

SHAPIN, Steven. (2010). *Never Pure: Historical Studies of Science as if It was Produced by People with Bodies, Situated in Time, Space, Culture, and Society, and Struggling for Credibility and Authority*. Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press. ISBN-10: 0-8018-9421-2. Number of pages: 552.

WHETHER STEVEN SHAPIN CONSIDERS HIMSELF A PRAGMATIST OR NOT is not much to the point; what does it seem to be very important is that the themes which concern this Harvard historian of science are closely related to those which concern American pragmatism. And one need not to look very far into Shapin's latest book –perhaps no further than its very title! *Never Pure: Historical Studies of Science as if It was Produced by People with Bodies, Situated in Time, Space, Culture, and Society, and Struggling for Credibility and Authority*, to realize that the spirit of the pragmatist tradition is also shared by Shapin in this collection of essays.

“Lowering the tone”, such is the way Shapin describes the task taken by himself and other historians and sociologists of science in the last forty years. This lowering of tone in the history and philosophy of science, which reckons Thomas Kuhn among one of its founding fathers, is also shared by the pragmatist tradition in philosophy in general. For the pragmatists (since

James to Rorty) the classical idea of truth as a metaphysical correspondence between cognition and reality has crumbled to pieces. Instead, they suggest that whatever is *true* is so depending on conceptual schemes and values, not on a metaphysical fit. Thus, pragmatists such as Dewey and Rorty have paid much attention to the way communities develop their concepts and values, treating ethics, as well as metaphysics, as dynamic matters. Shapin wants us to bear in mind such dynamic nature of science by *lowering the tone* of its history.

Shapin lowers the tone of scientific concepts such as Truth and Objectivity, by replacing them for (or putting more emphasis on) concepts such as *credibility*. The first essay in the collection, “Cordelia’s Love”, argues that the modern ideal of truth’s epistemic independence (*truth is its own standard*, as Spinoza claimed) fails to acknowledge the close links between validity and credibility, to the effect that “*insofar as we are concerned with scientific knowledge, credibility should not be referred to as a ‘fundamental’ or ‘central’ topic - from a pertinent point of view it is the only topic.*” (19) Credibility is a social matter that has many variables and shapes, thus it involves the necessity to speak of pluralism in the history of science and the need to incorporate the study of culture to it as well. Such lowering of tone or change of subject, as Rorty would say, is reminiscent of Hilary Putnam’s insistence that justification and warrant are evolving concepts (Putnam, 1992: 21). However, one shouldn’t push the analogy too far, since Putnam also claims that “*Whether a statement is warranted or not is independent of whether the majority of one’s cultural peers would say it is warranted or unwarranted.*” (Putnam, 1992: 21) Credibility, according to Shapin, has a more social nature than Putnam’s *warrant*, since he acknowledges the social and cultural forces which render an idea credible or not;¹ whereas for Putnam there is a *fact of the matter* as to whether a statement is warranted or not.

In *Never Pure* the tone is lowered as well as the topic changed. Shapin argues that dominant ideals of knowledge and truth are better understood when one looks to the persons and places where such ideals

¹ “In principle, there is no limit to the considerations that might be relevant to securing credibility and, therefore, no limit to the considerations to which the analyst of science might give attention...” (Shapin, 2010: 21).

have developed. In the eleven essay “The Philosopher and the Chicken”, Shapin explores the ascetic ideal of disembodied knowledge, arguing that the idea of pure and sacred knowledge is contingently linked to the idea of the *ascetic truth-lover*. From Pythagoras to Wittgenstein, passing through Newton and Einstein, there has been an ideal of the *pure truth-lover* as the philosopher who renounces all bodily pleasures and excesses in his (or, though not so often, *her*) search after the truth. In this essay (as well as in the following one “How to Eat Like a Gentleman”) Shapin suggests that the Western ideal of sacred knowledge is married to ideals of renunciation and self-denial (the disembodiment of knowledge) which have its origin in the heydays of our culture. Shapin’s pragmatic approach² is shown when he points to the dynamics of an idea in practice. For example, in late modern culture the topic of disembodiment has been losing rapidly its appeal; in other words, it is an ideal which does not represent our lives or fits our interests adequately: “*Increasingly, [Shapin suggests], heroically self-denying bodies and specially virtuous persons are being replaced as guarantees of truth in our culture, and in their stead we now have notions of ‘expertise’ and of the ‘rigorous policing’ exerted on members by the institutions in which expertise live.*” (257) Little by little, the ideal of the “genius” is replaced by that of the “expert”; which, at the same time, has a significant impact on our vision of knowledge itself: as the ideal of genius is replaced by that of the expert, knowledge becomes a more social and communal matter, instead of a solipsistic and visionary enterprise.

Of course this idea of “made” knowledge, instead of the classic and realist idea of “discovered” knowledge, disquiets those who place themselves in the “realist” field in the Science Wars. But as Richard Rorty reminded us,³ the pragmatist does not need to fall on the realist dichotomy between *made or discovered*. As Rorty saw it, the pragmatist must avoid such vocabulary and adopt instead a more ethnocentric vocabulary which better represents the shifting of a community’s interests. As another “historicist” philosopher of science -Ian Hacking- has argued, one need not to fall back necessarily on a constructivist approach of knowledge to

² Again, I do not know whether Shapin would consider himself a pragmatist; I just want to point some similarities his sociological approach has with the American pragmatist tradition.

³ See his “Relativism: Finding and Making”, in Rorty (1999).

acknowledge the impact that social and cultural conditions have on the production of scientific knowledge. (Hacking, 1999)

After reading *Never Pure*, one cannot help the thought that it is too bad that Richard Rorty did not read this book. If he had read it, perhaps he would reconsider his idea of philosophy as a “pure” discipline,⁴ untainted by social contingencies. For Rorty, the social conditions under which, say, Wittgenstein or Heidegger wrote had no impact on the problems which they concerned themselves and wrote about: “*Had Wittgenstein stayed in Central Europe, he would have met philosophy professors who worried more about the transcendental standpoint and less about skepticism. But he would probably have written pretty much the same books, and directed our attention to the same things.*” (Rorty, 1982: 177) For him, philosophy resembles more the creative drives of art and literature than the systematic necessity of science; thus, since philosophy is not a coherent whole, one should not expect to hold “reality and justice in a single vision.”⁵ Shapin’s book, though, argues favorably against the idea of disembodied and unconditional knowledge in general; to the effect that the ideal of pure knowledge shared by Descartes and Newton ends up being not so pure, after all; and much related to cultural phenomena which has been, only until recently, philosophically neglected.

All in all, Shapin’s merit is not only lowering the tone, but directing our attention to areas which only until recently were considered absurd or worthless of philosophical and scientific attention. Shapin’s book, along with his other works,⁶ reminds us that science is a human, all too human, enterprise, and the best way to understand it is to embrace its humanity and abandon its sacred character.

More than a century ago, Bertrand Russell, one of the greatest critics of all established dogmatism, praised in his essay “A Free Man’s

⁴ Of course Rorty did not consider or expected philosophy to be “pure” in the sense that most analytic philosophers expect it to be; in fact, he criticized such idea of “purity” (See his essay “Keeping Philosophy Pure”, in his *Consequences of Pragmatism*). However, Rorty considered that social conditions had no impact on the writing of philosophy.

⁵ See the Introduction to *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, and “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids”, in *Philosophy and Social Hope*.

⁶ Among others, see: *Leviathan and the Air-Pump* (1985); *A Social History of Truth* (1994); *The Scientific Revolution* (1996).

Worship,”⁷ the beauty of the image that science gave men once they abandoned the mysticism of religions: “*That Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; [...] all these things, [...] are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand.*” (Russell, 1994: 10) In Russell’s Victorian mind, religion held us captive; Shapin warns us that in our age the blind belief in Science has become something close to a religion. Fortunately for us, the burning of heretics takes place only metaphorically in academic life today.

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⁷ Coincidentally, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who is mentioned by Shapin as one of the ascetic models of disembodiment, criticized Russell’s essay as one of his more superficial writings.