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17 October 2024

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Knowing your pronouns

I. Pronoun-sharing practices, authority, and recognition

In this presentation I consider a few of the many pragmatic and semantic curiosities of our pronoun-sharing practices. I am mostly concerned here not with sociolinguistic questions but rather with the relationship between philosophy and sociolinguistic questions. I want to make certain arguments and stances in the history of American philosophy more intelligible and useful for sociolinguists working on questions around pronouns, gender, and social justice.

I begin with the recognition that giving and asking for pronouns involves presupposing at least some sort of rationality and autonomy among practitioners. That is, we have to recognize people as having the authority to tell us their pronouns—to influence the way we recognize them in terms of their gender, so as to bring our recognition of their gender in greater harmony with their own recognition of their gender. In turn, we expect this courtesy to be extended to us. Under this description, which may be a bit idealistic, pronoun-sharing practices are particular kinds of rational action. By ‘rational action’, I merely mean events in which we participate and for which we can give reasons. But this brings up a troubling question for us practitioners of pronoun-sharing practices: what *reasons* can I give for my assertion of one subset of pronouns over another? How do I *know* what my pronouns are? How do I know what anyone else’s pronouns are?

In recent years as talk of pronouns has risen alongside recognition of queer and trans people's existence, we have become familiar with homophobic and transphobic fundamentalists claiming that they 'don't have pronouns'. They would like to distance themselves from those that 'have pronouns'. With enough prodding, we might get them to justify their position by arguing that they don't recognize the question because that they don't recognize themselves, or anyone else for that matter, as having the authority to say what their pronouns are. One Catholic university in the U.S. has argued, for example, that God creates everyone as a unique human person, and this human person is strictly sexually dimorphic, not only from birth but from conception. From their perspective, God determines your gender when He creates you, and you have no say in the matter. Many scholars at that university are particularly interested in children and 'protecting' them from the threat of those not adequately obedient to the same theological strictures about sex and the same authoritative God.¹ We are also familiar with the ostensibly naturalistic fundamentalists who claim that our gender is determined by nature—that human sexual dimorphism is an absolute, immutable, objective biological phenomenon. In this case there is also no reason to raise the question of how you know which pronouns are 'yours' because nature already decided for you.

What does it mean that in contrast to these authoritarian approaches, we *do* recognize each other as having such authority, that we see it as desirable to extend to each other recognition of the right to sexual self-definition? Is it right to describe pronoun-sharing practices as anti-authoritarian? Late in his career, Richard Rorty delivered a series of lectures titled "Pragmatism as anti-authoritarianism" ([1996] 2021) in which he argued that the Enlightenment enacted a shift in patterns of human recognition of authority. Rather than seeing themselves as

¹ I'm referencing the Franciscan Institute in Steubenville, Ohio, which held in 2019 a conference called "Transgender Moment: A Natural Law Response to Gender Ideology."

responsible to the authority of a representative of an antecedently existing reality (made by God or nature), we humans took a step forward when we recognized authority only in each other. He argued, however, that Kant stunted the possibilities of this growth spurt by reasserting the authority of noumena—of reality in itself as opposed to reality as we experience it. John Dewey was deeply influenced by Hegel and Hegel's critiques of Kant, and Rorty reads Dewey as leading us to nothing less than the fulfillment of the original Enlightenment project of the de-centering non-human authority.

Although Rorty was known for being iconoclastic, his reading of Dewey in this light is entirely consistent with Dewey's own arguments. The final chapter of Dewey's classic book *The Quest for Certainty*, titled "The Copernican Revolution," effectively makes the same points that Rorty does about 'the fulfillment of the Enlightenment' or 'the second Enlightenment'. In that chapter, Dewey argues that

"Copernicus, as Kant understood him, effected a straightening out of astronomical phenomena by interpreting their perceived movements from their relation to the perceiving subject, instead of treating them as inherent in the things perceived. The revolution of the sun about the earth as it offers itself to sense-perception was regarded as due to the conditions of human observation and not to the movements of the sun itself" (229).

Kant thought he could apply this lesson to philosophy in order to reframe our point of reference for knowledge to focus on the "human subject in knowing" (229). For Dewey, however, Kant merely made "explicit what was implicit in the classic tradition," the tradition that says "knowledge is determined by the objective constitution of the universe" (229). Dewey likes Kant's idea of the Copernican revolution in philosophy, but he carries it out through reference to

a Hegelian approach focused not on the knower but on the totality of social and historical traditions in which the knower comes to know things.

Dewey puts his Copernican revolution like this: we should first reject “the old centre [which] was mind knowing by means of an equipment of powers complete within itself, and merely exercised upon an antecedent external material equally complete in itself” (232). In its place,

“the new centre is indefinite interactions taking place within a course of nature which is not fixed and complete but which is capable of direction to new and different results through the mediation of intentional operations. Neither self nor world, neither soul nor nature (in the sense of something isolated and finished in its isolation) is the centre, any more than either earth or sun is the absolute centre of a single universal and necessary frame of reference. There is a moving whole of interacting parts; a centre emerges wherever there is effort to change them in a particular direction” (232).

Pronoun-sharing practices can be thought of as such intentional operations, whereby we try to change something about the world in which we find ourselves (e.g. challenging the assumption that someone’s pronouns are self-evident). As Dewey and Rorty see it, the most important shift here is from an attempt to attain objective validity in reference to an antecedently existing reality, to an attempt to facilitate cooperation and social justice. In relation to pronouns specifically, this means that we don’t have to worry about matching the subset of gendered linguistic forms with the objective sex of the human antecedent. That’s just not the point of pronoun-sharing practices, which determine what it means to ‘have pronouns’. Rather, what we need to worry about is ensuring that our practices facilitate cooperation and social justice. I won’t go into much detail

here about *how* we can do that, as I'm more focused on the question of the question of knowledge.

II. Davidsonian triangulation and the intersubjective nature of subjective knowledge

Have Dewey and Rorty helped clean up some of the debris surrounding the question of how I know my pronouns? Perhaps, but they have also introduced a challenge. For if my own pronouns are determined by social practice and not through a matching relation of getting something right, I have nothing to appeal to in justifying my gendered self-knowledge outside of the social practices in which I'm engaged. This is, to me, an interesting and useful way of thinking about the social construction of gender. A similar point can be phrased in terms of the philosopher Donald Davidson's work on intersubjectivity.

Like Dewey, Davidson was another philosopher that Rorty admired for providing him with ammunition in his war against the errors of the Western philosophical tradition. If, for Rorty, Dewey took out Kant, Davidson was responsible for taking out another key figure, Descartes. This is because Davidson rejected the idea that subjectivity, *res cogitans*, is independent of objectivity, *res extensa*, or intersubjectivity. Instead, he adopted a kind of holistic monism based on a fundamental relation of triangulation between two interpreters and an objective environment. We find a similar sort of triangular relationship between speakers and object in Du Bois's (2007) stance triangle. However, Davidson is interested in triangulation for more than an explanation of stance. He notes, "I maintain that thought itself absolutely depends on a three-way relationship between at least two people and a series of events that are shared in the world" (Borradori 1994: 49). Further, for Davidson, the most important knowledge we have is knowledge of other minds. Davidson contends that "until we have an idea of what's going on

in the minds of other people, it doesn't make sense to say that we have the concept of objectivity, of something existing in the world quite independent of us" (Borradori 1994: 50). Thus, while knowledge of other minds is understood by Davidson to refer to objective knowledge, it is a kind of intersubjective objective knowledge.

Another important aspect of Davidsonian triangulation is that each element of the triangle is essential; there is no possibility of losing one without losing the others. He notes that

“the implication is that we have to communicate with somebody else, which means knowing what they are thinking in order to have a concept of objectivity—that is, a concept of objects in a public space and time. Of course, if we have knowledge of other minds, we must at the same time already have a concept of the shared world. Knowledge of the external, in the sense of shared, world, is the second kind of knowledge, from which follows a third: the knowledge of what happens inside ourselves” (51).

As we can see, Davidson has effected a reversal of the traditional order of things in the Cartesian vision. He externalizes what is internal to Cartesian subjectivity. Thus one of the papers in which Davidson outlines triangulation and three kinds of knowledge—subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and objectivity—is titled “Epistemology Externalized.” This is of course a reference to his professor, Quine's, famous essay “Epistemology Naturalized” (1969). He critiques his professor for maintaining the priority of first-person, subjective sense-data. For Davidson, whatever can be said about sense-data has to be *said*—that is, it requires a form that is in principle communicable.

Consider a child in an English-language environment. Gendered third-person pronouns are used for the child long before that child has the metapragmatic awareness required to understand the difference between one set of gendered pronouns and another. It is the parents or caretakers, not the child, who determine the right or wrong pronouns here. But that doesn't mean

that the parents or caretakers have either the original or final say in the truth of the gender deictic forms used in reference to the child. In a certain sense, the question of truth here requires that the child be able to be held responsible for choosing one subset of pronouns over another. Their authority is simply in waiting until they are able to recognize the validity and importance of the question for themselves. But if Davidson is right, this subjective question will only occur to them insofar as they have acquired the ability to determine to a considerable extent what is in the minds of others. At end, there is nothing to justify our choice of one subset of pronouns over another besides the appeal to ever more social practices in our efforts to cooperate with one another.

In this paper, I've discussed a few aspects of the question of how we know our pronouns, how we can justify the answer we provide when asked for our pronouns. I've recapitulated a few major arguments in the history of American pragmatism and neopragmatism, and tried to connect them to considerations of first-person knowledge, second-person knowledge, and third-person knowledge (or subjectivity, objectivity, and intersubjectivity). I've tried to suggest a few lessons we might take from the pragmatists and neopragmatists in attempting to recognize some of what's going on in the complex social practices, like pronoun-sharing practices, in which we negotiate with one another how we'd like to be recognized.

III. References

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Although I didn't explicitly mention him, the arguments I've made here owe a great deal to Robert Brandom's lectures as the Spinoza Chair of the University of Amsterdam in 2021. These lectures were dedicated to a thoughtful analysis of Rorty's 1996 "Pragmatism as anti-authoritarianism" lectures. Brandom makes explicit the connections between Rorty's later account of pragmatism as anti-authoritarianism in epistemology and ethics and Hegel's account of the development of *Geist* in the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807). I can only take credit for considering Brandom's arguments in relation to pronoun-sharing practices. Here is the reference entry for Brandom's published lectures:

- Brandom, Robert B. (2022). *Pragmatism and idealism: Rorty and Hegel on reason and representation*. Oxford University Press.