# PRAGMATIST PHILOSOPHY AND ACTION RESEARCH: READINGS AND CONVERSATION WITH RICHARD RORTY

For *Action Research*
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In the preface to *Philosophy and Social Hope,* Richard Rorty sets out a position with which many action researchers would agree:

> We cannot regard truth as a goal of inquiry.  The purpose of inquiry is to achieve agreement among human beings about what to do, to bring consensus on the end to be achieved and the means to be used to achieve those ends.  Inquiry that does not achieve co-ordination of behaviour is not inquiry but simply wordplay. (Rorty, 1999:xxv)

This suggests that a further exploration of his philosophy might be useful as we work to develop action research as a complement and alternative to the dominant models of 'disinterested' social science, and to reframe questions of quality and address a broader range of quality questions than traditional questions of validity (Bradbury & Reason, 2001).

This article is based on a reading of Rorty's work, starting with *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999), and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), and moving on to more technical works, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), collections of critical essays concerning Rorty's work and his responses (Brandom, 2000; Festenstein & Thompson, 2001), and some of Rorty's most recent essays available at the time of writing on the internet (2000; 2001). In addition, I visited Rorty in Paris and explored some of the issues raised with him personally. I much appreciate his willingness to give me time for this conversation.[1]  This paper cannot begin to address the full breadth of Rorty's work, nor the controversies he has stirred up.  I have a simpler aim: *what might be the relevance of the questions Rorty raises and the positions he adopts for the theory and practice of action research?*  In doing this I am building on the work of Greenwood and Levin (1998) in identifying important links between pragmatism and action research.

Richard Rorty is described as 'one of the most original and important philosophers writing today (Brandom, 2000:ix) and as adopting a 'distinctive and controversial brand of pragmatism' (Ramberg, 2002).  The characteristic idea of philosophical pragmatism is that ideas and practices should be judged in terms of their usefulness, workability, and practicality and that these are the criteria of their truth, rightness and value.  It is a perspective that stresses the priority of action over principles. Rorty tracks his pragmatism back to his intellectual hero, John Dewey, whose philosophy centred around questions of how life should be lived and addressed the social issues of his day (see e.g. Hanson, 1995; Rescher, 1995).

In his autobiographical essay *Trotsky and the Wild Orchids* (in 1999:3-20), Rorty describes how as a young man he was captured by Yeats' 'thrilling phrase' that one might 'hold reality and justice in a single vision' (1999:7). In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty

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addresses the question of 'reality', setting out his arguments against the 'correspondence theory of truth' and the idea that the task of inquiry is to 'mirror' the real world and thus approach ever closer to a true description of reality.  In *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity,* he explores the view that his earlier quest to hold reality and justice in a single vision was actually a mistake, that one cannot and should not weave together one's 'moral responsibilities to other people with one's relation to whatever idiosyncratic things or persons one loves with all one's heart and soul and mind' (1999:13).  Reading Rorty we can find many echoes of the project which is action research.  For don't we try to hold 'reality and justice' in a single vision?  Are we not also interested in having something to say about 'reality' while at the same time addressing issues of social justice?  Do we not worry about how best to do this?  Whether it is possible?

In response to these concerns about reality, truth and justice, Richard Rorty has taken on the task of 'redescribing' philosophy. Redescribing is an important term for Rorty: if we want to argue persuasively for a new view of phenomena, and we can no longer lay claim that our view is a better representation of reality, we are caught in a 'contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed vocabulary which vaguely promises great things' (1989:9).  So *redescription* refers to 'a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well' as 'the chief instrument for cultural change' (1989:7).

The 'entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance' is that set of distinctions— appearance-reality, matter-mind, made-found, sensible-intellectual etc.—which lie at the heart of Western thinking.  He recalls Dewey's description of these as 'a brood and nest of dualisms' that dominate the history of Western philosophy and can be traced back to Plato's writing. For Rorty, these traditional distinctions have become an obstacle to our social hopes—hopes for a global, cosmopolitan, classless, casteless society (1999:xii).

Rorty continues to argue that we must 'slough off a lot of intellectual baggage which we inherited from the Platonic tradition' (1999:xiii), in particular the distinction between 'appearance' and 'reality', 'finding' and 'making'.  He particularly resists the use of the term 'relativist' to describe himself and other pragmatists who do not accept the correspondence theory of truth, for this defines the issue in the Platonists' vocabulary:

> I think it is important that we who are accused of relativism stop using the distinctions between finding and making, discovery and invention, objective and subjective. We should not let ourselves be called subjectivists… We must repudiate the vocabulary our opponents use, and not let them impose it on us. (Rorty, 1999:xviii)

I remember my delight, on first reading this argument so clearly made.  For action research has at times adopted the 'vocabulary our opponents use': we have allowed ourselves to be influenced by taken-for-granted dualisms such a subject-object, researcher-subject, action-knowledge, at times unawarely accepting these distinctions, and at other fiercely arguing against them rather than elegantly side-stepping them. This has not been very helpful to us: we must develop our 'talent for speaking differently'.  Rorty allows us to see that we must create our own vocabulary to describe what we take as quality in our research.

For just as Rorty is undertaking to redescribe philosophy, the action research movement is engaged in redescribing inquiry: we are attempting to speak differently in the face of an entrenched vocabulary.  As Hilary Bradbury and I emphasize in the *Handbook of Action Research* (2001b), action research must not be seen as simply another methodology in the toolkit of disinterested social science: action research is an *orientation* to inquiry rather than a methodology. It has different purposes, is based in different relationships, and has different ways of conceiving knowledge and its relation to practice. Hence the importance for

developing a talent for speaking differently and articulating what we do with new metaphors rather than being caught in entrenched vocabularies.

Before I turn to explore Rorty's contribution to our thinking about action research I need to say a little more about Rorty's anti-metaphysics and his views on human language.

## Rorty and anti-metaphysics

Part of Rorty's fierce opposition to the 'nest of dualisms' is that they lead us back to metaphysics, to a distinction between the absolute and the relative, to a view that there is some higher reality outside the human condition. With Yeats, Rorty refuses to stand in awe of anything other than human imagination (in Festenstein & Thompson, 2001:133).  Rorty is out to radically 'de-divinize' the world: not just to get rid of God but also 'devotion to truth' (1989:45) outside of human discourse.

So in its ideal form, Rorty's culture of liberalism would have 'no room for the notion that there are nonhuman forces to which human beings should be responsible', including the idea of a truth outside human imagination.  This also means that inquiry does not naturally converge on a consensus, to some end point of Truth or Reality or Goodness. Rather our only useful notions of 'true' and 'real' and 'good' are extrapolations from human created practices and beliefs,  which will necessarily change over time (1979:377).

This stance is 'non-foundational' in that there are no foundations for knowledge outside human discourse, no appeals to an ultimate Reality that can be made.  It is a position that also questions the idea that human inquiry and science itself depends on a particular methodology.  Rather, 'all that remains of Peirce's, Dewey's and Popper's praise of science is praise of certain moral virtues—those of an open society—rather than any specifically epistemic strategy' (1999:36).  This perspective will appeal to the action researchers who would claim that the fundamental strategy of action research is to 'open communicative space' and help the emergence of 'communities of inquiry'.

## Language

Once we give up the notion that anything can have an intrinsic nature to be represented and drop the idea of language as representation, we must be 'thoroughly Wittgensteinian in our approach to language (1989:21). Language is seen as making *our* world rather than representing *the* world:

> Truth cannot be out there—cannot exist independently of the human mind— because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there.  The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false.  The world on its own—unaided by the describing activities of human beings—cannot. (Rorty, 1989:5)

All this points to the contingency of the language that we use: 'there is no way to step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary which somehow takes into account *all possible* vocabularies' (1989:xvi, emphasis in original).  The difference between what is taken as 'literal' and what is taken as 'metaphorical' is the distinction between familiar and unfamiliar vocabularies and theories (1989:17).  We can neither appeal to universal reason nor to an external reality as foundations for our claims.  This leads, as we have seen, to the key notion of *redescription*:

> The… 'method' of philosophy is the same as the 'method' of utopian politics or revolutionary science… The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behaviour which will

tempt the rising generation to adopt it… it says things like 'try thinking of it this way'. (Rorty, 1989:9)

A recent paper (McArdle & Reason, 2003) draws on the idea of redescription to look at the experience of young women in management in a co-operative inquiry group. As the young women examined their experience of certain difficult incidents at work, they were able to stop seeing what was happening to them in terms of their own inadequacies and 'redescribe' this as 'bullying' on the part of senior managers. They were also able to place this within a wider context of the culture of the organization as based on values of competition and winning rather than values of collaboration and inquiry, and so were beginning to create a new vocabulary—'redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways'—which had implications for personal and cultural change. It is not a question, as Rorty might say, of whether 'bullying' corresponds to 'the way things really are'; rather it is a question of whether it is useful because it invites the young women to stop feeling and doing some things and start feeling and doing others which are more fruitful for them. (for a full description of this inquiry, see McArdle, in preparation).

## Reflecting on Rorty and Action Research

In the *Handbook of Action Research* Hilary Bradbury and I articulated five characteristics of action research: it is an approach to human inquiry concerned with developing *practical knowing* through participatory, *democratic processes* in the pursuit of *worthwhile human purposes*, drawing on *many ways of knowing* in an *emergent, developmental* fashion. In the following sections I set out some of Rorty's views relevant to these characteristics, and then turn to draw parallels and contrasts between his views and the perspectives of action research.

### Practical knowing

> A primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives. A wider purpose of action research is to contribute through this practical knowledge to the increased well-being—economic, political, psychological, spiritual—of human persons and communities, and to a more equitable and sustainable relationship with the wider ecology of the planet of which we are an intrinsic part. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a:2)

Rorty's view is that human inquiry, as it ceases to be an attempt to correspond with a intrinsic nature of reality, becomes an exercise in human problem solving:

> Pragmatists hope to break with the picture which, in Wittgenstein's words, 'holds us captive'—the Cartesian-Lockean picture of a mind seeking to get in touch with a reality outside itself.  So they start with a Darwinian account of human beings as animals doing their best to cope with the environment—doing their best to develop tools which will enable them to enjoy more pleasure and less pain. Words are among the tools which these clever animals have developed. (Rorty, 1999:xxii-xxiii)

Rorty's view is that 'No organism, human or non-human, is ever more or less in touch with reality', it is a Cartesian error to think of the mind as somehow swinging free of the causal forces exerted on the body. So we should give up seeing inquiry as a means of representing reality, and rather see it as a means of *using* reality.  The relationship between truth claims and the world becomes 'causal rather than representational' and the issue becomes whether our beliefs 'provide reliable guides to getting what we want' (1999:33).

The question of proof (which Rorty the anti-metaphysician sees as an attempt to escape from the world) can be replaced by the demand for imagination:

> One should stop worrying about whether what one believes is well grounded and start worrying about whether one has been imaginative enough to think up interesting alternatives to one's present beliefs. (1999:34)

In conversation, Rorty's agreed with me that there appear to be links between his pragmatism and action research.  But he was skeptical throughout the interview as to whether this was a form of social science:

> *What I was dubious about… was, do (people) really need a new kind of language or do they just need less talk about what it is they are doing or what our method is? It's as if you are giving them a new meta-discourse instead of just saying skip the meta-discourse and just get on with it.*

> *When you define action research… you might just as well be describing democratic politics, it doesn't bear particularly on social science, it is just what people in democratic societies hope to be doing.*

This is, of course, precisely the point: action research practitioners aim to remove the monopoly of knowledge creation that has been endowed to academics doing social science, and contribute to the development of inquiry as part of everyday practice.  As I wrote with Bill Torbert,

> The action turn in the social sciences is a turn toward a kind of research/practice open in principle to anyone willing to commit to integrating inquiry and practice in everyday personal and professional settings.  (Reason & Torbert, 2001:7)

## Democracy and participation

In the *Handbook of Action Research* we argued that building democratic, participative, pluralist communities of inquiry is central to the work of action research, that action research is only possible *with, for* and *by* persons and communities (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a:2). Similar arguments can be found throughout the action research literature (for example in Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Heron, 1996; Kemmis, 2001).

Rorty similarly celebrates democracy:

> The democratic community of Dewey's dreams… is a community in which everybody thinks that it is human solidarity, rather than knowledge of something not merely human, that really matters…  Dewey… called pragmatism 'the philosophy of democracy'… a hopeful, melioristic, experimental frame of mind. (Rorty, 1999:20,24)

Rorty's anti-metaphysical stance leads him to reject final answers and 'redemptive truth'. Rather, he see philosophy as needing to 'keep the conversation going' (Rorty, 1979:377), a phrase borrowed by Greenwood and Levin (1998:86) and applied to action research:

> To keep the conversation going is a sufficient aim of philosophy, to see wisdom as consisting in the ability to sustain a conversation, is seeing human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately. (Rorty, 1979:378)

When I suggested that the role of the facilitator of inquiry was to open new arenas for discourse, he replied;

> *I guess I am sort of skeptical about the idea that there is anything general to be said about how people can be more democratic or more participatory…. I am dubious about the idea that there can be expertise in the matter of participation or being democratic…*

And later asserted that democracy was not necessarily an indicator of creative social change, but that we owed much to imaginative elites. We explored his idea that 'strong poets' are the heroes of his liberal utopia (e.g.1989:60); when asked for examples, he suggested:

> *The founders of social movements, the Protestant reformers, the founders of the trades unions,  Mary Wollstonecraft, people who suggested that we could do it differently, are heroes... People who suggested a new self image for women and gays.  People picked it up and ran with it, but it didn't emerge from anything participatory. It was an achievement on the part of people with more powerful imaginations than most….*

Some say that Rorty, 'proposes a relatively modest political agenda' (Conway, in Festenstein & Thompson, 2001:55). And indeed, he is uncomfortable with the word 'radical', quite clear that what he wants is

> *… just the conventional social democratic utopia in which everybody has enough to eat and freedom from fear and all the usual ideals of the Enlightenment and European liberalism....  Nothing new or interesting about it... It seems to me that if we're going to get the ideals of the Enlightenment its going to be by piecemeal reforms, here, there and all over the place.*

What some may see as a modesty in political agenda is another reflection of Rorty's anti-metaphysical stance. He claims to be 'neither complacent nor frivolous' (in Festenstein & Thompson, 2001:219), but rather is skeptical about *great big transformational projects* which don't seem to link with what is done everyday, and would want action researchers to be careful about bandying about a rhetoric of democracy.

But there is a dimension to Rorty's thinking on democracy that remains very individualistic. While seeing language and conversation as the basis of human understanding he doesn't seem to have embraced fully the kinds of relational ways of thinking and being articulated, for example, by Belenky and her colleagues (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986) from a feminist perspective, or Gergen and Shotter from a social constructionist view (Gergen, 1994; Shotter, 1993).  From a relational perspective, social form emerges as 'joint action', not from individuals, but from the dialogue 'in between' them; the very idea of an individual self is called into question (e.g. Gergen, 1991). I also wonder whether if we don't continually explore what we mean by democracy we are in danger of complacency, as suggested by the Nobel Laureat José Saramago:

> The world today behaves like a madhouse… Priorities need to be redefined, but there's no chance of redefining those priorities if we don't confront the need to know what democracy is.  We live in a very peculiar world.  Democracy isn't discussed, as if it was taken for granted, as if democracy had taken God's place, who is also not discussed. (quoted in Evans, 2002)

Rorty's political agenda may be modest, and he believes we must 'build solidarity piece by piece', but his pragmatist, anti-foundational view means that he keeps coming back to the human process of working together:

So it is best to think of moral progress as a matter of increasing *sensitivity*, increasing responsiveness to the needs of a larger and larger variety of people and things. Just as pragmatists see scientific progress not as the gradual attenuation of a veil of appearances which hides the intrinsic nature of reality from us, but as the increasing ability to respond to the concerns of every larger groups of people… so they see moral progress as a matter of being able to respond to the needs of ever more inclusive groups of people. (Rorty, 1999:81)

Such thinking about justice and democracy must be based not on arguing from appearances to some grand theory, but by imaginative articulation of 'still only dimly imagined future practice' (Rorty, 1998:218): we need to tell imaginative stories of new possibilities rather than build political theories. Here I think are important links with the work of describing and developing the *practice* of action research. We must learn to give good accounts of our practices in the development of democratic dialogue, to justify both to our colleagues and to a wider public our claim that we open communicative space. Any theories of democratic engagement we develop must avoid taking off into flights of speculation and grand theory, but must remain grounded in what we actually do.

## Ways of knowing

Action researchers often argue that their work is based on ways of knowing that go beyond the orthodox empirical and rational Western epistemology, and which start from a relationship between self and other, through participation and intuition (see, for example, Belenky et al., 1986; Heron, 1996; Park, 2001; Torbert, 1991). These many ways of knowing:

assert the importance of sensitivity and attunement in the moment of relationship, and of knowing not just as an academic pursuit but as the everyday practices of acting in relationship and creating meaning in our lives. (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a:9)

So how does Rorty see knowledge in a non-foundational world? He is quite clearly opposed to an conception of knowledge as fitting facts, and in this he is in continual disagreement with Habermas, who wishes to hold onto 'the intuition that true propositions fit the facts' and that there is an 'internal connection between justification and truth' (in Festenstein & Thompson, 2001:39-40).

Instead of truth as correspondence Rorty argues for truth as justification, warranted assertability, 'what our peers will, *ceteris paribus*, let us get away with saying' (1979:176).

If we see knowing not as having an essence, to be described by scientists and philosophers, but rather as a right, by current standards, to believe, then we are well on the way to see *conversation* as the ultimate context within which knowledge is to be understood. Our focus shifts from the relation between human beings and the objects of their inquiry to the relation between alternative standards justification. (Rorty, 1979:389-90, original emphasis)

This position provides support for the argument that action research returns the process of knowledge creation to the community of inquiry, and the proposition that what is important in inquiry is the quality of the conversations that are taking place. But Rorty believes that the concept of knowledge itself should be limited to the propositional and linguistic:

> *I would prefer to confine the word knowing to what you call propositional knowing… and say it's knowledge if it is belief that can be justified to other people in language (rather than in practice)…*
>
> *I don't think there is anything wrong with the term knowledge. I just think it is misused when we say that emotions give us knowledge, art gives us knowledge. That is just a way of saying the emotions are a good thing, art is a good thing. The term is most useful confined to justified true belief, that's the philosophical textbook definition of knowledge. Or leave out true and just make it justifiable belief.*

Again, his concern is that by extending the concept of knowledge beyond the linguistic we are in danger of appealing to some kind of essential reality:

> *If you think of knowledge as getting in touch with reality, as the traditional definition has and the pragmatist tradition doesn't, then you are inclined to say the emotions put us in touch with reality, art puts us in touch with reality… But for pragmatists there's no such thing… you know, you are never more in touch with reality you are just better or worse able to justify your views to other people…*

As Habermas puts it, 'For Rorty, every kind of representation of something in the objective world is a dangerous illusion' (in Festenstein & Thompson, 2001:36).

My own feeling, as I review this discussion, is first to re-assert that 'knowing' is a more appropriate term than 'knowledge' for action research. 'Knowing' implies 'a living, evolving process of coming to know rooted in everyday experience… a verb rather than a noun' (Reason & Bradbury, 2001a:2); while 'knowledge' is more fixed and thing-like. Then it seems that an extension of the concept beyond the propositional is important in directing our attention to different territories and qualities of knowing. There is an important political dimension to this, since to limit knowledge/knowing to the propositional favours the articulate and further disempowers those whose voices have been silenced. Further, the linguistic perspective, as used by Rorty and by social constructionists such as Gergen (e.g. 1999), can focus our attention too much on what we *say* rather than what we *do*. I am reminded again of Macmurray's argument that 'I do' rather than 'I think' is the appropriate starting point for epistemology (1957:84), and that

> … most of our knowledge… arises as an aspect of activities that have practical, not theoretical objectives; and it is this knowledge, itself an aspect of action, to which all reflective theory must refer. (Macmurray, 1957:12)

So I think we can refer to many ways of knowing if we so wish, while attending to Rorty's point that as we move between them 'there is no transition that needs explanation or mediation'(Rorty, in Brandom, 2000:57): different 'ways of knowing' will have their own qualities and criteria for justification. I would suggest, *contra* Rorty, that it limits our vision to see 'knowing' in purely cognitive terms.

What about Rorty's assertion that human beings are never more or less out of touch with reality? I think many action researchers would agree that in practical terms people and communities can be seen as 'out of touch with their reality'—for example, Argyris and Schön (1974) pointed to the difference between theories-in-use and espoused theory, to incongruencies between what we do and what we think we do. Learning to work toward a congruence between our intentions, frames, behaviour and 'what actually happens' is an important developmental processes to which action research practices can contribute (Torbert, 2001). Certain attentional exercises in the individual, and information collection and

feedback processes in a community, can help us to see what we were previously blind to. But there is also a paradoxical quality to this reality: as the Buddhist Heart Sutra has it, 'form is emptiness and emptiness form'. Maybe it is better to say we can be in touch with, or out of touch with, the process by which we create our reality, rather than reality itself.

So I think one may find force in Rorty's arguments for truth as justification while still having some sympathy with Habermas' claim that 'language and reality interpenetrate in a manner that for us is indissoluble' (in Brandom, 2000:39).  We can hold to local realities while recognizing the absurdity of seeking one Reality. I would recommend interested readers look at Rorty's powerful arguments, and particularly Habermas critique and Rorty's response (in Brandom, 2000:40) and consider these matters for themselves.

## Human and Ecological Flourishing

The fourth dimension of action research we considered in the Handbook was that it is intended to contribute to the flourishing of human persons, communities, and the ecosystems of which we are part.  This raises questions of values, morals, and ethics.

Rorty's anti-essentialism leads him to argue that just as we can have truth without correspondence with reality, so we can (and indeed must) have 'ethics without principles'. Pragmatists question the Kantian traditional distinction between 'morality' based on reason and 'prudence' based on self-interest, arguing that 'Moral choice… becomes always a matter of compromise between competing goods rather than a choice between absolutely right and wrong… (Rorty, 1999:xxvii-xxix)

As we have seen Rorty's view is that the whole point of human inquiry is to find better ways to cope with the environment—to enjoy more pleasure and less pain.  Pragmatists share with action researchers a desire that our inquiry be 'useful':

> When the question 'useful for what?' is pressed, [pragmatists] have nothing to say except 'useful to create a better future'. When they are asked 'Better by what criterion?' they have no detailed answer… [they] can only say something as vague as: Better in the sense of containing more of what we consider good and less of what we consider bad.  When asked 'And what exactly do you consider good?', pragmatists can only say, with Whitman, 'variety and freedom' or, with Dewey, 'growth'.

> They are limited to such fuzzy and unhelpful answers because what they hope is not that the future will conform to a plan, will fulfil an immanent teleology… but rather than the future will astonish and exhilarate.  (Rorty, 1999:27-8)

In conversation, Rorty again stressed the everydayness of the process of moral choice:

> *All discussion between human beings, one way and another, is about what's worthwhile.  It's about what are we going to do next!  I guess what I am suspicious of is the notion that there is a separate activity called discussion of worthwhileness. How could we not be discussing that?… Plato thought you could sort of rise above  the transitory quarrels of the day and think about worthwhileness as such.  Dewey's point was you can't do that.  Discussion of what to do is discussion of what it's worthwhile to do. When things get too bad you begin to think radically and ask if the whole project was worthwhile, but you are not going to do that until things go wrong.*

Above all, and again following Dewey, moral progress is about increased imaginative power (1999:87), which is why in his later writing Rorty emphasizes the importance of a literary culture, and in particular the novel (see 2001). But imaginative power and the ability to see the world from points of view other than ours is not only provided by novels and a literary culture, and it does seem rather limiting to focus on these. What is important, surely, is that we find ways to develop storied cultures, whether these are in a formal 'literary culture' or oral and vernacular. There are many practices in action research which allow us to see the world from different perspectives, notably the Public Conversations Project which promotes constructive conversations and relationships among those who have differing values, world views, and positions about divisive public issues (Public Conversations Project, nd).

I am attracted to Rorty's argument that the question of value, of what is worthwhile, permeates all our conversations, and that there is not a special form of dialogue about worthwhileness. This position provides powerful arguments against the positivist view that knowledge about the world is an end in itself, is intrinsically valuable, and supports action research as a practical form of inquiry in which knowledge and values are intertwined: as we create practical knowledge about our world we also shape that world with our imagination. And the arguments for widening our sense of who is the other chimes with Gergen's view (in this issue) that we must not limit ourselves to the first order democracy of the immediate group but also attend to wider circles of second order democracy. On the other hand, I do think it important that we find a place in action research projects for explicit reflection on what we value and want to enhance in our lives, and articulate this in our writing. As those writing about appreciative inquiry point out, the questions we ask are fateful (Ludema, Cooperrider, & Barrett, 2001:189). As Rorty says, moral choice is nearly always between competing goods: how we chose between these must always be part of our inquiry.

However, Rorty was also very clear that he was happy with a human-centred value perspective. When I asked if his perspective ignored our relationship with the non-human world and the environmental issues humanity is facing, he replied:

> There is one way of being environmentalist which is saying human beings are going to suffer if we don't pay attention to the environment. And there is another way which says there is something non-human out there to get in touch with. I don't think there is anything non-human out there to get in touch with. I think one should be an environmentalist because it is going to be tough on humans if we are not.

And to suggestions from deep ecologists like Thomas Berry (1999) that we need to widen our experience to see ourselves as part of a 'community of all beings' he was dismissive:

> I think we are the best thing that evolution ever came up with. I don't really care much about getting in touch with the other critters... I think we have so much trouble forming a community of humans, I would like to think about that first.

While I am sure there will be a huge range of views on this within the action research community, I find this narrow humanism frightening.

## Emergent form

Rorty takes an evolutionary perspective which conforms to his anti-essentialist perspective: if there is no real reality to be described, if there are no absolute moral choices, human inquiry must be seen as a pragmatic process of continual problem-solving. Action research is similarly concerned with the an emergent deepening of our understanding of the issues we wish to address, and the development over time of communities of inquiry.

But in his writing, Rorty does articulate a wider sense of moral progress, again fuelled by his anti-essentialist project.  Our inquiry must not be driven by a desire to get closer to some ideal, but rather we should address the questions "What breaks us out of our parochial contexts and expands the frontiers of inquiry?" "What keeps us critical rather than dogmatic?" (in Brandom, 2000:60).  And for Rorty this is linked with the key notion of hope, hope of progress toward the ideal of a liberal utopia, for a society

> … whose ideals can be fulfilled by persuasion rather than by force, by reform rather than by revolution, by free and open encounters… which has no purpose except freedom, no goal except a willingness to see how such encounters go and to abide by the outcome. (Rorty, 1989:60)

There is a strong link here between social hope and action research, which can be seen as a way of articulating and practising new ways of living together fruitfully: we are not trying to pin down one truth, but to articulate one of many truths, that are creative, liberating for ourselves and others.

## The reflective practitioner as ironist

One of the questions I took to my conversation with Rorty was whether there is a connection between his description of the ironist and the idea, common to many action researchers, of a reflective practitioner. An ironist 'has radical doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses' and is 'always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change' (1989:73-4). He or she therefore continually faces up to the contingency of their language, identity and community, and combine strong commitment 'with a sense of contingency of their own commitment' (Rorty, 1989:61).

Similarly, it seemed to me, a reflective practitioner, engaged in 'first-person inquiry', is attempting to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to continually question the frames through which they see their world, to act awarely and choicefully, and to assess effects in the outside world while acting (Marshall, 1999, 2001, 2002; Reason & Torbert, 2001; Schön, 1983; Torbert, 1991).

Rorty's development of the notion of ironist comes from his examination of contrasting trends in philosophy.  Very briefly, the argument in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* is that there is, in the Western tradition, an incompatibility between arguments for autonomy and self-creation on the one hand, and solidarity on the other—between ironists who refuse to be liberals, and liberals who refuse to be ironists.  The kind of personal autonomy which self-creating ironists (represented by Nietzsche, Derrida, Foucault) seek is at odds with attempts to build a philosophy around the needs of a democratic society (represented by Habermas, Dewey and Berlin). Rorty's conclusion is that the vocabulary of these two streams of Western thinking are different and need to be kept separate, and the longing for irony confined to the private sphere (see 1989:61-69).

However, those of us who have argued the importance of first-person inquiry might still see parallels with Rorty's description of the ironist. The practice of action research in public spheres cannot be separated from a well lived, inquiring life, in which one is always seeking to question one's assumptions, to see through one's own framing of situations. For example, Marshall illustrates what she describes as inner arcs of attention as she attempts to behave inquiringly in her organization:

> … seeking to notice myself perceiving, making meaning, framing issues, choosing how to speak out and so on.  I pay attention for assumptions I use,

repetitions, patterns, themes, dilemmas, key phrases which are charged with
energy or that seem to hold multiple meanings to be puzzled about, and more.  I
work with a multi-dimensional frame of knowing; acknowledging and
connecting between intellectual, emotional, practical, intuitive, sensory, imaginal
and more knowings. (Marshall, 2001:433)

The purpose of first-person inquiry disciplines within an action research practice is to step
outside the everyday common sense of one's presuppositions, to attempt (and it can only be
an attempt) to avoid taking the frames one habitually uses as reflections of 'reality'.  One is
then more likely to be able to explore one's behaviour for potential incongruity with one's
purposes leading to more effective action; and also recognize that others' framings of a
situation are important for them and have a claim to recognition, leading to the potential for
increased mutuality. The aim is to help create wider communities of inquiry in which those
involved can

> … discover the tacit choices they have made about their perceptions of reality…,
> about their goals and their strategies for achieving them.  The fundamental
> assumption of action science is that by gaining access to these choices, people
> can achieve greater control over their own fate. (Friedman, 2001:160)

However, Rorty was alarmed at the potential link between his view of the ironist and social
practice:

> *Sometimes ironists are completely self-involved and unconversable and useless
> to their fellow man except very indirectly by the books they write, which may
> catch on 50 years later.  I don't see any particular connection between being an
> ironist in the sense of what I was talking about in Contingency, Irony and
> Solidarity and being socially useful.  Some of them are, some of them aren't.*
>
> *I think of irony as working better for people alone in their studies than people
> doing things with other people. I use it as a peculiar cast of mind, so to speak…
> The figure I had in mind was someone obsessed with self-doubts, and that is
> different from making imaginative suggestions to a group.  The same person
> might do both, but there's no predictability.  There are obvious similarities, but
> I'd like to keep the distinction.*

My own view is that there *is* a link between Rorty's irony and reflective practice—and indeed
Torbert uses the term 'ironist' to describe one of the later stages in his developmental scheme.
I think that a reading of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* would be profitable to any would-
be action researcher, alerting them to a range of issues concerning the contingency of
language, self and community, and challenging whatever remnants of foundationalist,
metaphysical assumptions they retained.  As one does this, one must realize that Rorty
argument is framed within a philosophical discourse, it is about *people alone in their studies
rather than people doing things with other people,* as he says above.

The limitation of Rorty's view of the ironist, from the perspective of action research,  is that
he has no account of disciplines of practice; while the reflective practitioner is interested in
the congruence or otherwise of their language and theory theories with their practice. Just as I
argued above that action researchers must give good accounts of practices in the development
of democratic dialogue, the challenge is for action researchers to show in their behaviour and
their accounts more fully and more vividly what they mean by terms like 'reflective practice'
and what disciplines of practice might look and feel like (see, for example, Wadsworth, 2001;
Whitehead, 1989; Whitehead, 2000). If Rorty's account of the ironist helps in this, so much
the better.

## Reflections on Rorty and Action Research

What, at the end of this reflection on Rorty's pragmatist philosophy, might we say are the lessons for action research?  For me, whatever conclusions I reach about his views on a particular issue, Rorty's writing on the practical nature of inquiry, on democracy, on justification, on ethics and what is worthwhile is hugely educational and instructive. Above all, he shows how the vocabulary of dualism permeates Western thinking, and radically refuses to accept a trace of transcendental, metaphysical thinking, thereby inviting us to scrutinise our own vocabularies and presuppositions.  His non-foundationalist perspective urges us not to put principles above practice, not to attempt an appeal from transitory appearances to a permanent reality.

Through reading Rorty we can also see that while philosophers may be hugely suggestive and challenging, they will not themselves answer the questions that we in the field of action research need to address.  As he said, he was glad if his writing was useful, but was concerned that I might think it more useful than it actually was: *skip the meta-discourse and just get on with it!*  Rorty is out to dedivinize the world, and certainly doesn't want himself or any other philosopher to become an essential reference point, to take the place vacated by Truth or God. What we can take from Rorty is good questions, suggestive ways of addressing some of the issues that arise for action researchers.

So one of the most important lessons I take from Rorty is that as action researchers part of our task is to redescribe inquiry, and that we must not be limited by the taken-for-granted dualisms that underlie much of orthodox social science, nor over-influenced by the passing fashions of academia. We must fashion our own language, and at the same time, not get ourselves so caught up in the nuances of our language that we start to create new orthodoxies. There is in the field a proliferation of ways of addressing these questions, and we must, I suggest, celebrate and live out our epistemological heterogeneity.

Rorty's skepticism as to whether it is possible to actively create democratic, participative conversations, and his worry about 'big transformational projects' must be taken seriously, but clearly is not the last word.  Action researchers have come a long way in learning how to develop mutuality in conversation, collaboration in small groups, and wider networks of participative relationships.  Reading Rorty can challenge us to articulate more clearly just what it is we can do to facilitate emergence of communicative spaces, to create more public accounts and practice theories to justify our claims.

Rorty's challenge of the notion of many ways of knowing is at least in part rooted in his deep suspicion of metaphysics, that there can be an appeal to any reality outside human conversation. Even if we don't accept this position, we would do well to honour the tenacity of his non-foundationalism, and take from this a challenge to think through our own underlying assumptions.  We can learn to adopt the perspective of ironist, to combine a commitment to our position with continual doubts about the language we use.

Whether this leads us to the humanist position that Rorty adopts, that there can be no recourse except to human imagination and human discourse, remains open to question.  As I come to a resting point in my inquiry into Rorty's work I am struck with what seems like an unacknowledged paradox in this position.  While he challenges us not to be caught in the dualisms of appearance and reality, finding and making, I can't help feeling that, in the end, he is unable to hold the paradox open and his emphasis on human language creating our world in effect brings his down on the side of appearance (this seems particularly so in the opening pages of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*).  And this, I believe, leads us to an anthropocentrism which is intolerable given the damage human action is doing to our living space of the more than human world.

It seems to me that the metaphor of participation provides us with an alternative position. Our world neither consists of separate things, nor is it constructed through language, but rather emerges through relationships which we co-author and in which we partake. We can, with Rorty, reject the correspondence theory of truth while holding that experiential encounter with the presence of the world is the ground of our being and knowing, and is prior to language. In this perspective, what is important is not to confuse our meeting with the elemental properties of the living world—the I-Thou encounter with a living tree or person—with our symbolic constructs expressed in language (Heron & Reason, 1997)  As Abram has it, 'underneath our literate abstractions, a deeply participatory relation to things and to the earth, a felt reciprocity....' (Abram, 1996:124).

I think what we share most powerfully with Rorty is a concern for the relationship between truth and justice. As a philosopher, Rorty's view is that it is not possible to bring these together in one language, hence his view of the ironist.  Action research *does* attempt to bring truth and justice together, and action research practitioners are scholar-practitioners, not philosophers, and we may wish to extend the notion of irony to include the self-questioning awareness of the reflective practitioner 'living life as inquiry'.

So reading Rorty will help us asks ourselves good questions. But in the end each of us, in conversation with those others with whom we are working, have to use our imaginations to come to our own conclusions about the best way forward in the particular circumstances of our inquiry practice. This requires courage as well as good questions, and while Rorty clearly demonstrates courage in asking challenging questions, we cannot take from him the kind of courage required to take these questions into practice, to scrutinize our own behaviour and assumptions and to take the risks of engaging fully with others. The best we can do, in a journal such as this, is to describe those choices and the practices they led us to adopt. If we can do that fully, richly, imaginatively, we will be doing very well indeed.


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