



*Symposia. Language or Experience:
Charting Pragmatism's Course for the 21st Century*



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Introduction

More than thirty years ago, Richard Rorty published *Consequences of Pragmatism*. There, and in other writings, Rorty challenged the centrality and even the necessity of “experience”, a notion that had played such an important role in the work of pragmatists such as Charles S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. Rorty denigrated “experience” as both unnecessary and retrograde, and criticized Dewey and James for either lapsing into bad faith (offering experience as a substitute for “substance”, or “mind”, etc.) or for simply lacking the linguistic tools (devised later by analytic philosophy) to escape philosophical dead ends. He pronounced that experience could and should be eliminated to from pragmatism.

Rorty’s critique of the classical figures, along with his championing of figures he affiliated with pragmatism (such as W. V. O. Quine, W. Sellars, and D. Davidson) created both space and motivation for the development of more language-centered pragmatisms, sometimes collected as “neopragmatism” or “new pragmatism” or “linguistic pragmatism”. These language-centered strategies have become important in the work of figures such as Robert Brandom, Huw Price, Michael Williams, and Bjørn Ramberg. As summarized by Alan Malachowski, the advantage of the “new pragmatism” was that it “has not bound itself by the sorts of commitments that were always going to hold classic pragmatism back. Of these, empiricism, with the accent on experience, is the principal factor. New Pragmatists are able to discard much philosophical baggage by shifting its focus to language” (Malachowski 2010: 31).

Still, philosophy never just develops along one track, and neither did pragmatism. For while Rorty sought to eliminate experience from pragmatism, contemporaries of Rorty (e.g., John J. McDermott and Richard Bernstein) were elucidating the notion and arguing for its *indispensability* to pragmatism. In a recent book (2010) Bernstein argued, contra Rorty, that a pragmatic conception of inquiry requires experience: “*Redescription, no matter how imaginative, is not enough*” (Bernstein 2010: 214, *italics in original*). Bernstein traces this lesson to Peirce’s view that “experience involves bruteness, constraint, ‘over-and-againstness’. Experience is our great teacher. And experience takes place by a series of surprises” (Bernstein 2010: 132). Without this element, Bernstein maintains, experimental inquiries lack friction. This experience-centered approach was and continues to be influential for another group of contemporary pragmatists such as Mark Johnson, Thomas Alexander, Richard Shusterman, Charlene Haddock Seigfried, Gregory Pappas, Douglas Anderson, and many others. (I would place myself in this group.)

The depth and continuity of these developments show, I believe, that we have come to a point where what were originally just different *emphases* in pragmatism now constitute different *schools* or, if you like, “isms”. For if there is any stable meaning to the term “neopragmatism” (or its congeners such as “linguistic pragmatism”), it exists because of those pragmatists who have made language (and linguistic analysis) central

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to what pragmatism is and, more importantly, what it should *do*. And because there is a prescriptive element here – what pragmatism should do – there is a concomitant need to spell out the differences between the pragmatisms and to explicitly raise the question “What difference does it make if pragmatism is centered on *language* or *experience*”? This issue seeks answers to that question.

State of the question

While many in philosophy recognize the tension between pragmatisms that emphasize “language” or “experience”, many wonder whether this is a false question; they suspect that these concepts can, indeed must, coexist in some way. One motive for pressing the question, then, is revealed by pressing the further question: *How* should language and experience relate? Should we say, perhaps, that “All experience must be expressible in language”? Or should we say, instead, that “All language takes place within a broader field of experience”? We could phrase the questions differently, but my point is that the same type of initial choice points will recur; picking an emphasis is harder to evade than it might initially seem.

If you do not agree, here is another motive for investigating the choice that is more straightforward: the dismissal, *tout court*, of experience by the linguistic pragmatisms of Rorty, Brandom, and others following their linguistic leads. As various authors remind us in this issue, the explicit use – and even mention – of “experience” is viewed by some linguistic pragmatists as un- or even counter-productive to the methods and aims of pragmatism, and so *experience should be banned*. As readers will discover, this move to winnow pragmatism down is arguably much more than a technical adjustment; rather, it represents a fundamental, even radical, change in what pragmatism can and should do. (In contrast, classical pragmatism never sought to dismiss language.) Because, then, the newer pragmatism seeks a narrower (they’d argue better) focus, the question becomes one of the *costs*. This question is, I think, a sufficient reason to investigate language-*vs.*-experience as a dilemma.

The goal of this issue is to (a) have authors evaluate the dilemma *as they see it*, since the way a philosophical question is posed can make a huge difference; (b) present any answer they offer; and, finally, to (c) explore possible alternatives or, if they argue that the question is ill-formed, to provide convincing dismissals of the whole premise. The remainder of this introduction briefly limns a few of the issue’s themes and more striking assertions. By necessity, the introduction is selective; I urge readers to give close and careful study to all the pieces in this volume. By my lights, they are all excellent. I am most grateful to all the contributors for their diligent scholarship and their patience as this volume came together.

Defining Linguistic Pragmatism

Despite the fact that the salient themes and ideas have been on the scene for more than thirty years, consensus about the definition of linguistic or neopragmatism is

still hard to find. (I made one focused attempt in Hildebrand 2012.) It is gratifying, then, to see a variety of authors adding their efforts here. Mark Johnson, for example, locates the root idea of linguistic pragmatism in Rorty's key claim (in *Consequences of Pragmatism*) that "when it comes to matters of meaning, understanding, and knowing, there is nothing beneath or beyond language against which our linguistic articulations might be measured or evaluated. Rorty doesn't make the ridiculous claim that there is nothing beyond language, but only that our practices of communicating, assessing truth-claims, and coordinating action are linguistically structured, through and through". Rorty's idea, Johnson continues, is further developed by Brandom, who expresses it both in his depiction of the "linguistic turn" and his own "lingualism". As Brandom puts it, the former is a process of "putting language at the center of philosophical concerns and understanding philosophical problems to begin with in terms of the language one uses in formulating them" while the latter is the "commitment to understanding conceptual capacities (discursiveness in general) in terms of linguistic capacities" (Brandom 2011: 22). And while there is plenty that Brandom admires in the classical pragmatists, he minces few words as to how he parts company with them. "What one misses most in the pragmatists – at any rate separates them from us – is that they do not...share the distinctively twentieth-century philosophical concern with *language*, and with the *discontinuities* with nature that it establishes and enforces" (Brandom 2004: 15). Such views, Johnson comments, amount to "an analytic philosophical perspective enriched with a pragmatist attention to action [where]...the 'actions' are principally linguistic acts" and so, in sum, we get the following definition:

Linguistic pragmatism is what you get when you start with analytic philosophy's founding assumption that language is our access to any meaning we are capable of experiencing and then supplement this with the pragmatist insight that meaning is a mode of action tied to values and forms of communicative interaction.

Thomas Alexander agrees, and emphasizes the retrograde element in these (ostensible) "advances" in pragmatism. For Alexander, the narrowed approach taken by linguistic pragmatism constitutes a return to long-held habits in philosophy. Focusing mainly on Brandom, Alexander writes that "linguistic pragmatism...confines its vision of human existence to theories of linguistic meaning, where language is thought of as largely concerned with epistemological issues". Some other definitional efforts in this issue are fine grained; John Capps, for example, distinguishes between Rorty and what he calls a "second wave" of linguistic/neopragmatism rooted in Rorty but also divergent. Capps' focus is Huw Price's "global anti-representationalism/expressivism/inferentialism" which, he argues, takes linguistic pragmatist "anti-representationalism to its logical extreme".

The Rejection of Experience and The Rejection of That Rejection

Understandably, part of defining a philosophy that aims to supersede another, earlier one, returns, ineluctably, to *how* the newer should displace the older. Here,

the crux of the matter is the rejection of experience by linguistic pragmatism. To be a “linguistic pragmatist” is, in part, hermeneutic, a commitment to interpreting (major portions of) classical pragmatism as justifying “knowledge or truth claims by reference to some allegedly non- or pre-linguistic ‘experience’ that supposedly provides the ultimate constraints on what counts as knowledge” (Johnson). This accusation (made against the classical pragmatists but against others, too) is sometimes referred to as “givenism” and critics ground it in Wilfrid Sellars’ attack on the “Myth of the Given”. Regarding this issue, James O’Shea and Colin Koopman express some sympathy with neopragmatist criticisms of experience as committing the sin of “givenism”. Koopman, for example, invokes as legitimate “Brandom’s concern that Dewey frequently invokes a concept [experience] that he forces to play the double-role that Sellars criticized [...]. [Such givenism] is for Brandom (following Rorty, following Sellars) rightly a sin insofar as it cannot but help extending an invitation to empiricist foundationalism [...]. We can rightly attribute this double-role to Dewey’s concept of felt qualitative immediacy”.

O’Shea notices a similar, problematic tension in James’ view of pragmatic meaning, especially that between the (a) relational and “leading” aspect of meanings and their (b) felt, qualitative aspect. As O’Shea puts it, “The tensions arise when the ‘effects’ that are taken to be entailed by applications of and inferences involving the given concept begin to take the form of various introspected qualities or felt experiences that cannot plausibly be regarded as playing the cognitive semantic roles for which they are unfortunately volunteered by James”. This tension, O’Shea notes with some approval, “is taken by Rorty and Brandom to disappear if we follow Sellars’s thoroughgoing rejection of ‘the given’ as a myth; that is, if we eschew any appeals to ‘experience’ where this is portrayed as both non-discursive in nature and yet somehow by itself, without conceptual presuppositions, intrinsically reason-giving or reality revealing (the myths of the ‘epistemic given’ or ‘categorical given’ respectively)”.

The upshot, then – for those who suspect classical pragmatism of violating Sellars’ prohibition of givenism – is to force upon “experience” one of two construals. As Johnson puts it, “Experience, on this view, is either already a linguistic construct, or else it has no standing in selecting out which concepts, truth claims, and modes of knowing are sanctioned by communities of inquirers”. Such a dilemma demands a response from experience’s defenders, and they come with both force and speed.

Defensive and Expansive Accounts of Experience

Some authors offer a *direct* defense of experiential pragmatism (against the charge of “givenism”), while others offer an *indirect* defense – typically by offering an account of experience (frequently Dewey’s) exculpating it from such charges. Johnson, for example, attributes the erroneous nature of the givenism charges to linguistic pragmatism’s inadequate accounts of language, meaning, and experience itself (especially as informed by recent brain psychology). Linguistic approaches, he complains, assume that “all thought is linguaform–linguistically expressible as a set of concepts, propositions, and their relations”. He goes on to give evidence

why this is wrong. Alexander's piece notes this same tendency in Brandom: "In spite of the 'pragmatic' turn in placing emphasis on belief as action, it still has tacit propositional content that can be linguistically explicated. I think this is still a version of the assumption that all experience is about knowing". The correction, then, is to realize that "the key insight is that not all experience is experience-as-known and that knowing experience arises and terminates within experience that is not knowing". To Alexander, it is important not only to correct the misreading of Dewey, but to make clear that those who follow Dewey's lead are not being obstinate.

One of the major issues that divides "us" (experiential pragmatists or cultural naturalists) from "them" (linguistic pragmatists) is that "they" think we are holding on to some archaic piece of epistemology when we have dropped epistemology altogether and the "intellectualist" view of experience that comes with it and embraced instead an existentially embedded view of cultural existence that turns toward life, the lived body, culture and history.

Cheryl Misak's piece also criticizes Rorty and Brandom for narrowing pragmatism's wider compass: "Much of the damage Rorty has done to pragmatism comes from setting up a false choice between language or experience [...]. An important insight at the very heart of pragmatism is that language and experience cannot be pulled apart". She continues by noting that "James and Dewey...thought that philosophy was *not* all about language – it was about language and experience".

Still other defenses (for retaining "experience") proceed, at least in part, by discrediting those laying siege. Margolis, for example, attributes Rorty's criticism of Deweyan experience (and his suggestion to abandon it in favor of "discourse") to a "deep misunderstanding of Dewey's pragmatism" stemming from his "failure to engage Dewey's account [in the *Logic*] of 'experience'". Rorty's readings of Dewey neglect, either intentionally or unintentionally, Dewey's reconstruction of experience as well as his philosophy's account of "the precision of logic and science [as] itself no more than approximative and informal, being instrumental finally to the transient goals of the same inquiry that invites their subaltern precision" (Margolis). The result, Margolis argues, is that Rorty's advice is "irresponsible", "never really grounded pertinently", "completely wide of the mark", and "incoherent on its face". The upshot is stark: "Neither Davidson nor Rorty can be rightly supposed to extend or improve Deweyan pragmatism".

In addition to defending experience from (perceived) misreadings or reductions by linguistic pragmatists, there are a variety of positive explorations of what experience means. Some (such as Alexander, Margolis, Pappas, and others) emphasize the existential starting point. "The main idea", Alexander writes, is that the matrix of inquiry, the lifeworld, is largely noncognitive". Given that, he adds, experience in Dewey "takes on a plurivocity with a variety of 'as-structures'; these cannot all be reduced to the univocity of 'as-known'". In his reading, experience is akin to "culture" in an anthropological sense, "the structured practices and symbol systems by which human beings exist together as communities in the world". Roberta Dreon's essay also makes this point. In the course of correcting the mistaken "water pipe metaphor"

of communication – a deformation of Dewey’s famous remark about language as the “tool of tools” – Dreon argues that once we discard bad metaphors and come to see language as a form of action, we can come to see that “action...is structurally shared or participatory, in the sense that in order to be accomplished it needs many individuals’ contributions. This is why communication is so important for the human species, because according to Dewey it literally means the ‘making of something common’”.

Margolis also situates experience in this larger cultural and existential framework; he characterizes Dewey’s use of “experience” as “heuristic (or mythic) attempts to recover the profoundly conjectural, passing, constructivist nature of what we should mean by cognition and reflexive understanding”. Such attempts must evade the analytic exactitudes (of approaches such as Brandom’s) as they are “broadly self-regulative in a respect that cannot be independently ‘denoted’ by the instrumental powers of logic and science”.

Interestingly, for Jörg Volbers, what is worth celebrating about pragmatist reconstructions of experience is the way they enable other reconstructions of logic and science. Pragmatists provide, Volbers says, an “experientially driven reflection on the model of the experiment”. This reflection accomplishes the further (and most) important objective: it diversifies the antifoundationalist advance begun (but not adequately sustained) by Kant. As Volbers puts it,

the problem with much of post-analytic philosophy of language, as well as with certain readings of classical pragmatism, is a *too narrow* understanding of antifoundationalism. It is restricted to an idealized (and yet always implicitly scientifically biased) account of understanding and meaning. A wider conception should rather use science’s success as an opportunity to articulate the *different forms* of contact with experience[...]. Classical pragmatism establishes such a wider perspective... [because] instead of *dropping* the empiricist’s reference to experience, it consciously *reconstructs* it.

Thus, experimental practice consists of “experiences [that] are never isolated ‘given’ cognitions, but rather form a dynamic flow with both obstacles and reinforcing effects [and this] experiential flow is perceived *in relation* to the experimentalist’s expectations and conceptions, giving it significance beyond the immediate moment”. Via pragmatism, reconstructions of science and experience reinforce one another (and address practical human problems), while nevertheless remaining immune to Sellarsian charges of “givenism”.

The Inseparability of Language and Experience, and the Larger Stakes for Pragmatism

Most authors here argue for the inseparability of language and experience. Their reasons vary, of course, but their consensus about this basic point strikes a powerful contrast to the confident claims (by, for example, Rorty and Brandom) that experience can be *dismissed*. Such a dismissal, they argue, would seriously damage a range of core pragmatist ambitions; to name just a few: antifoundationalism (Volbers), more scientifically sophisticated understandings of language and meaning (Johnson, Dreon),

the creation of socio-cultural (and personal) meaning (Alexander), ethical and political engagement (Misak), and innovative understandings of human selves (Margolis).

To conclude, I shall return to the initial issue of the motive and import of the question itself (regarding whether language or experience is central to pragmatism). Do the authors here see this question as bearing on larger stakes for philosophy and pragmatism? The answer is that some do not, some do, and some do not register a view about this.

Two authors, Volbers and Koopman, argue explicitly *against* the importance of the *choice* itself (between “language” and “experience”). As Volbers puts it, “the conflict between ‘language and experience’ appears to be of limited value. The more important subject...is how to keep the delicate balance between what will turn out to be the two constitutive orientations of antifoundationalism: a general affirmation of science, on the one hand, and an insistence on the standing possibility of critical reflection. Here it emerges that it is ‘reflexivity’ which forms the core of modern antifoundationalism”. Nevertheless, as mentioned above, Volbers maintains that “the classical pragmatists’ strong notion of ‘experience’ is of great value for such an articulation of critical reflexivity”. Koopman’s strategy (against the choice between “language” and “experience”) is to promote what he imagines is a third option that is more important but overlooked: “conduct”. “Conduct”, he claims, is a more dynamic and processual notion than either “language” or “experience” and so is better able to engage what he says is central to pragmatism, its temporality and historicity: “Conduct is pre-eminently a *doing* rather than a thing *done* [...]. Though prior pragmatisms may have worked toward accounts of language and experience as dynamic in character, it is undeniable that thinking and feeling admit of static treatment in a way that conduct simply does not. A *doing* is something that moves, while *meaning* has for us almost entirely lost its verbal sense, and *experiencing* is already an awkward construct in contrast to *an experience*”. The virtues possessed by “conduct” (but not by either “language” or “experience”) ultimately matter to Koopman because they more effectively facilitate pragmatism’s traditional normative and melioristic aims.

For others, the question is meaningful and the stakes are high. “It turns out”, Johnson writes, “that this issue is not just a minor in-house skirmish over who gets to be the ‘true’ pragmatist. Rather, it is a matter of what philosophy ought to be and to do, if it hopes to make any significant positive difference in our lives”. Alexander concurs, arguing “the debate between linguistic and experiential pragmatism reflects a fundamental philosophical conflict – a conflict about the purpose of philosophy and its conception of human existence” (Alexander). He warns that the adoption of linguistic pragmatism comes “at the cost of all that is contained in Dewey’s concept of experience. And with that goes, I believe, most of what makes us human”. Margolis’ larger philosophical aim is to understand our humanity by grasping what he calls “the artifactuality of the human person (the hybrid, biologically and culturally ramified emergence of the human person)” and so for him it is important to raise the language/experience question in order to show that “for many reasons, there cannot be any effective priority between the existentialia of human feelings and those of our reflexive conception of the human condition itself!”. For Misak, the stakes are clearly normative. Concerned by how the

narrowness of some Wittgenstein-inspired pragmatisms engender moral quietism, one value to her of answering the question (regarding the relative importance of language vs. experience) is to establish a more appropriate (more engaged, more moral) balance. As she puts it,

Once [pragmatists like Rorty and Brandom] have so thoroughly contextualized meaning and truth, it seems that there is nothing we can say about how to evaluate this or that claim to meaning and truth...But the worry is: if it's all a matter of language, then how can we adjudicate between inconsistent views?...[T]his quietism is dangerous and makes no sense at all of our practices.

Clearly, the debate will continue.

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