Philosophy without Principles

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Pragmatism and Literary Theory

II

Philosophy without Principles

Richard Rorty

My colleague E. D. Hirsch has skillfully developed the consequences for literary interpretation of a "realistic" epistemological position which he formulates as follows: "If we could not distinguish a content of consciousness from its contexts, we could not know any object at all in the world." Given that premise, it is easy for Hirsch to infer that "without the stable determinacy of meaning there can be no knowledge in interpretation."[1] A lot of people disagree with Hirsch on the latter point, and they look to philosophy for replies to the premise from which it was inferred. But it is not clear where in philosophy they should look: To epistemology? Ethics?[2] Philosophy of language? What Jacques Derrida calls "a new logic, . . . a graphematics of iterability"?[3] Where do we find first principles from which to deduce an anti-Hirsch argument?

I want to argue that there is no clear or straight answer to this question and that there need be none. I shall begin by criticizing the strategy used against Hirsch and others by my fellow pragmatists Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels. They think that one can start with philosophy of language and straighten things out by adopting a correct account of meaning. I share their desire to refute Hirsch, their admiration for Stanley Fish, and their view that "theory"—when defined as "an attempt to govern interpretations of particular texts by appealing to an account of interpretation in general"—has got to go (p. 723, and see p. 742). But they want to defend this position by exposing a mistake which they think common to all theory so defined: an error about the relation between meaning and intention. They assert that "what is intended and

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what is meant are identical" and that one will look for an "account of interpretation in general" only if one fails to recognize this identity (pp. 729, 723). Such failure leads to an attempt to connect meaning and intention (as in Hirsch) or to disconnect them (as in Paul de Man). But such attempts must fail, for they presuppose a break "between language and speech acts" which does not exist (p. 733).

Knapp and Michaels defend this latter claim by saying that marks which are shaped like a sentence of English do not count as language unless the marks are backed up by an intention—unless they are inscribed by somebody who meant something by them. If one grants this point, Knapp and Michaels argue, one will not, with speech-act theorists such as H. P. Grice, distinguish between what sentences mean and what a given utterer means by them on a given occasion. Grice would say of a pattern of marks created on a beach by random wave motion that it means whatever the sentence it has been construed to token means, even though nobody ever meant anything by it. Knapp and Michaels would deny this (see p. 733, esp. n.13).[4] For Grice's distinction opens up the logical space they want to close: the space in which one asks the traditional interpretive question "Granted that the sentence means such and such, did its author use it to mean that on this particular occasion?"

Since I regard this as a useful question, I should like to keep the space open and, thus, to side with Grice. So I would urge that anything—a wave pattern, an arrangement of stars, the spots on a rock—can be treated not only as language but as any given sentence of English if one can find some way to map its features onto the semantic and syntactic features of that sentence (and other actual and possible patterns or arrangements or spots on the other sentences of English). "Linguisticality" is, on this view, cheap. You can impute it to anything simply by working out a translation scheme, just as you can impute goodness to anything by imagining a desirable end to which it can be a means. The question of whether the thing is really a sentence or whether we are simply pretending it is, is just as bad as the question of whether goodness is objective or subjective. Both questions should be eschewed by us pragmatists, since both presuppose Hirsch's Husserlian distinction between content and context, between essential and accidental properties (as opposed to the harmless distinction between normal or familiar properties and abnormal or unfamiliar ones). So I think Knapp and Michaels should not go out on a metaphysical limb by saying that the absence of an

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intending inscriber means that the marks in the sands are not words. For this leaves them open wider than necessary to Adena Rosmarin's question "Now how do Knapp and Michaels know *this?*" and to her charge that "their premises beg their question" (Rosmarin, p. 781).

Continuing this more-pragmatic-than-thou line, I would urge that Knapp and Michaels not try to undergird Fish by constructing a philosophy of language which will make it illicit to form a general theory of interpretation. Rather, we should follow W. V. Quine, Donald Davidson, and Jeffrey Stout in saying that the question "What is the meaning of a text?" is as useless as the question "What is the nature of the good?"[5] Pragmatists are supposed to treat everything as a matter of a choice of context and nothing as a matter of intrinsic properties. They dissolve objects into functions, essences into momentary foci of attention, and knowing into success at reweaving a web of beliefs and desires into more supple and elegant folds. So I think that Knapp and Michaels' distrust of "theory's epistemological project" (defined by them as "bas[ing] interpretation on a direct encounter with its object, an object undistorted by the influence of the interpreter's particular beliefs") would be better expressed by a direct attack on the image of "direct encounter with objects" than by an attack on Grice's handy distinction between more and less familiar contexts in which to place words (p. 737). Knapp and Michaels' claim that meaning is identical with intention suggests that we put the text in whatever context we find useful and then call the result a discovery of the author's intention.[6] But why call it anything in particular? Why not just put in a context, describe the advantages of having done so, and forget the question of whether one has got at either its "meaning" or "the author's intention"?

But Rosmarin's metaphilosophical question arises at the next level up. How do I, how does any pragmatist, know that there are no direct encounters with objects? Don't my premises beg all the interesting questions? They do indeed. There is a large circle of concepts—for example, knowledge, truth, object, science, reference, meaning, intentionality, and so on—such that a realist or a pragmatist analysis of any one will supply premises from which to deduce a parallel analysis of any of the others. There is no natural order of priority among such concepts which tells you how to start at the very top and work your way down. Nor is there any such order among the various areas of philosophy. You can start with metaphysics and move down to epistemology, or with semantics and work down to metaphysics, or with epistemology and work down to ethics and down from there to metaphysics. It may seem, consequently, that all of us who debate these matters start out with either Hirsch-like or Fish-like intuitions and then go round in circles, defending them in one guise by appealing to them in another.

If one thinks of philosophy as entirely a matter of deductive argument, then this game of mirrors will, indeed, be one's only recourse. But one can also think of philosophy in other ways—in particular, as a matter

of telling stories: stories about why we talk as we do and how we might avoid continuing to talk that way. When you find yourself at an argumentative impasse, baffled by your opponent's refusal to stop asking questions which you think you really should not have to answer, you can always shift the ground by raising questions about the vocabulary he or she is using. You can point out that the issue is biased in one's opponent's favor by the unfortunate jargon which has developed, a jargon which gives one's opponent an unfair advantage. You can use historical narratives to show why the issue previously discussed is moot and why it needs to be reformulated in terms which are, alas, not yet available.

This strategy of using narrative where argument fails is what makes Heideggerian and Derridean attempts to "problematize" the vocabulary used by contemporary philosophers so attractive. Inconclusive debates between reformers of the Right and the Left make revolutionaries look good. So it is tempting to think that the pragmatist should stop offering analyses of knowledge and truth and instead fall back on a quasi-Heideggerian account of how we got into our present dead end. Derrida tells us that unless we go back and deconstruct what Plato built, we shall always be haunted by his ghost—by the idea that there is some natural starting point and resting-place for thought, something like Hirsch's context-free contents of consciousness. Accordingly, one might think that only by overcoming the metaphysics of presence—ceasing to use not only "meaning" and "intention" but all the bad old Platonic oppositions which make these notions seem inevitable—could pragmatists like Knapp and Michaels end "theory."

Pragmatists and Derrideans are, indeed, natural allies. Their strategies supplement each other admirably. But there is no natural priority of one strategy over the other. It is not the case that we shall have rational grounds for rejecting realism only if we can overcome the metaphysics of presence. The notion of "rational grounds" is not in place once one adopts a narrative strategy. (That is why Derrida looks bad whenever he attempts argument on his opponents' turf; those are the passages in which he becomes a patsy for John Searle.) For if we ever did get rid of all the jargon of the tradition, we should not even be able to state the realist's position, much less argue against it. The enemy would have been forgotten rather than refuted. If Derrida ever got his "new logic," he would not be able to use it to outargue his opponents. Whatever a "grammatics of iterability" might be good for, it would be of no use in polemic. The metaphysics of presence was designed precisely to facilitate argument, to make questions like "How do you know?" seem natural, and to make a search for first principles and natural resting-places seem obligatory. It assumes that all of us can tell such a resting-place when we see it and that at least some of our thoughts are already there. You can't argue against that assumption by using the vocabulary of the tradition, but neither can you *argue* that the tradition is wrong in its choice of vocabulary. You can argue only against a proposition, not against a vo-

cabulary. Vocabularies get discarded after looking bad in comparison with other vocabularies, not as a result of an appeal to overarching metavocabularies in which criteria for vocabulary choice can be formulated.

This means that narrative philosophy should not be expected to fill gaps left vacant by argumentative philosophy. Rather, the importance of narrative philosophy is that persuasion is as frequently a matter of getting people to drop a vocabulary (and the questions they phrase within it) as of deductive argument. So, though I think Rosmarin is right in suggesting that the linguistic reform which Knapp and Michaels propose is the wrong way (because it is a needlessly paradoxical way) to make their antitheoretical point, I do not mean that linguistic reform is a generally bad—or ineffective—strategy, nor that Rosmarin's question "How do you know?" should be pressed. What is wrong with this question is that, as asked by Socrates and the Platonic tradition, it assumes that we know what knowledge is like and can tell when we have got it. But this notion of knowledge as an introspectable state is just one more Platonic myth. The right way to construe this question is "Why do you find what you just said persuasive?" That is a question which ignores the traditional distinctions between reasons and causes, psychology and logic, rhetoric and demonstration. It is a *practical* question, a polite version of the question "What am I going to have to do to convince you?"

To return to the question of theory, one can be against what Knapp and Michaels define as the attempt to get outside practice and regulate it, and agree nonetheless with another of their critics, Steven Mailloux, that theory should "continue doing what all discursive practices do: attempt to persuade its readers to adopt its point of view, its way of seeing texts and the world" (Mailloux, p. 766).[7] For, in its unobjectionable sense, "theory" just means "philosophy." One can still have philosophy even after one stops arguing deductively and ceases to ask where the first principles are coming from, ceases to think of there being a special corner of the world—or the library—where they are found. In particular, I take "literary theory," as the term is currently used in America, to be a species of philosophy, an attempt to weave together some texts traditionally labeled "philosophical" with other texts not so labeled. It names the practice of splicing together your favorite critics, novelists, poets, and such, and your favorite philosophers. This is not exactly what Mailloux calls "metapractice (practice about practice)," for that term suggests a vertical relationship, in which some practices are at higher levels than others (Mailloux, p. 766). Rather, it is just more practice of the same sort, using a slightly different set of raw materials. Thinking of it this way helps one get rid of the idea that philosophy is somehow on another level. It lets one think of "philosophical" and "literary" texts as grist for the same mill.

To conclude on a blatantly practical note, I would offer as one reason in favor of my version of pragmatism and against Knapp and Michaels' that they are driven to the conclusion that we should "eliminate the

'career option' of writing and teaching theory" (p. 800). In my view, this career option consists in an opportunity to discuss philosophy books—as well as novels, poems, critical essays, and so forth—with literature students. Knapp and Michaels, however, construe it as the attempt to supply foundations for literary interpretation. I would hope that the latter rhetoric could be discarded while the career option remains. The recent emergence of this option seems to me one of the healthier features of American academic life. For, as Paul Alpers has remarked, courses in "literary theory" have become "ports of entry" for a tradition of European philosophical thought which had been neglected in America. There is no particular reason why this tradition should be taught in literature departments rather than in philosophy departments, but there is also no particular reason why it should not be. It should certainly be taught somewhere in our universities, and it seems to me greatly to the credit of our literature departments that they have given it a home.

1. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago, 1976), pp. 3, 1.

2. See ibid., where Hirsch offers a "fundamental ethical maxim for interpretation" which, he says, "claims no privileged sanction from metaphysics or analysis" (p. 90). Here and elsewhere Hirsch suggests that it may be ethics rather than epistemology which provides the principles that govern interpretation. There remain other passages, however, in which he retains the view, conspicuous in his earlier writings, that an analysis of the idea of knowledge is the ultimate justification for his approach.

3. Jacques Derrida, "Limited Inc abc . . . ," *Glyph* 2 (1977): 219.

4. It seems to me that Knapp and Michaels are wrong in thinking of John Searle and H. P. Grice as "arriv[ing] at determinate meanings by adding intentions [to language]" (p. 733). They are, rather, distinguishing between two sets of intentions—the ones normally had by users of a sentence and some special ones had, or possibly had, by an individual user. More generally, I cannot think of anybody who would deny that one has language only where there is a system of community intentions, of conventions (in the sense analyzed by David Lewis). So I am not sure that there are any "anti-intentionalist accounts of meaning" (a phrase used by Knapp and Michaels; see p. 727). Paul de Man (cited as an example of an anti-intentionalist; see Knapp and Michaels, "A Reply to Our Critics," p. 795 n.4) does not seem to me to hold such a view. Nor, I think, does Michel Foucault. I would take Foucault to be saying that one can tell useful historical stories if one takes language rather than human beings as one's subject, bracketing questions about why human beings changed their linguistic habits. But that does not commit him to the claim that language can exist without human beings establishing conventions, any more than atheistic idealism is committed to the view that minds existed before rocks did. Questions about what comes first in causal sequence are irrelevant in both cases.

5. See Jeffrey Stout, "What Is the Meaning of a Text?," *New Literary History* 14 (Autumn 1982): 1–12.

6. See Knapp and Michaels: "Any interpreter of any utterance or text, within the institution of professional literary criticism or not, is, if we are right, attempting to understand the author's intention" (p. 800). It seems to me that Knapp and Michaels do not satisfactorily answer Hirsch's claim that their arguments show only that "a text's meaning . . . must always be what *an* author intends it to mean" and not that it "must always be what *its* author intends it to mean" (Hirsch, p. 745).

7. Cf.: "What Knapp and Michaels treat as inherent and erroneous dissociations might be more subtly and profitably discussed as analytic strategies" (Rosmarin, p. 780). In their "Reply," Knapp and Michaels say that Mailloux and Rosmarin are both "negative theorists" (p. 795). (As Knapp and Michaels define it, negative theory tries to preserve "the purity of language from the distortion of speech acts" [p. 733].) But I should think that the "hostility to method" which Knapp and Michaels say characterizes negative theory was independent of any such motive (p. 733; and see n. 4 above).