

Pragmatism, Historicism, and/or Reflective Equilibrium

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I am flattered that Nakia Pope read my work so carefully and took it so seriously. I have some disagreements with his interpretation of my work, and his readings of John Dewey and Richard Rorty. So despite all the excellent things in his essay that it would be fun to praise, I will emphasize points of divergence.

First, I should clarify my enterprise. My theory is an epistemological theory. It seeks to explain what is cognitively good. It does not purport to be a general theory of being in the world. So if, as Pope contends, lots of human activity is noncognitive, lots falls outside the scope of my theory.

Epistemology, being normative, requires a criterion for cognitive goodness. We have habits, traditions, and inherited cultural frameworks. What if anything makes them or other commitments cognitively worthwhile? Rorty denies that such a question can be answered. He denies that there is a standpoint from which to assess the practices and theories that constitute our cultural heritage. This seems wrong. There are plenty of aspects of our cultural inheritance that we can and do criticize. Traditional views on the proper roles of women come to mind. So do traditional views about the transmission of diseases. We do not merely develop a distaste for such views. We are able to identify and explain exactly what is wrong with them.

I take reflective equilibrium to provide the criterion of cognitive goodness. Philosophers standardly believe that unless a commitment is absolute, it is arbitrary. If we cannot vindicate it from a God's eye view, it has no vindication. I disagree. We need to be able to stand outside a theory or practice to critically assess it. But we need not adopt the perspective of an omniscient God. Rather, we assess it in light of our antecedent views about the subject at hand and our aims with respect to it. They supply a suitably detached but readily accessible standpoint.

Granted, our situation is fraught with contingencies. Pope objects that I start with initially tenable commitments and say nothing about where they come from. He is surely right that many are products of our cultural heritage. But I consider pedigree irrelevant to epistemic standing. Some initially tenable commitments derive from our cultural inheritance, others we took from other cultures, yet others we made up for ourselves. What gives them their initial tenability is simply the fact that we can say of them "someone endorses this." One aspect of my position that Pope seems to overlook is that it is a social, not an individualist epistemology. What makes a commitment initially tenable is that someone holds it, not necessarily that the individual thinker does. So I acknowledge that the views, standards, and practices of others contribute to the systems of thought we collectively endorse.

My indifference to the pedigree of initially tenable commitments is an element of my pragmatism. The crucial question for me is not where a commitment came from, but what it contributes. So my position is practical and future oriented. A

crackpot idea is harder to integrate into a tenable system of thought than a commonsensical one. But if a system of thought that accommodates it is more tenable than rivals that reject it, the fact that the idea was originally crackpot makes no difference. (The Heisenberg uncertainty principle and the principle of religious toleration are two seemingly crackpot ideas that prevailed.)

The contingency Rorty emphasizes is reflected in my account in the fact that we start with whatever initially tenable commitments we have. If we had different initially tenable commitments we would start elsewhere. It is a contingent fact that we grew up in the West, and that our cultural inheritance includes the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution. So it is a contingent fact that we have certain resources. But we can explain what makes those resources good. We can explain how the scientific method enables us to form more reliable beliefs about nature than other available methods. This involves showing how controlled experiments, rigorous statistical analyses, intersubjective agreement among suitably trained experts, and so forth are better than the untutored folk wisdom of our ancestors. Scientific commitments are more likely to get confirmed and integrated into tenable theories. They enable us to develop workable technologies, and so on. Similarly, it involves explaining how freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of association, and the like figure in respect for persons and lead to what Dewey calls a “freeing of experience.” It is a contingent fact that we have these resources and that we are in a position to avail ourselves of them. But it is nonetheless a fact that they are valuable resources. A contingent fact is still a fact.

Pope criticizes me for ignoring how much human behavior is habitual. Like Dewey, he considers habitual behavior to be unthinking behavior, and assumes that it is therefore non-cognitive. If so, Pope’s criticism misses its mark. I am concerned with what makes things cognitively good. Any behavior that is noncognitive is not covered by my theory. I say nothing about breathing or blood pressure. Being unthinking responses to the environment, they do not fall within the scope of my theory. But I doubt that we are the creatures of blind habit that Pope thinks we are. Although we regularly act out of habit, we monitor the situations we are in and adjust to circumstances by critically reflecting on feedback. Dewey contends that we act blindly until we are brought up short. Then we recognize that we have a problem and our critical faculties are engaged. I think we rarely go in for this two step process. We routinely monitor our habitual behavior, and are at least dimly aware of how well things are going. Although I take the same route to work every day, I attend to driving conditions and adjust my behavior accordingly.

Moreover, there are such things as bad habits. The fact that I routinely and unthinkingly do something does not exempt me or my habitual behavior from criticism. We can discover that habits have deleterious consequences, perhaps ones that are not immediately evident. (Think for example about smoking or slouching.) To act on habit is to take one’s current behavior as unproblematic. But from the fact that we take something to be unproblematic, it does not follow that it is unproblematic.

In some ways, my position is closer to Dewey’s than Pope seems to realize. He says that for Dewey, “Inquiry is a process of movement, transaction, tinkering, and

trying out.” I do not recall saying anything about movement, but the rest of the description quite nicely characterizes the process of achieving reflective equilibrium. So is his characterization of the reflex arc. Feedback loops provide new considerations to be accommodated in our developing conception of the objects we are dealing with and in our developing conceptions of ourselves as dealing with those objects. Although I think more is cognitive than Pope evidently does, I deny any significant mind/body split, so the idea that the cognitive is somehow different from the engaged is no part of my theory.

But there is a way in which I am more cognitivist than Dewey. He thinks that all problems are practical problems. I disagree. Fields like cosmology and transfinite mathematics deal with domains that are unlikely to impinge on practice. Still, they are fraught with problems. Do quasars travel faster than the speed of light, thereby violating the theory of relativity? Is the continuum hypothesis true? Dewey also holds that only problems spark inquiry, or as Pope puts it, that “thinking begins when normal activity cannot proceed.” I disagree. Sometimes people engage in inquiry out of sheer curiosity. Plenty of scientific inquiry takes this form: Someone wonders why a certain phenomenon occurs (why, for example, shower curtains bow inward when the water is on) and mounts a research program to find out. But plenty of inquiry of a more mundane sort takes the same form. Many excellent mechanics got their start by wondering how a motor works and taking it apart to find out. There was no problem. The motor was doing exactly what it was supposed to do. But inquiring minds want to know. So they attempt to figure things out.

Finally, on the charge that I am too cognitive: I do not think there is such a thing as being too cognitive. *Homo sapiens* infuse cognition into pretty much everything. I am interested in the cognitive dimensions of things. (I incorporate art and emotion into the cognitive, so I do not have as narrow or “scientific” a conception of cognition as some.) I emphasize science because it is clearly a successful cognitive enterprise. It serves as a touchstone for epistemology: a necessary condition on an adequate epistemology is that it accommodate science. I argue that any epistemology that can do that ends up accommodating the arts, everyday thought, even play. An epistemology that can do justice to science, I contend, ends up recognizing that cognition is more widespread than we standardly believe.