualisms and foundations in epistemology, Rorty went on to develop in a series of widely read and highly influential studies¹ a revitalized image of pragmatism at the cutting edge of American intellectual life. Needless to say, Rorty’s version of pragmatism was highly idiosyncratic, and some partisans of “old fashioned” pragmatism have repeatedly accused him of hijacking the name and reputation of pragmatism in the name of a dubious brand of “postmodernism” – a label Rorty has vehemently rebuffed. But whatever the historical merits of Rorty’s appropriation of pragmatist authors and themes, it remains true, I think, that the proliferation of contemporary neopragmatisms and the widespread revival of interest in the original American pragmatists has been in large measure Rorty’s doing.²
Rorty’s unrelenting attacks on foundations and the normative status of principles have occasioned vigorous methodological debates and challenged longstanding disciplinary assumptions in such fields as literary studies, sociology, political theory, religious ethics and law. Is bioethical principlism the next “standard methodology” due for subversive reappraisal? Due to its resolutely practical nature, its habitat in the medical environment, and its consequent relative isolation from the intellectual fads of American academia, bioethics has only recently begun to assess the relevance of pragmatism to its own methodological debates.

In spite of this routine acknowledgement of Rorty’s ubiquitous influence, those who have invoked his name en route to advancing their case for a pragmatist bioethics have not given us a very clear picture of exactly how Rorty’s work might actually contribute to methodological discussion in this field. I try to provide such an account here, with the following caveat. Given the impressive depth and scope of Rorty’s work during the past two decades, I make no pretense of presenting either a comprehensive or novel interpretation of his project. My primary aim here is simply to sketch what I take to be the implications of Rorty’s neopragmatism for our methodological debates within bioethics.

II. RORTY’S CRITIQUE OF FOUNDATIONS

The classical American pragmatists rejected the so-called spectator theory of knowledge in favor of a view of the knowing subject as embodied, social and actively engaged with the world. Rorty takes this critique of objectivist forms of knowledge several steps further in his version of pragmatism. He begins with an attack on the traditional philosophical project of developing a faithful representation of reality upon which various human practices and institutions, such as morality and politics, might be grounded. Stressing the need to adapt Dewey’s pragmatism to the environment of a very different postwar philosophical culture, Rorty subjects pragmatism to a thoroughgoing “linguistic turn.” According to this view, language and human interpretations color everything that we can know. The human mind cannot act as a mirror, faithfully reflecting reality, because it cannot escape from its own webs of interpretation. Importantly, language for Rorty does not and cannot function as a medium through which a human mind can make solid contact with the world the way it “really” is apart from our interpretations of it. Instead, he views language and
our various conceptual schemes as tools that we all use to get a grip on our environments. Some tools, such as Newtonian physics, have proven themselves to be more useful than other tools; but no set of tools can be presumed to afford us some sort of unfiltered access to “the real.” Consequently, Rorty holds that there are no entities out there, such as an “order of things” or “the meaning of history,” and no entities in here, such as a soul or human nature, that could serve as a source of justification in ethics or politics.

In place of Dewey’s metaphysics of “experience,” Rorty thus substitutes a thoroughly anti-metaphysical conception of language. Borrowing from Wittgenstein’s notions of language games and forms of life, Rorty contends that all meaning and attempts at justification require a certain context in which things can “hang together” and make sense. He calls these linguistic contexts “vocabularies.” Examples would include such things as Darwinian biology, Christian fundamentalism, Ptolemaic astronomy, Freudian psychology, Aristotelian physics, and feminism. Now, instead of playing the traditional game of trying to establish which of these vocabularies best connects with or faithfully tracks “reality” – whether this be conceived as the order of nature or women’s intrinsic human dignity bequeathed to them by their human nature – Rorty announces that no such argumentative justification of any one of these basic or “final” vocabularies is possible. While things make sense and can be justified within any final vocabulary, just as defendants in our courts of law may be rightly convicted or acquitted according to the canons of ordinary legal interpretation, final vocabularies themselves cannot be justified in this way. In fact, says Rorty, they cannot be justified at all, in the sense of being connected to reality or being derivable from some true universally applicable principle.

This “democratization” of final vocabularies points up another major difference between Dewey’s pragmatism and Rorty’s. Within the latter’s scheme, it would appear that romantic poetry and modern physics are both simply two different vocabularies vying for our attention. In spite of what William Blake or Isaac Newton might have thought, neither of these disciplines or practices can be said to give us privileged access to the realm of the really real. As a result, Rorty refuses to follow Peirce and Dewey in thinking that modern scientific method provides us with the ultimate exemplar of human reason in action. Since he rejects the very notion of a world beyond our language and conceptual schemes that the human mind can discover or represent, Rorty rejects the collateral idea that there must be a true or reliable method to get us there. Hence his call for a “pragmatism without method” (Rorty, 1991b, pp. 63–77). Whereas Dewey idealized science and tried to fit
ethics out in the finery of experimentalism, Rorty views science as just another contribution to the general cultural mix, and not a terribly interesting one at that. Rorty would no doubt admit that science is helpful in the pursuit of various practical interests, but he resists the temptation to follow Dewey in giving it pride of place within the disciplines of knowledge (Rorty, 1991b, pp. 35–45).

III. RORTY ON PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

The upshot of Rorty’s “linguisticification” of pragmatism and his attack on the mind as the mirror of nature is a thoroughgoing historicism. There simply are no transhistorical standards of rationality, right and wrong, or the correct way to organize society. Contrary to Dewey’s attempt to ground morality and democratic politics in a theory of human nature, and contrary to Hilary Putnam’s contemporary attempt to justify democracy as a precondition of reliable knowledge,6 Rorty contends that our moral and democratic practices cannot be justified by philosophical argument. We cannot, for example, say that slavery, oligarchy or patriarchy are wrong because they fail to honor the innate “human dignity” of every person, whether he be a slave or she a woman. Or, if we do say such things within the context of our own liberal culture, we cannot appeal to some objective or neutral foundation in an effort to convince people from different cultures who disagree with us.7

Principles, both scientific and moral, undergo a corresponding deflation in this historicist tableau. Instead of viewing principles as objective, normative standards against which our disparate practices are to be judged, Rorty sees them as mere post hoc rationalizations of the values and habits already embedded in our existing practices. At most, he contends, principles can serve us as mere “reminders” of a consensus that we have already reached in science, morality or politics. As such, they lack the sort of normative punch usually claimed for them in moral, political and bioethical theory.

If we cannot move from one final vocabulary to another – e.g., from Aristotelian to Galilean physics or from entrenched medical paternalism to a new bioethics based upon autonomy – by means of principles, good reasons, or reliable methods of inquiry, how to account for scientific and moral progress? Since Rorty has already excluded the possibility of explaining change and progress through closer and closer approximations of our physical, moral, or political concepts to “the world” or “human nature,” he opts for an
explanation in terms of new metaphors or new descriptions of familiar experiences. Change and progress are brought about by people like Freud and Marx, who invent new ways of describing things, ways that elicit new and different emotional responses that, in turn, can motivate others to substitute new practices for the old. Crucially, these new metaphors are simply new vocabularies, new ways of talking, that literally change the subject by helping us shed our old repertoire of concepts and emotional responses. One of Rorty’s favorite examples of this phenomenon is provided by contemporary feminism. Instead of saying that old-fashioned patriarchal ways of thinking and talking are flawed because they fail to acknowledge women’s true human nature, Rorty lauds theorists such as Catherine MacKinnon who, he says, are trying to create new metaphors and a new group identity for themselves by telling counter-narratives about women’s experiences. These new ways of speaking will eventually lead to new practices, like our laws against sexual harassment, that will provide future sources of new standards and criteria for relations between the sexes. As always in Rorty’s work, practices ground or justify principles, not the other way around.

One rather disturbing implication of Rorty’s account of the transition between ultimate vocabularies is that the criteria for embracing one account over another are primarily aesthetic rather than rational. Since we cannot reason our way from one vocabulary to another by means of logical argument, we must rely on more rhetorical forms of persuasion to make the new vision look good, and the old vision look bad, in the eyes of the relevant public. As Rorty puts it with characteristic frankness, “The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it” (Rorty, 1989, p. 9). Notwithstanding his attacks on scientific and other interpretive methods, then, Rorty does turn out to have a method of sorts; but it is a method that seeks to cause a change of viewpoint in one’s interlocutors by non-rational means of persuasion.

IV. THE ROLE OF PRAGMATIST PHILOSOPHY AND PHILOSOPHERS

Just as Dewey’s attack on the spectator theory of knowledge had direct implications for the nature of philosophy and the role of philosophers, so Rorty’s attack on the metaphor of the mind as a mirror of nature leads him to
articulate a new conception of the philosopher’s role within contemporary culture. Given Rorty’s subversive conception of language, philosophical topics like epistemology, metaphysics and ethics find themselves divested of their traditional subject matters. Rather than attempting to solve traditional philosophical problems in these areas, Rorty spins historical narratives that attempt to show us why these problems should no longer bother us.9 The only remaining task for the pragmatist philosopher, then, is to criticize other philosophies that still take “foundations” seriously and thereby impede the creation of new metaphors by new social “prophets” like Freud, Marx, and MacKinnon. The primary role of the pragmatist philosopher, then, is the negative task of clearing the rubbish left over by traditional philosophers who continue to insist on discovering the “grounds” of this, the “foundations” of that, or the “conditions of possibility” of everything. In response to those who complain that his brand of philosophical pragmatism lacks “critical bite,” Rorty is quick to reply that no philosophy can bite into reality. Thus, the only kind of bite his philosophy can manage is into other (foundationalist) philosophies. And in response to Cornel West’s call for a “prophetic pragmatism,” a call echoed by bioethicist Susan Wolf (1994), Rorty tartly observes that if pragmatism is taken in what he calls the “professorial sense” – i.e., as a technical device for criticizing the overinflated claims of traditional philosophy – then the term “prophetic pragmatism” will sound as odd as “charismatic trash disposal” (Rorty, 1991c, p. 75).10

V. PRAGMATISM AND PROPHESY: RORTY’S CONSTRUCTIVE PROGRAM

Rorty thus agrees with Dewey that philosophers need to be knocked off their priestly pedestals; but whereas Dewey envisioned a quite significant public role for philosophers in conjunction with social scientists, Rorty conceives of philosophers as mere underlaborers of the social prophets, poets, and other creators of new visions. But at this point, a serious question arises concerning which prophets are worthy of being followed. Into whose service should the contemporary philosopher cast his or her lot? This is an important question since, strictly speaking, Rorty’s so-called “professorial pragmatism” is limited to foundationalist “trash removal” and, as such, it is theoretically neutral between the respective prophecies of democrats and fascists, of F.D.R. and Mussolini (Rorty, 1990).
Rorty contends that the only kind of “justification” a political standpoint can have is the frankly “ethnocentric” fact that it meshes well with the beliefs, intuitions, and values of those who espouse it. The kind of liberal democracy now institutionalized in Western Europe and North America is the end product of many historical contingencies that could well have worked themselves out in very different political directions. Had our history been significantly different, we would all have very different beliefs and intuitions about the value of individual freedom. But as good liberals, we are committed to beliefs in individuality and freedom in spite of the fact that these cannot be given a rational or transhistorical justification.

Borrowing a line from political philosopher Judith Sklar, Rorty contends that the basic stance that defines liberals is their opposition to cruelty and humiliation (1989, p. xv). These, he says, are the worst things that humans can do to each other, and liberalism as a political program seeks to build a society as free as possible from their baleful presence. Another way to put this, underscoring Rorty’s emphasis on language and vocabularies, is that a liberal society will oppose all forced “redescriptions” or coercively imposed stereotypes of other persons, such as the widespread images imposed upon African-Americans for so long in our society as lazy, shiftless, primitive, promiscuous and childlike. In a liberal society, everyone is permitted to pursue his or her own path to self-realization just so long as their chosen means do not interfere with the freedom and self-development of others. Apart from this important constraint elaborated long ago in Mill’s On Liberty, Rorty believes that liberalism should be single-mindedly devoted to the protection of individual rights and to the self-realization of individuals (1998, p. 33). Thus, although he cannot provide a philosophical argument in favor of this kind of society, Rorty believes that the planting and nurturing of this kind of forest is eminently worthy of the pragmatist philosopher’s humble ground clearing efforts. As he sometimes puts it, pragmatist philosophy’s goal is to clear away other philosophical distractions so that people can get on with the important tasks of ending cruelty, humiliation and “getting what they need.”

Rorty thus has a positive program – a “prophetic pragmatism,” if you will – but there are two important caveats. First, Rorty’s prophetic vision of democracy is, as we have seen, a completely ungrounded leap in the dark. There are, in other words, no philosophical reasons to prefer Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence to Mao’s Little Red Book. His visions and those of other likeminded liberals thus represent a kind of groundless “social hope” for a better future. This program, then, amounts to a difficult – some would say
impossible – balancing act. On the one hand, Rorty is a good liberal committed to the standard litany of liberal values, including toleration, individual freedom, and social solidarity in the face of human finitude and death. But, on the other hand, Rorty is an “ironist,” a philosophical character beset by unremitting skepticism regarding the ultimate justification of his or her own final vocabulary and most deeply held values. Whether Rorty is capable of actually sustaining this dual commitment to liberal values and to skepticism regarding the grounds of those same values is, not to put too fine a point on it, a matter of continuing conjecture and disputation. Whereas Rorty holds that the outlook espoused by liberal ironism places us in a so-called “meta-stable” situation, wherein it is hard to take ourselves and our values seriously due to their ultimate contingency (1989, pp. 73-74), others might describe such a stance as an invitation to intellectual schizophrenia.

Second, Rorty concedes that there is nothing distinctly pragmatic about his own or anyone else’s social visions. When confronted with the plethora of Deweyan texts that attempt to do much more than clear away metaphysical junk from the roadway of democracy, Rorty splits his favorite philosopher into two distinct personages. On the one hand, there is Dewey the pragmatist philosopher, making the world safe from the spectator theory of knowledge and foundationalism; on the other hand, there is Dewey the social visionary, prophet, and poet of left-wing democracy (1990, p. 1816). The latter Dewey, Rorty insists, is not derived from and does not need the former.

VI. BIOETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF RORTY’S PRAGMATISM

One aspect of Rorty’s prophetic program has clearly defined and, on the whole, quite salutary implications for medicine and bioethics. Recall that, for Rorty, liberalism stands for liberty and individual self-expression, while opposing coercion, cruelty, humiliation, and forced redescription. One rather straightforward medical application of this view would be the proposition that health care professionals should not forcibly redescribe the identities of their patients. This proscription would obviously encompass the practice within Soviet psychiatry of labeling many political dissidents as being mentally ill, but it would also include more ordinary assaults on the identities of patients in the everyday practice of medicine. Rorty’s proscription of forcible redescrip-

The Wounded
Storyteller (1995), Frank attempts to articulate an avowedly postmodern “ethic of voice,” according to which everyone should be allowed to “tell their own story.” Patients facing chronic illnesses (such as cancer, AIDS, heart disease, etc.) should be assisted in reclaiming and asserting their own voice and personal experiences with illness in the face of medicine’s depersonalizing language and categories.\textsuperscript{14}

Given the general anti-foundationalist, anti-epistemological, and anti-metaphysical views sketched above, it should come as no surprise that most other implications of Rorty’s views for bioethics are largely negative or critical. In the first place, his version of philosophical neopragmatism would target any vestiges of foundationalism and naturalism remaining within the field of bioethics. Views based upon conceptions of natural law, natural rights, the “inherent dignity of persons,” or foundationalist moral/political theory of any kind would have to go. This blanket rejection would also include moral theories and principles based upon a metaphysical conception of the self as an identifiable and stable entity that endures through time. Thus, any bioethical principle based upon a Kantian notion of the self that gives near absolute priority to autonomy over other considerations would also fall within the sweep of this critique. Examples of bioethical work that Rorty’s views would discredit include Leon Kass’s naturalistic ruminations on the nature of health, the moral status of embryos, and on the family in its relation to society; H. Tristram Engelhardt’s early work insofar as it was inspired by Robert Nozick’s theory of nearly absolute “side constraints” on public action; and any and all religious views that claim a transcendent source and guarantor of their bioethical conclusions.\textsuperscript{15} Importantly, this list should also include the early editions of Beauchamp and Childress’s Principles of Biomedical Ethics, which Rorty would claim are tainted by nostalgia for philosophical foundations.

Rorty would also no doubt take a dim view of efforts by philosophically inclined bioethicists to engage in “conceptual analysis.” Such bioethicists typically explain their work as consisting in both conceptual analysis of notions like “autonomy,” “coercion,” “person,” and “suicide,” and in normative examination of substantive moral questions, such as “Is abortion wrong?” (Arras, 2003a). Rorty would say, with regard to the former effort, that philosophical bioethicists really do not have much to offer practicing physicians, except perhaps the possibility of suggesting to them new vocabularies and the prospect of some new alternatives. Towards this end, they can tell the perplexed doctor about what some illustrious philosophers, such as Plato, Kant, Mill, and
Rawls might have said about “freedom” or “truthfulness.” But this will not, Rorty suggests, tell the doctor what she “really meant,” on what presuppositions she must be relying, or what was “really” in question in any given case. Rorty rejects the notion, often voiced by bioethicists, that physicians may use a concept like “ paternalism” or “autonomy” in some sort of confused way, but that it falls to the philosophically trained bioethicist to really analyze and clarify the concept in question. The most they can do, he claims, is to help enlarge the troubled doctor’s linguistic and imaginative possibilities, just as any other humanistically trained literary or historical scholar would do. Beyond this rather modest task, Rorty sees no special contribution of philosophers to the moral problems confronted by ordinary working stiff physicians, just as he sees no use of philosophers of law for ordinary working stiff judges. No special contribution, that is, beyond the typical lawyerly and sophistic task of “provid[ing] an argument for whatever our client has decided to do, mak[ing] the chosen cause appear the better” (Rorty, 1982, pp. 222-223).16

One important remaining question here is whether and to what extent Rorty’s pragmatism poses a threat to Beauchamp and Childress’s still-dominant principlist approach to bioethical method. As noted above, the early editions of Principles of Biomedical Ethics (PBE) would certainly have fallen under Rorty’s generalized attack on foundationalism, but what about their later editions that attempt to develop a non-foundationalist but still principle-based bioethics? We need to recall here that beginning with their 4th edition, Beauchamp and Childress have abandoned any pretense of grounding their principles in some sort of philosophical or theoretical foundation. Instead, they now claim that the principles they discuss have their origins in an historically rooted “common morality,” a bow towards historicity and contingency that Rorty might welcome.17 In addition, the later editions of PBE explicitly embrace Rawlsian reflective equilibrium, a method that attempts to weave our intuitions, principles and theories into a coherent fabric while denying foundational or privileged status to any one of these ethical raw materials. Since Rorty has already gone on record enthusiastically supporting Rawls’s apparent admission that ethics and political theory are really about the coherent ordering of our time-bound intuitions through reflective equilibrium, he would likewise welcome this development in PBE.18

The remaining sticking point seems to be Beauchamp and Childress’s abiding commitment to the normative status of ethical and political principles. In spite of their recent admission that principles are ultimately rooted in the history of our communal life and their endorsement of non-foundationalist
reflective equilibrium, Beauchamp and Childress still cling to the notion that principles can guide action, that they are not “mere (post hoc) reminders” of consensus that we have already reached. The difference between Rorty and Beauchamp and Childress appears to be that the former does not believe that moral, political or scientific principles do any actual work, whereas the latter believe that they do. For Rorty, principles merely tell us what we already know; they serve only to highlight the values that cement our allegiance to our ongoing social practices and institutions. For Beauchamp and Childress, principles can help shape, criticize, reform or revolutionize ongoing practices.

It is worth noting here that Rorty’s rejection of the normativity of principles is more nominalist than it is pragmatist, at least if we understand pragmatism as Dewey did. Recall that in spite of his emphasis on the temporality and flexibility of moral principles, Dewey viewed principles as abbreviated statements of those actions or policies that have been found to work in the past. Although he had no use for a mechanistic view of principles as algorithms, rigid rules or substitutes for good judgment, Dewey did consider principles to be action guiding in the sense that they could help inform intelligent choice. This difference between Rorty and Dewey can be brought into sharper focus by recalling Dewey’s description of principles as tools for analyzing a special situation (Dewey & Tufts, 1932, p. 309). According to this account, principles function ideally as a kind of ethical flashlight, helping us illuminate the morally relevant aspects of our situation and to think through that situation in an intelligent and effective way.

Dewey’s view of principles thus appears to have a lot more in common with the more mature work of Beauchamp and Childress than it does with Rorty’s “mere reminder” view. In later editions of PBE, principles function very much like Dewey’s tools, helping us sort out what to attend to in a morally freighted situation. Beyond this highlighting function, however, principles also resemble tools here in the sense that they are deployed along with other tools. Just as one needs to coordinate the use of a hammer, eye hooks, tape measure, wire and a level in hanging a framed picture, so in complex moral situations one must invoke several moral principles or maxims, specifying as far as possible the concrete meaning of each one, and then carefully weighing their respective claims in the context of a rich factual narrative. For Dewey, Beauchamp and Childress, then, one must do things with principles, which are like tools scattered around one’s living room. For Rorty, by contrast, principles appear to bear more resemblance to the framed facsimile of the Bill of Rights on the wall. It reminds us of something we agree on, but it pretty much just hangs there.
Rorty’s “reminder view” of principles will also prove less than entirely helpful in the usual context of difficult choices for individuals and societies. If the only function of moral and political principles is to remind us of a consensus that we have already forged, they cannot be expected to be very helpful when we are faced with morally problematic situations involving serious conflicts among values and principles. Rorty says remarkably little about this ubiquitous feature of our moral and social lives, contenting himself with the observation that such “intra-societal tensions” are usually satisfactorily resolved, not by means of general principles, but rather by convention and anecdote (1991b, p. 201).19

The positive flip side of Rorty’s critical pragmatism is his claim that once we clear away the detritus of foundationalism we will then be free to create new vocabularies, new possibilities, and new practices that will, as he puts it, “work better,” “satisfy our needs” or deliver “what we want.” Although I would certainly agree with Rorty that many traditional appeals to “objective truth” and “ethical first principles” have had the untoward effect of stunting human flourishing and denying human needs, it is unclear just how helpful Rorty’s pragmatism will be to us in its post-trash disposal phase. In the first place, a mere appeal to “what works” will obviously require supplementation by some vision of the good in order to provide an answer to what we ought to do in any given situation. The question of whether any particular constellation of results can be deemed sufficiently “fruitful” presupposes some sort of value framework that Rorty’s pragmatism seems unable and unwilling to provide. Take, for example, the vexing problem of choosing a societal response to the emergence of many new reproductive technologies. According to one side of this debate, we can best “get what we want” by giving individuals the widest possible latitude to join with others – such as doctors, surrogates, baby brokers, etc. – in so-called collaborative reproductive efforts. According to this libertarian outlook, so long as no particular, identifiable individuals are harmed, prospective parents should have near total freedom and discretion in their use of the new technologies. But according to another side of the debate, allowing people this sort of freedom will have subtle but real adverse consequences for individual children, women, and society at large. Viewed from this angle, the new technologies threaten to create a brave but decidedly unpleasant new world in which baby making is transformed into a commercialized and alienating industrial process (Arras, 2003b, pp. 342–355).

Importantly, it is not at all clear whether either of these competing visions of emerging reproductive technologies is inherently more “pragmatic” than the other. If one is primarily concerned with helping infertile individuals and
couples become parents, subject only to the constraint that no identifiable individuals are harmed, then clearly the first perspective is the more pragmatic. But if one is primarily concerned to avoid the commercialization, objectification, and debasement of baby making, then the second perspective will be judged the more pragmatic. Thus, even when Rorty begins to contemplate the positive space opened up by the destruction of philosophical foundationalism, the prophetic side of his pragmatism turns out to be singularly uninformative about how we should proceed to grapple with such difficult problems of social policy making. In the end, it will come down to a poetic contest of vocabularies, with each side trying to attract the attention and approval of the rising generation while also trying to make the opposition look bad.

Beyond the fact that Rorty’s pragmatism offers scant positive guidance for individuals and policy makers, there may also be a contradiction between two aspects of his more positive philosophical program. On the one hand, as a good bourgeois, North Atlantic liberal (his description), Rorty is on record opposing revolutionary social change and coercion in the name of social progress. Conversation, persuasion, and unforced redescriptions are the preferred routes to social change. On the other hand, Rorty’s liberalism also leads him to oppose cruelty, sadism, and humiliation practiced against the poor and vulnerable. An important question arises when we realize that putting an end to humiliating social conditions, such as lack of access to health care, might well require coercion in the form of forced redescriptions and reallocations of wealth. What does Rorty say to the devotee of Ayn Rand or to H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., who prizes individual autonomy and self-creation above all else, and resists the imposition of a societal consensus in favor of alleviating cruel and humiliating social circumstances? Solidarity is clearly a pivotal theme in Rorty’s work, but it’s unclear that he is capable of mustering the resources to justify, in the face of inevitable libertarian protests, the social coercion required to fund many public expressions of solidarity.

VII. CONCLUSION

In sum, then, the yield of Richard Rorty’s pragmatism for current methodological debates in bioethics is primarily negative, knocking the props out from under any pretensions to foundations and universal principles of right and wrong. His “professorial pragmatism” and philosophical trash disposal efforts would clearly sweep away some approaches based upon appeals to
nature or universal human dignity, and his deflationary nominalist view of principles would threaten the foundations of some influential principlist approaches to bioethics. Apart from these negative contributions, Rorty is characteristically modest about the contributions of pragmatism to the ongoing moral struggles of professionals and ordinary working people. Indeed, if we are seeking new and hopefully more fruitful approaches to our moral problems, Rorty seems to think that we will probably do better to look to novelists and poets rather than philosophically oriented practical ethicists. We can always wax prophetic, attempting to create a better society through redescribing lots and lots of things, but these efforts won’t have much, if anything, to do with philosophical pragmatism or with bioethics.

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NOTES

3. A notable omission from this list is the field of philosophy, which has by and large simply ignored Rorty’s frontal assault on its claims to intellectual respectability (let alone supremacy).
5. For Dewey, the very notion of “pragmatism without method” would have been unthinkable.
7. Thanks to Chris Tollefsen for this clarification.
8. One of my colleagues in philosophy at the University of Virginia once remarked to me, in an outburst without the slightest hint of irony, that Rorty, then a colleague of ours at Virginia, was corrupting our youth!
9. Were one tempted to boil Rorty’s approach down to a slogan, it might read, “Philosophy – get over it!”
10. Rorty, “The Professor and the Prophet” (1991c, p. 75). Rorty elaborates on this metaphor elsewhere: “The ‘new’ pragmatism should, I think, be viewed merely as an effort to clear away some alder and sumac, which sprang up during a thirty-year spell of wet philosophical weather – the period that we now look back on as ‘positivistic analytic philosophy.”’ See ‘The Banality of Pragmatism and the Poetics of Justice’ (1990).

11. Rorty defines an “ironist” as someone who meets three conditions: (1) Due to her acquaintance with the ways of people from other times and places, she has continuing doubts about her own final vocabulary; (2) she realizes that these doubts cannot be dissolved by any argument emanating from her own final vocabulary; and (3) she has given up on the notion that her own final vocabulary is in any way “closer to reality” than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself (1989, p. 73).

12. I owe this formulation of the problem to Jeffrey Blustein (personal communication).

13. Frank Miller observes that, as Dewey saw things, the experimentalism of science provided the bridge between these two different aspects of his work (personal correspondence).


16. It’s hard to imagine bioethicists rushing to embrace this conclusion.

17. Although it is doubtful that Rorty would approve of Beauchamp and Childress’s lingering insistence that the dictates of this common morality are in some sense universal.


19. Rorty’s discussion of principles in this text actually approaches the view I have attributed to Dewey and Beauchamp/Childress: “The political discourse of democracies, at its best, is the exchange of what Wittgenstein called ‘reminders for a particular purpose’ – anecdotes about the past effects of various practices and predictions of what will happen if, or unless, some of these are altered.” What is the difference between this formulation and Dewey’s notion of principles as the pooling and crystallizing in general ideas of the experience of the entire human race? (See Dewey & Tufts, 1932, p. 304). One difference might be that Dewey still regards principles as “the final methods used in judging suggested courses of action.” (p. 309).

20. For a similar assessment of Rorty’s pragmatism with regard to the problem of legally regulating hate speech, see Michael Rosenfeld, “Pragmatism, pluralism, and legal interpretation” (1998).

21. I refer the reader here to Michael Walzer’s astute observation that, in our society, lack of access to health care is not only dangerous, but degrading as well. See Walzer, Spheres of Justice (1983, p. 89).

REFERENCES


