# Pragmatism, Perfectionism, and Feminism

*Richard Gilmore*
*Concordia College*
*gilmore@cord.edu*

**ABSTRACT:** I consider the revision of pragmatism by three leading neopragmatists: Richard Rorty, Richard Bernstein, and Cornel West. I argue that their vision of pragmatism lacks a teleology, though a teleology is suggested by Bernstein's description of a pragmatic ethos. I appeal to Stanley Cavell's notion of 'moral perfectionism' to suggest a kind of teleology that is available to pragmatism. Finally, I find the weakness of pragmatism done without teleology well exemplified in the exchange between Rorty and Nancy Frazer at Rorty's 1990 Tanner Lecture. Rorty's paper, "Pragmatism and Feminism," was meant to offer feminists some pragmatic strategies for improving their position. Frazer's strong response finds Rorty's suggestions only marginally helpful. I interpret her criticism of Rorty's suggestions to be that they lack something like a teleology. To me, this suggests that pragmatism can learn from feminism.

Pragmatism is revolutionary both in the sense of being a philosophy that is critical, destabilizing, and progressive, as well as in the sense of being a philosophy that, in the turning philosophical tides, has come back. Pragmatism was eclipsed in the first half of the twentieth century by analytic philosophy, in its various forms, but in the last decade or so pragmatism has returned in full force, and with an explicitly philosophical agenda. In this paper I will examine this new wave of philosophical pragmatism, sometimes referred to as neopragmatism, as it appears in the works of three of its leading proponents, Richard Rorty, Cornel West, and Richard Bernstein; and specifically, how it compares to, contrasts with, and contributes to feminism, as illustrated in the exchange between Rorty and Nancy Fraser that occurred as part of Rorty's 1990 Tanner Lecture.

A difficulty that arises in talking about pragmatism, new or old, is that pragmatism comes in so many forms. For Rorty, the most influential of the neopragmatists, pragmatism is primarily anti-philosophical. He defines its role in terms of negations: it is anti-representational, anti-universalist, and anti-foundational. One of Rorty's descriptions of what pragmatists do is, "pragmatists keep trying to find ways of making antiphilosophical points in nonphilosophical language." (1) For Cornel West, pragmatism represents a kind of return to philosophy, a return, that is, from a false to a genuine philosophy. It is a return to a philosophy that, at last, addresses the loci of our real needs. In his impressive, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, West describes the return to pragmatism as follows:

It is no accident that American pragmatism once again rises to the surface of North Atlantic intellectual life at the present moment. For its major themes of evading epistemology-centered philosophy, accenting human powers, and transforming antiquated modes of social hierarchies in light of religious and/or ethical ideals make it relevant and attractive. (2)

Richard Bernstein in his, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* sees the proponents of pragmatism as, from its beginnings, being marked by "clashing philosophical temperaments" and suggests that the best approach to pragmatism is to regard it not as a set of doctrines, or even a specific method, but as a kind of conversation. He does, however, identify what he calls a pragmatic *ethos*. (3) Bernstein's identification of a pragmatic *ethos* strikes me as both telling and important. To identify pragmatism with an *ethos* is to implicitly align pragmatism with a very old philosophical perspective, namely, that of Aristotle. As William James himself said of pragmatism, it is "a new name for some old ways of thinking" and I intend to make explicit the connection between pragmatism and the older way of thinking of Aristotle. Specifically, I will identify in this pragmatic *ethos* a characteristic of Aristotelian teleology. I will suggest that, for all of pragmatism's and neopragmatism's anit-teological disclaimers, there is an implicit strain of teleology in pragmatism, and that that is not a bad thing.

Certainly both West and Rorty have agendas. West is very explicit about his,

> The fundamental argument of this book is that the evasion of epistemology-centered philosophy--from Emerson to Rorty--results in a conception of philosophy as a form of cultural criticism in which the meaning of America is put forward by intellectuals in response to distinct social and cultural crises. (4)

The pragmatic agenda that West describes here is a kind of ad hoc cultural criticism that is descriptive rather than prescriptive, engaged by crises and devoted to some form of making ourselves historically intelligible to ourselves, but without any kind of overarching conception of where we might or ought to be going.

Rorty, too, has an agenda. It is the agenda of the bourgeois liberal ironist. Rorty describes the liberal ironist as follows:

> I borrow my definition of "liberal" from Judith Shklar, who says that liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do. I use "ironist" to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires--someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance. (5)

With such agendas as these, what need is there of a teleology? It is to this question that I would now like to turn. To take up the question of teleology is to take up the question of what is the function of a human being and how he or she can best fulfill it. Stated in this way, and this formulation is, I think, consistent with Aristotle's formulation of the question, I would have to agree with Rorty, West, Bernstein, et al, that the question is fundamentally, and in principle, unanswerable. However, if the question is asked in a slightly different way, that is, if it is asked without the presumption of some meta-function, but rather is asked from within the context of being human and having human needs, desires, and limitations (which is also consistent with Aristotle), if the question is asked in the form of, for example, "Is there something I can do that can contribute to my leading the best life that I can possibly lead?" with "best" here referring to an idea of an overall maximized satisfaction with my life, then the question is answerable, and it is worth the time of our life to try to answer it. This formulation of the question has a strongly instrumentalist tone, which is consistent with pragmatism, new and old, but it also contains the suggestion of an objective, non-relative *telos*, the "best" life I can live. There are no particular epistemological claims being made here, only the suggestion of a kind of attitude, an

attitude of intending to live the best life that one can live, the best life that one can live given the context one finds oneself in, and the materials one has at one's disposal. It is the attitude of trying to live the best life one can live as a human being.

I take what I have been describing as teleological concerns to be minimally normative and to be consistent with Stanley Cavell's idea of moral perfectionism. Discussing this idea of moral perfectionism in relation to the work of the later Wittgenstein, Cavell describes the,

> absolute responsibility of the self to the self...through the endless specification, by exemplification, in the world (of and with others) of when words are called for and when there are no words. Call this the absolute responsibility of the self to make itself intelligible, without falsifying itself.... (6)

This passage is of typical Cavellean density, but unpacked it seems to specify the conditions that consititue being rational, and from a teleological perspective. That is, moral perfectionism is determined by the recognition of our responsibility to make ourselves intelligible, to ourselves and to others. The recognition of this responsibility of making ourselves intelligible to ourselves and others is just what is meant, I think, by the idea of our being guided by the rational element in us. In so far as we are intelligible to ourselves and to others, in so far as we exemplify that intelligibility in our behavior, we can be said to know who we are and what we are doing. In so far as we are not so intelligible, we neither know who we are, nor what we are doing and, hence, in the classic philosophical sense, we are not free. This minimal teleological framework is neither gender nor culturally specific. It is as applicable to women as to men, as useful to Buddhists as to Christians or atheists. The instrumentality inherent in the conception of living the best life opens the question up to a worldwide conversation on the various strategies for maximizing a human life, and the notion of the responsibility of oneself to oneself *compels* openness to, and participation in, this conversation.

Rorty's 1990 Tanner Lecture entitled "Feminism and Pragmatism" and Nancy Fraser's response to his paper provide a provocative exchange on the question not only of the value of pragmatism to feminism, but also on the question of the value of feminism to pragmatism, and this latter question will raise the issue of the value of teleology to both.

The question that Rorty raises in his paper is the question of what value, if any, can pragmatism be to feminism. Rorty offers a two-part answer to this question. The primary value of pragmatism to feminism, as Rorty sees it, is negative. It is to proscribe the kinds of discourse, specifically, the kinds of discourse that has typically been representative of philosophical discourse, i.e., essentialist, universalist, and foundationalist discourse, that feminists ought to avoid. On the other hand, Rorty sees pragmatism as simply endorsing a trend in feminist work that Rorty considers as already characterizing the best feminist work and which he describes as 'prophetic feminism'. (7) This latter representing, as Rorty sees it, a species of Rortian redescription by means of which women can create a moral identity for themselves through imaginatively redescribing a future identity for themselves. This sort of redescription is "prophetic" for Rorty, because it will not be based on their past experiences, nor on any idea of their inherent nature, but rather on some leap of imagination that is offered up for trial use. This new conception will be neither inherently better or worse than the past conceptions of women, but may be more comfortable for future women if they are effective enough at insinuating it into the power structures that be.

Nancy Fraser, in her response to Rorty's paper takes issue with the notion that the only way that feminists can achieve a moral identity, can achieve semantic authority over themselves, is by raw invention. Her criticism of what Rorty has to offer feminism comes down to the limits of over-reliance on redescription alone as our only hope for the improvement of our human condition. She argues that Rorty's description of the future of feminism as

depending on prophecy is inconsistent with the way feminism has made progress in the past. Fraser's criticism of Rorty's insistence on radical redescription comes down to the criticism that Rorty's pragmatic suggestions make the future of feminism *unreasonable*. For Fraser, there is a reasonable trajectory for the future of feminism and she finds it in feminist political activity. Fraser accuses Rorty of a kind of failure of nerve, she says,

> we can read a kind of failure of nerve in Rorty's excessive preoccupation in his lecture with the figure of the feminist as prophet and outcast, the solitary eccentric or member of a small embattled separatist club, huddled together spinning a web of words as a charm to keep from going crazy. (18)

She goes on to say,

> So my difference with Rorty boils down to my wanting to put a more sociological, institutional, and collective spin on these ideas and to divest his account of its individualistic, aestheticizing, and depoliticizing residues...Whereas Rorty has made the significant but still incomplete move "From Irony to Prophecy," I want to go the rest of the way "From Prophecy to Feminist Politics." (9)

Fraser goes on to describe various feminist strategies, strategies that include renaming and other practices of "collective consciousness raising." She describes these practices as "empowering," rather than as "individual self-fashioning or poetizing." (10)

The idea of "going the rest of the way," it seems to me, gets us back to the issues of Aristotelian teleology and the idea of moral perfectionism. That is, the limitation of genealogies as a form of cultural criticism in the Westian mode, and of redescriptions as a kind of prophetic, imaginative act of self-invention á la Rorty, is that neither allows for even the question of how I might reasonably maximize my own good across the whole of my human life, or, for that matter, the good of the group with which I identify over the course of history. These questions, of course, can only reasonably asked in the context of a community, with due consideration to the resources I may have at hand, which will include my own political activity and my identification with various groups.

It is at just this point that I find some equivocation in the position of Fraser. Fraser, as much as West, Bernstein, and Rorty, still largely clings to the perspective of radical contingency and plurality. Politically, the perspective of radical contingency and plurality has the advantage of contextualizing current power structures (primarily by means of genealogies), and thereby undermining claims of inherent rights to power based on 'naturalness,' or 'merit,' or 'justice'. But philosophically this position belies our actual condition of finding ourselves in a no-longer-contingent specific context, and confronting specific difficulties. Where the intent of this perspective seems to be to be liberating, freeing us to act in new, as yet, unknown ways, it instead serves to undermine the grounds of all deliberate action. It does so because the position of radical contingency and plurality, from which no course of action can be defended as inherently preferable to another, will continually return us to relying on some form of prophecy, either feminist or otherwise. It belittles the power of ordinary reason in ordinary people to assert themselves to achieve greater autonomy, without radical self-invention. It would do this, that is, if it were genuinely held. In fact, there is a strong strain of teleology, of reliance on reason, and on us being reasonable, in the work of Fraser, as well as that of Rorty, et al.

Fraser overtly sides with certain aspects of Rorty's position, the aspects I align with the perspective of radical contingency and plurality. She says, "I, too, reject moral realism and universalism in favor of the historicist view that feminists are engaged in creating new moral identities and sensibilities rather than in realizing or discerning latent or pre-existing ones." (11) But Fraser goes on to say that her difference with Rorty "boils down to my wanting to put a more sociological, institutional, and collective spin on these ideas and to

divest his account of its individualistic, aestheticizing, and depoliticizing residues." I want to argue that this is a difference that does not make a difference.

It is certainly a difference in emphasis, but not a difference in terms of the idea of our philosophical project being that of refining our teleology. Fraser is even closer than Rorty to the teleological perspective of Aristotle, who saw us as, not only profoundly social and political animals, but also as socially and politically created animals. This is not an accusation against Fraser, except insofar as she refuses to acknowledge this teleological aspect to her own work, but is rather an endorsement of the project that she has outlined in her response to Rorty, of the project she sees for feminists, and for the project she sees for herself as a feminist philosopher.

Aristotle, himself, was neither a moral realist, nor a moral universalist. Nor do I invoke him in order to endorse his teleological account of what it means to be a complete human being. I invoke him because he was an explicit teleologist, and, in that respect, both more honest, and because of that, more useful to all who would like to improve on the project he began, which is just the project of trying to identify what will lead to the best life for us as human beings.

The energy of teleology is positive and forward looking, and in that way more purely pragmatic than the oppositional energies of genealogies and redescriptions. There is work here for philosophy. The development, the refinement, the critique of teleologies requires reflection, critical acumen, honest, and strong powers of persuasion. Part of our *telos*, in a strongly pragmatic, even Rortian, way, should involve the criticism of our own teleologies. The advantage of an explicit teleology over an implicit one is that it makes us accountable for the motives behind our redescriptions and genealogies.

Martha Nussbaum in a review in The New York Review of Books entitled, "Feminists and Philosophy" argues,

> Convention and habit are women's enemies...and reason their ally. Habit decrees that what seems strange is impossible and "unnatural"; reason looks head on at the strange, refusing to assume that the current status quo is either immutable or in any normative sense "natural." The appeal to reason and objectivity amounts to a request that the observer refuse to be intimidated by habit, and look for cogent arguments based on evidence that has been carefully sifted for bias. (12)

It is surely to just such an idea that Fraser is making an appeal when she criticizes Rorty's description of 'prophetic feminism.'

It is from this in her response to Rorty that comes the lesson that pragmatism can learn from feminism. It is a lesson about the value of asking the teleological questions: what is the *best* for me and my group, now and for the future, and what must I do to achieve that end? These questions do not undermine Bernstein's metaphor of a constellation, but only encourage the active engagement with the various points of light in an attempt to find some pattern there, and one's own best place within that pattern. It is to acknowledge, as Aristotle suggests, that "from the standpoint of truth the object of wish is the good, but that for each individual it is whatever seems good to him" (13) and, having acknowledged that, to adopt the attitude, by means of reason and reflection, of refining and perfecting our perceptions of the what-seems-good. To adopt the attitude of intending to refine and perfect our notions of the good is to acknowledge one's responsibility to make oneself intelligible, in one's thought and by one's example, to oneself and to others.

# Notes

(1) Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980)*, (Minneapolis:: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. xiv.

(2) Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. 4.

(3) This pragmatic *ethos* is characterized by "five interrelated substantive themes." The five themes that Bernstein identifies are 1) anti-foundationalism; 2) a thoroughgoing fallibalism; 3) the social character of the self and the need to nurture a critical community of inquirers; 4) the awareness and sensitivity to radical contingency and chance; and 5) plurality. In Richard J. Bernstein, "Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Healing of Wounds," reprinted in *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992), pp. 323-240.

(4) *Ibid.*, p. 5.

(5) Rorty, *Contingency*, p. xv.

(6) Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. xxii.

(7) Richard Rorty, "Feminism and Pragmatism," *Michigan Quarterly Review* Spring 1991, p. 235.

(8) Nancy Fraser, "From Irony to Prophecy to Politics: A Response to Richard Rorty," *Michigan Quarterly Review* (1991, vol. num. ?), p. 263.

(9) *Ibid.*, p. 263-4.

(10) *Ibid.*, p. 266.

(11) Fraser, p. 263.

(12) Martha Nussbaum, *The New York Review of Books*, October 20, 1994, p. 59.

(13) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), p. 63.