Deweyan Scientism and Romantic Consequentialism

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In “Pragmatism Without Method” (Rorty, 1991) Richard Rorty argues against a self-description of pragmatism that holds that it is by comparison of methods between theories or philosophical positions that one comes to commend and adopt pragmatism. According to Rorty the methodology of pragmatism, scientific or not, is an unfulfilled promise in John Dewey’s work. It is not just that Dewey indulged in a fantasy of scientism, it is that he preserved his social democratic hopes in terms of a wide-ranging reconstructive project that, as it turns out, did not have the depth and breadth of metric available for social practice that it pretended to. But Rorty maintains that simultaneous to his scientism Dewey sometimes recommended a turn towards the reliable problem solving strategies available in merely the scope of context in which they were reliable. “Dewey’s description of moral and scientific progress is much more like somebody’s description of how he or she managed to get from the age of twelve to the age of thirty (that paradigm case of muddling through) than like a series of choices between alternative theories on the basis of observational results.” (Rorty 1991, p.69) Whether or not this reading of Dewey is commendable is up for discussion.

In this paper I will contrast several available readings of Dewey and what commentators offer as a consequence of their readings. Rorty takes pains to separate the “good Dewey” from the “bad Dewey” in order to recommend what he sees as the important upshot of Dewey’s contribution to pragmatism. Kloppenberg and Gouinlock both take issue with Rorty’s spin on Dewey, saying that he misdescribes that contribution. While I approve of Rorty’s historicist distinction and, quite generally, his appropriation of Dewey, I do think that Rorty has too neat and clean a carving of Dewey’s views and that for a variety of reasons Dewey’s views hang together (the views of the good Dewey and the bad Dewey both) in a rather more important way than Rorty says. On the other hand, I will discuss Kloppenberg and Gouinlock’s appropriations of Dewey as a step in elaborating what I consider to be the important insights
of Dewey. I want to work a dialectic with these interpretations of Dewey to see if there is not a step in another direction than they recommend. In doing so I will be relying on a powerful suggestion by Robert Brandom concerning Rorty’s own commitments and practices.

First, however, I wish to make a brief side-note. The inclination to heroize Dewey is manifest in all three authors (Rorty most notoriously), and although this is strange it points in the direction of Dewey’s legacy: that he was such an engaged no-nonsense thinker that we all pale to think of ourselves doing less than pursuing, to our best ability, engaged no-nonsense thinking. The agitation in this debate about Dewey’s actual commitments and methodology results, in part, from the plural interpretations that are available of Dewey’s massive body of work. His shifting emphases, impassioned rhetoric and ambiguous terms cause dead obvious problems in asserting an interpretation of Dewey. Dewey’s work is shot through with an almost Romantic view of the power of inquiry, fused with a sense of diligence and hope. This Romanticism emerges in his interpretation of philosophers who came before him, such as Francis Bacon (Dewey 1953, chap.2). Thus we see contemporary philosophers appending their deep hopes to Dewey’s name and work.

If we agree that even among pragmatists the figure of Dewey and his work marks an important turning point in the history of philosophy and intellectual thought generally, then we should understand that it is natural to want to assert loudly one’s “Dewey”, but like a “national character” of a nation, these different variations can most likely profitably coexist. We can issue forth fine-grained interpretations of previous thinkers and not worry too much if these interpretations contradict each other. After all, neither Gouinlock, Kloppenberg nor Rorty have much trouble having their voices heard. What is more important about our historiography is to manoeuver these contradictions for further insights.

I will speak of a “Deweyan turn” in an attempt to reconcile the views of these commentators. The idea is to reconcile the debate (even if this results in a disjunctive recommendation) by suggesting what is common to these interlocutors and to eliminate what is the misunderstood product of the impact of disagreement. Thus my reconstruction will be largely therapeutic.
The Deweyan turn consists both of a naturalism and a scientism, but also a historicism, put forward with an intent to effect some particular ends in view and some unexpected changes in our ends. Dewey’s scientism is well worth criticizing, but it also Romantic, and stands in an interesting parallel to Rorty’s own expressive-Romantic commitments. I agree with Rorty that Dewey does lack a genuine metric that specifies pragmatism as the “best account”. My intuition is that the Deweyan turn can speak to us for some time yet. In particular, the notion of the mediation of categories and instruments of inquiry with and by the exigencies of life or practice and what this amounts to, according to these interlocutors, points to a useful tension in discourse.

In “What Is The Legacy Of Instrumentalism? Rorty’s Interpretation of Dewey”, James Gouinlock argues that Dewey asserted the importance of methodology for arriving at beliefs, and that Rorty disregards this aspect of understanding of inquiry that made it seem, by Dewey’s lights, tractable and fruitful. Method was so important to Dewey, says Gouinlock, that Rorty, by dint of his linguistic philosopher’s bifurcation of Dewey, must “… reject what was surely dearest to Dewey himself.” (Gouinlock 1995, p.72) Surely, Dewey did take method, and in particular, scientific method to be of great importance. What matters is whether or not Dewey had in mind a particular methodology or not, and what level of generality he was employing the term method at any given time. Gouinlock asserts that, for Dewey, “The virtue of method is not that it attains final truth, but that it is self-corrective, progressive, just as Peirce had characterised it in his epochal article, ‘The Fixation of Belief’.” (Gouinlock 1995, p.72) So, like Peirce, Dewey contrasted a better and a worse way of doing things.

Gouinlock characterizes Rorty’s views as seemingly stuck on

… the famous thesis of the incommensurability of translation, owing principally to Quine and Kuhn. According to this theory, the meaning of observation statements in any alleged body of knowledge is determined by a theory, and any is incommensurable with any other …. [S]cientists and philosophers of science will hope in vain that observation statements will provide a way of comparing or commensurating alternative theories. (Gouinlock 1995, p.73-74)
Rorty does argue that although incommensurability theses are incoherent, a conversation is what is left over after the idea that observation statements or anything else conceptually or formally identifiable provides, in their interaction, knock-down theory choice arguments is dropped. Gouinlock believes this does not leave Rorty any criteria for theory choice. He does not understand Rorty’s views on the “linguistic turn” and the way in which Rorty appropriates Dewey’s pragmatist consequentialism.

For Dewey it was important that knowledge claims be mediated by what he called experience, which for him was often synonymous with “experimentalism”, “empiricism” and “practice”. Gouinlock believes there is a difference between Rorty’s and Dewey’s understanding of the mediation of inquiry by language. “Dewey’s claim is that language is a function of shared activity … with an environment.” (Gouinlock 1995 p.82) Gouinlock asserts that Dewey was not “… flirting with the language-game theory.” (Gouinlock 1995, p.83)

Gouinlock has it that Dewey thinks that the meanings of words map instrumentally according to their expediency at avoiding ills or obtaining goods. “We identify these meanings as deficient when their implied consequences do not in fact occur, and we remedy deficient meanings with responsible inquiry.” (Gouinlock 1995, p.83) That is, Deweyan meanings are consistent with the Peircean view of “The Fixation Of Belief” where live doubts or problem-contexts arise with breakdowns of otherwise habitual actions or discourses. This view, however, is in contrast with the view that meanings, especially predictive ones, are implicated in background meanings and conditions to such an extent that “a meaning” cannot be revised on its own, separate from those background elements. Empiricism, “radical” or not, is founded on semantic representationalism, argues Rorty, and it is a picture we should want to escape. Pragmatists, he argues, “are dubious about the suggestion that we can isolate little building-blocks called ‘meanings’ or ‘sensations’ or ‘pleasures and pains’ and construct something interesting out of them.” (Rorty 1991, p.64) But is this what Dewey was committed to, and is there a forced choice between semantic representationalism and “language-game theory” in Dewey?
Gouinlock asserts, against Rorty, that Dewey held that “Prior to inquiry, the status of relevant events in the environment is somehow puzzling or uncertain; otherwise, inquiry would not occur. The very process of inquiry is inseparable from manipulating and organizing overt events, and its intent is to produce the full-fledged object. Clearly it is not reducible to conversation.” (Gouinlock 1995, p.78) He has it in mind to “devastate … Rorty’s imputation of antirealism …” to Dewey. (Gouinlock 1995, p.79) So he relies on a tension of Dewey’s between meanings that are operative before inquiry (as a result of custom) and those that are empowered to operate after inquiry. The production of meaning and techniques is centre stage.

According to Dewey we sharpen “know-how” with inquiry, alterations in “knowing-that” follow after. Dewey says, for instance:

... the interaction of organism and environment, resulting in some adaptation which secures utilization of the latter, is the primary fact, the basic category. Knowledge is related to a derived position, secondary in origin, even if its importance, when once it is established is overshadowing. The senses lose their place as gateways of knowing to take their rightful place as stimuli to action. (Dewey 1953, p.83)

For Dewey, inquiry pursues knowing-how in science, and should pursue knowing-how in morals, fallibilistically, but not as an ultimate aim. Inquiry does this because of its value in the production of new knowledge and instrumentalities.

The alternative to definition, classification and systematization of satisfactions just as they happen to occur is judgment of them by means of the relations under which they occur. If we know the conditions under which the act of liking, of desiring and enjoyment, takes place, we are in a position to know the consequences of that act. The difference between the desired and the desirable, admired and the admirable, becomes effective at just this point .... The test of consequences is more exacting than that afforded by fixed general rules. (Dewey 1981, p.583-594)

Whether or not this consequentialism holds, either for science or moral life, to what degree it should be pursued, and whether that pursuit is in any way exclusive are interesting and open questions.
Gouinlock says: “Even after inquiry, our experience is mediated by language, but mediation is not distortion, much less is it concealment – at least not necessarily so … this [new] mediation is not distortion; it is selectivity.” (Gouinlock 1995, p.83) The inquiry produces know-how which is translated into knowing-that. For instance, we go from boiling water to the knowledge of what temperature it boils at. Gouinlock admits mediation by linguistic structures after inquiry, but it is not so clear how things are for his “Dewey’s” know-how.

For Rorty this situation of selectivity is unproblematic, because knowing-how and knowing-that are both linguistically mediated; they are both theory-laden. In Gouinlock’s interpretation of Dewey, however, realism is an important “as a key in a lock” in knowledge, because know-how is more susceptible to the constraints of an environment, than its derivative product, knowing-that. There is something interesting to say here, but it is not that realism is “grounded” in some methodological way, because it can adopt necessary data from pre-linguistic structures. For “groundedness”, such as it can be had, reflexivity in the community of inquiry is needed. Reflexivity in the community of inquiry points us away from pre-linguistic structures as “grounds” because such critical reflexivity depends upon acts of linguistic justification to refer, conceptualize, and describe the objects and results of inquiry.

In his “Response to Gouinlock”, Rorty should have said that knowing-how and knowing-that can merely sometimes be differentiated, depending on how integral rules are to a particular description, and how integral we take discursive justification to be to description. I’ll say more about this later. What Rorty does do is challenge Gouinlock to produce (himself or through Dewey) a method that is global enough to be “the method”. Gouinlock and Dewey do not, and therefore it is quite right to say, with Rorty, that “critical intelligence” is what we gain from pragmatism and that it “… encourages, bold and imaginative speculation.” (Rorty 1995, p.93) But that this is the only result of Peirce’s comparison between the scientific method and the a priori method, insofar as the a priori method discourages this speculation, is not quite right.
The scientific method is reflexive in its relationship to a community of inquirers. It applies to itself. According to Peirce and Dewey it can solve inter-community disputes and it also may apply to what Rorty has to say about vocabularies. Peirce argues that the fourth method is “… the only one of the four methods which presents any distinction of a right and a wrong way.” (Peirce 1992, p.121) Reflexivity itself, even within a robustly critical community, does not amount to a “scientific method”. Rorty is right about “muddling through” insofar as it applies to reflexive communities.

Granted that there is no one method, there is the question of whether or not methods of science and the norms generated with them are of any inter-community or inter-vocabulary probity. Rorty says of Dewey and Gouinlock’s attempt to inform culture with science: “After we have drawn the rather thin analogy between abandoning astrology for astronomy and abandoning feudalism for democracy, I do not think we can make further use of the suggestion that we look more closely at what scientists do in order to figure out what the rest of culture should do.” (Rorty 1995, p.96) In a way, Rorty admits that there are methods and norms in science that do have probity, or so I would argue, but does not put this very generously in response to Gouinlock: “I should prefer to drop the term [method], and to call the sort of thing Peirce described a social practice and to call the skilled use of magnetometers a technique … none of these … practices is reducible to rules, and none of them seems happily described as a ‘method’.” (Rorty 1995, p.95) There is no point quibbling over words, suffice it to say that Rorty’s practices and techniques are normative, even though they do not fare well when described as part of a philosophical attempt at nomological integration. Gouinlock may have the normative operation of know-how to recommend in recommending Dewey’s method.

Dewey certainly did have the bootstrapping of culture by the norms of science in mind, in recommending “scientific method”. He did also apprehend something like the considerations that lead to “the linguistic turn”, in his examination of technique and practice.
Attention has already been called to the meaning that is now given the term law – a constant relationship among changes. Nevertheless, we often hear about laws which ‘govern’ events, and it often seems to be thought that phenomena would be utterly disorderly were there not laws to keep them in order. (Dewey 1953, p.69)

Dewey thinks that new ends can be created for human beings by attending to possibilities of practices and techniques.

Man … gains power to frame new ends and aims and to proceed in regular system to their actualization. Only indefinite substitution and convertability regardless of quality [of ideal and base] … render nature manageable. The mechanization of nature is the condition of a practical and progressive idealism in action. (Dewey 1951, p.74)

Local norms of science abound in popular culture, and they have transformed it on many occasions. The norms of scientific reasoning have been appealed to in justifying all sorts of cultural movements. A misunderstanding of evolution was appealed to by Nazi idealism to justify racial superiority. Later, evolution and genetics were appealed to in order to descry that racial idealism as bad science. Freudian theories put mechanisms into casual conversation that explain repression and projection. These concepts and others and assumptions about their normativeness come into the conversation; their know-how becomes operative.

If Dewey thought that science was normative all the way down, then the fact that he was painstakingly fallibilistic gives us an understanding of why he yoked norms so closely to inquiry. It was because inquiry could be innovative. We have Dewey’s insistence that inquiry will “quicken” our understanding of the relations of culture, society and morality. Gouinlock may be insisting that this somehow bypasses or settles the conversation of inquirers. That would be a mistake. It would first off be a mistaken reading of Dewey. Dewey would have repudiated it in an instant. Second it mistakes what the requirement of reflexivity can do for the fixation of belief. We are indeed left to muddle through the reflexive axis in the interpretation of the claims and counter-claims of methods. We are stuck with purpose-relativity. When we
assert a description or demonstration as evidence or counter-evidence for a claim the
descriptions or demonstrations stand as part of practices relative to specific sets of purposes.

Rorty gets it right when he says that

Dewey’s fundamental contribution to moral philosophy has always been taken
as his insistence on a ‘means-end continuum’ – that is, as the claim that we
change our notions of the Right and of the Good on the basis of the particular
mixture of success and failure produced by our previous efforts to act rightly
and to do what is good. (Rorty 1998, p.303)

What he might not be right about is the extent of the organization produced by scientific
discovery or invention. Rorty and Dewey, and Gouinlock and Dewey all agree that the causal
interactions of society and culture are evaluable in terms of their efficacy. They disagree, it
seems, about the extent to which those evaluable causal interactions can or should be organized.

James T. Kloppenburg, in “An Old Name for New Thinking”, argues, similar to
Gouinlock, that classical pragmatism allows a greater perspicacity than Rorty’s account does.
In particular, Kloppenburg affirms a field of pre-linguistic experience as a strong component
of Dewey’s, and the other classical pragmatists’, commitments. “Their pragmatism”, he says,
“…. extended beyond the boundaries of language in two directions: in its fluid and historicized
conception of the social experience that lies behind linguistic expression, and in its dedication
to the diverse forms of continuing democratic practice, including the negotiation rather than
the elimination of difference.” (Kloppenburg 1998, p.117) I would not deny that Dewey spoke
of pre-linguistic experience, however, he also spoke of action as pre-interpreted by language.
To be charitable to him is to ascribe to him at least the notion that action is mediated in a context
of language and theory-laden activity. Thus we can see what he says as importantly consistent
with the “linguistic turn”, as Kloppenburg suggests, when he says that “The early pragmatists’
‘old ways of thinking’ already incorporated the most valuable insights of the linguistic turn and
the postmodern suspicion of power.” (Kloppenburg 1998, p.117)
As Robert Brandom has argued, a large part of what Rorty is about is a synthesis of naturalism and historicism. (Brandom 2000) Rorty effects this synthesis, in an effort to transform practice, with what Brandom calls “a vocabulary of vocabularies” to replace the scheme/content distinctions of modern philosophy, and one that is complementary to a causal vocabulary. What Gouinlock calls Rorty’s “language-game theory”, what he gets out of the linguistic turn that allows him to sidestep Wilfred Sellars “Myth of the Given”, Brandom sees as the commendation “… to observe the sharp distinction between epistemic, inferential, normative relations, on the one hand, and causal ones, on the other ….” (Brandom 2000, p.161)

Further, Rorty shows, he says:

The fact that we can use the vocabulary to discuss the causal vocabulary (its emergence, peculiarities, practical virtues and vices, and so on), and the causal metavocabulary to discuss vocabularies (the role of reliable differential response dispositions in empirical vocabularies, the practical capacities they enable, and so on), shows that the distinction between the vocabulary of causes and the vocabulary of vocabularies is not drawn in terms that make relations between them unintelligible. (Brandom 2000, p.167)

Their relations, Brandom says, are asserted by Rorty to be purpose-relative, like everything else. (Brandom 2000, p.168)

If Brandom is right about Rorty’s commitments and argumentative practices then we can profitably relocate some of the discussion between Gouinlock, Kloppenberg, and Rorty about Dewey’s commitments and specification of method to distinctions about the interpenetration of these vocabularies, further we may see if there are genuine differences between their Dewey and Rorty’s “good Dewey”. I have said that there is more to Rorty’s “bad Dewey” than the mistake of radical empiricism. What I want to say is that a tension between knowing-how and knowing-that in Dewey’s work, which he elaborates frequently in terms of the skill of the artisan, shows that he thought mere interpretation would not suffice; experimentalism which
cannot be easily interpreted prevents that. The forward-looking context of experimentalism and its norms must sometimes be broken away from the backward-looking context of interpretation and justification and their norms. I do not think that this entails that experimentalism involves “[K]nowledge of specific extralinguistic relations ….” as Gouinlock does. Or at least Dewey did not think so. Dewey saw the needs of humanity as linguistically interpreted.

The stuff of belief and proposition is not originated by us. It comes to us from others, by education, tradition and the suggestion of the environment. Our intelligence is bound up, so far as its materials are concerned, with the community life of which we are part. We know what it communicates to us, and know according to the habits that are formed in us. Science is an affair of civilization not of individual intellect. (Dewey 1981, p.713)

What I interpret him to mean is that habits also mediate language, and can do so in novel ways. Civilization is concerned because the interrelations of habit in acculturation have consequences which can issue into explanations of the blank spots of interpretations. Let me lay out what I think Dewey argues in this connection in an attempt at salience.

1. All experience is mediated. In any case the de-epistemologized questions about knowledge are: what factors mediate knowing? And what happens when we bring some other factors to bear?

2. Intelligence is the factor of (quickened) relevant mediation. There is no way to know in advance what that is.

3. The Deweyan turn is in part about learning. The method to recommend is the one that allows us to learn what there is to learn. This is “muddling through”, but it is also the opportunity to generate new methods, in terms of an experiment of habits in acculturation.

Wittgenstein held that acculturation in language-games is participation in a form of life. What is described by the phrase form of life is in part what remains opaque, as it is brought to articulacy we account for the mediation of language by habit and habit by language. Rorty’s linguistic turn teaches us not to see these as separable in a way that epistemically privileges
either the vocabulary-vocabulary or the causal vocabulary. The difference between “bad
Dewey” and Rorty is the emphasis. For Rorty it is important that the norms of habit, of the
causal vocabulary, do not overwhelm the interpretative vocabulary. For Dewey it is important
that reliable causal interactions renew the relevance of the interpretative vocabulary. Both
acknowledge that the other can happen.

Compare the difference in their views of accidents in the development of human coping.
For Rorty, accidents in evolution and culture produce us; there is no escape from the contingency
of our interpretative viewpoint. “Squirrels do what is best by their lights and so do we.” (Rorty
1998, p.304) What is important is that we often do well to stop change in the interpretative
vocabulary. We have the following assertion on Dewey’s part:

The question of ought, should be, is a question of better or worse in social affairs.
The extent to which the weight of theories has been thrown against the perception
of the place of social ties and connections in moral activity is a fair measure of the
extent to which social forces work blindly and develop an accidental morality.
(Dewey 1981, p.716)

Dewey hopes for the sufficiency of experimental tools for better human ends.

Perhaps the difference between them, (if there is any) has to do with the way in which
Rorty specifies the public and the private goals of discourse. Dewey does not see creation of
new vocabularies as located just in the private sphere (Rorty also, I would argue, implicitly
does not). Rorty says:

I have sometimes tried to sum up my views on these matters by saying that
Freedom is more important than Truth: that it is better to regard inquiry as
enlarging our imagination, and thus our alternatives, than to think of it as
getting more and more things right. It does ... I admit ..., get things like snow
and photons and baseball right .... Both are very useful, but they are only means
to an ever-changing end. (Rorty 2000, p.188)

Whereas Dewey says things like:
… the notion that action and sentiment are inherently unified in the constitution of human nature has nothing to justify it. Integration is something to be achieved…. The problem of the relation of theory to practice is not a problem of theory alone; it is that, but it is also the most practical problem of life. For it is the question of how intelligence may inform action, and how action may bear the fruit of increased insight into meaning: a clear view of the values that are worth while and of the means by which they are to be made secure in experienced objects. (Dewey 1981, p.495)

It is not that Dewey thought that what he called philosophy or inquiry is prior to democracy, just that they were perfectly commensurable and necessary to each other. So does Rorty up to a point, but he asserts the priority of democracy to philosophy (for the usual and important reasons made clear by people such as Foucault, Derrida and Rawls).

If I am right then the Deweyan turn and its Romantic experimentalism relies on its mediation of action by language and language by action. The point of language-games is that they show us a fused horizon where action often makes sense of language. I think that Dewey appreciated this much more than Kloppenberg and Gouinlock realize. I also think that Rorty’s ‘bad Dewey’ conceals from him how much forward-looking Dewey appreciated Bacon’s formulation: “… that science means the invasion of the unknown.” (Dewey 1953, p.49)

For both Dewey and Rorty pragmatism is a consequentialism. Rorty deploys the notion of consequences of successful inter-vocabulary relations when he recommends the priority of democracy to philosophy as an experimental context. (Rorty 1991, p.196) It is amiss that Rorty does not see the same consequentialism operative in the norms and practices of scientific contexts, when it is probably from Dewey that he learned not to be satisfied with “pre-linguistic experience”, and to holistically orient himself towards the consequences of successful practice.
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