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# Something Funny Happened on the Way to the Twenty-First Century

**Abstract:** This essay first traces change in, roughly, the epistemology of the humanities from the 1950s to the 21st century. The second section looks at how the meaning and options in moral philosophy altered in more or less the same period. The last and easily most speculative section examines how these changes permeated American culture, and how professional philosophers responded to the challenges of the new political world they inhabited.

**Keywords:** Quine, Rorty, analytic philosophy, political culture, pragmatism, Dewey, truth within democracy

In the wake of World War Two, intellectual endeavor in English-speaking countries, and especially the United States, was associated with the great victory. The academics who occupied the foremost research universities burgeoning after 1945 were convinced that their impartial empiricism would better the world. The good had vanquished the Nazis, and the most up-to-date learning would promulgate useful knowledge, perhaps best exemplified in the latest sciences of man, which included operations research, public policy, security studies, and urban planning. Recently minted PhDs had often absorbed logical positivism, which told them that the hard sciences were the gold standard of understanding. The goal was a quantifiable result founded in mathematics, and careful experimentation sought to manipulate experiential data under controlled circumstances. Investigators, however, had perhaps encountered these ideas by way of the more moderate 'instrumentalist' views of John Dewey of Columbia University. More ambiguous, his philosophy also premised that a single scientific method could establish warranted generalizations about how we interacted with the universe (Cowles 2020). An instrumentalist commitment perhaps differed from that of the positivists in that it was more directed to improving our situation via the social sciences than to pure research.

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Accompanying a scientific worldview was a contrasting notion that moral and political loyalty was irrelevant to scholars; their work was 'value free' or 'value neutral.' Science was objective; morals were subjective. But this oversimplification in the ruling ideology occasioned little quarrel during the early years of the Cold War. The consensus in the West was so deep – about the evils of communism – that the emotions essentially involved in evaluation did not disturb the dispassionate guarantees of rationality.

The promise of the pan-scientific that had grown up from the beginning of the twentieth century, certainly in the United States, and that had dramatically expanded in the post-war period, might be said to be naïve. In assuming that nature and culture could be comfortably mastered, the major forums of higher education agreed on a relaxed materialism that may now seem less than judicious. Yet immediately following World War Two, the growing secularism that complemented positivism and instrumentalism was also compatible with a modest piety. While campaigning for office in 1952, Dwight Eisenhower proclaimed that "our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is" (Henry 1981). Eisenhower himself was hardly interested in the sacred, and his remarks were regularly dismissed as banal. It was nonetheless widely accepted that the West demanded engineering skills and Sunday church-going but not much more. Certainly, many of the European thinkers who had fled the Continent in the 1930s and 1940s – they looked on matters somewhat from the outside – found these priorities in America. For émigré theorists like Hannah Arendt; and Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse of the Frankfurt School, the United States was spiritually impoverished and wedded to the false philosophy of positivism and to the scientistic thought of Dewey.

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# 1 The Epistemology of the Humanities

At the first-tier universities in the middle of the twentieth century, an upheaval began in the precincts of departments of philosophy. The upheaval eventually

spread throughout other disciplines and took place at a time when university thinkers had a great intellectual sway.

At the end of 1950, W. V. Quine delivered a lecture at the yearly meeting of the prestigious Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association, 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism.' It was printed the next year in the premier professional journal of the discipline, *Philosophical Review*, published by Cornell University. 'Two Dogmas' was in the air in the second half of the century for the front rank of philosophers in those countries where English was the primary language of scholarship. A specialist in symbolic logic, Quine was soon to hold the most important position in philosophy in the United States, the Edgar Pierce Professorship at Harvard. He had studied with the original logical positivists, was friendly with many of them, and an advocate for the primacy of the knowledge in physics, chemistry, and biology. No authority was higher. Those who framed the dominant systematic approaches in the United States had to reckon with Quine's apparent apostasy when he discarded 'dogmas' of empiricism. Yet something in his writing struck a chord across the landscape of privileged schools, and philosophers and historians alike have often cited his essay as the most influential piece of strict philosophical prose in the last half of the century.

Quine challenged the time-honored pronouncement that we could distinguish the conceptual from the empirical, the ideas with which we approached experience from the sensory evidence itself. We could not assert that evidence confirmed or disconfirmed the hypothetical generalizations put forward by scientists in the lab; scientific truths were not favorably verified in any simple way. We rather faced the world having in mind a complex scheme that had gotten itself in place by showing itself, in some vague way, superior in organizing the flow of events in a useful way. While Quine tilted toward the dimensions of the scheme that contained the theories and tools of the physical sciences, he allowed that our knowledge was "a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges." In an astonishing statement integral to his thought, he wrote:

> Physical objects are conceptually imported [into our beliefs] as convenient intermediaries
> – not by definition in terms of experience, but simply as irreducible posits comparable . . .
> to the gods of Homer. . . . Both sorts of entities enter our conception only as cultural posits.
> The myth of physical objects is epistemologically superior to most in that it has proved
> more efficacious than other myths as a device for working a manageable structure into the
> flux of experience. (Quine 1953, 42)

Although it was not apparent at the time, Quine had descended from the pragmatists of the late-19th and early-twentieth century, most of whom had also lectured at Harvard – like Charles Peirce and William James. They had voiced the compatibility of science and religion and measured the true by what was beneficial

for human beings. When Quine's lineage was sorted out, commentators agreed that his 'pragmatic analysis' had brought an American tradition to fruition but had rid it of its excessive divinity-school baggage.

Quine's own comparison of physical objects to the gods of the Greeks and his bringing 'myth' into play were received as flippant, perhaps metaphorical, although he repeatedly made the same point. "Physical objects and gods," the essay restated, were "myths on the same footing." "I do, qua lay physicist," he said for a third time, "believe in physical objects and not in Homer's gods; and I consider it a scientific error to believe otherwise. But . . . the physical objects and the gods differ only in degree and not in kind" (Quine 1953, 44, 45).

Quine received unusually respectful though critical attention in the magazines of philosophers, and professors au courant with the specialist literature chewed them over. Some substantial adversaries opposed his approach, and they prospered in some corners of what was becoming known as 'analytic philosophy' where Quine was food for conjecture for many years. Yet these opponents also gradually yielded ground.

In addition to this rarified population of experts and their appraisals, Quine had a more significant interpreter in a student, Thomas Kuhn. Harvard had educated Kuhn as a physicist in the 1940s, but he had also embraced the pragmatic analysis on offer in its philosophy department and particularly in Quine's compositions. In 1957 Kuhn published a book on astronomy, which, along with other items, exhibited the blend of philosophy and history of science that infused his publications. Then, in 1962, Kuhn wrote *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. It became *de rigueur* reading for scholars, an international academic best seller, and a smashing cross-disciplinary assigned text. The volume built on the Quine of 1950–1951.

Focusing on the practices of science, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* depicted two kinds of change in scientific belief: that which was part of 'normal' research and that which happened when a 'scientific revolution' took place. Normal research progressed within a paradigm. This disciplinary matrix delimited a scientific community and had three elements. The first were symbolic generalizations tied to a specific accomplishment like Newton's mechanics. The second element Kuhn termed models, large-scale beliefs about the universe, analogies, and heuristic maxims. The belief that the structure of the atom was like the solar system illustrated the model. Lastly, Kuhn spoke of exemplars, shared problems or standard initiations; for example, the high-school test for oxygen that heated potassium chlorate in the presence of manganese dioxide. Scientists had performed this experiment so often that it was almost inconceivable that it should go wrong. It rather functioned ritualistically, socializing students to correct routines.

The science done within such a paradigm presupposed more research based on results attained previously. Such normal research, the first kind of change, elaborated, applied, or confirmed this paradigm's way of seeing the physical cosmos.

Distinct from this 'progress,' Kuhn analyzed the scientific revolution that occurred when scientists perceived anomalies unsolved by normal research not as inadequately explained puzzles or yet-to-be-understood phenomena. Instead, the anomalies were regarded as counterexamples that put the paradigm itself at risk. When scientists viewed anomalies in his way, Kuhn argued, normal science went into a crisis. Out of such a crisis, a new paradigm might arise, one in which a novel set of concepts defined different problems. Kuhn asserted that different paradigms implied different views of the world. Dramatic 'paradigm shifts' – such as Einstein's replacement of Newton – were not cumulative. A new paradigm replaced – 'shattered' – an old one and did not build upon it. Elderly advocates of the earlier theories died; younger scientists underwrote the later.

Quine looked askance at his pupil's efforts and considered Kuhn to be an anti-scientific relativist. Kuhn, nevertheless, in an accessible book of under 200 hundred pages in its initial form, illustrated the anti-positivist ruminations in Quine's professional article. Quine's 'holism' and his unwillingness to presume any direct confrontation with sensory evidence had intimated that alternative frameworks could equally well account for experience. Now Kuhn said this was true of succeeding paradigms. Scientific practices were set beside the abstract testimony of the earlier positivists. Philosophers of science were encouraged not to impose some logical layout on the messy reality of scientific behavior.

The end of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* argued that the 'evolution' of science ruled out 'progress toward truth.' The evolution did not move us closer to the real but instead consisted of the growth in problems solved and the precision of solutions. Science came from "very special communities," and humanity had a "tenuous . . . hold" on "the wonderfully adapted set of instruments we call modern scientific knowledge." Kuhn could not say what nature, including humanity, had to be like in order that science could be possible, although the positivists' axiom of progress was wrong (Kuhn 1970, 160, 167–173). The book at once overshadowed the *magnum opus* of the positivist at Columbia University, Ernst Nagel, in his *The Structure of Science* of the same year of 1962. When Carl Hempel, the distinguished positivist at Princeton, collected his most formidable essays in *Aspects of Scientific Explanation* in 1965, hardly anyone noticed. These tomes became the equivalent of the dinosaurs, while Kuhn's effort was the harbinger of a new species.

This new species of philosophy of science in Kuhn's mold sprang up from where he had halted, and several examples show what was brewing. Four years before *Structure*, Norwood Russell Hanson had written *Patterns of Discovery: An*

*Inquiry into the Conceptual Foundations of Science* (1958), as anti-objectivist as Kuhn. Hanson himself liked to be regarded as a bomb-thrower, and his influence might well have been greater than Kuhn's over time, but he died at age 42, in 1967, holding a professorship at Yale. His posthumous *Perception and Discovery* (1969) indicated that he was moving beyond Kuhn's modest attack on positivism. Paul Feyerabend, who spent most of his career at the University of California at Berkeley, was an Austrian native. With a greater international presence than Kuhn or Hanson, he brought these considerations to the attention of Europeans. Just the titles of Feyerabend's three most significant writings give the flavor of his approach: *Against Method* (1975), *Science in a Free Society* (1978) and *Farewell to Reason* (1987).

While these philosophers of science were denying past truths, their university affiliations gave them support. Institutes for the study of the History of Science transformed into Departments of Science and Technology Studies (STS), The History and Philosophy of Science, or even The History and Sociology of Science, the addition of 'and Sociology' suggesting that scientific reality and progress were now diminished. To appreciate the nature of science and its history, one had to take in aspects of the social order in which science was lodged – through the discipline of sociology (Daston and Galison 2007; Jewett 2020, 236–243, 322–323; Shapin 1994). In Europe, Bielefeld University in Germany became known for this approach as did the 'Strong Programme' of Scotland's Edinburgh University – 'strong' indicating more radical ideas than Kuhn had put forth. In the United States such departmental renovations bore upon his career.

Kuhn had gone from Harvard to Berkeley, and in 1960–1961, when he was putting the last touches on 'the book,' Berkeley took up his advancement to a full professorship. Still under the spell of positivism, the senior philosophers there agreed to his promotion only if it were made in the History Department. Although the philosophers did not inform Kuhn, they argued that he had few pretensions to being a philosopher, and that his sort of history of science had little connection to philosophy. The History Department welcomed Kuhn, but two years after his 'eviction' from philosophy, he was hired as Professor of Philosophy and History of Science at Princeton, with ties to the Department of History. The decision of the Berkeley philosophers underscored the resistance of conventional philosophy to the trail that Quine had blazed (Brucker 1998, 43–45, 48–50; Kuhn 2000, 301–302).

Although Kuhn had an impact on science studies at Princeton, it can be argued that he wielded a still greater influence on the wider public of philosophy through his interaction with the applauded or notorious Richard Rorty. Around Kuhn's arrival, in 1964, Rorty had started an almost twenty-year tenure in Princeton's Philosophy Department. Kuhn was one of his early interlocutors. Yet just as Kuhn

could not understand why Quine regarded Kuhn as a renegade from rational philosophy of science, Rorty could not absorb Kuhn's dismay over Rorty's 'anti-realism' or, more usually, 'anti-foundationalism.'

Rorty had begun his career at Yale dedicated to the philosophy of language, a cornerstone of the reigning analytic philosophy. But in the 1970s, he retreated from conventional commitments, his renunciation broadcast in periodical essays. In 1979, after 10 years, his *Philosophy and The Mirror of Nature*, capped a sea-change in his thought and attempted to bring down professional philosophy. In the volume, Rorty gave a detailed justification for the looser complaints that people like Kuhn had about positivistic science. Rorty's book learnedly situated contemporary philosophy in what Rorty deemed the essential project to have engaged philosophers since Kant. The thrust had been to find an unassailable way to ground knowledge, usually to justify science and distinguish it from other endeavors that were less valid, more subjective. Over the years this enterprise had exhibited, certainly in the Anglophone world and Europe, great technical virtuosity while at the same time it had lost a non-expert audience. Logical positivism was just the most familiar of the more recent attempts in Western thought to buttress the natural sciences.

Rorty judged the major research programs in the discipline of philosophy. For him they displayed internal troubles and could be pitted against one another. If philosophers were on the right path, how could there be contradictory agendas that rose and fell with such regularity? Moreover, Rorty articulated a crucial issue in the theory of knowledge – the problem of reference, the possibility of our beliefs being directed to an external world. Rorty's argument entailed that we could not see how one or another set of linguistic exchanges could adequately intend something outside of themselves. We had only various 'conversations,' sometimes competing, sometimes cooperating. These exertions could not "mirror . . . nature." This took Quine and Kuhn one step further. In a much-cited essay of 1972, 'The World Well Lost,' Rorty explicitly dismissed talk of a physical universe at all. We had to abandon the expectation of "getting in touch with something safer and more stable than the wobbly and endangered human community." Various renderings of 'the world' existed or, better, various colloquies could be adjudicated by their efficacy in meeting certain restricted human aims. Philosophers were not involved in a quest for truth but were rather engaged in reconnoitering discourse and vocabularies (Rorty 1972, 3–18; 1979, xiv; 1992, 33, 371; 1999, xii–xxii). "True," Rorty wrote, was "a compliment paid to sentences that seem to be paying their way and that fit with other sentences which are doing so." In fact, Rorty often provoked and spent more time than usual in clarifying his remarks (Rorty 1982, xxv; 2000a, 374). His overemphasis had irritated Kuhn and made him an adversary of Rorty's.

Rorty became the most well-known cross-disciplinary thinker of the end of the twentieth century, eclipsing even Kuhn. Rorty's anti-foundationalism was commonplace by that time, even in select and exclusive philosophical circles. While the atmosphere was more unmistakable in the humanities, and while the hard sciences and some critical sub-fields of the social sciences still had a positivistic orientation, the elite universities inclined toward anti-realism. Rortyean ideas spread everywhere.

Rorty leveraged his standing at Princeton to empower the lowly in the pyramid of learning. He denounced the professional philosophical hierarchy, and legitimated many groups formerly thought to be at its fringes and isolated at run-of-the-mill colleges. These marginal elements were suspicious of scientific independence and eager to make room for the religious, the romantic, or the idiosyncratic. In deriding notions of the independently real in brief and popular essays, Rorty additionally delivered readings that downgraded the adherence of other thinkers to science. Most notably he misread Dewey, who had firmly argued for the objectivity of the sciences of man, the primacy of a single method, and the application of unbiased techniques to the study of culture.

The chief beneficiary of Rorty's allegiances and the allegiances he attributed to others may have been Religious Studies, although this field profited via subdisciplines such as the sociology of knowledge, anthropology, and social theory. These areas of inquiry were a haven for ideas indebted to Quine–Kuhn–Rorty. Simultaneously, however, after the late 1960s, the ideas could be said to be in the air of the fevered culture of that period when quixotic outlooks gained currency in the era of the Vietnam War, African-American protest, and student rebellion, in the United States and around the globe.

An early sign of the times had been Michael Polyani's *Personal Knowledge* of 1958. Polyani had begun his career as a Hungarian-British physical chemist, and his work evidenced that the atmosphere driving positivism out to sea was not just a storm in the United States. *Personal Knowledge*, a product of almost 30 years of debate, contended that knowledge relied on private and tacit judgments. Scientific method never yielded truth mechanically; the positivist understanding was flawed. Many saw Polyani and not Quine as the chief influence on Kuhn and Feyerabend. But Polyani made a greater mark outside of the philosophy of science, as religiously inclined thinkers were led to seek in the latest works on the nature of science a license for faith.

Unlike positivism, which had made rivals of science and religion, the new perspectives could be seen to have room for the divine. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann wrote *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* in 1966. Berger followed it up with two more books: *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967) and *A Rumor of*

*Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (1969). For Berger, who was a more direct than a subtle author, the message of the three was clear: ideas of what we might want or need contributed to making things so, and we needed the unearthly, which might be privileged over the empirical. Clifford Geertz was a University of Chicago anthropologist, for many years regarded as the most influential person in his discipline. In 1970 he was called to the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, an exalted organization. Its prized lifetime appointments meant a vocation of research. The Institute was also located in the same place that provided a home for Kuhn and Rorty. In 1973 Geertz collected the articles that he had written in the 1960s and that had given him his reputation as an anthropologist. *The Interpretation of Cultures* wove together material from philosophy and linguistics and reminded readers of 'the relativity of cultures.' Geertz dwelt upon the importance of seeing a society from its inside, adopting a strategy of 'thick description.' We could not easily assume escape from our own culture in comprehending others. We were locked into our own way of understanding and could not deduce that it was any better than others.

Robert Bellah, of Harvard and the University of California at Berkeley, was another student of religion sympathetic to what he was examining. By the early 1970s, he was commenting on the 'American civil religion,' a concept he invented, and lamenting its demise. A scholarly fistfight over him at the Princeton Institute was an example, writ-small, of alterations in the cerebral DNA of thinkers (Bortolini 2011). In 1972, Bellah was nominated as a candidate for a permanency there – Clifford Geertz recommended him. The standing faculty turned Bellah down in a contentious ballot. All the mathematicians voted NO because, they believed, his work had little basis in reality. On the other side, the physicists voted in favor of Bellah on the grounds that there were already humanists at the Institute; none of them had any entitlement to true science, so why bother to blackball Bellah?

By the last quarter of the century, scholars like Quine, Kuhn, and Rorty were serving as models for students who would go on to praiseworthy careers. A notable record of the imprint of this training appeared in a 2005 book, *The Disobedient Generation*, that reviewed the lives of a generation of social theorists. The volume covered some 19 of them, students in the 1960s who had gone on to celebrated chairs, and not just at key universities, but at the foremost institutions of learning – Berkeley, Chicago Harvard, Stanford, Yale. They were mainly US nationals. Nonetheless, the editors included some Europeans, most with close connections to the United States, at places like Oxford, Cambridge, and the Sorbonne. These academics also headed their departments of inquiry, presided over professional associations, and edited esteemed journals.

The radical milieu of the 1960s guided their scholarship, which was unconventional, 'disobedient.' The work of the authors was thus more penetrating than it otherwise would have been, or more penetrating than that of other academics. The collection illuminated not merely the connection between the personal and the intellectual, but also suggested the preconditions of incisive writing.

These theorists adopted what one of them named 'standpoint epistemology.' This was a phrase that betrayed how Rorty was being transferred to other areas of the academic landscape. Standpoint epistemology "link[ed] experiences with consciousness, power relations with knowledge." In brief, this approach contended that "where you stand will shape what you see . . . and stand for" (Sica and Turner 2005, 98). Now, however, this adaptation of Quine – Kuhn – Rorty embraced a novel element. The sixties theorists probed why society functioned as it did. They were interested in religion, citizenship, racism, and class. For the 19 experts, the conventional way to talk about these interests was to use the phrase 'social justice.' Social justice was the end of their efforts, and the work of social theory was, roughly, to pursue the knowledge to gain it. That is, social theory combined learning with activist engagement to get a desirable polity. The line between research and moral and political commitment was consciously crossed.

## 2 The Meaning of Moral Philosophy

'Standpoint epistemology' was a humble version of the philosophical antifoundationalism that I have unpacked. But it was now juxtaposed with an innovation – the unarguable quest for social justice. The juxtaposition highlighted a further stage of *fin de siècle* intellectual life that was occurring at world-class centers of erudition. Now, as certitude about facts declined, there was enhanced assurance about values. On a scale of the reliable, the former were going down, while the latter were going up, as the study of politics and ethics was being renovated.

In moral philosophy of the post-war period, often called 'metaethics,' a perspective usually called 'emotivism' had frequently been prevalent, again in the ranks of the most sophisticated intellectuals at stellar institutions. Not taking sides about actual conduct, metaethics investigated what was going on when moral clashes occurred, what people were doing when they made moral judgments. Consistent with the positivist belief that we could make a distinction between science and other less rigorous enterprises, emotivists and their supporters declared that morality, politics, religion, aesthetics, and anything non-scientific were 'non-cognitive.' Statements of worth were not akin to empirical statements. Philosophers who argued that predicates like 'good' were similar to predicates

like 'red' – designating something in nature – committed 'the naturalistic fallacy.' The language of morals was not about how the world was. Propositions about what should or should not be done, what was right or wrong, functioned differently from scientific propositions. The former evinced approval or disapproval or gave a word of instruction; they directed or prescribed or drove one to action.

The non-cognitivists had spelled out metaethics in part to show why disputes over what we ought to do were fraught with sentiment, always contested, and rarely settled. Such disputes needed to be segregated from science. Nonetheless, the profitability of these approaches depended on the distinction between facts and values, just as the positivism of the post-war period depended on the distinction between the factual and the conceptual that Quine had attacked. Just as the second half of the twentieth century had seen Quine and a host of followers undermine the disinterest of science, the last part of the century saw a protracted assault on non-cognitivism, on the separation of fact and value.

After it came out in 1971, John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* climaxed the return of 'naturalism.' In philosophy at Harvard and a younger colleague of Quine's, Rawls expounded at great length how moral and political undertakings were not just persuasive in character but derived from rational reflection. Rawls delivered a body blow to the non-cognitivism that had had a hold on the university community. As one scholar has declared, "no one would have dared to predict the broad critical acclaim, even fame" that welcomed the book in the erudite and non-erudite press (Daniels 1975, xxxi).

To delineate justice, Rawls called on his readers' imagination. Visualize a group of intelligences founding a society; they could not be actual people for they had no idea of whether they were young or old, rich or poor, male or female, white or black. From this 'original position,' organisms acted from 'a veil of ignorance.' What rules would they draw up to live together harmoniously? To get a handle on justice, Rawls modeled a kind of rationality. In his thought experiment Rawls made such ignorance the *sine qua non* of civics.

Members of this putative society would comport themselves so that a modicum of benefits might accrue to the least advantaged. This awareness, said Rawls, would pilot rational minds: they could be among the disadvantaged under the veil. The upshot of the enterprise brought definitive answers to queries about ethics and politics; a 'reflective equilibrium' would be achieved. As a meticulous biographer has stated, 'heated and persistent' discord, according to Rawls, concealed "a shared conception of justice." "Political disagreement is a result of misunderstanding, which philosophy should correct." (Gališanka 2019, 1) Justice *meant* being fair, and we recognized fairness as a matter of fact. Yet understanding what justice meant, as a matter of fact, carried an imperative inducing us to behave in a certain way.

Rawls was indebted to the epistemology of his colleague Quine: our views derived not from some one-to-one correspondence a belief had to a piece of sensory evidence, but to some overall web of commitments. And Rorty looked on Rawls as a fellow anti-foundationalist. From Rorty's perspective, what Rawls had achieved in thinking about justice was the result of a kind of dialogic exchange that people might have. In any case, *A Theory of Justice* became scripture to cohorts of students – many at Harvard – who went on to inhabit the loftiest senior employments in the university world in philosophy, in law schools, and in policy institutes.

On the one hand, over the last 50 years of the twentieth century, humanistic scholarship discounted neutral research. Acclaimed thinkers stressed that our knowledge was compromised in a range of ways. One version or another of 'standpoint epistemology' became the precept of the day. But, on the other hand, the objectivity that had once been attributed to one's learning was ascribed to one's politics. The latter realm, which was in a prior period conceived as packed with passion, seasonal blindness, and the partisanship of competing factions, now more possessed the unconditional role that science had previously satisfied. The characteristics of the two realms of scholarship and morals were being switched. Empirical knowledge was being likened to political obligation, while political obligation was acquiring the coloration that empirical knowledge was losing.

Different fields responded differently to this challenge, but a good example arose in the discipline of History. Before the rise of anti-foundationalism, graduate students in History were advised to check their prejudices at the door and imbibed a simple positivism. Trying to gain the impersonal or evenhanded stance of the historian might be problematic, if not impossible. Yet this was a regulative ideal for which the beginner must strive. One accumulated the facts and if enough were accumulated, a monograph would tend toward the objective and fill a small niche in the tapestry of historical knowledge. Sometime in the late twentieth century, young historians – unaware that they were the children or grandchildren of Quine–Kuhn–Rorty – espoused a different approach that was most explicit in the Preface or Acknowledgment of dissertations. The basic idea was that it was foolish to try to hide one's political stance and so here is what mine is. The stance, which was inevitably taken to be beyond criticism, would inevitably tint one's research, and this was for the best because the stance was assumed to be acceptable to all compassionate people. The author would be honest in saying that the work to follow would aid in forwarding . . . , a space-holder substituting for feminism, anti-racism, democracy, egalitarianism, multiculturalism, or patriotism under fire, or whatever the cause of social justice might be.

An example of what this might mean can be found in a text in history more prominent than the numberless books produced by PhDs with graduate training in historical topics. Rorty's *Achieving Our Country*: *Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* arrived in bookstores in 1998.

At the end of the century, now in his late sixties, Rorty examined civic policy, an area he had always deemed secondary not just to the *apriori* reasoning of philosophers but also to the private worlds of individuals. By this time, Rorty had renounced his profession and left Princeton, at first for a special chair in the Humanities at the University of Virginia, and then for a similar one in Comparative Literature at Stanford University. Wanting to diminish the status of philosophers, Rorty recommended not just that enlightenment did not lie in epistemology but that it did lie in the arts, poetry, literature, and history. Responding to the critiques of those who saw him as an apolitical elitist, Rorty adopted the duties of a public intellectual and set aside a spectatorial indifference.

One set of his non-*apriori* ruminations appeared in *Achieving Our Country*. Rorty despaired that the American left since the 1960s had focused on cultural issues rather than the social and economic priorities of his youth. He urged that his academic audience recall to mind the activists and the soft-Marxism of the earlier era, and put aside the identity politics of the later era. The way to do this was Rortyean: the radical political language of the first part of the twentieth century had to be reinvented; current notions had to be redescribed in the phraseology of the 1930s. Such an elucidation would allow his audience to adopt a posture more fruitful for remaking America for the better. US intellectuals who followed Rorty might 'achiev[e] our country.' The academics, however, would not initiate reforms by scientific understanding of the government or some sort of investigation that had a hold on truth. Rather, their command of a certain kind of conversation could bring into being the good society, a sort of nationhood that all caring citizens might sustain.

Rorty's history displayed a facet of the novel transposition of science and value that had become a dimension of the work of university Departments of History. Rorty gave up on the external evidence and replaced it with benign conversation about what he called 'hope' for a kindlier administration; we must attend not to statements that might be impugned but to the ethics of all folks of good will. Nonetheless, the attention that *Achieving Our Country* received showed the discomfort the new dispensations were causing. Rorty's loosely written exhortations contrasted with the careful reasoning of his earlier epistemological writing. His chronicle reflected his nostalgia and memories as a child of Popular Front intellectuals in the 1930s and 1940s, which he incorporated into the text, more than it did history. Rorty later apologized to professional historians for his 'amateurish' inexperience (Rorty 1985, 39; 1998a, 3–4, 153; 1998b, 50–54; 2000b, 207; 2000c).

Yet the elevation of his own inclinations to historical legitimacy did signal the implicit transfer taking place, with knowledge going to the subjective and morality to the objective.

Another version of this transfer came in departments of English, Romance Languages, and Rorty's new field of Comparative Literature itself. In these domains, savants in France like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and Jean Baudrillard were prominent in America, and once again showed the international efflorescence of anti-foundationalism. The French and their US advocates were interested in 'regimes of knowledge,' *epistemes*, and platforms of linguistic idealism. What others took as an external reality, these philosophers analyzed as construals in language; not the world but words about it became primary. The extent to which Quine–Kuhn–Rorty were influential here is not clear, but an effective Franco-American alliance played to Rorty's strengths. Additionally, Francophone scholars – most famously associated for a period with Yale University – put forward their political ideas as beyond challenge.

# 3 Philosophy and American Culture

This final section takes us onto risky terrain. In a remarkable set of developments, many of these academic ideas could be seen to have turned up in the real world of American politics of the early 21st century. Not just in the Ivory Tower, but now outside the academy, facts were increasingly put at risk, while what may have formerly been taken to be expressions of emotion were thought to be indisputable. Connecting these developments in the rough and tumble of government to developments in the academy is a tricky endeavor. Two more sophisticated projects that various coteries of scholars expounded to circumvent the relativism associated with Quine–Kuhn–Rorty gained prominence. Both projects appeared in the context of the transfigured public arena and may have been connected to that transfiguration. Neither seems to me to have succeeded.

Politics had been mutating at least since the photogenic and media-savvy presidencies of John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan, from the early 1960s to the late 1980s. As Kennedy put it, "appearance contributes to reality" – the not real could underwrite the real (Kennedy 1963, 897–898). Actuality might be overlooked, while moral prescriptions were heightened. Kennedy's illnesses and philandering were dismissed as facts, and Reagan's unquestionable political ethic was based on astrological calculations and the confusion of Hollywood characters with human beings. These aspects of national life came more urgently into focus in the 1990s when Democrat William Clinton entered the White House. The systemic deception that occurred during President Clinton's affair with an executive branch

intern was, in another guise, an extravagant example of Rorty's argument that conversations might compete and that we had to decide amongst them on grounds of fruitfulness. As President Clinton replied in one famous statement when he was interrogated, "It depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is" (Starr 1998, fn. 1128). A few years later, the new Republican Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld puzzled critics when he said: "As we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns — the ones we don't know we don't know" (Rumsfeld 2011). About the same time, a phenomenon called 'Reality TV,' which had originated in the Clinton years, blossomed. This sort of television documented purportedly unscripted situations with ordinary people but blended entertainment with life in an original fashion. Television production placed participants in an artificial environment and coached them on performance. Storylines were generated ahead of time, scenes were staged, and editing premeditatedly misled viewers. The shows introduced public figures as surprise 'actors' who might make almost supernatural appearances to alter the plot. It became common for politicians to contribute to mass commercial entertainment. What was 'reality' became more open to doubt.

Some 15 years after Clinton and Rumsfeld, a later administration elevated fiction while according self-interest the status of a principled absolute. The distinction between truth and falsity was sidestepped, and feelings of hurt or outrage turned into undeniable moral information. The affirmation of fake news, of alternative facts, and of different narratives was a vulgarization of an outlook that the academic book-reading leadership had espoused for two generations and had driven into as many heads as possible. In less cultivated accents, politicians were making the same points as Quine–Kuhn–Rorty and displayed a tasteless version of some of the priorities at Princeton University in the 1960s and 1970s. Cable TV in the 21st century, fair and balanced, was only mimicking what Rawls had put on offer at Harvard in the 1970s and 1980s.

Some observers of the academic world of the early 21st century urged that the humanistic endeavors I have surveyed from the 1950s through the 1990s caused what was named postmodern or 'post-truth' popular and political culture. Were Rorty and his predecessors and followers the agents of such change? Should observers and journalists congratulate or denounce scholarly postmodernists for what they had accomplished? These questions of liability are difficult to answer.

The attribution of responsibility to the learned community – that academics are in some straightforward way accountable for the civic communiqués that define our era – may just be another example of how the learned get their importance amplified. They were in reality part of a more pervasive deflation of truth and an inflation of the demonstrability of ethics and politics that took place in the

latter part of the last century and carried over into the twenty-first. The sources of this sort of large shift are often too easily associated with some single factor. So, for example, university professors might be said to be the agents of the shift. Or the statesmen in the high-1960s are sometimes taken as the causal drivers. It might be asserted that over-reach by the Democrats of President Lyndon Johnson (and then by the Republicans under Richard Nixon) had repercussions in university life. But both thinkers and politicians veered out of their typical patterns. Johnson designated the pragmatist, can-do, appointees in the executive branch as 'the Harvards,' implicating both the Ivory Tower and the White House in this era. Similarly, in the middle of the nineteenth century, arrangements over slavery were tested and found wanting by abolitionists in intellectual life and secessionists in the Senate and the House of Representatives. In the late twentieth century, I do not believe we can say the lecturers brought about the alterations in the polity or that policymakers affected scholarly enclaves. We face a wholesale movement in the ethos of the country's order. National politicians and university leaders were both enmeshed in a civilization that had embraced the notion that, again to quote Rorty from 1972, 'The World [Was] Well Lost.'

Complexity, however, does not mean that if we explore the rise of the evidence-diminished but morally loaded domain that we inhabit, humanists were of no weight. Expert collegiate authorities often ask: How can contemporary politicians hold truth-dismissing, but ethically-absolute ideas? Big lies and moral extremes? Yet luminaries of the scholarly world have been immersed in Quine–Kuhn–Rorty for years and have communicated it to one and all. Why would they be surprised if a version of these concepts drifted into the minds of the ordinary public? Ruling university quarters, I believe, harbored a case of conscience. Because they inhabited a rarified, deracinated world, Rorty had had deprecated professional philosophers. Although still part of the culture, they did not know much about it. They were most of all burdened by the false belief that they did know something and were citizens of influence. Their feelings of answerability, I think, was a dimension of the emergence of a complex philosophical argument that made coherent the elevation of what often became known as the 'the normative' and the 'construction' of the scientific.

What I call the exploration of normativity is the first learned project that hoped to benefit from Quine–Kuhn–Rorty yet repudiate its subjectivism. Philosophers argued that a social context underlay our theoretical endeavors, and that fully to understand knowledge production we first had to grasp the rules embedded in cultural structures. Thinkers might differ about the sources of this 'normativity.' A conventional candidate, nonetheless, was human autonomy, a concept that originated in German thought. Coherent behavior devolved from the universalizing of the wills of individuals trying to comprehend their existence and acting in

concert within a community of like-minded organisms. Some implicit agreement on claims that we might legitimately make on one another was a stipulation of action, action that might crucially include the obtaining of knowledge. Beneath the order of science was an order of the customary, indeed more than customs but routines that made possible institutions necessary to human existence. The work of Harvard's Christine Korsgaard and like-minded philosophers took this position. For other 'inferentialists,' like the highly regarded Robert Brandom, these routines, expressed in language, allowed us to infer what might or might not be justifiably done. A more recent development is found in the writing of Philip Kitcher and commentators on his work. For some professional philosophers, such theorizing, again often based on the sort of reasoning found in Kant and Hegel, avoided the oversimplification of relativizing truth and objectifying ethics although the reasoning also managed to reify the imperatival (for example, see Brandom 2000; Kitcher 2011, 2021; Korsgaard 1996).

But could the professoriate, even in the Ivy League, the Oxbridge colleges, and their handmaids, expect such considerations to influence men and women in the street? There are some signs that the answer is YES. Scholars initiated programs in 'real life morality' designed to educate common folk about what rationality required of them in their daily lives, about what implicitly accepted standards demanded in the way of behaving, and about the requirements of moral improvement. The series in 'Practical Ethics' published by Oxford University Press was an outstanding example. It may be true that some academics considered their role to be tutors of the less knowledgeable and intelligent. But it is much more straightforward to believe that such tutoring foundered. Opponents of the humanists – especially in the political realm – might be entirely ignorant of normativity and inferentialism, and of books (in the Oxford Series) titled *Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals; Killing in War*; or *Choosing Children: Genes, Disability, and Design*. Opponents, however, could easily pick up a rude opinion that their moral views were weighty and facts dodgy.

This is the issue of unintended consequences. Perhaps it should have been seen that a price would be paid for shrinking the factual to the conversational and making the social a precondition of the natural. The cost would come in inevitable simplification. What would occur when the other side took liberties with what was formerly the truth? Suppose, for example, one side said a vote was rigged, while the other side said it was legitimate. Who was to be believed? Some public philosophers might invoke challenging Kantian factors about the prerequisites of claim-making. It was, however, much easier to take for granted that, especially since the truth could not be pinned down, what I wanted to be true must be true. If one's enemies controlled the politics, and one's own certainties were dismissed, unpleasant effects might follow.

Another group of leading scholars, more attuned to what they saw as the destructiveness of public relativism, have sought a way out by looking at the affinity of democracy for truth. This is the second scholarly project designed to salvage the worthwhile in Quine–Kuhn–Rorty. It has different problems than the normativists' and inferentialists' schemes. If we can associate democracy with truth, such a connection would declare that 'we' – in the West and particularly in America – stand for democracy and that such a form of government compels esteem for truth. Thus, we could give short shrift to anti-foundationalism – the speculative underpinning of a post-truth order; and then also to its unfortunate consequences in public life. John Dewey, close to a century ago, had first made this argument. It had several steps. US democracy was for him founded on the well-known respect for rights, basic liberties that the state could not touch and that individuals in a community exercised. But just this veneration for independent personhood was essential for a researcher's freedom and for the experimental reasoning carried out by cadres of scientists. This experimental reasoning led to the warranted generalizations that efficaciously directed our navigation in the world. These generalizations were the hallmark of Dewey's 'instrumental realism,' the truths produced about nature and society. Truth was at the end of a path from democracy.

A chief opacity here was the status for Dewey of the truths generated in his instrumental realism. Dewey's methodological scientism did tie him to the logical positivists, yet truth did not lie in any connection between propositions or judgments or ideas to an independently existing reality. We attained a viable connection to an outside world, said Dewey, only through human activity; instrumentalism both revealed what was out there and assisted in its being there. Dewey's desire to overcome various dualisms and his demanding prose make it arduous to argue with much accuracy where he stood. He baffled colleagues with his stance about the connection of, say, sentences we might utter and the externality to which they might properly pertain. This may not have been a weakness for Dewey because – as Rorty later showed – the problem of reference had perplexed thinkers for a long time. Nonetheless, whatever we make of Dewey and truth, for him democracy circuitously led to it (Westbrook 1991).

Rorty evaded such a connection between a political location and any philosophical orientation. So, for example, Dewey was convinced that authoritarianism was related to Hegelian idealism (Dewey 1915). Rorty repudiated such couplings, and I think took this tack because he put his anti-foundationalism in the same camp as that of the philosophy of the renowned Martin Heidegger, who was a card-carrying National Socialist; and Jean-Paul Sartre, who was frequently identified as a communist. Contra Dewey, who wanted to claim epistemological positions (like instrumental realism) for regimes (like democracy), Rorty was leery of such

deductions. Philosophical ideas were one thing, for Rorty in one of his moods; public affairs another (Rorty 1991).

However, after Rorty, some humanists undertook to find truth as a core element of democracy – the serious politics of America beyond the university. In a change of course, they would turn aside post-truth in the contemporary culture of the West and reconstruct what amounted to a Deweyite edifice, giving the join between democracy and truth a more robust basis. This was a tall order, not least because even present-day supporters of the link between democracy and truth were far more sophisticated than Dewey in their inspection of the historical record. They found that, since the eighteenth century, democracies had awkwardly attached themselves to a respect for the truth. The link might have existed but had been erratic and spotty in the past. Furthermore, the twentieth-first century reasoning about a democratic virtue of truth neglected to deliberate on whether monarchical or autocratic or repressive orders had a better link to truth. Dewey, even if cursorily, had made such a declaration. One could not do much with the link unless it distinguished democracies from other regimes.

The main problem in the 21st century, though, was the chain of evidence that effected the link. This claim was clearer than Dewey's but still flawed. It was first urged that realism characterized American democratic thought. Then, a zeal for truth in philosophy might surface from this 'modest realism,' a belief in 'things as they really are.' One study told its readers that 'most philosophers' in the United States were realists, and suggested Rorty's 'realism.' If we had independently existing objects, then we could uphold truth as a tie between some of our judgments and the real; and this is what American thinkers had believed. Democracy implied realism, and realism implied truth; truth could be derived from democracy. Put this another way: we found that, in America, realism was the accepted philosophy, and from realism came a theory of knowledge that gave us truth (Rosenfeld 2019, 19, 67, 183, 193) The problem with this contention was that realism was simply not what had been on offer at American universities since 1945. The neo-Deweyans, trying to assist educated citizens struggling against the postmodern, simply ignored or rewrote the intellectual history of the United States. Indeed, if democracy did imply realism in thought, the United States was not a democracy, for its philosophy was not realistic.

A version of pragmatism – that truth is what works – runs like a red thread through this narrative of intellectual and political life in America. For much of the period from 1950 onward pragmatists of many stripes were seen as liberating heroes as pragmatisms of assorted kinds became associated with the 'American.' Whether these movements are praised or blamed, however, it would still be nice if scholars tried to be more detached in their research and less moralistic about their politics.

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