

## **Not Reading Rorty**

TJ Crow 2014 -- Response to a Susan Haack paper called Vulgar Rortyism.

Thomas Kuhn in his 1962 *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* laid out his idea of a Paradigm Shift: A change in the way of looking at things so profound that the communities on either side of the Paradigm Shift have trouble even talking to each other. As I read folks who are trying to understand Rorty, I believe that it takes a Paradigm Shift to really get what Rorty is saying.

The necessary Paradigm Shift can be summed up as "There is no World As It Is In Itself". The idea here is that since you can't describe the World As It Is In Itself, life is easier if you just forget about it. We can't describe the World As It Is In Itself because that would require us to talk about the way things are apart from being talked about, and we have no idea what that would be like.

The immediate objection to this attitude is that it would leave a person dangerously unhinged from reality. But just as rejecting God doesn't leave you morally unhinged, rejecting the idea of the World As It Is In Itself leaves your beliefs just as connected to reality as they ever were. As healthy organisms, we are constantly in touch with our environment, the reality that surrounds us as it were. As healthy humans, we hold beliefs that help us cope with our environment and our beliefs never stray too far from it. Beliefs don't work because they closely correspond to the World As It Is In Itself. Beliefs work because they're constantly tested against the reality of trying to get something done.

Admittedly, this seems fishy. It's fishy because you can't let go of the idea of World As It Is In Itself. Without making the effort to entertain this new paradigm, Rorty can't help but sound ridiculous. It's akin to the way a round-earthier would sound to a flat-earthier, or the way that Copernicus sounded ridiculous to his contemporaries. For example, a Vulgar Rortyism like "What people believe to be true is just what they think it is good to believe to be true" sounds unhinged unless you understand the context of the above stated pragmatic non-correspondence-theory-of-truth type of paradigm shift.

I suppose you could say Haack is just taking things out of context. But another paragraph of hers is so wacky that the only way she could support these observations is by not "getting it" about the paradigm shift.

The [Rortyan] "pragmatism" Menand admires is not only anti-philosophical; it is also, though more covertly, profoundly anti-intellectual. Repudiating the idea that beliefs are objectively true or false, evidence objectively better or worse, Rortyism induces a factitious despair of the possibility of real inquiry of any kind, misprizes the truths that literature can teach us, and undermines the hope of knowing what would truly improve the condition of society.

This is simply false on all counts. Because the Rortian paradigm shift I've outlined makes it easier to think about such things, Rortyism induces the hope of the possibility of real inquiry of the kind that actually helps people, Rortyism prizes the truths of literature better than do most positivists, and Rortyism promotes the hope of knowing what would truly improve the condition of society.

I've never studied Pierce nor have I read the Menand book that Haack is critiquing, so I cannot directly address her views of Pierce or Menand. I have a tin ear for Metaphysics, so Haack's description of Pierce as extracting from it "a precious essence" leaves me disinterested. My biggest problem with Haack is that she considers it a matter of honor that truth should take precedence over happiness.

I don't want to live a world where the search for truth and the search for happiness are different. When that happens, you get a bunch of prideful positivist types saying stuff like Haack quoting Pierce about the "... genuine desire to discover the truth—which "is SO ... whether you or I or anybody thinks it is so or not." ' These people will ruefully admit that they are of "that class of scalawags who purpose ... to look the truth in the face, whether doing so be conducive to the interests of society or not." They are proud they have the guts to put knowledge above other human concerns. To my ears it sounds just like, "We have to follow God's commandments whether we like them or not", or the anti-choice advocate who argues that "Whether you like it or not, the truth is that abortion is an immoral act and should be banned over all objections." It's an authoritarian and anti-intellectual attitude that encourages people to stand up for the truth whether others like it or not, thereby discouraging inquiry and inviting dogmatism.

Besides, living in the new paradigm totally undercuts their position. For example, when would looking truth in the face ever not be conducive to the interests of society? Never. It's tautological. Here's why. Imagine this conversation between you and me.

Me: "You believe that the truth must be faced, right?"

You: "Yes. It's a matter of honor."

Me: "Why not just ignore the truth?"

You: "Because even though it may destroy my life, I'm better off knowing the way things really are."

Me: "And why is it better to know the way things really are?"

You: "That's obvious. The more I know the truth, the more I can align my actions with the way things really are, which in turns means I'll be more successful in my endeavors, including more success in building a better society."

Me: "Which proves my point nicely, thank you. The truth must be faced not so much because it's a matter of honor, but instead because knowing the truth is conducive to the interests of society and yourself. If it wasn't so conducive, you wouldn't consider it to be the truth."

Instead of the common sense that beliefs are successful because they are true, the new paradigm turns this around. Beliefs are true because they are successful. Try to think of a true belief you have that doesn't work for you in this pragmatic way. You can't. And all the cooperative inquiry that may have gone into finding this true belief of yours was conducted by humans none of whom can see the World As It Is In Itself any better than you can. Because it's not there. There never has been a World As It Is In Itself to compare beliefs with in order to find out if they are true. We have always simply judged truth as what seems right to us.

We're coping beings and the more a belief helps us cope, the more we say that belief is true. That's it. There ain't no more. No more metaphysical Freudianesque phantasies connecting us with a huge powerful body of knowledge called The Truth. We don't owe allegiance to The Truth but only to Each Other.

At the end of his book, Kuhn says this.

We are all deeply accustomed to seeing science as the one enterprise that draws constantly nearer to some goal set by nature in advance. But need there be any such goal? Can we not account for both science's existence and its success in terms of evolution from the community's state of knowledge at any given time? Does it really help to imagine that there is some one full, objective, true account of nature and that the proper measure of scientific achievement is the extent to which it brings us closer to that ultimate goal? If we can learn to substitute evolution-from-what-we-do-know for evolution-toward-what-we-wish-to-know, a number of the vexing problems may vanish in the process.

In fact, Kuhn's book makes it clear that when you take up his way of looking at things, some vexing problems in his field of History of Science do indeed vanish. Rorty urges us to apply this lesson more broadly. Some of the vexing problems of how to live a good life will vanish if we can substitute seeing ourselves as using beliefs to cope for seeing ourselves as accumulating beliefs that are objectively true.