

*Rehabilitating Objectivity: Rorty, Brandom, and the New Pragmatism*¹

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I

In recent years, a renascent form of pragmatism has developed which argues that a satisfactory pragmatic position must integrate into itself the concepts of truth and objectivity. This New Pragmatism, as Cheryl Misak calls it, is directed primarily against Rorty's neo-pragmatic dismissal of these concepts. For Rorty, the goal of our epistemic practices should not be to achieve an objective view, one that tries to represent things as they are 'in themselves,' but rather to attain a view of things that can gain as much inter-subjective agreement as possible. In Rorty's language, we need to replace the aim of objectivity with that of solidarity. While the New Pragmatists agree with Rorty's 'humanist' and 'anti-authoritarian' notion that the world by itself cannot dictate to us what we should think about it, they demur from his suggestion that this requires us to give up

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the notions of truth and objectivity. The new pragmatic line of thought goes something like this: Implicit in the inter-subjective practice of giving and asking for reasons there are norms of correctness, of getting things objectively right, that go beyond the warrantedness that agents ascribe to each other's justificatory speech acts. In being guided by such norms, we are not, as Rorty thinks, simply trying to convince a dialogical partner that our view of something is justified, we are also trying to make sure that our mutual beliefs about that something are right. Because the question of whether these beliefs are right cannot be answered by pointing to a social consensus — as we can always be wrong about any given question — their truth or falsity is an objective matter. Since the commitments to both warrantedness and objective truth are implicit in our discursive and inquiring practices, a pragmatic reconstruction of these practices, one that takes the point of view of the agent seriously, will show them both to be philosophically legitimate.

Many of the New Pragmatists — most notably Bjorn Ramberg, Jeffrey Stout, and Robert Brandom — argue that the aim of getting things objectively right is in fact consistent with Rorty's own best insights. If Rorty only took seriously the lessons of his pragmatic radicalization of the linguistic turn, the argument goes, he would either be a New Pragmatist² or, in Brandom's story — the story we will be concerned with in this paper — he would recognize that his anti-authoritarianism is at least consistent with a pragmatically reconstructed notion of objectivity. In this paper I argue that Brandom's attempted recruitment of Rorty for the new pragmatic cause fails because it misdiagnoses the source of his hostility to the concept of objectivity.

Later in Rorty's career, the reasons for this hostility are clear: The search for truth and objectivity as they have been construed in the philosophical tradition is not consistent with human dignity and freedom. Rorty often put this thought in terms of his prophetic desire to help institute a second Enlightenment.³ The great achievement of the first Enlightenment was the change that it effected in our moral view of ourselves. Instead of seeing ourselves as morally indebted to something outside of ourselves, i.e., God, we came to think that the 'source of normativity' was internal to our own moral being. The norms of moral action are not *given* but are something that *we* need to take responsi-

2 For this story, see Ramberg (2000) and Stout (2007). Ramberg and Stout take Rorty to be a New Pragmatist because in his response to Ramberg's paper Rorty accepts — based upon a new reading of Davidson — a hygienic notion of objectivity (see Rorty 2000). In Levine (2008) I argue that there is less to this admission than meets the eye, and that Rorty, even in his later stages, rejects the new pragmatic project.

3 For more on this, see Rorty (1999), Brandom (2008), and McDowell (2000).

bility for by deliberating together about what to do and what type of people we want to be. Rorty's envisaged second Enlightenment transfers this train of thought from the practical to the theoretical sphere. Just as we threw off our tutelage to an outside moral authority in the first Enlightenment, in the second we would additionally unburden ourselves of the need to bow down before the epistemic authority of objective reality. For Rorty, objective reality cannot dictate to us how we should represent it because it is mute, i.e., it does not speak and offer reasons to us. This is something that only we do in the inter-subjective space of giving and asking for reasons. In a second Enlightenment we would realize this fact and accordingly shoot for solidarity rather than objectivity.

The question is: Where does the original source of this hostility to objectivity lie? In his paper 'An Arc of Thought: From Rorty's Eliminative Materialism to his Pragmatism,' Brandom argues, I think correctly, that it stems from the constellation of ideas that informed Rorty's eliminative materialism. However, I think Brandom stresses the wrong idea in this constellation. In his opinion, it is Rorty's views concerning the *in corrigibility* of the mental that leads to his eschewal of the concept of objectivity, whereas I think that it is Rorty's views concerning the eliminability of *sensory experience*. What I try to show in this paper is that it is Rorty's views on the eliminability of sensory experience that open the way to his later hostility to objectivity, and that any attempt to pragmatically rehabilitate objectivity must address this thesis if it is to be successful.⁴

Let me say one more thing. I agree with the New Pragmatists that the rehabilitation of objectivity is necessary and important, but disagree about the theoretical direction that such a project must take. The paper's focus on Rorty is meant to sharpen this disagreement. While this might seem a roundabout way to get at our divergence, this focus is necessary because Brandom and most of the New Pragmatists arrive at their positions in large measure by working through the perceived deficiencies of Rorty's account of objectivity.⁵ While Brandom thinks that Rorty's account of objectivity can be rehabilitated through *communicative-theoretic* means, I argue that this rehabilitation can only be achieved through a consideration of the objectivity that pertains to *perceptual experience*, and therefore through a much more thoroughgoing revision of the Rortyan picture than allowed for by the New Pragmatists.

4 I adopt the language of 'rehabilitation' from McDowell (2000).

5 See Brandom (2000a and 2008), Misak (2000 and 2007), Ramberg (2000), Stout (2007), and Price (2003).

II

In Brandom's telling, Rorty's hostility to objectivity can be traced back to his thesis that incorrigibility is the mark of the mental. Before explaining how for Brandom this thesis leads to Rorty's later views of objectivity, we must first briefly explicate the thesis itself.

In his early paper 'Incorrigibility as the Mark of the Mental,' Rorty makes the argument that what distinguishes the mental from all other realms of existence is the fact that certain events, thoughts and sensations, and no other events, are subject to incorrigible first person reports. The innovation here is defining the mental in epistemic rather than ontological terms. Instead of worrying about the ontological status of thoughts and sensations — about whether they are physical events that admit of topic-neutral explanations, etc. — Rorty urges us to focus instead on the linguistic criteria that we use to characterize and demarcate the mental. If we do so we shall see that the only feature that thoughts and sensations have in common is that their avowal in sincere first-person reports cannot be rationally overridden by other agents. This incorrigibility is for Rorty the mark of the mental.

The Cartesian tradition of course also took incorrigibility to be the mark of the mental. But unlike the Cartesian who accounts for incorrigibility by pointing to certain of the mind's ontological characteristics, i.e., transparency and immediate self-acquaintance, Rorty argues that incorrigibility is a *socially and linguistically instituted phenomena*. The raw materials for this argument come from Sellars's myth of Jones given at the end of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. Very briefly, the myth of Jones attempts to show how a community of our ancestors — Sellars's famous Ryleans — who begin with an inter-subjectively available language describing objects in space and time could develop, through 'natural' additions to the language, the ability to make direct non-inferential reports about their own 'inner' episodes, whether thoughts or sense-impressions. What Sellars wants to show is that this ability to make direct non-inferential reports about our inner episodes is not *given*, as a Cartesian would have it, but *instituted* through the acquisition of non-innate conceptual abilities.

This institution occurs when the Ryleans introduce the concepts of thought and sensation into their language to explain certain anomalies that cannot be accounted for by their already available public concepts. In the case of thoughts, the Ryleans are puzzled by the fact that a line of rational behavior can go on without agents' avowing their thoughts and intentions aloud, while in the case of sensations, they are puzzled by perceptual illusion, i.e., by the fact that they sometimes think that they are perceiving things that are not actually there. In response to these puzzles, the Rylean community (in the personification of the

genius Jones) is pushed into making certain analogical extensions from concepts it already possesses. Predicates that apply to publicly available physical entities are now used as a model to form new concepts of theoretically posited inner episodes. In the case of thoughts Jones simply took the characteristics of public speech — intentional aboutness, truth-aptness, compositionality, etc. — and extended them to apply to a concept of certain inner episodes, thoughts. In the case of sense-impressions, Jones analogically extends ‘the predicates of physical objects’ by giving them a ‘new use in which they form sortal predicates pertaining to impressions, thus “an (of a red rectangle) impression”’ (Sellars 1968, 69). Of course, while each episode is modeled on a publicly available physical entity (verbal speech and the predicates of physical objects respectively), they have their own intrinsic features, being a ‘thought about X’ and a ‘sensation of Y.’

When Jones initially teaches the Ryleans about these new concepts and the theory in which they are embedded, the episodes that these concepts refer to are inferentially posited theoretical episodes not available for immediate introspection. However, after a certain amount of training, the Ryleans learn to refer to these episodes directly by coming to use these concepts in direct non-inferential reports. Here, (to use the example of sensations) the Ryleans come to ‘*directly* know (not merely infer by using the theory) on particular occasions that [they] are having sense-impressions of such and such kind’ (Sellars 1991, 91).

Although Sellars provides the raw materials for Rorty’s view, his account of the mental is ultimately found wanting. While his story is essential for explaining how mental terms enter the language, it fails to specify the mark of the mental correctly. The difficulty is that Sellars does not provide a single feature that characterizes both thoughts and sensations save the ‘one of being ‘inner’ states apt for the production of certain behavior’ (Rorty 1970, 412). But the notion of something going on inside our bodies that accounts for our overt behavior does not give us a robust enough notion of the mental to contrast with the physical. To establish the mental as ‘new category of existence’ what is needed is a publicly available linguistic practice that treats the authority of certain types of reports differently from that of others. ‘Only after the emergence of the convention, the linguistic practice, which dictates that first person contemporaneous reports of such states are the last word on their existence and features do we have a notion of the mental as incompatible with the physical’ (Rorty 1970, 414). Following Sellars’s example, Rorty gives a mythical and naturalistic account of the origin of this convention. When explaining the behavior of agents who use the concepts of thought and sensation to make direct first-person reports, the Ryleans note certain features of their use that are helpful for this explanatory task.

They found that, when the behavioral evidence for what Smith was thinking about conflicted with Smith's own report of what he was thinking about, a more adequate account of the sum of Smith's behavior could be obtained by relying on Smith's report than by relying on the behavioral evidence.... The growing conviction that the best explanation in terms of thoughts for Smith's behavior would always be found by taking Smith's word for what he was thinking found expression in the convention that what Smith said went. The same discovery occurred, *mutatis mutandis*, for sensations. (Rorty 1970, 416)

The upshot is that until a community took it that Smith's first-person reports were more reliable than the behavioral evidence for his thoughts, incorrigibility did not exist. In this sense, incorrigibility is arrived at from the 'outside-in' insofar as it is first posited as a facet of our explanations of one another. In showing that incorrigibility is not an intrinsic feature of one another. In showing that incorrigibility is not an intrinsic feature of our mental events but a socially and linguistically instituted status, Rorty can then argue that the mental itself is an *optional* category of existence. This is because it is possible that the social and linguistic practices that institute incorrigibility, and therefore the mental, can change such that there would no longer be states about which we are incorrigible. How could these practices change? Rorty canvasses the empirical possibility that relying upon technological advances we could develop a new 'practice of overriding reports about mental entities on the basis of knowledge of brain states' (Rorty 1970, 421). In other words, it is possible that we could develop third-person ways of detecting a person's mental states that are evidentially stronger than that person's own reports. Here our evidentiary practices would change in such a way that our 'mental states would lose their incorrigible status and, thus, their status as *mental*' (Rorty 1970, 421).⁶ If this change in status is truly possible, then, as Brandom puts it, 'The Cartesian mind is real, but it is a contingent, optional, product of our mutable social practices' (Brandom 2008, 4).

III

We are now in a position to understand Brandom's story about the origin of Rorty's hostility to objectivity. Brandom sums up Rorty's position about the incorrigibility of the mental by pointing out that it is composed of two principle theses: 1) That incorrigibility is a *normative* phenomenon insofar as it concerns the incontestable authority of certain episodes, and 2) That incorrigibility is underlain by the *social-prag-*

6 Here we find the origin of the line of thought that will result in Rorty's story about the Antipodeans in chapter two of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

matic thesis that the normative status of authority is instituted by social and linguistic practices. How do these ideas lead to Rorty's position on objectivity? Brandom points out that Rorty's 'post-ontological' philosophy of mind follows from his meta-philosophical view that after the linguistic turn ontology can only be done by examining the normatively governed linguistic practices by which we detail our view of reality. In this regard Rorty remains, for all of his fulminations against Kant, a linguistic Kantian — just like his hero Sellars. Based upon this meta-philosophical view, Brandom thinks that a three-sorted ontology emerges.

Subjective (Cartesian) things are those over which each individual knowing-and-acting subject has incontestable authority. *Social* things are those over which *communities* have incontestable authority . . . Finally, *objective* things are those over which *neither* individuals nor communities have incontestable authority, but which *themselves* exercise authority over claims that in the normative sense that speakers and thinkers are *responsible* to them count as being *about* those things. (Brandom 2008, 5)

In this scheme the category of the social is privileged because each ontological realm is instituted on social-pragmatic grounds — i.e., upon the grounds of what social-linguistic practices are taken as authoritative in each sphere. There is no further court of appeals concerning authority than what a community, through the game of giving and asking for reasons, takes or treats as authoritative. But just as a community can change its linguistic practices so as to eliminate incorrigibility and hence the mental, it can also, through a change in linguistic practice, eliminate the category of the objective. And with this we come to Brandom's thesis concerning the origin of Rorty's hostility to objectivity: This hostility emerged when Rorty came to treat the authority of the objective in the same eliminativist way that he treated the authority of the subjective.

Brandom thinks that two separable positions result from this treatment of the objective. The first position leads directly to the picture detailed by Rorty's second Enlightenment. Since our ontology falls out from the normative structure of authority operative in any given sphere, the category of objectivity is incoherent insofar as authority can only be accredited to normatively structured items. We can't grant 'authority to something non-human, something that is merely *there*, to intrinsically normatively inert *things*' (Brandom 2008, 6). While we can make sense of the idea of our entering into various theoretical consensuses concerning the nature of the 'objective world,' 'the idea of something that cannot enter into a conversation with us, cannot give and ask for reasons, somehow *dictating* what we *ought* to say is not one we can make sense of. Reality as the modern philosophical tradition has construed it ... is

the wrong *kind* of thing to exercise rational authority. That is what we do to *each other*' (Brandom 2008, 6).

The second position that results from the social-pragmatic treatment of objectivity asks us to remember one of the key lessons of Rorty's thesis about incorrigibility, namely, that the structure of authority that instituted the mental, while eliminable, is fully intelligible as it stands. Brandom puts the point this way:

[Rorty's] claim was precisely *not* that the structure of individual *subjective* authority that instated mental events as incorrigible was *unintelligible*. On the contrary: we can understand exactly how we must take or treat each other in order to institute that structure and so the ontological category of things that exercises authority of that kind. The claim was rather that the structure is *contingent* and *optional*, and that it is accordingly *possible*, and under conceivable circumstances even *advisable*, to *change* our practices so as to institute a *different* structure of authority. (Brandom 2008, 7-8)

Brandom's strategy for rehabilitating objectivity takes the form of applying this lesson, forged in a consideration of subjectivity, to objectivity itself. Here we do not deny that objectivity makes *sense*, but consider whether it is desirable to change our practices in such a way that this type of authority goes by the wayside. Rorty thinks that it *must* go by the wayside because reality is normatively inert. But as Brandom points out, Rorty's social pragmatism about normative statuses 'does not entail that only the humans who institute those statuses can exhibit or possess them' (Brandom 2008, 8). For since it is *we* who take or treat things as authoritative, we can put this authority 'where we like.' In other words, we can and should, from within our practices, 'invest authority in non-human things: *take* ourselves in practice to be responsible to them in a way that *makes* us responsible to them' (Brandom 2008, 9). When this thought is put together with Brandom's thesis that semantic content is pragmatically rendered through the game of giving and asking for reasons, a hygienic notion of objective representational content emerges that is consistent with Rorty's normative social pragmatism.

Rorty's two principle theses [that incorrigibility is a normative phenomenon and instituted in a social-pragmatic fashion] are compatible with acknowledging the existence of an objective representational structure of semantic authority. For, first, the referential, representational, denotational dimension of intentionality is understood as a *normative* structure. What we are talking or thinking *about*, what we *refer* to or *represent*, is that to which we grant a characteristic sort of *authority* over the *correctness* of our commitments . . . And, second, we understand doing that, making ourselves responsible to non-human things, acknowledging their authority, as something *we* do — as conferring on them a distinctively *semantic* kind of normative status by our adopting of social practical-normative attitudes. The only question that remains is one of social engineering: what shape do our practices need to take in order to institute *this* kind of normative status? This is a Deweyian question that Rorty would have welcomed. (Brandom 2008, 10)

For Brandom, the dimension of normative assessment that we institute by adopting certain practical attitudes is a non-optional 'quasi-transcendental' feature of our communicative practices insofar as agents sort and track these assessments (in their deontic scorekeeping) in light of an implicit distinction between the objective correctness of certain commitments and other lesser sorts of commitments. Brandom is not claiming that Rorty would endorse this strong view. His claim is more minimal, namely, that the structure of authority that underlies objectivity is *consistent* with the notion that it is *we* who grant authority by making and taking reasons. If Rorty had recognized this, he could have endorsed the new pragmatic way of seeing things without endangering his central commitment to epistemological anti-authoritarianism.

IV

Before we can understand why Brandom's argument that Rorty's views are consistent with a social-pragmatic conception of objectivity fails, we must provide our alternative genealogy of Rorty's eschewal of objectivity. As we mentioned in the introduction, it is not Rorty's social-pragmatic theory of subjective incorrigibility that is most responsible for his hostility to objectivity but rather his prior elimination of sensory experience.

We can see this by examining Rorty's early eliminativist paper, his 1965 paper 'Mind-body Identity, Privacy, and Categories.' There, Rorty's goal is to 'impugn the existence of sensations' (Rorty 1965, 182) by comparing them to entities (demons, witches, etc.) that were once thought to refer but which, after improvements in our knowledge, are no longer discussed in polite company. As he says, 'sensations may be to the future progress of psycho-physiology as demons are to modern science. Just as we now want to deny that there are demons, future science may want to deny that there are sensations' (Rorty 1965, 179). The main obstacle to making this argument is that 'sensation statements have a reporting role as well as an explanatory function' (Rorty 1965, 179). In other words, the fact that science will be able to explain sensory phenomena in a more precise and comprehensive way than our folk psychology does nothing to undermine our intuition that sensory vocabulary plays a privileged role in our first person reports. It is this that makes it seem that sensation statements and the phenomena that they report cannot be eliminated. But, Rorty says,

the demon case makes clear that the discovery of a new way of explaining the phenomena previously explained by reference to a certain sort of entity, *combined with a new account of what is being reported by observation-statements about that sort of entity*, may give good reason for saying that there is no entity of that sort. The absurdity

of saying 'Nobody has ever felt a pain' is no greater than that of saying 'Nobody has ever seen a demon,' if we have a suitable answer to the question 'What *was* I reporting when I said I felt a pain?' To this question the science of the future may reply 'You were reporting the occurrence of a certain brain-process, and it would make life simpler for us if you would, in the future, say 'My C-fibers are firing' instead of saying 'I'm in pain.' (Rorty 1965, 179-80)⁷

This response is underlain by the Sellarsian argument, elaborated in the Myth of Jones given above, against the givenness of inner mental states. Just as the Ryleans integrated the concepts of thought and sensation into their conceptual repertoire and learned to use them in first person non-inferential reports, we in the future will be able to integrate neuro-physiological concepts into our first person reports.⁸ If we just focus on sensations, instead of reporting that we are in pain we will report that a certain C-fiber is firing. Here, terms like "sensation," 'pain,' 'mental image,' and the like will drop out of our vocabulary ... at no greater cost than an inconvenient linguistic reform' (Rorty 1965, 185).

The elimination of sensation does not just follow from the Sellarsian argument against the givenness of inner mental states, however. It also follows from 'an appreciation of the internal difficulties engendered in traditional empiricisms and rationalisms by the notion of a pre-linguistic item of awareness to which language must be adequate' (Rorty 1971, 231). In other words, it follows from Sellars's attack on the myth of the *perceptual* given. Let us review this attack before coming back to the specifics of the eliminativist case.

In many discussions the myth of the given is considered from an exclusively epistemological point of view.⁹ We, however, are interested in a more fundamental version of the given, one that takes place at the level of perceptual content rather than justification. Here is the picture that lends itself to this version of the given: While our perception is

7 Rorty recognizes the intuitive implausibility of this thesis. But he thinks this intuition is based upon the fact that dropping all sensation talk will be practically inconvenient. But philosophers must separate what is philosophically possible from what is convenient.

8 Here I say 'will be able' rather than 'may be able' because I think Rorty's argument, like Sellars's, is not based, as they think, on an empirical prediction about future science, but upon a rational reconstruction of our basic cognitive structure.

9 In epistemological discussions, the given is roughly considered to be an item of immediate awareness that has a positive epistemic status simply through its being entertained. What is special about the given is that it has a positive epistemic status independent of all other items in our system of knowledge, yet it is also epistemically efficacious with respect to these items insofar as it can pass on its positive epistemic status to non-basic episodes.

the result of causal processes in which the properties of an object are impressed upon our perceiving apparatus, what is actually perceived is an internal state constructed from that sensory array or manifold. This sensory construction, insofar as it registers the objective properties of the object that is perceived, is the result of a purely causal mechanism. However, insofar as this content represents the object *as* something, it also has epistemic or intentional properties. Now we have a single sensory state or episode whose content 1) expresses itself as an awareness *that* something is the case, and 2) is pre-conceptual. For Sellars, this is the hallmark of the perceptual given. On this conception, the non-conceptual sensory items which are impressed upon the faculty of sense (outer or inner) *intrinsically* possess intentional purport — purport which can be abstracted out of the sensory manifold through careful attention to one's own immediate states. So without any conceptual stage setting or linguistic acquisition, a sensation is itself a knowing that one is having that sensation rather than merely the causal antecedent to that knowing.

For the eliminative materialist this view is obviously problematic because if sensations provide an agent with a 'knowing that something is the case' (e.g. that there is pain or a red triangle) prior to the acquisition of concepts or a language, then 'there is a sort of pre-linguistic givenness about, e.g., pains [or sensations of red triangles, SL] which any language which is to be adequate must provide a means of expressing' (Rorty 1971, 228). This, in turn, supports the 'intuition we will have the same experiences no matter what words we use' (Rorty 1971, 229). But with this intuition on the table how can we 'impugn the existence of sensations' as Sellars wants to do? For on this account the change in concepts that we use in our first person reports (for example, from 'pain' to 'x C-fiber firing') is merely a *linguistic change* that does not affect the underlying experience. The words that report the experience are different, but their reference remains the same. But then the eliminativist claim about sensations, which seemed so radical, becomes the trivial thesis that we can change the vocabulary that we use to report our pre-existing experiences.¹⁰

The critique of the myth of the perceptual given is meant to ward off this criticism. For the 'intuition that we will continue to have the same experiences no matter which words we use is in fact a remnant of ... the Myth of the Given' (Rorty 1971, 229). Rorty counters this myth by questioning the notion that there is a pre-linguistic awareness to which language must be adequate.

10 For this argument see Bernstein 1971.

The notion of a non-linguistic awareness is simply a version of the thing-in-itself — an unknowable whose only function is paradoxically enough, to be that which all knowledge is about. What *does* exist is the causal conditions of a non-inferential report being made. But there is no unique vocabulary for describing these causal conditions. There are as many vocabularies as there are ways of explaining human behavior. (Rorty 1971, 229)

There is no pre-linguistic sensory awareness because sense-impressions are causal intermediaries with the world that don't provide us with a consciousness of anything. As Sellars puts it, the "of-ness" of sensation simply isn't the 'of-ness' of even the most rudimentary thought. Sense grasps no facts, not even such simple ones as something's being red and triangular' (Sellars 1975, 285). To be aware in the sense of having a conscious experience requires that one take up these causal conditions by using a concept in a perceptual judgment. Since Rorty follows Sellars in thinking that to possess a concept requires being able to use a word, for him conscious awareness is therefore bound up with the use of language. This is the Sellarsian doctrine of psychological nominalism, i.e., the doctrine that '*all* awareness of sorts, resemblances, facts, etc. ... is a linguistic affair. According to it, even the awareness of such sorts, resemblances, and facts as pertain to so-called immediate experience is presupposed by the process of acquiring the use of language' (Sellars 1997, 63).

Sellars qualifies his psychological nominalism in two ways. First, the myth of Jones demonstrates that there are inner thought-episodes (including perceptual episodes) that are not in any given instance linguistically articulated. Although thought-episodes *presuppose* the acquisition of a language insofar as they are semantically modeled on overt-verbal episodes, they need not be linguistic in any particular instance. Rorty is usually not so careful as to make this qualification, often identifying thought and language. Second, perceptual episodes for Sellars have a sensory aspect even after the critique of the notion that they can by themselves play a cognitive role in our experience. While sensations are not the *object* of our perceptual experience, as act-object accounts of perception posit, we can say retrospectively, after their Rylean 'discovery,' that they have qualitatively informed our perceptual experience all along. For Sellars this retrospective discovery of sensation is what makes the elimination of sense-impressions in the scientific image such a pressing and difficult problem for him. Once again, Rorty is not so careful. In a move that Brandom will take over, Rorty couches Sellars's talk of sensation in terms of a creature's causal response-dispositions to stimuli. On this account, sensory awareness is 'awareness-as-discriminative behavior' (Rorty 1979, 182). Here a creature's sensing is construed in terms of what it *can do* and not in terms of what it *lives through* in experience. Sellars of course does use

the language of discrimination, stimulus and response, for example in his paper 'Some Reflections on Language Games.'¹¹ But he does not use it in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* or *Science and Metaphysics* to detail his theory of sense-impressions. There, he consistently treats sense-impressions as *episodes* and not as modes of behavior.

Because of his reductive interpretation of what Sellars's psychological nominalism entails, Rorty takes it that the critique of the perceptual given results in the complete *epistemic neutralization* of sensation. By this we mean that the critique drains sense-impressions of the immediate qualitative and phenomenal aspects that were taken to be their hallmark by the classical tradition. Sensations are epistemically inert causal conditions that when 'coded' by a conceptual or linguistic system leave no sensory remainder over and above the conceptual episode that eventuates. So when we respond to certain of our own inner causal states by deploying a concept (one that is originally part of the Rylean's informal theory of thoughts and sense-impressions) the character of our response is not determined by *the ontological nature of the states themselves* but by the vocabulary and the concepts that provide for the possibility of our giving a direct non-inferential report of these states. In this case, 'what appears to us, or what we experience, or what we are aware of, is a function of the language we use. To say that 'X's appear to us as F' is merely to say that 'We customarily use "F" in making non-inferential reports about X's' (Rorty 1971, 228).

Since what we experience is a function of the language we use and the concepts we possess, when we exchange sensory concepts with neuro-physiological ones, our very experience changes. The change in vocabulary is therefore not merely a linguistic change, but a change in the very structure of our psychology. In ceasing to talk about sensations, we cease to have them.

V

The question that we must now address is how the argument for the elimination of sensation and sensory experience leads to Rorty's hostility to objectivity as a legitimate aim for our thought and inquiry. This connection comes out most clearly in Rorty's seminal *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* when he uses the Sellarsian argument against the perceptual given to untangle 'the basic confusion contained in the idea of a "theory of knowledge,"' i.e., 'Locke's confusion between justification

11 This paper is included in Sellars (1991).

and causal explanation' (Rorty 1979, 161). This is germane to Rorty's attack on the vocabulary of objectivity because he tries to demonstrate that the specifically modern conception of objectivity as the representation of how things are 'in themselves' is dependent upon the theory of knowledge having become, through the confusion of explanation and justification, first philosophy. Let us review this confusion and Rorty's response to it before coming back to how it is related to the elimination of sensory experience.

Rorty's exposition of the confusion of explanation and justification is embedded in a complex historical account of the emergence and eventual decline of epistemology. There are three basic stages in this emergence, Descartes' invention of the mind, Locke's confusion of explanation and justification, and Kant's confusion of predication with synthesis.¹² The move that sets the stage for Locke's confusion is familiar enough: Descartes invented the mind when he misinterpreted Rylean incorrigibility (the social practice of taking each other to be incorrigible) to be an ontological relation of immediate self-acquaintance. In defining the mind as the realm of immediate certainty, Descartes sets the stage for the assimilation of the items immediately known in this realm, i.e., thoughts and sensations. This assimilation was complete when Locke posited a single genus of representation, ideas, which included whatever was self-intimating for the mind. This, according to Rorty, is the key to the emergence of epistemology as an autonomous discipline because it makes it seem as if there is an object, our *representations* of the world, which can be reflexively accessed and examined prior to the world itself. Now epistemology has its own object, one that is prior to the objects of the special sciences.

Locke's view fails, according to Rorty, because he never fixes on a stable strategy to study this new sphere of the mental. On the one hand, he wants to give a quasi-Newtonian mechanistic explanation of the understanding, breaking it down into the smallest units possible (sense-impressions) just as the corpuscular theory accounts for light in terms of the smallest particles possible. He wants this type of account not only to ape the most advanced forms of natural explanation but also to provide a plausible explanation of how the operations of the understanding are causally constrained by the sensory deliverances of the external world. On this score, naturalism and empiricism go hand

12 Although Kant is essential to Rorty's story about the emergence of the theory of knowledge as a foundational discipline for the other areas of culture, the Lockean stage of this emergence is most important for our purposes. This is because for Rorty, Kant's basic mistake is to repeat the Lockean confusion of explanation and justification. See Rorty (1979, 161).

in hand. However, Locke does not give up the notion that the products of the understanding are rational and so potentially knowledge-bearing. For the whole goal of epistemology is to secure certain 'privileged representations' to ground the edifice of knowledge. To get around this problem, Locke construes representations in such a way that they can be the product of the causal impingements on our sensory apparatus while simultaneously standing in the rational relations characteristic of the judgments and propositions in the space of reasons. So instead of separating the causal antecedents to knowledge (sensations) from the rationally articulated judgments and propositions in which knowledge is expressed (thoughts), Locke takes it that a 'causal account of how one comes to have a belief should be an indication of the justification one had for that belief' (Rorty 1979, 141). In so doing, Locke confuses giving an explanation of our knowledge with giving a justification for it, and so commits himself to the myth of the given.

It is this confusion that gives weight to the notion, central to epistemology as first philosophy, that we can be in touch with the 'foundations of knowledge,' i.e., with 'privileged representations' that 'are automatically and intrinsically accurate' (Rorty 1979, 170). Rorty gives a very complex historical genealogy for this idea, finding its origin in the Platonic notion that knowledge should be modeled on a direct (noetic) perception of objects (e.g. mathematical truths) that don't allow themselves to be judged incorrectly. On this model, to be in touch with the foundations of knowledge is to be in touch with 'truths which are certain because of their causes rather than because of the arguments given for them' (Rorty 1979, 157). In knowing these truths, we

get beyond reasons to causes, beyond argument to compulsion from the object known, to a situation in which argument would be not just silly but impossible.... To reach that point is to reach the foundations of knowledge. For Plato, that point was reached by escaping from the senses and opening up the faculty of reason — the Eye of the Soul — to the World of Being.... With Locke, it was a matter of ... seeing 'singular presentations to sense' and what should 'grip' us — what we cannot and should not wish to escape from. (Rorty 1979, 159)

The Lockean story about the foundations of knowledge, in which knowledge is based on the certainty that pertains to certain immediate presentations to sense, is made plausible by the given because in 'enchanted' causality — i.e., smuggling into it epistemic properties — it allows the notion of cause to *not* be the one that would be at work in a purportedly mechanistic account of cognition. For if that notion of cause *were* operative, Locke would owe us a story about how a mechanistically construed state could dictate to us what we *should* believe. Here we would need a story about how to move from 'is' to 'ought.' But because for Locke 'knowing a proposition to be true is to be identified

with being caused to do something by an object' (Rorty 1979, 157), i.e., because causation *is* rational justification, this story is not even conceived of as being necessary.

To disentangle the given and cut the Platonic cord requires, once again, the epistemic neutralization of sensation. Through our sensory contact with the world we *do* directly confront the world causally, but the notion of causality at play here is not infected by the given and hence one not epistemically relevant to propositionally structured knowledge. Unlike Locke, who only pretends to give a mechanistic explanation, Rorty accepts this burden and thinks of the causal impacts on our sensory apparatus as *merely* causal. As Brandom is fond of pointing out against those who read Rorty as a postmodern thinker for whom anything goes, Rorty thus thinks that our thought and perception are causally constrained.¹³ But while 'there is such a thing as brute physical resistance — the pressure of light waves on Galileo's eyeballs, or the stone on Dr. Johnson's boot,' because Rorty separates explanation and justification, there is 'no way of transferring this nonlinguistic brutality to *facts*, to the truth of sentences' (Rorty 1991, 81). There is no way of doing this because there are no *rational* relations between language (as well as linguistically structured mental states) and the physical world at all. While the relationship between our perception, thought, talk and the world is strictly causal, rational relations only pertain to items that are propositionally structured, i.e., items within the space of reasons. As such, the space of reasons is autonomous insofar as items within it can only be rationally constrained by other items in this self-same space. But how then does the causal constraint provided by the world relate to the rational constraint generated inside the space of reasons? For Rorty, this is a bad question, for he thinks that any answer to it necessarily reinstates the myth of the given. We know through higher-order philosophical reflection that there is causal constraint, but we can't, on pain of reinstating the myth of the given, answer the question of how this constraint rationally affects our view of the world.

It is this separation of the causal sphere from the rational sphere that underlies Rorty's infamous view of knowledge. Since we cannot explain how rational constraint from the world gets into the justificatory process in the space of reasons, and only items in this space can justify other items in this space, in thinking about knowledge we must ignore the 'vertical' relation of mind to world and focus exclusively on the result of 'horizontal' conversational or justificatory processes. As Rorty puts it, 'justification is not a matter of a special relation between

13 See Brandom 2000a, 160-1.

ideas (or words) and objects, but of conversation, of social practice.... We understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it as accuracy of representation' (Rorty 1979, 170). The move from objectivity to solidarity, or the move from being concerned with how our representations correspond to mind-independent facts to how our beliefs hold up in an ever-widening inter-subjective process of justification, is therefore not a mere prejudice on Rorty's part, but strictly follows from his underlying view about the relationship of reasons and causes.

It is here that we find the link between Rorty's attitude toward objectivity and the elimination of sensory experience. Simply put, they are linked because the argument for avoiding the confusion between justification and causation, which underlies his argument for overcoming objectivity in favor of solidarity, is based upon the same argument that Rorty previously used to eliminate sensory experience. This argument is his critique of the perceptual given. In the sixties, Rorty tracked the consequence of this critique in the philosophy of mind, leading to his eliminative materialism, while in the seventies he sought out its consequences in epistemology, leading to his social-linguistic holism. The move from eliminative materialism to the rejection of objectivity was thus the carrying forward of this single Sellarsian line of thought.

In a passage from a later article on McDowell, but one that uses the language of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty demonstrates the interconnection of these moments:

Adopting psychological nominalism, and thereby avoiding a confusion between justification and causation, entails claiming that only a belief can justify a belief. This means drawing a sharp line between experience as the cause of the occurrence of a justification, and the empiricist notion of experience as itself justificatory. It means reinterpreting 'experience' as the ability to acquire beliefs noninferentially as a result of neurologically describable causal transactions with the world. (Rorty 1998b, 141)

In other words, untangling the central confusion of the epistemological tradition between justification and causal explanation requires reinterpreting sensory experience in such a way that it is construed as a pre-personal causal transaction with the world rather than something that in being *lived through* is justificatory for our thinking. Sensory experience so interpreted cannot dictate to us what we should think because, depending upon the system of concepts one has, these causal transactions with the world can be taken up in different ways, leading to different sentences being taken to be true. This means that the *world itself*, which is only related to us via the causal deliverances that we are now calling experience, cannot offer us *reasons* to think one thing rather than another. Only other agents in the space of reasons can do

that. But if the world and its experiential deliverances cannot offer us reasons, it cannot exercise authority over what vocabulary we should use to describe it. The aim of achieving an objective view of the world, one that only contains intrinsically accurate representations, is therefore nonsensical. And this, of course, is the ultimate lesson of Rorty's second Enlightenment.

VI

Now that we have our alternative story about the origin of Rorty's hostility to objectivity on the table we can come back to why Brandom's argument that Rorty's anti-authoritarianism is consistent with a pragmatically rendered notion of objectivity is flawed.

The first problem with Brandom's interpretation of Rorty is that it is, as we have tried to show, predicated upon a false genealogy. Brandom takes it that Rorty's rejection of objectivity is based on the social pragmatism that Rorty initially developed to eliminate subjective incorrigibility. Based upon this genealogy, Brandom can then argue that Rorty misinterprets the consequences of his own pragmatism insofar as a social pragmatism about objectivity, in contradistinction to Rorty's avowed understanding, allows for a community to engineer its linguistic practice in such a way that it can grant non-human things authority over their discursive practices. Here is the basis for Brandom's claim that it is within Rorty's power to accept a hygienic notion of objectivity, one that is not given, but *authorized* by a linguistic community. But if, as shown above, Rorty's elimination of the category of objectivity is not based on his social pragmatism but rather on his prior eliminativist thesis about sensory experience, then this argument does not pull through. Rorty rejects the vocabulary of objectivity because sensation, in being rendered a causal process through its elimination as an epistemic factor in our cognitive lives, cannot rationally mediate between the causal and conceptual orders. Because there is no mediation between these two orders, there is no way to account for how the world rationally constrains, via the deliverances of experience, our beliefs about it. But without an explanation of rational constraint one cannot have a working notion of objectivity. Of course, for Rorty this explanatory lacuna is a positive feature of his position insofar as he thinks it leads directly to his second Enlightenment.

Why does Brandom's interpretation of Rorty misidentify the origin of his hostility to objectivity? Brandom misses the real story because he is as invested in the strategy of eliminating experience as Rorty. In his aptly titled paper, 'No Experience Necessary: Empiricism, Non-inferential Knowledge, and Secondary Qualities,' Brandom states that we

can make sense of perceptual knowledge 'without postulating a layer of potentially evidentially significant (hence conceptually articulated) states in between purely causally occasioned and physiologically specifiable responses to enviroing stimuli and full-blown perceptual judgments' (Brandom 2004, 2).¹⁴ In other words, to explain the possibility of perceptual intentionality and knowledge we don't need a layer of experience that, in being lived through, is rationally relevant to our beliefs and judgments about the world. All we need are full-blown perceptual judgments that are causally occasioned by environmental stimuli. To think otherwise is to fall into the myth of the given. Brandom's interpretation of Rorty is therefore redemptive: it is meant to show that Rorty's social pragmatism can accommodate a hygienic notion of objectivity without utilizing the concept of experience. In other words, Brandom wishes to bring Rorty into the new pragmatic fold so as to create a genealogy for his thought that does not undermine his own central aim of rehabilitating objectivity in social-pragmatic terms; for if this rehabilitation could not be effected for Rorty, whose social-pragmatic transformation of Sellars sets the stage for Brandom's social-normative pragmatism, it would cast doubt on the cogency of his own project.

There is a second problem with Brandom's interpretation of Rorty. Even when taken on its own terms it fails because it does not capture an essential feature of objectivity, namely, that what is objective constrains our thought and perception in a way that is *beyond our control*. If the category of objectivity is something we engineer can we really say that the world that is taken to be objective through the application of this concept really is objective? To argue, as Rorty and Brandom do, that we are constrained by the world through its causal impact upon us does not address this question because the *category* of objectivity is a normative structure of authority that cannot, by their own admission, be accounted for or reduced to these causal impacts. So one can either: 1) give an account of how the causal constraint provided by experience (understood in Rorty's reductionist way) leads to or grounds a type of rational or normative constraint in such a way that this constraint can become *part* of the content of the concept of objectivity, or 2) provide a notion of objective constraint which is rendered solely at the normative or semantic level. Because of the way that they conceptualize the consequences of the critique of the myth of the given both Rorty and Brandom think that the first course is impossible; accordingly Brandom, on Rorty's behalf, takes the second. But in accounting for the normative

14 This paper has circulated in mimeo, but it is essentially the same as Brandom (2002), which is published.

category of objectivity in social-pragmatic terms Brandom makes the category of objectivity *optional*, thereby leaving out the seemingly essential ingredient that what is objective constrains our thought and perception in a way that is beyond our control. By staying within the terms of Rorty's social-linguistic pragmatism, Brandom cannot genuinely rehabilitate objectivity.¹⁵

Of course, one might question whether the concept of objectivity has to capture the ingredient of constraint beyond our control. Indeed, Brandom might say that one of the consequences of pragmatism is that there simply is *no* such concept of objectivity, that it is a metaphysical illusion, and that his social-pragmatic account captures all that there is to the concept. How can we respond to this point? One of the aims of pragmatism, at least on my understanding, is to provide an elucidation of our concepts and a 'reconstruction' of our practices, rather than a complete revision of them. This follows from pragmatism's suspicion of foundationalist positions that think that philosophical analysis can begin from a standpoint outside of our concept and practices. For the pragmatist, philosophical analysis must begin *in medias res*, i.e., with all of the presuppositions that it in fact has, and commence in a process of problem solving that progressively elucidates the meaning of our concepts and reconstructs the shape of our practices. In moving so far from how the ordinary concept of objectivity operates in our inquiries, by making objectivity something that we control, Brandom completely revises the concept rather than elucidates it. Of course this complete revision may be justified, but the burden is on Brandom to show that it is. I don't think Brandom has met this burden, especially when we have on hand a pragmatic account of objectivity that *can* accommodate the fact that what is objective constrains our perception, thought, and action in a way that is beyond our control. To conclude, let us briefly review this account.

VII

All pragmatists agree that the metaphysically realist notion of objectivity as that which is there anyway in complete abstraction from our perception, thought, and action is one that is beyond the bounds of sense. However, this by itself does not leave us in a situation where objective

15 I would argue that this result applies not only to the analysis Brandom gives in his paper 'An Arc of Thought: From Rorty's Eliminative Materialism to his Pragmatism,' but also to his full-fledged analysis of objectivity given in chapter 8 of *Making it Explicit*. This argument will have to wait for another occasion.

constraint is absent, for the pragmatist can formulate a notion of 'constraint from within.' Indeed, most of the figures in the pragmatic tradition, including those who are taken to be the most Promethean (Dewey and James) put forward just such a view. They do so by elaborating a thick notion of *experience* in which the rational relations characteristic of the space of reasons are *internal* to our sensory and bodily responsiveness to the world. This means that our sensory and bodily states, are not bare states of the given, but are either habits, or when conscious, shot through with rational relations.¹⁶ But these rational relations do not operate in an 'frictionless void,' as an idealist might posit, because the experiential states which they sediment are states of an active body that is always coping with world-generated problems that in their facticity cannot be circumvented.¹⁷ For the pragmatist the fact that our sensori-motor activity always encounters problems in the world provides a notion of objective constraint — one that is beyond our control — that in having to be dealt with in our perception, thought, and action registers itself 'within.'

While pragmatism thereby has a notion of objective constraint, this constraint should not be thought of in *authoritarian* terms. In our contact with the world what is given is not the world as it is 'in itself' but the world as it is given to a being whose experience is structured by the concepts, skills, and capacities acquired through their previous world coping. These acquired concepts, skills, and capacities are plastic, meaning that they, to varying degrees, change over time due to the habituation and learning that results from dealing with a recalcitrant and independent world. The fact that these items make our experience of the world possible allows the pragmatist to avoid the myth of the given, the myth that we can perceive or think that something is thus-and-so without the benefit of prior habituation, learning, and concept formation. The key for avoiding the myth of the given is thus not accepting an absolute break between the sensory and the conceptual, as Rorty and Brandom think, but recognizing that there are acquired conditions of possibility for engaging the world, conditions that change due to learning and habituation. In shifting the criteria for avoiding the myth of the given in this way we allow into our theory a thick notion of experience without accepting the inference, necessary for Rorty's position, that this notion of experience necessarily brings in its wake the authoritarian metaphysical view that the Second Enlightenment is meant to overcome.

16 See Dewey (1981, 61) for a classical exposition of this view.

17 For the phrase 'frictionless void' see McDowell (1994).

Rorty, predictably, rejects this conclusion, thinking that this thick pragmatic notion of experience is just another version of the given. On his view, the pragmatist should have dropped ‘the term ‘experience,’ not redefined it He should have agreed ... that a great gulf divides sensation and cognition, [and] decided that cognition was possible only for language-users’ (Rorty 1998c, 297). In other words, what the pragmatist should have realized is that the intentionality of cognition can be accounted for exclusively by considering the aboutness that pertains to verbal behavior and that it can be separated entirely from experience — which now is understood as a pre-personal causal transaction with the world. But as we have seen, in redefining experience in this way, Rorty also undermines the possibility of explaining how the objective world can play a rational role in the formation of our world-directed beliefs. If Brandom and the New Pragmatists are to rehabilitate objectivity in a non-metaphysical fashion it is *this* deficiency in Rorty’s view that they must tackle. And until they do so by reintroducing a robust notion of experience back into the pragmatic tradition, they will just be spinning Rorty’s wheel.

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