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Rorty, Geertz, Brandom, and Peirce: Using Pragmatist thought to Resolve Ethical Dilemmas of Post-Colonial Legacies

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Abstract

Iyko Day, writing about Asian American racialization and settler colonialism, identifies a dichotomy regarding Asians: as a racial identity, they have historically been treated both as a foreign threat that needs to be neutralized and as a critical cog in the machine of the American Empire. Richard Rorty argues that truths are not objective, nor are they normative, but instead a matter of relating a foreign principle to one's own truth conditions that must be assumed to be held in common with the other. Clifford Geertz uses the case of "The Drunken Indian and the Kidney Machine" to challenge Rorty's views of the world, arguing that the historical background and trauma should be evaluated in ethical hypotheticals. Rorty responds in "Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers" that a model of procedural justice must be used to resolve ethical dilemmas. The identity of the people involved in the certain circumstances is irrelevant. This paper uses the epistemological frameworks of philosophers to explore the question of whether pragmatism allows for historical inquiries into the impact of post-colonialism, particularly in Asian American spaces. This paper compares Rorty and Geertz's worldviews with those of pragmatist philosophers Robert Brandom and Charles Peirce. Brandom and Peirce's theory leaves a gray area for whether procedural justice is the best mode of evaluation, but at the very least allows for the possibility of an alternate historical inquiry, which highlights the need in the 21st century for middle ground.

Keywords: Richard Rorty, Clifford Geertz, Robert Brandom, Charles Peirce, The Drunken Indian and Kidney Machine, Pragmatism, Post-Colonialism, Iyko Day, Asian American

1. Introduction

The modern world is fraught with the legacies of both discrimination and resistance in response to centuries of colonial violence. Government legislation barring Chinese immigrants from entering the United States, redlining being used as a mode of separation since the 1930s, and hate crimes against elderly Asian Americans in Oakland Chinatown during the Covid pandemic all show that biases against minority communities manifest on both institutional and interpersonal levels. Movements like Stop AAPI Hate give hope for a future free of hatred, yet moments like the Atlanta Spa Shooting of Asian-American women in 2021 exemplify the deep-seeded roots of racism in the United States. Iyko Day, writing about Asian American racialization and settler colonialism, identifies a dichotomy regarding Asians: as a racial identity, they have historically been treated both as a foreign threat that needs to be neutralized and as a critical cog in the machine of the American Empire. Day posits, "As a negative personification of capital, Asians...symbolize a destructive dimension of value based on what Marx calls "socially necessary labor time." In a settler colonial context that relies on alien labor, Asian labor has had a

precarious relation to the racial, gendered, and sexual constitution of “social necessity” (Day 2016). Asian immigrants played a key role in building the 1911-mile-long Transcontinental Railroad, taking the place of white laborers. Their labor is “socially necessary” when it has preserved White life, yet when Asian Americans and Asian immigrants reap success from their labor, racialized violence ensues. Vincent Chin was murdered for the Japanese success in the automotive industry despite being Chinese himself. Asian labor replaced that of white Americans because Asian immigrants agreed to grueling hours with less pay. However, the mass fear of China, a country that has gained more political and economic power throughout the last few decades, throughout the Covid-19 pandemic reflected onto Asian Americans domestically, culminating in a spike of hate crimes toward Asian Americans increasing 115% in Los Angeles County in 2021 (NPR). Moments of hatred toward Asian Americans historically inform the lives of Asian American centuries later. Thus, the issue this paper explores is how epistemological theories of different pragmatist philosophers resolve questions of historical and colonial inequity. I ground my argumentation in the interactions between Richard Rorty and Clifford Geertz, then move to compare their respective conclusions with those of Robert Brandom and Charles Peirce.

2. Dichotomy of the Asian identity

2.1. Richard Rorty and his critique of objectivity and relativism

Richard Rorty was one of the foundational thinkers in pragmatist philosophy of the 20th century. Much of his research complicated notions of relativism, idealism, and realism, and aimed to debunk the widespread epistemological theory of correspondence where truth was modeled in terms of attaching meaning to a set of words and propositions. For Rorty, truth was a question of justification rather than a question of correspondence. Rorty argues for a philosophy that derives truth through language, and this argument is made clear through his critique of the idea of conceptual schemes, which are a set of truth conditions specific to certain groups of people. One might be inclined to believe that different communities and societies that evolve under different influences will have vastly unique conceptual schemes, supporting relativism, the idea that there are different ideas of truth that all relate to one another. For example, one community’s notion of the word “snow” is that it is used to make snowmen, but another community may see “snow” as the deadly crop killer and a signal for a starving winter. However, Rorty tears down the idea of different conceptual schemes by positing truth being a translation device. He argues that truth is used to associate expressions in different conceptual schemes with one common conceptual scheme. Truths are not objective, nor are they normative, but instead a matter of relating a foreign principle to one’s own truth conditions that must be assumed to be held in common with the other. This idea of truth being a matter of relating unknowns to ideas known to oneself can be seen in Plato’s *Meno*. While correspondence theory is an empiricist philosophy, *Meno* addresses many of the same inquiries. Plato asks his servant about different shapes and then connects concepts he is familiar with about to foreign ideas, teaching the servant a new concept about geometry. When regarding the idea of snow being cold or a crop killer, Rorty would reason that the community that says snow can be used to make snowmen because it is cold and icy, and snow could kill crops because it is cold and the ice freezes the plants. The other community would say that snow kills crops because it is cold, and you can make a snowman with snow because it is cold and icy. Both communities acknowledge that the snow is cold and icy, fitting in the other community’s truth conditions into their own with a commonality. Therefore, the alternate conceptual schemes are rather just part of one overarching conceptual scheme. Rorty’s principal argument is that relativism does not adequately express the world because only one conceptual scheme exists, so there is no “other” to relate to. Additionally, neither realism nor idealism represents the world, because truth is simply a function of social terms and agreement. What is considered the truth is confirmed through “warranted assertibility”, or using methods of language communication to discern what is true. His idea of their only being one conceptual scheme and truth as “warranted assertibility” opens the door to questions of whether or not he believes the aftermath of colonialism is true and translatable across different communities.

2.2. Clifford Geertz: “Uses of Diversity”

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz, known for his work in symbolic anthropology, wrote “Uses of Diversity”, challenging Rorty’s notions of truth translation in cultural contexts. Geertz argues for moral logic as the method to get past ethnocentrism, the idea that all people view other societies through their own culture and biases. He

critiques Rorty's notion of cultures as self-contained units that can be described as independent of each other. To Rorty, the only way to explain culture to one another is to translate it via common terms, which obliterates differences between each culture. For example, both China and Vietnam celebrate Lunar New Year, but the traditions of each culture vary differently. In Vietnam the year of the rabbit is replaced by the year of the cat. However, when translated, these differences are flattened into one standard identity, along the lines of "rabbit = cat.". Any differences that are not "translatable" are simply ignored and deemed unimportant to Rorty's philosophy which ultimately means that Rorty process of cultural translation is fundamentally unable to fully capture the dynamic culture of different societies.

Geertz raises further questions around ethnocentrism and moral logics in his hypothetical scenario "The case of the Drunken Indian Man and the Kidney Machine"¹. Geertz's hypothetical presents a medical clinic in the Northeast that offers access to a rare, life-saving kidney dialysis machine to those who, through a vetting process, are found to be unable to afford a traditional hospital and to be at risk of losing their lives without the machine. An Indigenous man receives life-saving care from the kidney machine, but after receiving the care, the doctors administering the treatment discover that he is an alcoholic, and continues drinking after going onto the machine. He continues to damage his kidney despite the doctors urging him not to, undoing any potential benefits the machine unlocked. However, discrimination and dispossession contributed to the Indigenous man's alcoholism. Colonialism, land loss, and discriminatory health care practices had a role to play in the Indigenous man's excessive drinking. The moral question posed is whether the doctors should have removed the Indigenous man to potentially save the life of a person who would not "waste" the machine by continuing to damage their liver. Geertz doubts whether there is a correct way to resolve a situation that takes in two fundamentally different viewpoints and contexts for a situation, but ultimately argues for making cultural context intelligible in these hypothetical situations. The doctors, who are predominantly upper-middle class, live vastly different lives than the Indigenous man. While Geertz agrees that alcoholism is "evil", he also asserts that ethnocentrism programs society to discriminate against Indigenous people to such a degree that they turn to alcoholism. Contrary to Levi-Strauss and Rorty, he suggests that there are methods for understanding cultural differences other than assimilating them into one model and that do not obliterate the differences.

2.3. Richard Rorty's Response to Geertz

Rorty's response to Geertz in "Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth" is curious in that Rorty asserts that ethnocentrism is inevitable. Meaning, from an epistemological perspective, it is only possible to understand ethical claims through the prevailing truth conditions of one's own community. He responds to "The Case of the Drunken Indian and Kidney Machine" by asserting that the doctors are unable to put themselves in the shoes of the Indigenous man, because they may not know the historical context that drove the man to alcoholism. Rorty argues that doctors [can or are ethically permitted to apply the standards of procedural justice] defer to procedural justice, or the most amount of good, for the people most in need. He writes, "It urges liberals to take with full seriousness the fact that the ideals of procedural justice and human equality are parochial, recent, eccentric cultural developments, and then to recognize that this does not mean they are any the less worth fighting for" (Rorty 1991). To Rorty, procedural justice is a "recent" tactic to understand cultural disputes, such as the Lunar New Year example from above. He would argue the only way for people from Vietnam to understand Lunar New Year for Chinese communities is to find the commonalities and translate them into their own truth conditions. Regardless of whether it flattens cultural nuances of the specific animal years, it is the only way to understand Chinese culture. The alcoholic Indigenous person should not receive care from the "scarce" kidney machine, as he does not gain anything from it and another person would benefit more from the care. Ethnocentrism shapes every person's judgment, and any differences in cultures are true but not translatable (Rorty 1979). Rorty asserts that Ethnocentrism is the only way to view other cultures without losing one's own identity: "we begin to wonder whether our attempts to get other parts of the world to adopt our culture are different in kind from the efforts of fundamentalist missionaries. If we continue this line of thought too long ... We begin to lose any capacity for moral indignation, any capacity to feel contempt. Our sense of selfhood dissolves" (Rorty 1991). Rorty's response to the "Drunken Indigenous Man" hypothetical scenario shows clear epistemological limitations to his theory, and

¹ Geertz's title of the scenario, will be substituting "Indigenous" for "Indian" in the rest of the paper

further prop up problematic colonial agendas. Rorty's arguments suggest that the legacies of colonialism are true but not translatable, and therefore are irrelevant to all communities except those suffering from colonial traumas. This means that if an Asian person became homeless because of a drug addiction in response to the stress of working twelve hours a day, Rorty's argument is that a non-Asian person who did not have an addiction should get admitted to the homeless shelter. Even though the Asian worker developed a drug addiction in response to working tirelessly, yet never getting promoted because of the Bamboo Ceiling Myth where Asians are the hardworking junior workers but never the leader, according to Rorty's philosophy, the non-Asian person would be justified in getting admitted because they have a "lower chance of becoming homeless. Rorty's ideas open the floor to explore whether his logic is uniquely blind to racial violence, or if similarities between different philosophies prove that the epistemological systems of philosophical pragmatism as a whole uphold the colonial project.

2.4. Robert Brandom and inferential equivalence

Robert Brandom, a contemporary pragmatist, is widely regarded for his work in technical semantic pragmatism. In Brandom's book "Making it Explicit", he creates the notion of inferential equivalence, which arrives at truth through semantic content. Inferential equivalence is the product of inferential entailments as a heuristic device that one enters a conversation with. For example, if one says that Ben Franklin wrote "The Poor Man's Almanac", and the person that one is engaged in conversation with says that the inventor of the lightning rod wrote "The Poor Man's Almanac", it can be concluded that Ben Franklin invented the lightning rod and wrote "The Poor Man's Almanac". The concluding statement of Ben Franklin invented the lightning rod and wrote "The Poor Man's Almanac" was derived through the process of engaging in conversation. It can be inferred that Ben Franklin invented the lightning rod, because he wrote the "The Poor Man's Almanac". Rorty's method to determine the truth is through translation, whereas Brandom's is through inferential equivalence. For Rorty if there are 2 truths, X and Y, the only two options are that Y can be translated by associating it with X, or only X is true, and there is not even a possibility of Y. However, in line with Brandom's inferential equivalence, the possibility of a Y truth may exist, if there can be enough inferences made between truth X and truth Y. Brandom's philosophy entertains the possibility of a truth outside of one's own truth conditions, but any truth outside one's truth conditions for Rorty would be true but not translatable. For example, me and my friend are having a conversation about ideas A, B, and C. We both agree that A and B are true, but I believe in C. However, my friend believes that idea C is false. In Rorty's terms, ideas A and B are in the same conceptual scheme, but idea C is an alternate conceptual scheme, and therefore is untranslatable. Brandom would argue that it is possible for my friend to acknowledge that the idea of C intelligibly exists, even if my friend does not believe that it is true. Even though my friend doesn't translate idea C into their own truth conditions, they can still believe there is a possibility of idea C being true for someone else.

Brandom's litmus paper example also shows that hypotheses or truths can be revised, hinting at the possibility of a truth that is not one's own at that exact moment. Brandom's litmus paper scenario presents the hypothesis that a chemical will turn the litmus paper red because the chemical has an acidic pH. However, the litmus paper turns blue, the color of a base. Then, the hypothesis must be revised to take into consideration whether the original hypothesis mistook the color the litmus paper turns for bases, whether the litmus paper tests pH, whether the chemical is acidic, etc. The litmus paper test shows that truth is a moment within cycles of discursive practices, and can be revised. Brandom argues that truth, and the way people think can be changed. In the case of the Indigenous Man and the Kidney Machine, the point of conflict between Geertz and Rorty lies whether the doctors should find a different patient that would not "waste" the dialysis machine by drinking. Geertz believes that the Indigenous man's socio-historical experiences should be taken into consideration, and Rorty's argument in "Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth" is that ethnocentrism is inevitable, and therefore the only fair way to assess such a situation is using procedural justice. Rorty's argument is that the Indigenous Man's historical trauma may be "true" but is not translatable to the doctor's truth conditions, and therefore is irrelevant. Brandom's litmus test hypothetical shows that shifting the ethnocentric societal "truths" is possible within his philosophy. Geertz argues that the doctors should take into consideration the historical background of the Indigenous man. He further argues that "moral logic" can help change the ethnocentric globe. Brandom's argument with the litmus test is that what we believe to be true can be revised. The litmus test shows that semantic processes, such as discussing with others

about why the litmus paper may have turned an unexpected color, can change the “truth”. Brandom’s thought aligns with Geertz’s, as they both argue for changing the way the people assess a set of circumstances. Brandom may challenge the claim that ethnocentrism is inevitable, meaning doctors should defer to the most amount of good for the largest number of people. Thus, Brandom may side with Geertz on the ethical question of whether or not cultural differences should be considered in moral dilemmas.

2.5. Charles Peirce: *If P happens then Q*

Lastly, Charles Peirce, the “father of pragmatism”, coined the definition of pragmatism and formed tentative rules for the school of thought. Much of his philosophical research centered around the content of an object or idea. He comes to the argument that the content of an object or idea is simply the consequences of that object or idea. Peirce posits in “A Syllabus of Certain Topics of Logic”, “[Every theoretical judgment expressible in a sentence in the indicative mood is a confused form of thought whose only, meaning, if it has any, lies in its tendency to enforce a corresponding practical maxim expressible as a conditional sentence having its apodosis in the imperative mood” (Peirce 1903). Peirce argues that all factual assertions by themselves only have meaning when they enforce a conditional sentence “if P happens then Q”. The apodosis, or the second part of the “if P, then Q” analogy, is the factual aspect, and the first part is conditional and is subject to change from person to person. For example, we only know that a chair is a chair if we can sit on it. A chair being a structure with four legs and a slab of wood on top is intelligible to Peirce, unless humans know that it’s a chair and we can sit on it. The content of a “thing” is not merely what we define it as but what we do with it, which is in line with Brandom’s idea of truth through inferring with “things”. The meaning of any factual assertion is a statement that takes the truth as its premise and what follows as a conclusion. Peirce’s principle that all ideas should be evaluated by their consequences implies that all the consequences that have no effect on the original idea are irrelevant to the “identity” of that idea. Peirce’s thinking is similar to Rorty in this matter, as Rorty argues that untranslatable differences drop out of the equation. In the case of the Indigenous Man and the Kidney Machine, Peirce would argue that the consequence of giving the kidney machine to someone other than the Indigenous man would not affect the Indigenous man because his liver would be damaged from drinking, regardless of whether or not the machine worked.

Peirce expands on the idea of consequential content with his Theory of Signs. Peirce argues that reasoning processes should operate through a series of interactions between firstnesses, secondnesses, and thirdnesses. Firstness is the sign, secondness is the object, and thirdness is the interpretant. The sign has the potential to influence meaning, the object actualizes the sign’s meaning, and the interpretant, person, internalizes the sign. However, the sign may be interpreted differently depending on the person, which opens the opportunity for alternate intelligibility. The Theory of Signs question whether otherness can be intelligible, as the process allows for disputes in between signs, objects, and interpretant. It sets up a world in which alternate intelligibility is possible, and objects of knowledge independent of the way people in one community know it. Even if society has influenced the way we interpret signs, the Theory of signs facilitates alternate ways of interpreting signs and objects. I may point at a painting and interpret it as a landscape, but a person who is more familiar with the artist’s work may point at a painting and interpret it as the artist’s first painting. Using the Theory of Signs, Peirce may argue that the historical perspective of the Indigenous man, the centuries of dispossession and the law treating him less-than-human, should be considered in the ethical calculus of the kidney machine dilemma. Unlike Rorty, who believes that only the perspective of the doctors using procedural justice should even be thought of, Peirce’s philosophy allows for an understanding of an outside possibility, even if he ultimately concludes that procedural justice is the best and most pragmatic way to evaluate the situation. If Peirce’s theory only explored pragmatic maxim, he may have sided with Rorty because the consequences of the Indigenous man getting care from the dialysis machine would be zeroed by his alcoholism. However, his Theory of Signs allows for a historical inquiry into Indigenous discrimination and racism.

3. Conclusion

Pragmatists like Rorty, Geertz, Brandom, and Peirce have challenged numerous to fundamentally pivot the way they both epistemologically and ontologically understand the world. Rorty’s thinking supports a model of procedural justice, evaluating the consequences of an action, as the sole conceivable solution for moral dilemmas.

In response, Geertz's paper argued for methods of resolving moral hypotheses that include the legacy of racial violence and discrimination. Brandom and Peirce's theory leaves a gray area for whether procedural justice is the best mode of evaluation, but at the very least allows for the possibility of an alternate historical inquiry, which highlights the need in the 21st century for middle ground. While Rorty's conclusion ultimately upholds a race-blind view of the world that further strengthens colonial powers, numerous other pragmatists support epistemological systems that break down colonial prejudices. In world fraught with entities trying to push narratives to the masses to broaden their political, social, and economic power, a philosophical grounding for thought is more crucial than ever. Times of crises like Covid combined with the mirror maze of social media and news (mis)information make it exponentially harder to juggle ethical questions. Asian Americans have faced increased discrimination in the last ten years, and though the Covid-19 is no longer at the forefront of our minds, trails of the violence during that time persist. Tropes of unsanitary Asians spring up from the cultural staple of wet markets and children in elementary schools still get bullied for bringing Asian foods to school. While not all the aforementioned authors support taking the legacy of postcolonial violence into consideration for future legislation and activism, it is nonetheless imperative to facilitate the discussions.

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