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Abstract

Pragmatism, Religion, and Ethics: A Reminder from Rorty

In Richard Rorty's 1991 essay "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,"¹ he argues that concerns of democracy, so questions of politics and ethics, should take precedence over those of philosophy. Worries about the social good should precede metaphysical concerns and arguments about conceptions of the self. While scholars of the past rightly reject using, for example, God to justify a political or ethical program, Rorty points to John Rawls² and Thomas Jefferson as arguing against the tendency to do the same with conceptions of the human being. If we first come up with a theory of the self and then use this theory as our base for taking on ethical and political questions, we are doing things backwards, Rorty says. In true pragmatist spirit, he argues for the primacy of pressing doubts, of questions of utmost concern in our society, to the prior imposition of weighted views of philosophers and theologians.

The argument of this paper is that, nearly 25 years later, Rorty's insight is one we need to take seriously and one useful for taking on questions about the relationship between psychology and ethics. In subtle ways, especially in the study of religion and ethics, we tend to slip back onto a conception of the self, justifying ethical claims based on those conceptions, forgetting the important pragmatist insight about the priority of politics and ethics, even its priority in arguments for our very conceptions of the self.

The paper will focus on Rorty's essay and some evidence of this tendency in current uses of the work of the pragmatist philosopher (and student of Rorty's) Robert Brandom and, from this, will assess some of the prospects and limits to the use of cognitive science in the study of religion and ethics. In Brandom's linguistic theory³ – one grounded in pragmatics and identifying a normativity to the deepest aspects of linguistic exchange – scholars have begun to appeal to a conception of the self as justification for democracy, undermining a founding pragmatist insight. The recent turn to cognitive science as a compelling resource for our view of the human being perhaps also reflects this tendency. While these avenues are essential for our work, questions remain regarding the relationship between these areas of research.

This analysis is central to the questions anchoring this conference. How far can we take insights from psychology before we revert to a robust conception of the self as justification for our ethical claims? With the pragmatist rejection of a view of the individual as rational, autonomous, and untethered to social and historical context, this paper also takes on the relationship between reason and intuition, one central to warring conceptions of the self and the role of those conceptions in our work.

¹ In *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 175-196.

² For example in "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Summer, 1985) 223-251.

³ Found in, among other places, *Making it Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, & Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1994).