

TESTING THE TRUTH

Jane Skinner

Durban University of Technology

Janes@dut.ac.za

ABSTRACT: This paper discusses, from the perspective of an observer in southern Africa, some of the political and educational implications of theories of mind and knowledge developed within the pragmatist canon during the twentieth century. It argues that John Dewey's rejection of any idea of "knowledge in general" allowed for a dynamic conception of intelligent meaning-making within historical context – an understanding later grounded more firmly by the "robust relativism" of Joseph Margolis. In contrast Richard Rorty's attempt to "drop" philosophy, replacing epistemology and metaphysics entirely with empiricism and naturalism, had to renege on any role for philosophy in establishing or testing the truth, thus effectively handing over existing hegemonic knowledge to its supporting disciplines. The paper argues that this may be opposed to some of the central intuitions of pragmatism, and that it must inhibit the power of informed debate from acting as a creative force for developing entirely new approaches, and thus for the best thinking to emerge in the academy and beyond. As Margolis foresaw, such "best thinking" is now urgently required to address the crises facing the world in the 21st century and, most especially, in the developing world.

Keywords: Pragmatism, 'robust relativism', developing countries, Darwinism, higher education.

1. Introduction

Both the most influential pragmatists of the twentieth century, John Dewey and Richard Rorty, gained fame or notoriety (depending upon the viewpoint of the receivers of their messages) for new conceptions of the role of philosophy. At the beginning of the century, to a newly industrialised, dynamic, thrusting America, Dewey brought an end to outworn epistemologies, and a celebration of practical discovery, democratic values and evolutionary advance. To a globally powerful, prosperous, over-confident America at the end of the century, Richard Rorty brought a celebration of the liberalism of the west, and at the same time, gave over the finding of truth and meaning entirely to science with its currently determinist, physicalist underpinnings. Human advance would happen only through the positive influence of literature and irony – the inspiration of 'strong poets'. While there are some superficial commonalities, the paper argues that the implications of each of these

positions for both politics and education are radically opposed.

Dewey's work was concerned with establishing a formidable body of practical theory. While he believed that "there is no problem of knowledge in general" (Dewey, 1917a: 32) and his demolishing of epistemology as "knowledge in general" is well known, the significance of intelligence and meaning-making, through experience and reflection, and the involvement of the interconnections of things, as well as its future orientation, contributed a dynamic general understanding of what it is to know, and what it is that we can know. Democracy was a project yet to be achieved – one which required an equality of status of all individuals, as did education, whose aim was to promote individual growth. (Current 21st century educational theory is apparently similarly focussed – but with a different orientation, as I discuss below).

Dewey's position lost influence partly because it allowed for its interpretation as inherently relativistic, and it remained for Joseph Margolis at the end of the century to defend the establishment of a pragmatic "robust relativism" – a defence of truth within context. Margolis's thinking combined the rigors of logical analytic thought with the reality that final, decontextualized knowledge is unattainable. At the same time, and much more famously, Richard Rorty was developing what Margolis dismissed as "philosophy by other means" (Margolis, 2000).

Rorty's "replacement" of epistemology and of metaphysics by empiricism and naturalism (Rorty, 1980: 6) led to his accompanying "dropping" of any independent concept of mind and meaning making altogether, and the second chapter of his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is called "the invention of the mind" (Rorty, 1980). While Rorty wanted human conversation to continue, and particularly "the conversation of the West", he did not want these conversations to "degenerate into enquiry" (Rorty, 1980: 272). Truth must be "given" to science (Rorty, 1989: 3–4). That the philosophical world was dazzled by this sleight of hand seems to have surprised even Rorty himself – and I argue that it left a

political vacuum, giving to our neoliberal world an unwitting apologist, and dampening the chances of developing radically different approaches to entrenched and powerful disciplines within the academy, or of challenging their supporting political structures. From this impasse a philosophy of “robust relativism” may be the best way out.

2. Conceptions of the Mind and Knowing Initiated by John Dewey

In *Philosophy and Education* Dewey insists on a central role for active intelligence and reflection in establishing knowledge: “mind is precisely intentional, purposeful activity controlled by perception of facts and their relationships with one another” (Dewey, 1916: 104). Within a democratic population “the aim of education is to enable individuals to continue their education” and “the object and reward of learning is continued capacity for growth” (Dewey, 1916: 100) – which is very close to what would now be called “lifelong learning”. Again in *The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy* Dewey says, “There is apparently no conscious experience without inference. Reflection is native and constant”, and he concludes “the time has arrived for a pragmatism which shall be empirically idealistic, proclaiming the essential connexion of intelligence with the unachieved future” (Dewey, 1917a: 111).

While receiving a large following in the early decades of the century, Dewey’s ideas were always open to the charge of relativism, and at the time of the Second World War they lost traction when, under the influence of analytic philosophy, the discipline became a highly technical, logical, word game. This has concentrated “not on ideas in the mind but on the language in which the mind’s thinking is expressed” (Bullock et al, 1988: 30) and it took the emphasis away from meaning making, and the discipline away from the concerns of the real world. Morris Dickstein says, however, that while “the [Second World] War discredited the kind of enlightened planning with which pragmatism had become identified” its eclipse was never complete and that “during the very

period when it seemed least fashionable the pragmatist revival was on the way” (Dickstein, 1998: 9–10).

One of its defenders in the latter part of the century was the philosopher Joseph Margolis whose defence of a “robust” relativism was minutely argued in his book *The Truth About Relativism* (Margolis, 1991). Margolis’s method of analysis was described by one commentator as “analytic baroque” – which Margolis himself approved “because it signifies (to me) an honest effort to depart from the ingrained habits of analytic philosophy without abandoning its genuine sense of rigor” (Margolis, 1991: x). He argues that analytic philosophy simply assumes that its method of analysis will establish “justified true belief” despite the fact that, as he sees it, “the use of true is inseparable from our theories about what we mean by knowledge and the apprehension of particular truths” and therefore “there is no way of giving conceptual priority to alethic questions over epistemic or ontic ones”. Thus “neither logic nor epistemology is an autonomous discipline though modern analytic philosophy has always mistakenly supposed they were” (Margolis, 1991: 8). However,

The robust relativist shares with the opponents of relativism the ordinary alethic options of bivalent and many valued truth-values: his distinction rests rather, in theorising that, in this or that sector of inquiry, the intelligible world can intelligently support truth claims that, on a bivalent model, would yield inconsistency or self-contradiction.

And the implications of this are profound for the engaging with the world:

Vindicated, relativism has the force of deepening, in the most profound way, every incipient doubt regarding the presumptions of cognitive fixity, certainly unconditional truth, irrelevance of context and history and personal and societal perspective in both theoretical and practical matters – hence of course, regarding the timeless reliability of specialist pronouncements on the grand Truth of anything – once and for all. (Margolis, 1991: 2)

Again “Relativism presents itself as a philosophy of the free spirit, of all those unwilling to divide the world between the revealed and the debateable. There are no

such divisions". Most significant here is the implication that only within a relativist position can there be an enabling of context, history and debate to inform what can be deemed as true, and consequently the meaning of things to be both potentially discoverable and infinitely debateable. Therefore, while Margolis argues against the final truth claims of analytic philosophers, his understanding of relativism enables critique to have a purchase on finding the truth in politics and in practical affairs within context. It is thus an enabling approach not a disabling one – bringing back into play the concerns of the real world.

Margolis evokes the legacy of the ancient Greek philosopher and relativist Protagoras ("man is the measure") but sees this as being virtually unrecoverable – only known through his critics, notably Plato and Aristotle. More recently, Carlin Romano has reaffirmed the legacy of the 4th century BCE relativist philosophy of Isocrates whose works *are* extant, seeing them as bearing remarkable similarities to the thinking of Dewey as far as a focus on practical problems and public life are concerned: "think of Isocrates here as Dewey-onicus" (Romano, 2013: 551). Only accidents of history prevented these thinkers from attaining the central role in our conceptions of philosophy always held by foundational truth-seekers.

3. Conceptions of Mind and Knowing as Conceived by Richard Rorty

While Rorty saw his philosophy as entirely compatible with Dewey's, ("I think of myself as sharing John Dewey's political attitudes and hopes, as well as his pragmatism") it seems that their conceptions of the independent role of mind and meaning are opposed at almost every point. Rorty was initially a professor of English Literature and a philosopher operating within the dominant analytic tradition. He explains his continued use of its method in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* as follows:

The reason why the book is written largely in the vocabulary of contemporary analytic philosophers, and with reference to problems discussed in the analytic literature, is purely autobiographical. They are the vocabulary and the literature with which I am most familiar and to which I owe what grasp I have of philosophical issues. Had I been equally familiar with other modes of writing philosophy this would have been a better and a more useful book. (Rorty, 1980: 8)

Rorty seeks to refute Cartesian dualism by suggesting that our understanding of the independent concept of mind is merely intuitive and should now be superseded by "physiological methods" (Rorty, 1980: 10). "It seems clear, at least since Wittgenstein and Sellars, that the "meaning" of typographical inscriptions is not an "immaterial" property they have, but just their place in a context of surrounding events, in a language game, in a form of life" (Rorty, 1980: 25). This can be seen as an example of Rorty's recruiting of other philosophers into his way of thinking – often without strong grounds for doing so. In *Philosophical Grammar*, for instance, Wittgenstein indicates that grammar itself is insufficient to indicate meaning: "Is the meaning only in the use of words? Is it not the way this use interlocks with life?" (Wittgenstein, 1969: 65). But I digress. Rorty then goes on to dissect the idea of mind by various analytic tools concluding that "we shall treat the intentional as a sub-species of the functional" (Rorty, 1980: 32) and that "insofar as dualism reduces to the bare insistence that pains and thoughts have no places, nothing whatever hangs on the distinction between mind and body" (Rorty, 1980: 69). However, the fact that Rorty can prove that the concept of mind cannot rightfully be placed within conventional analytic categories can have no final significance in undermining the existence of mind as distinct from the body from a common sense point of view. The inclusion of another consideration such as the quality of "discrimination" could, for instance, immediately reopen this debate – and he admits that he is "painfully aware of the lacunae in the story [he has] told" (Rorty, 1980: 69).

However, Rorty, although he uses their methods, is concerned overall to undermine and displace analytic philosophy. He therefore falls back on literature and hermeneutics to produce "edifying philosophy" and "conversations" – particularly ones which will encourage us to continue "the conversation of the West" (Rorty, 1989: 394) – an injunction which would hardly be currently well received by those nominally outside of a western orbit. Rorty's naturalism necessarily involves biological determinism. His understanding is therefore

that we are, at bottom, the playthings of a system that constitutes us through our biology: “Some atoms-in-the-void account of micro-processes within individual human beings will [eventually] permit the prediction of every sound or inscription which will ever be uttered”. In this scientific “reality” Rorty is certain “there are no ghosts”. But if we are not responsible, we cannot be accountable. Like the proles in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, we can be allowed to think whatever we like because, ultimately, our ideas will not matter.

Which brings us to consider the implications of Rorty’s interpretation of a key instance in Orwell’s book. This involves the main protagonist, Winston Smith, concluding that “the obvious, the silly and the true had got to be defended. Truisms are true. Hold onto that! The solid world exists...stones are hard...water is wet... Freedom is the freedom to say that two and two equal four. If that is granted all else follows” (Orwell, 1990: 84). As H. O. Mounce argues, it is an extraordinary reading of this passage to suggest, as Rorty does, that this can be read as saying that:

It does not matter whether “two plus two is four” is true, much less whether this is “subjective” or “corresponds to external reality”. All that matters is that if you believe it you can say it without getting hurt. In other words what matters is your ability to talk to other people about what seems to you true, not what is in fact true. If we take care of freedom, truth can take care of itself. If we are ironic enough about our final vocabularies, and curious enough about everyone else’s, we do not have to worry about whether we are in direct contact with moral reality, or whether we are blinded by ideology, or whether we are weakly “relativistic.” (Rorty, 1989: 176–177)

But it is surely precisely Orwell’s point that without the truth we cannot take care of freedom (or morality, or false ideologies). The simple truth that all of us are able to find unaided is, in the last resort, our only guarantee of freedom. If, however, our powers of independent thought are only illusory, if we can be swayed this way and that by “strong poets”, this ensures that we can not only recreate ourselves but that others can recreate us. If by means of terror or misinformation we renege on our beliefs, there is nothing for us to hold onto – we are

at the mercy of the Party. Mounce holds therefore that Rorty and Orwell’s character O’Brien who “re-programmes” dissidents so that they come to love the system “differ in their politics but in their philosophy they are indistinguishable” (Mounce, 1997: 228). The more serious problem is however, that philosophy and politics *cannot* be thus separated. A politics (the holding of power) without a population who have access to independent, grounded, human thought or morality will inevitably turn out to *be* the politics of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

4. The Implications of Rorty’s Position for Politics and Education

In Margolis’s estimation “all philosophy is political” (unpublished comment, Stara Lesna, 2000), but the thrust of Rorty’s second major work, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, is his controversial attempt to divided “private irony” from public liberalism – philosophy from politics. His idea that philosophy has no power to underpin or to debunk other areas of culture means that it cannot underpin (or debunk) a political programme. The philosophical endeavour, the realm of the “ironist” must remain an individual and private concern. Liberals are just a self-appointed group who happen to think that cruelty is the worst thing one can do. Their public commitment has no basis in theory. The lucky chance that led to liberal, Western, democratic systems proliferating since the Enlightenment, is simply due to a fluke of evolution which provided appropriate grounds for these new metaphors (“re-descriptions”) taking root and flourishing at the time (Rorty, 1989: 16). This would also seem to be very much at odds with Dewey’s regret that in his day “direct preoccupation with contemporary difficulties is left to literature and politics’ rather than being appropriately the concern of philosophy” (Dewey, 1917b: 5).

Rorty’s position also undermines any attempt to bring issues of power into the discussion: “without traditional concepts of metaphysics we cannot make sense of the appearance-reality distinction and without this dis-

inction one cannot make sense of the notion of “what is really going on”. “No more metaphysics, no more unmasking” (Rorty in Mouffe, 1996: 14). A political stance that “drops” the notion of power in this way might be seen as equivalent to a theory of mind that “drops” the idea of mental capacity. It may be convenient but it is hardly conducive to conclusive argument! – and each must ensure the continuance of current received wisdom and scientific reality. In this regard, it is perhaps unfortunate that political ideas of “unmasking” the hidden operation of power, initiated by Karl Marx in 1848, have remained almost exclusively within the realm of politics and within the armoury of the far left, when powerful disciplinary positions are equally susceptible to “false consciousness” and both require the exercise of independent, contextualised intelligent thought to disentangle the true from the false.

This political stance of Rorty’s was criticised extensively at the time particularly by Nancy Fraser – but also by others, including Simon Critchley who pointed out that “Rorty’s definition of liberal as ethico/political ... pays no attention to the economic liberalism... which is indeed in the process of rapidly and violently globalising itself, more often than not without any accompanying commitment to tolerance and the abhorrence of cruelty” (Mouffe, 1996: 23).

Although Rorty was never himself active in politics he responded to critics who urged him to make his political position clear in a book developed from lectures he gave at Harvard called *Achieving our Country*. Here he accused the then fashionable post-structural ideas of the continental intellectuals of failing to be involved with politics on the ground – contrasting them with the engaged left supported (and practiced) by Dewey. The most interesting upshot of this book in recent years, however, has been its prophetic foresight of the rise of Donald Trump:

Members of labor unions, and unorganized unskilled workers, will sooner or later realize that their government is not even trying to prevent wages from sinking or to prevent jobs from being exported. Around the same time, they will real-

ize that suburban white-collar workers – themselves desperately afraid of being downsized – are not going to let themselves be taxed to provide social benefits for anyone else. At that point, something will crack. The non-suburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking for a strongman to vote for – someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots. (Rorty, 1998, quoted in the *New York Times*, Nov 20, 2016)

While this indicates extraordinary foresight on Rorty’s part, the question remains as to whether he provided any philosophical tools for its amelioration, or for the recovery of Dewey’s project of achieving true democracy over time. A denial of any possibility of unmasking hidden powerful interests, or entrenched disciplinary knowledge (particularly in disciplines such as economics and genetics), or of drawing on extraordinary human powers of intelligent decision making, it could be argued, must leave the situation unresolved and the current entrenched divisions still in place.

In contrast to Rorty’s generally optimistic, forward-looking analysis of the possibilities of American politics at the turn of the century, is Margolis’s sobering global vision following 9/11:

The reduction of extreme disparities in goods and rights affecting survival, quality of life and perceived injustice is no longer a matter of extraneous benevolence but rather one of war and peace and survival itself. *We can no longer live in peace if most of the world does not live nearly as well as its most privileged part* (emphasis in the original). (Margolis, 2004: 199)

5. Pragmatism as the Testing of Truth

I believe that while it cannot be the role of philosophy to offer alternative truths to disciplinary knowledge it can nonetheless be its role to set up for debate the basic assumptions of existing disciplines, and to require their practitioners to justify these on practical and logical grounds. John Maynard Keynes held that the difficulty in progress lies in escaping from old ideas and not so much in developing new ones, while Dewey believed that “we

rely on precedent as authority only to our own undoing...final reliance on precedent entails some degree of class interest guiding us by the nose whither it will" (Dewey, 1917a: 69).

This Deweyan approach, while aware of its political implications, serves to distance it from Marxist and related critical approaches. If the kind of informed, experiential, experimental method defended by Dewey at the initiation of modern societies, has recently been successful in landing a "rover" with precision on Mars – the same approach can surely be used to disentangle currently entrenched disciplinary positions. Thus I argue for philosophy to assume the role of arbiter between currently entrenched positions and their logical alternatives and, as an educationalist, for students to be involved in these debates from the outset of their studies. How else can "the best thinking" be separated from the currently most powerful?

6. Economic Determinism

Since the intertwined disciplines of economics and politics are of crucial contemporary interest (and especially from a non-Western viewpoint as Margolis's sobering comment above indicates) I will digress here to indicate the apparent weaknesses in their assumptions which key authorities within the disciplines themselves have pointed to. The object is to argue for the importance of continuing not merely the conversation, but rather initiating a (logical, informed) debate in this field and in others – and from standpoints beyond the West.

The transition of economics from its initial status as a political and social science to its current status of a natural, mathematically determinable discipline, began as early as the 1950s under the influence of the economist Paul Samuelson. As a system supportive of the political regimes of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan in the 1980s this "neo-classical economics" increasingly held sway across the western world and is still the undisputed approach of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation and all leading

economics departments in the principal universities. Its status as scientific "truth" is illustrated by the fact that undergraduate students of economics are not generally expected now to study either economic history or its theoretical underpinnings. As in any natural science economic approaches are assumed to be the best and most rational currently available (Skinner, 2016). This negates Dewey's understanding that: "Any theory and set of practices is dogmatic which is not based upon critical examination of its own underlying principles" (Dewey, 1917a: 182). That some of its most respected and successful practitioners are amongst its severest critics should allow for their voices to be heard.

The most successful and respected economist of the mid-twentieth century was almost certainly John Maynard Keynes who, in his book *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, said of classical economic theory that its characteristics "happen not to be those of the economic society in which we actually live, with the result that its teaching is misleading and disastrous if we attempt to apply it to the facts of experience". And of von Hayek's *Prices and Production*, Keynes commented that "It is an extraordinary example of how, starting with a mistake, a remorseless logician can end up in Bedlam" (Harrod, 1972: 513). While this is not an important book of Hayek's, it is significant that his ideas underpinned Thatcher's "TINA doctrine" (There Is No Alternative). Other leading economic thinkers in more recent times have included Paul Ormerod (one-time leading writer for "the Economist"), Ha-Joon Chang (reader in the Political Economy of Development at the University of Cambridge) and Janis Varoufakis (former finance minister of Greece). All have powerfully challenged the underpinning logic of this discipline, without any significant refutation of their arguments – but also without gaining any traction in the political or mainstream academic world.

While there is no space to debate the issues here, the economists involved in disciplines of Development Studies would be able to open up debates on the issue of third world debt which subsumes more than half the revenue of poorer countries – and can extend to Euro-

pean countries (as in the case of Greece) effectively denying any real development. They might require answers as to why the USA has always been open to bankruptcy as a means of reinstating individuals and companies within its borders (viz Donald Trump) but not for countries – although this has been proven successful historically; and why a Tobin Tax of less than one percent levied on all international financial transactions (as suggested by a Nobel prize winner in economics as long ago as the 1970s) could not powerfully address climate change, global epidemics and natural disasters.

Rorty says very little about economics and yet, however democratically inclined he clearly was, his philosophical instinct had to be to “give” economics to the economists, in the same way that he believed that “it would make for philosophical clarity if we just gave cognition to predictive science” (Rorty, 1989: 360).

7. Biological and Evolutionary Determinism

Of even longer duration has been the hegemonic standing of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution and its attendant rationalist naturalism. This has become ever more entrenched over succeeding decades from a stage in the early 20th century when it lost support. Yet it remains only a theory – and debatable. As its potential implications are strongly supportive of the current economic and political hegemony, I will take my digression a little further before returning to my main arguments. Here also debate on the strength, or otherwise, of these underpinnings has been almost entirely closed down in the academy and thus in the curricula offered to undergraduates in the universities.

Just as Rorty was more tentative in his arguments than are his subsequent supporters – so Darwin was more tentative in his claims than are his current adherents. In order to indicate that his theories are open to debate, I shall therefore consider only two key doubts that Darwin himself expressed as to the soundness of his own theories. He admitted that if it could be shown that a development could only have happened if more than

one new element had to appear simultaneously to make it work, then his conception of random mutation as the initiating mechanism of evolutionary advance would fail; and he also realised that to confirm his theories about the origins of new species (that is beyond the obvious truth of successful adaptations) “missing links”, not only in the ascent of man but in all other species, would need to be discovered across the fossil records – but subsequent decades, and now centuries, involving huge expansion of the fossil records, have produced no further missing links. The origin of species thus remains obscure.

In connection with Darwin’s concern about the simultaneous emergence of complex adaptations, in the early 1990s a group of eminent American scholars in the fields of biochemistry, evolutionary biology and philosophy of science, met to discuss their growing dissatisfaction with the currently accepted neo-Darwinian view of evolution, particularly in the light of recent spectacular discoveries concerning molecular biology. In a video of this meeting and its conclusions, one of the scientists involved, Dr. Behe, describes, as an example, the working of the bacteria flagellum as being “akin to an out-board motor” in its operation although several times more sophisticated and operating at 100 000 rpms. The group concluded that the molecular “machines” within cells, of which the flagellum is only one, are the most efficient machines in the universe – but also that all parts of each machine had not only to be assembled in perfect sequence but all were essential for its operation – that is, they all had to have been initiated simultaneously. This flaw in Darwin’s theory thus had to wait 135 years to be exposed by irrefutable scientific evidence – but its significance has yet to be acknowledged. (The scientists themselves retreated to a position in support of “intelligent design” – guaranteed to outlaw them from further serious scientific consideration). Again, I put the opposing arguments simply to indicate that they *are* available, and again, no leading university requires its undergraduate students to debate them.

8. “Student Centred” Teaching and Learning

There is at least a superficially close resemblance between the currently fashionable educational goal of “student-centred teaching and learning” and Dewey’s educational vision. In response to the rather diverse understandings which have developed around this idea, Louise Starkey has recently developed a conceptual framework for “student-centred education” which encompasses three overlapping dimensions. These she defines as being humanist, agentive and cognitive (Starkey, 2019). As envisaged by Dewey, in this educational approach each student must be treated as a unique human being whose individual cultural differences are respected, and the aim of education is to empower and develop students in order to enhance their intellectual growth. However, Starkey places these current goals firmly within the framework of neo-liberal thinking whose agenda is market-driven and where competition drives the market – and this is confirmed by wider reading within this literature which centres strongly on the need for student-centred learning to provide the economy with the necessary “twenty-first century skills”. These involve the development of flexibility, autonomy and lifelong learning in order to respond to the demands of the future workforce (Guillermo and Humberto, 2018: 2) and to enhance the competitive capacity of the university in the global marketplace. Higher Education Institutions thus face continued political pressure to be “agile and responsive” to societal needs (Doyle and Brady, 2018: 316). However, these “societal needs” are understood as those required by governments and employers rather than those of the universities themselves (now experiencing diminished academic freedom) or of the students whose protests (particularly concerning their economics curriculum) generally go unheeded. While Dewey also saw employability as a legitimate aim of education, it was hardly the principal one.

African countries’ universities have for some years sought to adapt to this “learner-centred” agenda, but successful implementation levels have been minimal

(Xulu-Gama et al, 2018) – there is simply not enough money available for what is necessarily a highly labour-intensive teaching and learning system. Skilled lecturers, trained tutors, well-adapted learning spaces and small classes are needed for “tailoring teaching interventions and learning interventions to enhance each student’s academic achievement... and to give formative feedback” (Starkey, 2019: 6). The reality is that this can only be achieved in elite institutions which must undermine Dewey’s parallel democratic intention which sees education as requiring equality within a population if the agenda is not to be set by outsiders beyond the students themselves. And this agenda is increasingly set by political and economic interests, even in the case of the elite institutions.

9. Conclusion

Thus, it appears to a pragmatist living in the southern tip of Africa twenty years into the new century, that John Dewey’s century-old agenda for education and for democracy are exactly what we need but that they have hardly progressed. That Richard Rorty’s provocative pragmatism, if ultimately unconvincing to this observer, served importantly to revive a global interest in this most practical of philosophies, is universally acknowledged. It also appears that if Dewey’s understanding of knowledge seeking and finding can have proven so successful in practical and scientific disciplines over the past century, it can equally be used now to disentangle the true from the false in current assumptions of knowledge where these are clearly failing to produce Deweyan practical, useable, democratic results. “Faith in the power of intelligence to imagine a future which is a projection of the desirable in the present, and to invent instrumentalities of its realization, is our salvation... surely a sufficiently large task for our philosophy” (Dewey, 1917a: 69). The current need appears particularly to be for a philosophy given free rein to *test the truth of current knowledge and no longer to seek it* – and this need is urgent while academic freedom appears increas-

ingly to be compromised. This, I believe, will only be feasible within the bounds of a “robust relativism” of Margolis’s type. In this, Margolis’s vision of the early 1990s was prescient:

I regard the defence of relativism as a strategic part of a much larger philosophical venture that is likely to collect the strongest currents at the end of the century and to dominate the best thinking of the new century. I say the “best” thinking because my own comfortable cynicism sees the world bent in the most determined way on deepening everywhere the influence of every benighted vision imaginable, at the same time the planet is being utterly used up. So the “best” thinking is desperately needed. (Margolis, 1991: x)

Viva Joe! Viva your continued influence!¹

References

- Bullock, A (ed). 1988. *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*. Second Edition (London: Fontana Press)
- Critchley, S. 1996. “Deconstruction and Pragmatism – Is Derrida a Private Ironist or a Public Liberal?” in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (ed Mouffe)
- Dewey, J. 1916. *Democracy and Education* (Accessed on Kindle)
- Dewey, J. 1917a. *The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy* (Accessed on Kindle)
- Dewey, J. 1917b. *Creative Intelligence: Essays in the Pragmatic Attitude* (Accessed on Kindle)
- Dickstein, M. (ed) 1998. *The Revival of Pragmatism*. (London: Duke University Press)
- Doyle, T. and Brady, M. 2018. “Reframing the university as an emergent organisation: implications for strategic management and leadership in higher education.” *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 40 (4): 305–320.
- Fraser, N. 1988. “Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty between Romanticism and Technocracy”. *Praxis International* 8
- Guillermo, S.-A. and Humberto, C. 2018. “Implementation Issues of Student-Centered Learning based Engineering Education in Developing Countries In: Proceedings of 2018 World Engineering Education Forum-Global Engineering Deans Council (WEEF-GEDC). IEEE, 1–6.
- Harrod, R.F. 1972. *The Life of John Maynard Keynes* (Aylesbury: Pelican)
- Keynes, J.M. http://research.omicsgroup.org/index.php/The_General_Theory_of_Employment,_Interest_and_Money
- Margolis, J., 1991. *The Truth about Relativism* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell)
- Margolis, J. 2000. “Richard Rorty: Philosophy by Other Means” in *Metaphilosophy*, Vol. 31, No. 5.
- Margolis, J. 2004. “Terrorism and the New Forms of War” in *The Philosophical Challenge of September 11*, 194–205. (Oxford: Blackwell)
- Mouffe, C. (ed) 1996. *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (London: Routledge)
- Mounce, H.O. 1997. *The Two Pragmatisms: From Peirce to Rorty* (London: Routledge)
- Romano, C. 2013. *America the Philosophical* (New York: Vintage Books)
- Rorty, R. 1998. *Achieving Our Country* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press)
- Rorty, R. 1980. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell)
- Rorty, R. 1989. *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity. Philosophical Papers Vol. 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Senior, J. *New York Times*, Nov 20, 2016 <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2017/2/9/14543938/donald-trump-richard-rorty-election-liberalism-conservatives> (accessed 19 Aug 2019)
- Starkey, L. 2019 “Three dimensions of student-centred education: a framework for policy and practice.” *Critical Studies in Education*, 60:3, 375–390, DOI: 10.1080/17508487.2017.1281829.
- Skinner, J. 2016. “The waxing and waning of democracy as a way of life (1916–2016): some of the economic underpinnings”. *Pragmatism Today*, Issue 2, 2016.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1969. *Philosophical Grammar* (University of California Press)
- Xulu-Gama, N., Nhari, S.R., Alcock, A. and Cavanagh, M., 2018. “A student-centred approach: a qualitative exploration of how students experience access and success in a South African University of Technology”. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(6).1302–1314.

¹ This tribute is in the form of an anti-apartheid salute and rallying cry.