

RORTY THE REFORMER?

¿Rorty el reformador?

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ABSTRACT

Rorty should be read as a reformer, rather than a revolutionary transformer. While the reformer aims to improve what is already good, the revolutionary transformer seeks to dispense with the merely good in a quest for the absolutely best. For Rorty this choice was a bad choice. In order to make the case that Rorty was a reformer, we explicate Rorty's views on truth. These views argue that we can obtain consensus about what is worth preserving and improving without reference to either rightness, truth, or objectivity. For after all, there is no way for philosophers to get outside the circle of language within which we debate about what we take to be authoritative and acceptable.

Keywords: Hilary Putnam, Charles Peirce, William James, truth, objectivity, post-philosophy, reformer.

RESUMEN

Rorty debe ser leído como un reformador, y no como un transformador revolucionario. Mientras que el reformador trata de mejorar lo que ya es bueno, el transformador revolucionario trata de dejar de lado lo que es bueno en búsqueda de lo que es absolutamente lo mejor. Para Rorty esta es una mala selección. Para defender el argumento de que Rorty es un reformador, explicaremos lo que Rorty pensó acerca de la verdad. Él pensó que podemos obtener un consenso acerca de lo que vale preservar y mejor sin hacer referencia a la rectitud, verdad, o objetividad. Después de todo, no hay forma en que los filósofos puedan salir fuera del círculo del lenguaje en el cual debatimos acerca de lo que tomamos por autoritativo y aceptable.

Palabras clave: Hilary Putnam, Charles Peirce, William James, verdad, objetividad, postfilosofía, reformador.

*Swift has sailed into his rest;
Savage indignation there
Cannot lacerate his breast.
Imitate him if you dare,
World-besotted traveller; he
Served human liberty.*

W. B. Yeats's translation of Jonathan Swift's self-composed Latin epitaph

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A curious phenomenon haunts the world of academic philosophy, as a wave of revisionisms introduces readers to “new” historical figures. There is a new Nietzsche, who challenges the language and thought of onto-theology and is not just another late Romantic; there is a new Husserl, who is not merely a semantic theorist of intentionality and the lifeworld but also develops a doctrine of non-fictional, Nietzsche-proof, transcendental subjectivity; there is a new Wittgenstein, whose journey from early to later thinking is not merely one from metaphysical realism to metaphysical anti-realism but a complex transit from one way of ruling out metaphysical nonsense to another; and now, perhaps inevitably, there are the new pragmatists, who see truth as an objective matter of “getting things right” rather than a mere relative matter of whatever we happen to let each other say, in our culture, this week.¹

This latest case of revisionism is, above all, an attack on the ideas of the late Richard Rorty, who took his own views to update those of the historical pragmatists William James, John Dewey, and C. S. Peirce. The new pragmatic revisionists challenge both Rorty’s non-objectivist story of truth and his attribution for that story to the historical figures of pragmatism, especially Peirce and Dewey. Rorty’s view of truth and thinking seemed to leave humanity adrift in a sea of arbitrariness, with no real grounds for criticism of what anyone might actually do or say.² The pragmatic revisionists try to locate more objective understandings of truth in the work of the historical pragmatists, and they make their own new arguments in favor of attention to “how things are, anyway” and “getting things right” (*cf.* Misak 19ff).

In what follows, I shall try to explain Rorty’s position on truth –an especially difficult thing to do, having so clearly concluded from Rorty’s own writing that objections to it are the things that are hard to understand. I’ll argue that Rorty was right to look back to James, Dewey and Peirce as forebears and that his ideas are not really the menace to civilization that the revisionists think they are. Even if we take Rorty’s advice and stop trying to dig up any kind of philosophically useful objectivity, there will be just as much room as there always was for the project of criticizing wrong acts and beliefs and then getting things right. Criticism and improvement of our theories and our ways of life do not have to involve insistence on objective rightness or truth, and we can, without invoking objectivity, do all the reforming worth doing and get all the rightness worth having.

1 Examples of work in these movements are found at Allison (2000), Welton (2003), Cray and Read (2000), and Misak (2007).

2 “The trail of the human serpent is over everything, as James said, but this does not toss us into the sea of post-modern arbitrariness, where truth varies from person to person and culture to culture” (Misak 2).

I

Hilary Putnam does not seem to be an official member of the new pragmatist movement, for whatever reason, but he anticipated their main complaints. He railed against Rorty's social theory of truth as he mounted somewhat critical defenses of both the old pragmatists and more recent pragmatic thinkers like W. V. Quine. In Putnam's view, Rorty was doing for the logical ideal of truth what the crudest logical positivists had done for moral, political, and aesthetic ideals; he was explaining them with "non-cognitivist" or "emotivist" theories (*cf.* Putnam 1990 24). For the positivists, at least in their stereotypical representation, the pronouncements "Karl Shapiro's *Buick* is one of the best modernist poems in English", "[t]his society has been much improved by the emancipation of women" and "[g]ross economic inequality is a moral iniquity" are equivalent, respectively, to "Poem, mmm!", "[f]ree women, yay!" and "[i]nequality, ewww!" There was nothing really to be right or wrong about in making those animal noises, which could not be rationally criticized, only liked, tolerated, loathed, repeated, ignored, or suppressed by the people who heard them. Analogously, Rorty seemed to think that "[t]he theory of evolution is true", roughly meaning "[e]volution-talk, whoopee!". We the majority either let people get away with such expressions of approval or we don't, and there is no genuinely normative issue involved here, no way to judge such an expression to be genuinely better or worse than "[e]volution-talk, yuck!".

Rorty was fond of saying things that fit this interpretation. For example, he observed that "those who wish to reduce objectivity to solidarity – call them 'pragmatists' – do not require either a metaphysics or an epistemology. They view truth as, in William James' phrase, what is good for *us* to believe" (1991 22). Thanks especially to the emphasis on "us" this sounds like a reductive definition of objectivity in terms of socially relative approval. And Rorty also said more than once that "'Truth' is not the name of a power which eventually wins through, it is just the nominalization of an approbatory adjective" (1998 53 & 226). "True" expresses approval, "truth" is just an artifact of language that names nothing. Moreover, in his notorious 1979 presidential address to the American Philosophical Association, Rorty claimed that

[Pragmatism] is the doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones – no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers. (1982 165)

So, apparently, not only is there no thing called “truth” beyond what we let others get away with saying; there is no world of things at all to constrain what we say.

A critic like Putnam thinks that what human beings do and other animals don’t, or don’t do nearly do as well as we, is *think*; and thinking is the pursuit of objective *truth*, or truth about the way objects or things really are in the world. Putnam says that we should

[R]ecognize that one of our fundamental self-conceptualizations, one of our fundamental ‘self-descriptions’, in Rorty’s phrase, is that we are *thinkers*, and that *as* thinkers we are committed to there being some kind of truth, some kind of correctness which is substantial and not merely ‘disquotational’. That means that there is no eliminating the normative. (1985 246)

The other animals can never say or believe anything true. They are evidently mere parts of the natural, causal order of things, and they can only bleat whatever bleats the world forces out of them. We human beings, however, have something driving our speaking, writing, and believing that is irreducible to physical forces and bodily emotions. We have *reason*, which, as shown to us by the true or ideally acceptable things to say, takes us beyond causation –or at least it does *if we choose* to be rational. As Kant pointed out, we human beings can also choose to reject our rationality and thus become like the other animals. To use an example Putnam recurs to, that’s what the Nazis did (1990 23-24). They embraced the myths, lies, and propaganda that satisfied them and got them what they wanted; and as they did so they exulted in depravity, dehumanizing others and leaving their own humanity behind. Thus, for Putnam, Rorty’s attitude toward truth and objectivity involved flirting with the worst kind of evil and mental sickness. No wonder Putnam’s tone in his criticisms of Rorty sometimes seemed one of barely suppressed contempt.

II

Readers like Putnam make Rorty deny the existence of truth and the objective world; but it takes only a little reflection to see a big difference between “[t]here is no truth or world beyond what we say” and “[n]o truth or world beyond what we say puts constraints on our speaking and writing”. The latter claim is compatible with utter *indifference* to the question whether there is a truth or a real world “out there” beyond our theories and thoughts. And Rorty could hardly have expressed any more explicitly his indifference to any such transcendent entities. He compared pragmatists to secularists who have no interest in proving the non-existence of God but still want

to stop talking about Him, in political and moral contexts especially, because they think it isn't helping anything (*cf.* Rorty 1982 xiv). Rorty did not really try to prove the non-existence of objective, external truth, a “wholesale” abstract ideal out beyond all our particular “retail” real-life verifications, a thing that is somehow calling us to verbal and intellectual righteousness. Instead, he argued that there was nothing to be gained philosophically by holding on to the idea of such a thing. His light-hearted “reduction” of objectivity to solidarity was offered explicitly as a rejection of metaphysics and epistemology, not as an account of what objective truth really is or whether it really exists. Instead of showing us what there *is or is not*, Rorty was much more interested in having us reconsider what *matters*. He was debating importance, not existence.

Of course, someone might think that importance depends on existence, and indeed much of Western philosophy since Plato seems to take this dependence for granted. The real or the permanent, which is the same from perceiver to perceiver, culture to culture, and day to day, is the source of real value. Fleeting particular “appearances”, including our local and transitory desires for the perishable things of the perceivable world, distract us from these abstract objects and tie us to our particular bodies. If we don't want to be reincarnated as birds or donkeys –or, less metaphorically, if we want to hang on to and display the feature that elevates us above the other animals– we had better pay as little attention as possible to the manifold of appearances and as much as possible to the imperceptible abstract things, or maybe the Parmenidean, unitary Thing, that our reason lets us see (*cf.* *Phaedo* 80c-84b). The seventeenth century complicated this story by showing how the abstractions knowable by reason might include items made of *quantities* like force, mass, motion, extension in space, and the like. That is, they might include the “material” things Plato would have considered transitory and not nearly as well worth thinking about as the form of the good. But modern rationalism remained rationalism, and it still argued that our reason, rather than our perceptions and emotions, was our only source of thoughts about real things.

Rorty understands the pragmatist to compete with the empiricist or positivist for the position of radical anti-rationalist (*cf.* Rorty 1982 xvii). William James also described this competition when he said that while pragmatism represented the “empiricist temper regnant”, it also challenged both the “tough-minded” empiricist and “tender-minded” rationalist schools of thought (*cf.* James 1975 12f). Both empiricism and pragmatism try to return our attention from the abstractly universal to particularities and localities, especially the particular experiences and desires we have in the course of living our contingent, grubby, dangerous, and imperfect day-to-day lives.

The story of reason as a power exalted above those contingencies has had its uses in our journey from barbarism to half-civilization, and a more experience-based and practical understanding of rationality can still be helpful today; but we evidently cannot and do not leave our irrational perceptions or emotions behind when we think and speak meaningfully, whatever our subject matter.

Pragmatists and traditional empiricists agree that the rationalists' story of pure abstractions known to reason alone is a lot of nonsense, but they mean different things by that claim. Empiricists mean that since talk about purely abstract forms and principles is unconnected with sensation, it is so much sophistry and illusion, suitable for consignment to the flames. Pragmatists mean that we typically find no satisfactory *use* for such talk in our lives of practical experience, or at least that other ways of talking have proven to be much more helpful. Empiricists argue that only perceivable and measurable things are knowable, and then they use the epistemological cart to drag the metaphysical horse, taking their point about meaninglessness to entail that no suprasensible things exist.³ But pragmatism allows meaningful talk of abstract objects, general principles, material substance, minds, angels, or any other non-perceivable things, as long as that talk tells us to expect some kind of good or bad practical consequences in our life of experience.⁴ As far as Rorty, Dewey, or William James are concerned, whatever our subject matter may be, we are not only making sense but speaking truth as long as what we say helps us live in a satisfactory way.

Thus Putnam was in a way right but in a more important way wrong about the challenge to reason offered by Rorty. Rorty was indeed attacking the rationalist idea that as human beings we have to rise above contingent causes and search for ideal truth about the objects. He attacked this idea as rationalists have used it in the history of philosophy, and he also wanted to confront contemporary philosophical attempts to edit out of the human story the way we get our "truths" from our practical lives of experimentation,

3 My favorite examples of this empiricist maneuver are the fusillade of arguments offered by Philonous in Berkeley's *Three Dialogues* to the effect that since the idea of matter involves both being perceivable and being external to the mind, that idea is "inconsistent" or "repugnant" to conception, and nothing repugnant to conception can exist in nature – or, at least, no such thing can be believed in by us. See Berkeley (1979), in the first and third dialogues especially.

4 James's whole goal in promoting pragmatism was making his increasingly Darwinian nineteenth-century world safe not only for scientists but also for religious and moral thinkers (*cf.* James chap. 1). And even Quine the neo-pragmatist (which is not the same thing as a "new pragmatist") argued in his famous "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" that "in point of epistemological footing the physical objects and the gods differ only in degree and not in kind" (Quine 44).

conversation, joy, and misery in sundry localized circumstances. But Putnam was wrong to accuse Rorty of positivistically “reducing” thinking or language to noises produced and observed regularly in the causal order. In fact Rorty made it clear that, following both Putnam and Quine, he had serious doubts about the very idea of reductive definitions.⁵ Instead his naturalism was best understood as an inclination to *describe* thought in causal terms. It was not a reductive theory of truth but a non-theory, or less a theory than a story. It treated the history of truth as a lot of contingent historical processes rather than an unchanging real essence waiting, or demanding, to be spoken and defined. And, more important, those historical processes were the particular life processes of real, live truth-seekers. The “conversation” was something that happened, and continued to happen, in our natural, observable world.

III

We use the adjective “true”, according to Rorty, when we approve of the consequences of this or that belief or claim. We do not ascertain how things are with the truth or in the world and only then decide what it would be best to say. Those are observable facts about our “approbatory” use of “true” –but of course those are not the only facts. We also do not put beliefs aside to lie unmolested after we pronounce them true. We put them to work and then evaluate them again, we share the ideas that seem good with others, we meet people with different ideas and compare ours with theirs, we decide which beliefs to call true, and then we start the whole process over again. As often as not, we later find ourselves criticizing our original evaluations and adopting new theories and thoughts. Thanks to this kind of ongoing, back-and-forth conversation among ourselves and with outsiders, we learn that we have a perennial need to be ready and willing to revise our current beliefs.

Well, actually, not everyone has learned this. We talk sometimes of “freshman relativism”, that bird’s nest of ideas featuring most prominently the confident belief that what is true for you is not necessarily true for me. This view, if we want to call it that, is mainly motivated by insecurity. Young persons who don’t know anything about the world want to insure that no one can tell them anything, and so they perform the philosophical equivalent of sticking their fingers in their ears and saying *la-la-la-la* until that annoying would-be educator goes away. But people who know a

5 Rorty agrees with the “non-reductive physicalism” of Putnam and Donald Davidson, and argues that reduction of any kind, especially the philosophically useful kind, is rare because “it is very rare the case that we can [...] show that a given language-game which has been played for some time is, in fact, dispensable” (1991 115).

few things about the world know the value of at least hearing other people out, comparing others' experiences with their own, and only then deciding whether to hold on to old beliefs or adopt new ones. In the truth-seeking process, this bit of worldly wisdom is institutionalized in standard warnings we issue involving the word "true". Nevertheless, if Rorty is right, we do not commit ourselves to the existence of a substantive, objective truth by those standard warnings.

Rorty acknowledged our "cautionary use of 'true'", or our occasional recognition that a theory or belief is as justified as it could be under the circumstances but still might not be true or good to believe (*cf.* 1991 128; 1998 60f). Everybody knows we do talk this way sometimes, and nobody, least of all Rorty, denies over the years that this has also proven to be a good thing. Rorty's "ethnocentric" understanding of truth, in terms of what *we* real inquirers actually find it helpful to believe, may seem to be at odds with the idea that we inquirers sometimes have to correct ourselves or get correction from others, and it may even seem to be a backhanded way – a rather blockheaded, freshman-relativist way – of achieving the "certainty" that Platonistic rationalists told us to seek and that figures like Dewey wanted to help us live without.⁶ But Rorty was trying instead to focus attention on real situations of inquiry and leave behind idealities known only to reason. Rorty's ethnocentrism was his anti-Platonism.

The post-Philosophical culture that Rorty hoped to help bring along, centered on cultural politics rather than rational proofs, will still look to others and to the future for tests of even its most satisfactory "truths".⁷ Inquirers will be aware that satisfaction has a way of turning out to be only partial. They will know that future disappointments have a habit of lurking in the darkness ahead, and they will know all about the way previously unheard-from members of our culture or "us" tend to pop up announcing their grievances and dissents. They will also realize that they have yet to determine the extent of "us", and so they will be braced for the discovery or the admission to the party of new conversational partners with challenging things to say. However, they can acknowledge all this without appealing to any objective, persisting, ideal truth that must be there behind the fleeting appearances or the actual results of our belief-creating investigations. All they have to recognize is that the process of deciding what to say is not yet over and may in fact go on as long as speakers like us experience life.

In fact, apart from particular cases in which hypotheses get investigated, believed, and then questioned some more, there is no ideal

6 Dewey (1929) is the classic pragmatic statement in criticism of this pursuit.

7 At Rorty we find pragmatism depicted as the "political" conception of what has been sought and what there is to be gained by doing philosophy (*cf.* 1991b 9-26; 2007).

truth any more than there is, in William James's example, abstract health or wealth apart from the particular persons and acts associated with those abstractions (*cf.* James 106). Which is to say, while there *might* be some kind of "health" and "truth" up there with the gods in Plato's heaven, they are not what we call every day by those names, so who cares? We might even think of the word "health" not as a name at all but rather as the nominalization or reification of an approbatory adjective, "healthy". Maybe the actual historical etymology didn't go that way, but the point is that we do not necessarily intend to speak of health as a *thing* when we say that an act or a person is healthy. Particular healthy persons, who make their own abilities to perform definite *activities* of respiration, reproduction, good digestion, and heavy lifting, constitute the only health that we ever really take any interest in; and likewise the beliefs we generate, verify, criticize, and revise over our different lives of activity constitute the only truth that we ever actually care about. Rorty's idea that a cautionary use of "true" complements the usual approbatory use fits this pragmatic picture—which is pretty much the antithesis of freshman relativism or any other kind of upside-down quest for certainty.

IV

Of course, we want beliefs that not only seem true but really are true, just as we want not only to feel well but that really be well; but this does not mean that we want to get in touch with abstract objects called truth and health that exist apart from all the misleading concrete appearances. The health and the truth we want are both practical abilities to achieve certain satisfactions, not things that are as they are no matter what we perceive, how we feel, or what we can do. Even what we call "real" health is a matter of continuing to *feel* well, continuing to meet the criteria for being *called* well. Likewise, what we recognize as "real" truth is a matter of continuing to *seem* true. It is belief that continues to pay off in life. And so Rorty wanted to help us see that if we want to find truth, we had better do what in fact we usually do to find it, which is pay attention to the satisfactions and frustrations we experience in practical life.

For me, this seems to put Rorty squarely into the historical pragmatic tradition. Even Peirce, despite his theory of truth as an ideal set of beliefs distinct from the beliefs we affirm on subjective grounds, pointed out in "The Fixation of Belief" that:

We may fancy that [a settlement of opinion or belief] is not enough for us, and that we seek, not merely an opinion, but a true opinion. But put this fancy to the test and it proves groundless; for as soon as a firm belief is reached we are entirely satisfied, whether the belief be true or false. (1931 5 375)

Peirce later reconsidered some things about this remark, but he did not give up the idea that “‘a settlement of Belief,’ or, in other words, a state of satisfaction, is all that truth, or the aim of inquiry, consists in” (6 485). Rorty argued this same point in different terms.

Peirce had other things to say about truth besides this, of course, and he was famously critical of James for understanding truth in terms of current satisfactions rather than in terms of dispositional-ity or “habit” (*cf.* 6:485). Truth was not what *did* happen to satisfy us; instead, it was what *would* satisfy us after an indefinite amount of inquiry. But James, in fact, far from denying this, insisted on it. He said that “[a]ll such qualities [as health and wealth] sink to the status of ‘habits’ between their times of exercise; and similarly truth becomes a habit of certain of our ideas and beliefs in their intervals of rest from their verifying activities” (106).

Truth is not just the present reality of beliefs providing satisfactions, but isn’t either a pure, pre-existing ideality. For Peirce and James alike, truth is the disposition to provide satisfactions, a habit or function we inquirers create as we create the opinions, theories, hypotheses, or beliefs that have that habit. And though truth cannot simply be identified with the beliefs we generate or the satisfactions we get from those beliefs, the truth we care about has no abstract existence apart from those particularities, either.

James did occasionally say things that could be taken for simple identifications of truth with actual satisfaction –as did Peirce, as we just saw. But when we look at their remarks in context, it is clear that both James and Peirce thought of truth neither positivistically or rationalistically, neither as a simple collection of observable, concrete, real beliefs nor as a pure abstract ideal. Instead they saw it as a goal made out of realities, a “habit” or normal, typical function that we not only seek but also *make* out of the real; particular beliefs we develop as tools for coping. Not all our beliefs are true, but there is no truth that we know of or care about apart from our real beliefs and what they contingently do.

Rorty’s “conversation” is the same process of practical satisfaction-seeking that both James and Peirce identified as the origin of truth. It is the accumulation of particular beliefs that satisfy *us*, whoever “we” are. At first, this sounds like a story a positivist could love but, remember, “us” is not a pre-specified group. “Our culture” shrinks and grows over time, and it might even end up encompassing all of humanity –though that’s unlikely, since humanity seems to include both the severely mentally challenged and the Nazis. Rorty said that “[u]s’ here does not mean ‘us humans’ (for Nazis are humans too). It means something like ‘us tolerant wet liberals’” (1998 53). Obviously the categorization “wet liberal” is not just out

there now, holding all the thinkers it will ever hold. “We” can and will try to make others as wet as we are. Sometimes, rarely, we will even convert the occasional young Nazi. Rorty’s “us” is “an *ethnos* which prides itself on its suspicion of ethnocentrism –on its ability to increase the freedom and openness of encounters” (Rorty 1991 2).

Moreover, Rorty obviously either got a little confused or was speaking colloquially about his own view in the preceding passage. “Us” is, of course, an “indexical” term like “today” or “me”. Its meaning stays the same while its reference varies over occasions of utterance, and thus its meaning will not specify any particular group with any given set of characteristics. “Us” will refer, depending on who’s talking, to different shrinking and growing, appearing and disappearing groups, not only to us Western middle-of-the-roaders. In “good for us to believe”, therefore, it will have to mean something more like “us believers or conversationalists in our culture, whatever that culture may be”. That still will not necessarily include all humanity or all rational beings –but it might do just that, in the end, and we are free to try to coax any and all thinkers into joining “us”.

For both Rorty and the paleopragmatists, then, the truth, the thing that is good for us conversationalists to believe, will result from a process of development with an open future. When and if it arrives, truth will have a *history*, the history of particular believers and their local efforts, in unpredictable, contingent, and changing circumstances, to create both satisfactory beliefs and cultural groups to be satisfied by those beliefs. Though the language used to make this point by the pragmatists sometimes suggests it, truth is not, for either Peirce, James, or Rorty, simply whatever happens at the moment to satisfy any specifiable group of thinkers.

V

Again, this kind of helpful naturalistic description of what goes on when we use language truly is what the historical pragmatism was all about. William James took pains to explain that he was doing just this, especially in his responses to his remarkably uncomprehending critic Bertrand Russell. Russell understood James to offer a logical definition of truth and, moreover, one that was easily refuted by counterexamples; James responded that he was not “defining” truth in Russell’s sense. There is no denying that James often did say things that sounded like traditional definitions of truth; the claim in *Pragmatism* that “‘*The true, to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as ‘the right’ is only the expedient in the way of our behaving*” (James 106, italics in original), looks very much like a definition of truth in terms of expediency or “working”. But James says that the real “essence” of truth, what

should be given in a “definition” or a “theory” like this, is the “*causa existendi*” of our truth-attributions or our beliefs, or the *why* rather than the *what* of truth (cf. 313). James used the language of definitions to tell us where the stuff we know as truth contingently comes from and why it comes into being.⁸ Knowing that will actually help us recognize truth and get more of it. The logically necessary definition of truth will not do that job.

Russell argued in response to James’s definition of truth that if it were correct, “[i]t is expedient to believe that other people exist, but they don’t” and “it is true that other people exist, but they don’t” would be equally sensible things to say. The first claim makes sense, though only a solipsist would believe it; the second claim is ruled out by logic as a kind of self-contradiction. James’s startling response to this was:

The social proposition ‘other men exist’ [that is, “it is true that other men exist”] and the pragmatist proposition ‘it is expedient to believe that other men exist’ come from different universes of discourse. One can believe the second without being logically compelled to believe the first; one can believe the first without ever having heard of the second; or one can believe them both. The first expresses the object of a belief, *the second tells of one condition of the belief’s power to maintain itself*. [James 279f, emphasis added].

That is, James does not offer his pragmatic definition as a synonym for “true” or an account of what that term entails logically. Instead he is offering an explanation of the real-life process by which we decide what beliefs we will identify as “true”. For James, going from talk about truth to another about expediency involves switching “universes of discourse”, or changing the subject from the world as it happens to be known to the believer to the world as it happens to be known to us investigators of truth.

Russell was interested in truth as a Platonic ideality, not an everyday practical reality. He therefore responded to James that even if we did happen to apply the term “true” to useful beliefs, it was still a big mistake to confuse the search for truth with our actual belief-choice processes. It would be like confusing the books in a library with the card catalogue (Russell 120f). Just as the whole point of the catalogue is to let us know about something *else* that *exists* and is *there*, the whole point of our truth-picking processes is to let us know about an ideal something, truth, that is *there* waiting beyond those often misleading processes and the beliefs they produce. That thing will in turn put us in touch with whatever other things there are in the world, and this connection to realities or reality is what makes truth valuable. James’s verificationism threatens to make us overlook the whole point of our efforts to verify our beliefs.

8 This is the central piece of evidence for my argument in Cormier (2000).

But the real point of our actual inquiries, what really satisfies us and what keeps us investigating, is exactly what James tried to explain in a naturalistic way. Jamesian pragmatists are like anthropologists watching from the blinds the natives of a sophisticated, successful society. As the philosophical observers watch the natives and their relations to the objects in the world, they see expediency; but the natives typically see only objects or signs of objects, about which they are motivated to develop beliefs. The observers note that the beliefs the natives call “true” are not always those that correspond to real objects; “true” beliefs are instead those that happen to *work* in a certain way for the believers, the ones that “maintain themselves” for a while in the natives’ world-view by making life easier in one way or another. The expedient, helpful beliefs they develop are not mere cards in the card catalogue; the natives get what they want, when they do in fact manage to get what they want, out of those beliefs, not out of something else to which the beliefs are a mere guide or of which they are a mere representation. The pragmatic philosophical observers of all this activity then conclude that the best and most reliable way to understand native attributions of truth is in terms of expediency –though of course this does not mean that the believers do or should see themselves and their beliefs in this way.

It also does not mean that the natives never see themselves in this way, or that they shouldn’t, or that they do or should have any consistent view of these philosophical matters at all. As it happens, the pragmatic observers have picked up this way of understanding inquiry from the “geologists, biologists and philologists” among the natives that they have been observing (*cf.* James 34). But not all the natives see things this way, nor is there any particular need for all of them to do so. James offers this typically colorful analogy:

A horse may be defined as a beast that walks on the nails of his middle digits. Whenever we see a horse we see such a beast, just as whenever we believe a ‘truth’ we believe something expedient. Messrs. Russell and Hawtrej, if they followed their anti-pragmatist logic, would have to say here that we see *that it is* such a beast, a fact hardly visible if you are not a comparative anatomist. (318)

Likewise, it takes a pragmatic philosophical thinker to see expediency where philosophically uninterested native believers see objects and truth, but expediency is there nevertheless.

James does not deny that the logical concept of truth involves a relationship to objects. In fact, in his response to Russell, he casually treats claims about objects and claims about truth as interchangeable. He evidently regards “other men exist” as just another way of saying “it is true that other men exist”; and surely this is the expectable

pragmatist view, since the practical consequences of the beliefs represented by these claims would seem to be just the same. But James also shows us that we don't really need, or in fact use, correspondence to objects in the way we may think we do. When we ascend to the pragmatist's perspective and switch "universes of discourse", we observe that beliefs survive in the hunt for truth thanks to their usefulness, not their correspondence. The only agreement with reality that James recognizes as typically important to the pursuit of truth is "agreeable leading", the ability of beliefs or claims to lead us to good results in our life of trying to do things (*cf.* James 97). No other kind of agreement with or correspondence to objects, even to "objects" made out of sensations, plays any significant role in the true story of truth.

Correspondence and objects may *exist*, and we pragmatic observers can even appeal to objects as we explain what the natives are doing. We can point out that sometimes native beliefs match the objects and sometimes they don't, and we can use this observation to explain why correspondence does not really matter to the natives' ways of figuring out what to say. But in the end we observers will have to recognize that we are "natives", too, and that our own ways of ascertaining when native speech is corresponding and when it is missing the mark –which include all of our own ways of ascertaining what is true and what's really "out there"– are subject to the same kind of condescension on the part of whatever observers may be watching *us*. Nobody's beliefs get any discoverable constraint from objects that transcend the believers' conversational efforts to decide what beliefs it would be best to accept and announce. Perhaps this realization will send a skeptical chill down our spines; but maybe not, especially if we also realize that even without worrying about correspondence to objects our society can continue to be as successful, and as self-critical, as ever. When we are directed to face reality or be objective, we can respond the way we have always responded without noticing it before; that is, we can try to insure that we are thinking and saying the best things we can think and say.

We can also share our insights into these matters with the natives we have been studying. We will not have to do it as if we were handing knowledge down from Olympus, and we'll be especially disinclined to display any kind of intellectual imperialism once we realize our own status as natives. But we may want to offer our picture of expedient truth as something that happens to be expedient to believe in its own right. We may have noticed that some native believers have reached states of deadlock with others, arguing implacably that the man *did* go around both the squirrel and the tree, that a fetus *is* a human being, or that God *did not* intelligently design the universe, all the while indicating no practical consequences of

those beliefs that might be used as a test. We can offer pragmatism as a way out of deadlock in such cases. Usefulness can answer questions that sensation or reason alone cannot, and sometimes the lack of a genuinely useful answer on either side of a question can show us that there is no real issue at stake.

The appeal to practical worthwhileness is not an instant panacea; there may be long hunts for compelling evidence ahead, and in fact pragmatism gives no guarantee that there will be a single, universally convincing resolution of every intellectual dispute. But pragmatism, in James's phrase, "unstiffens our theories" by helping us see that evidence is relevant to everything properly called a belief. It can help us unblock the road of inquiry by showing us that in a world of changing evidence we may have to change even our favorite beliefs every so often. It makes human beings that much less dogmatic and that much more willing to listen to one another and to consider new ideas. And for this reason we pragmatic observers may be inclined to share our beneficial discoveries with our native subjects, and we may want to hold on to pragmatism as our own undogmatic and revisable philosophical position.

VI

The "new pragmatists" are typically careful to acknowledge the valuable features of traditional pragmatism, especially its fallibilism, its lack of reliance on foundational certainties, and its status as a naturalistic non-definition of truth. But they insist that all of these good things are compatible with a search for the objective, and they fault Rorty for not recognizing this. They want, as Jeffrey Stout and Mark Johnston would put it, "pragmatism without narcissism", or a view that affirms the importance of things outside ourselves and our search for our own satisfactions (*cf.* Misak 8f).

Stout illustrates the problem with Rorty's lack of commitment to objectivity with an interesting example.

Consider an Olympian athlete who takes pride in her excellence as an archer. Aiming to hit the bull's-eye and [...] live up to her discipline's standard of athletic excellence lead her to do exactly the same things: to release the tension from her body, focus her attention, adopt the appropriate stance, draw her bow in a certain way, and so on. But why would it follow that it makes no sense to say that hitting the target is one of her goals? [...] Unfortunately, a gust of wind blows her arrow to the left of the bull's-eye. Will she not be disappointed? [...] It seems that it does make sense, then, to speak of my having two distinct goals even if I do exactly the same things in trying to accomplish them. (Misak 20)

We fail to capture the target-directedness of archery if we fail to appreciate the role played in the practice by hitting the target. Analogously, when I seek the truth, though I strive to attain belief that is justified or that seems satisfactory to my cultural peers, it still makes sense to say that getting the objective truth is one of my goals. Local satisfaction and objective truth are two distinct goals even if we do all and only the same observable things in pursuing either of them. We fail to capture the truth-directedness of inquiry if we fail to appreciate the role played in the practice by getting the objective truth. The Rortian ethnocentrist is therefore mistaken to identify the pursuit of truth with the development of beliefs that “we” currently like or can justify to ourselves.

We don’t have to be ethnocentrists to be anti-Platonists, in Stout’s picture; objective truth need not be a *purely* Platonic ideal or goal even if it transcends local justifications and agreement. Our developing social practices may have been essential to the creation of that ideal. Maybe we created the search for truth just as we created archery, by creating norms of acceptable behavior in an activity. However, in both cases we seem to have created activities that involve looking outside ourselves in pursuit of goals.

Stout’s analogy is misconceived, however. It is not about objective truth being to inquiry as targets are to archery. This happens because we can test to find out whether archers are shooting at targets, but no test will tell us whether inquirers are trying to get at objective truth. Archery without aiming at targets would indeed look very different to observers standing from the anthropologists’ blind; our archer would keep loosening up, drawing the bow, and letting arrows fly in just the same way even after the wind changed, after other archers hit more bull’s-eyes with different techniques, and after we experimental observers contrived to have her targets moved. But inquiry would look pretty much the same with or without the search for objective truth. Our inquirers will not readjust their experimental strategies if they don’t get objective truth or if other inquirers are getting more objective truth using other techniques –as long as they keep getting beliefs that satisfy them or that *seem* true by their standards. Moreover, by contrast, if the outcomes of inquiry stop meeting inquirers’ criteria for good, justifiable, or satisfactory beliefs, or if our inquirers spot other inquirers getting more satisfaction from different beliefs, *then* our inquirers *will* start seeking replacements –for their beliefs, their criteria of justification, or both.⁹

9 James emphasized, to Peirce’s dismay, what amounted to the idea that pragmatism could not only tell us what to believe, or how to be scientific, but could also tell us how to decide what to believe, or whether to be a scientist at all. See his remarks on pragmatism as a “corridor” among moral, scientific, and religious outlooks (*cf.* James 32).

This is obviously not to say that inquirers do or should arbitrarily pick their beliefs. They look for *evidence*, especially evidence relevant to actions that will make life better –and this way of proceeding has in fact made their lives better in many ways. They proceed pragmatically, though they do not necessarily think of themselves as doing so. In fact, they often praise objectivity and deplore ethnocentric traits like bias, prejudice, and partiality on the part of investigators, at least in some areas of investigation. Still, they sometimes also say commonsense things like “You can’t really be objective. All you can do is express your point of view and let your claims compete in the marketplace of ideas”. Sometimes they exalt experts who “know what they’re talking about”, and sometimes they praise “idealists” and “persons of faith”. Sometimes they dogmatize like infallible popes, sometimes they display “healthy skepticism”. Sometimes they pound the table and insist that their opponents face reality, sometimes they are freshman relativists and want only to be left alone. They are fans of Plato, Kant, Descartes, Marx, Emerson, Nietzsche, Rorty, and Derrida, and they think that all of that philosophy stuff is so much *meshugas*. They see themselves differently on different days, and on no day do they all see themselves the same way. This means that there is no way to use the inquirers’ own professed self-understanding as evidence that they either are or are not seeking transcendent objectivity.

VII

Shall we philosophical observers teach inquirers the truth about truth, and shall we demand consistency? I don’t think we’ll get very far if we try. It seems to me that the best we can do is take a hard, close look at how we think about things, encourage those who are taking the conversation in good directions, and challenge thinkers who cannot quite choke down all the wacky new ideas that the nineteenth century has brought us. And I think that this is what Rorty did. He did not offer his ethnocentrism as a way of ruling out anybody’s ways of talking; he was happy to let us continue talking about objectivity as long as that talk brought good results, and obviously it has done a lot of good in contexts like law and physical science. But sometimes it has blocked the road of inquiry, and it may have done so especially in philosophy itself. Therefore Rorty urged the philosophical observers of inquiry to take a closer look at how we actually succeed in our investigations and to give objectivity a rest for a while.

This micro-reform may make the world a better place, and it may not. If it does, the improvements may be small; some philosophy professors may become less self-certain and self-righteous. Or those

improvements may reshape human life; some solitary prophetic thinker may get a dollop of encouragement she would not otherwise have had, and she may consequently develop and persist in promoting the next great theory, novel, film, political movement, Web-based application, or renewable energy resource. Rorty himself seemed to want most of all to provide intellectual support for “us” Westerners and our tolerant wet liberal politics, or our experimental and (slowly, steadily) progressive way of life (*cf.* Rorty 1999). He wanted to help us see how we can and why we should defend our politics from the theorists and the thugs of both the far left and the far right. Even –maybe especially– without doing metaphysics, we can see that both left-wing extremes of internationalism and right-wing extremes of social-Darwinist individualism depend on endlessly debatable theories of what human beings are like and their proper place in the Real World. If we can shake free of those theories and just have a look at what actually makes life better, we can justify (to ourselves, at least) our bland, un-Romantic social efforts to provide citizens with access to clean water, unadulterated food, fulfilling jobs, housing, health care, free speech and thought, political representation, and the rest of the intellectually unexciting things that have proven to make human life decent and dignified.

Of course, even a struggle for these acknowledged goods is not certain to yield happy outcomes. Pragmatic philosophers, like the rest of the inquirers, have to wait for the future to see what works out for the best. But Rorty praised thinkers who set out to free their own and others’ minds, to develop ideas that benefit their friends and their society, and to make that society as inclusive and happy as possible. If all we can do is bet on contingent beneficial outcomes, this at least seems like a bet on the right horses.

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