

Truth – a Philosophical Non-Theory?

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I intend to talk today about Richard Rorty and his attitude to truth in the context of his vision for how philosophical practice ought to be undertaken in terms of intentions and objectives, and where he felt that philosophy may have taken a wrong turn and allowed itself to become too deeply entrenched in trying to deal with intractable problems that turn out to be intractable only because of being constructed on false hopes engendered by confused frames of reference.

Such a position, to some – perhaps to many - can appear to smack of unacceptable hubris, and Rorty was seen as something of a philosophical contrarian; a philosopher who had been actively part of an academic profession and who had undoubted respect from his peers and colleagues, but who then seemed to adopt a turncoat attitude decrying not only analytic philosophy as misguided but making sweeping statements regarding the entire oeuvre of philosophy, the 'tradition' as he referred to it, as being inherently flawed. As a consequence of this, he is taken to be arguing philosophy can never amount to more than circular arguments reiterating the same old problems and ultimately going nowhere.

I think this is a highly flawed reading of Rorty's philosophical project. I think that Rorty held genuine philosophical concerns that went beyond the narrow confines of academic professionalism, as the best philosophy should, which were aimed at addressing the human condition as it grappled with the demands placed upon it by modernity. That Rorty made rhetorical gestures that left him open to such misinterpretation is undeniable, and it is fair to say that he would, at times, make disingenuous statements that seemed to deflect criticism rather than engage with it, which can be undoubtedly frustrating. As Simon Blackburn said, something along the lines of, "How can you argue with someone who is walking away with their back to you?" But Rorty's concerns were a reflection of, and a response to, what felt like a genuine tension in academic philosophy and he did as much as anyone to feed into the transitional changes on both sides of the so-called divide between Continental and Anglo-American philosophy that led to fundamental differences in how philosophy is now practiced in Western academic circles.

At the core of Rorty's critique of analytic philosophy, as it was practiced by the orthodoxy in the 1980s (all those years ago!) was a paradigm of 'philosophy-as-epistemology'. Rorty's historicist account gave the origination of this as to be found in the worries of Descartes concerning his need to ground knowledge upon the firm foundations of certainty and being later substantiated in the philosophy of Kant. Central to both of these philosophers was a dualist ontology that seemed intent upon separating the knower from the known in such a way as to leave us never feeling terribly confident as to where reality actually lay (for Descartes, the cleave being situated between mind and body, for Kant, between subject and object). This bifurcation of the world, Rorty believed, could be further traced back to modern philosophy's Platonic

beginnings. Whether or not Rorty's reading of the history of philosophy is justifiable is a moot point, but not one that need concern us here – all I am trying to accomplish is some contextualisation for what is to follow. Central to this Platonic-Cartesian-Kantian philosophy-as-epistemology axis, which for brevity's sake I will now refer to, as Rorty does, as 'the tradition' or as 'traditional', were to be found such notions as 'reality-as-it-is', or the 'thing-in-itself', or the 'ideal form', as constituting some level of metaphysical otherness, which pointed to the objective aspect of reality as being positioned in some way beyond a veil that lay between the knower and what was to be known; and that 'Truth', which had gone the way of all other abstract universals due to Socratic insistence on hypostatization, consisted in our eventually breaking through this veil, or escaping from the cave, or insert preferred metaphor as desired.

At the time of Rorty's first public airings of his radical critique, this orthodox position could be construed as having been instrumental in encouraging an overwhelming confidence in the 'Correspondence Theory of Truth', especially amongst empiricist philosophers (who really did constitute the orthodoxy for Anglo-American analytic philosophy), and even more so for those who were committed to a position of scientific realism. There were some who expressed a preference for 'coherence' or 'consensus' theories, but for Rorty, in a loose coalition with Quine and Davidson, held that where these theoretical attitudes were located within a 'subject-object' ontology (or in Davidsonian terms, 'scheme-content') they would ultimately be reducible to correspondence, and when they fell outside of this ontological expectation they amounted to nothing much at all.

This confidence in truth as correspondence came to be seen by Rorty as being at the heart of his meta-philosophical concerns – as being the central conceit that formed the 'faultline' in the tradition. Rorty's alternative had been to develop a form of neo-pragmatism (much to the dismay of professed practicing pragmatists such as Susan Haack and Isaac Levi) that he felt could provide therapeutic aid to the troubled ruminations of traditional philosophers. This 'therapeutic approach' seemed to cause some irritation amongst his peers (which, as a therapist, one might categorise as the kind of dysfunctional behaviour that proved one's point, thereby upping the irritability quotient), but the issues surrounding the uses and misuses of truth held centre stage in Rorty's pragmatic approach. He wrote

"...pragmatism, as I have defined it...", and we do have to note the use of the personal pronoun at this juncture, *"...consists very largely in the claim that only if we drop the whole idea of 'correspondence with reality' can we avoid pseudo-problems."*

So, how does Rorty propose that we go about doing this, and why does he feel so strongly that this is such a major issue? These questions are dealt with in a number of papers and he devotes a large part of his seminal work, 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature' to the issue, but it is in a paper entitled 'Davidson, Pragmatism and Truth' that I think he gives his most focussed attention to questions concerning truth and how we should proceed with the matter and it

is to this that I should like to turn.

Now, I think it is not unreasonable to identify Rorty as a fairly syncretic type of philosopher; he enjoys his textual analysis and post-structuralist techniques, and he was always happy to display his eclectic erudition. I think this may have been the 'back-breaking straw' for some of his critics – not only was he a turncoat but one who appeared to engage in frivolous literary flourishes (one can almost visualise a Bateman cartoon in the making), and the essay that I am focussing on is a densely-argued piece that makes implicit assumptions about, and explicit references to, a fairly extensive catalogue of other philosophers. I will own up – this script has been in the bin more times than I care to remember as I have allowed myself to become distracted by Tarski, Quine, Dummett and others. But my intention is to keep to the nuts-and-bolts of Rorty's position, although we are going to have to reference the work of Donald Davidson on a couple of occasions.

Rorty's paper is actually a response to a famous essay by Donald Davidson, entitled 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' in which Davidson sets out his theory of truth. The literary conceit of Rorty's response is that Davidson has reached a position that is not that far from Rorty's, but Davidson is still inclined to hang onto the vestiges of a notion of correspondence which he refers to as "...correspondence without confrontation..." [ref]. Rorty is attempting to co-opt Davidson onto the Pragmatist team by showing that, in having gone so far in regard to destabilising the generally accepted realist conception of truth (although whether that was Davidson's intention is debatable), he might as well go the whole way and join Rorty in abandoning truth as just being the sort of thing that it is not useful to hold philosophical theories about.

Now at this point, I need to remark that one of the accusations that was regularly levelled against Rorty was that he was an 'enemy of truth' (along with being a relativist). As I hope to make clear, I don't think this is a fair summary of his position, and that those who arrived at this conclusion had rather missed the point of what he was telling us, although, depending on which bit of Rorty they had read, it could be understandable how they might have come to miss the point – it does kind of depend on where you pick the argument up from and who it is that Rorty is arguing in opposition to.

Anyway, to get back to the matter in hand, the central thesis that I want to most bring to your attention is to be found in the section of Rorty's essay, subtitled 'Davidson and the Field-Linguist'. Now there is a stack of interesting stuff, even in this one section, that I am not going to talk about – but what I do want to focus on is Rorty's highly critical attitude to 'theories of truth' in general.

As far as Rorty is concerned it is the construction of these theories (*which, to recap and expand a little, are, for the most part, all reducible to 'correspondence with reality' being, as they are, constructed in a vocabulary that is imbued with Platonic ontological assumptions; those that are not so*

constructed are merely trivial – for example, a coherence theory of truth that does not make any claim to realising some degree of correspondence with reality is just going to be making a claim that any argument that purports to be true must be internally coherent - but that is just to say arguments need to be internally coherent making the truth-predicate entirely redundant), so it is the construction of theories of truth that give rise to the metaphysical difficulties that, in Rorty's post-Wittgensteinian eyes, result in the 'pseudo-problems' of philosophy – the impasses that he might suggest have left us ensnared in what amounts to little more than a 2,500 year-old bicker: problems such as the 'reality-appearance' distinction, realism or anti-realism, physicalism vs. idealism, and so on.

Given that we accept these as being 'pseudo-problems' in the first instance, why does this intractability hang on this single idea that truth has to reflect in some way a direct correspondence to reality-as-it-is-in-itself? I think the beginnings of an answer are to be found in Plato's mystical goings on in the cave and Socrates' drumming in to us that universals had to be defined in terms of their essential nature rather than through the ostension of their instantiations (something that the later Wittgenstein worked hard to drum out of us). In this way philosophy became lumbered with an untenable notion of what it is that reality consists in, which led to an equally untenable philosophical expectation in regard to the function and nature of 'truth'.

Why are these notions of reality and truth untenable? Because it assumes that reality is constituted by the 'ding an sich', the 'thing-in-itself', and to know that in terms of exact correspondence is to know it in an unmediated manner, as a direct apprehension of reality. Now, this is either a paradox, as knowledge, the act of knowing something, is necessarily a mediative process – it requires some level, irrespective of how minimal, of interpretative practice and methodological application – or else it is some form of intuited gnostic mysticism, and I suspect that neither paradox nor intuition were what the hard-nosed scientific realist would have been aiming for.

What Rorty wants to tell us is that any theory of truth, and specifically truth as correspondence, is nothing more than a 'tertium quid', which is, as I am sure you all know, a third thing that is introduced to explain a relationship between two knowable entities, but does so in a rather indefinite, and ultimately mysterious, sort of way. So, there is 'us', with our beliefs about the world and the language in which these beliefs are formulated and expressed, and there is how the world is arranged. But to explain these knowable states of affairs we resort to the correspondence theory of truth, in its variety of forms, which turns out to be either paradoxical or mystical, thereby making this relationship obscure. This seems to be a questionable way to go about conceptual clarification – the 'flagship' of analytical philosophy.

So, what are we to do - are we to be left in a world without truth? Are we in danger of a complete existential meltdown? Well fear not, because we have pragmatism (or at least Rorty's brand of it). What is needed is the transition to a new paradigm, a 'gestalt switch', in which we recognise that all of our

interactions with reality and our attempts to make sense of experience involve some form of hermeneutic process and that how we do this, how we construct knowledge, is through language, both natural and formal. But if language is the new interpretative framework might it not turn out to be another form of 'tertium quid'? Aren't we now just going to get hung up on theories of meaning rather than theories of truth?

Rorty's path out of this draws upon Donald Davidson's theory of 'radical interpretation' which Davidson extrapolated from Quine's theory of 'radical translation' but I don't want to get lost in a haze of references here. Essentially what radical interpretation tells us is what a field-linguist would have to do when coming up against a completely unknown language – one in which she has no reference points of semantic contact; in other words, how interpretation works in its purest form.

However, before we move on to being rescued by the pragmatic/hermeneutic practices of the field-linguist, there is a trailing thread that needs tidying up. When the logical shortcomings of the correspondence theorists optimism were so devastatingly exposed, I imagine the Kantians amongst you were feeling a sense of smug self-satisfaction and thinking gleefully to yourselves "Well, we know all of that. The ontological distinction between the subject and the object being such as it is dooms us to never really knowing the thing-in-itself but we have the 'Categories of Understanding' to fall back on. Those will justify our claims to objective truth."

But Rorty is not having any of that either because therein lies the eco-system that enables the 'epistemological skeptic' to thrive.

As an aside, I find it both touching and reassuring that Rorty, even though primarily concerned in his post-analytic phase in undertaking this radical critique of philosophy-as-epistemology, has the epistemological skeptic as one of his main worries in this discussion. Whilst Rorty is often keen to point out the shortcomings of the 'tradition', this concern does much to identify his location within this tradition and that for all his 'end-of-philosophy' rhetoric, which, it has to be said, did provoke a considerable uptake of umbrage amongst his colleagues, we do get the feeling that Rorty's anti-establishment pose is perhaps simply an expression of a desire to save philosophy from some of its worst excesses.

The point that we have to remember in regard to Rorty's attack on theories of truth is that he is on a mission to knock out the pseudo-problems, the metaphysical entrapments that get in the way of philosophical progress (although Rorty may raise an ironic eyebrow at the notion of 'progress'), and insurmountable ontological dichotomies are indubitably a part of this package. Even though a Kantian may have given up on the knowability of the thing-in-itself, she is still holding on to the idea that there is a thing-in-itself to be unknowable, and neither Rorty nor Davidson, amongst others, want to acknowledge that possibility. The role of the epistemological skeptic at this juncture is to show that the 'epistemological gap' provided by Kantian ontology provides room for that never-ceasing-to-be-irritating question, "...but can we

ever really know reality as it really is?" (which I see as the philosophical equivalent of 'are we there yet?' on a long car journey). The retort that Rorty and Davidson want to give to the epistemological skeptic is, "Well this is reality, and this is how it really is!"

Anyway, back to our salvation at the hands of the field-linguist. If, according to Davidson such a professional were to come up against a language such as they had never encountered before, the only way they could possibly find a hook to hang the hat of interpretation upon would be the correlation of the native-speaker's linguistic behaviour with other demonstrative behaviours. In order to cut a fairly long story short, what this insight should encourage us to infer is that the very idea of translatability, which underscores the very idea of meaning, requires that, as Davidson puts it, for the "plainest cases" we can extend a 'principle of charity' which allows us to confidently assume that the relationship between language and how the world is arranged is, for beliefs up to a moderate level of complexity, a causal relationship, and that the language in which these beliefs are formed and expressed is nothing more than the conventional arrangements of a natural language. This gives us a functional use of the truth-predicate which everyone can be happy with that is not accompanied by obfuscatory metaphysical murk!

As always in matters philosophical, there is a bit of a sticking point here, which might go some way to explaining why we are not all pragmatic hermeneuticists and why the question of truth remains a philosophical issue, and this is that underscoring the radical interpretation approach, whereby the field-linguist can assume the truth of our beliefs in the 'plainest cases', is Davidson's 'Cartesian turn', one which Rorty approves of, that truth is a primitive constituent of how we understand reality and experience in the first place. He says in 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge' (which, if you recall, is the paper that Rorty is responding to):

"Truth is beautifully transparent compared compared to belief and coherence, and I take it as primitive...", to which one might be tempted to respond, 'Well that's handy isn't it?'. He expands on this a little more informatively in a conversation with Rorty, that is available on YouTube, and well worth a look just for the pleasure of seeing deep thought in action, where he says that truth is one of a number of equally important concepts, which include time, space, intentionality, and others, whereby we "would not be able to understand" somebody who lacked one of them, and this possibly goes a fair way to increasing one's confidence in the optimism of the field-linguist. Of course, it smacks of Kant, but without the epistemological gap.

I shall now, in conclusion, tell you why Rorty is not an 'enemy of truth' and is, in fact, nothing more than a guardian of truth, and if that means having to be a relativist in the eyes of some, then so be it.

Rorty does not deny truth. He is not engaged in a quest to remove truth from language. He happily identifies three positively useful ways in which truth functions in everyday discourse: the first two he says are normative uses and he labels one of these the 'endorsing use' and the other the 'cautionary use' – I

would like to say more on these, but time is of the essence, and you can refer to the handout. The third use that he acknowledges is what he refers to as the 'disquotationalist' use. Disquotationalism has its origins in Quine's adaptation of Tarski's Convention-T, from the well-known 'Semantic Theory of Truth', which Tarski developed to deal with self-referential paradoxes in formal languages, such as the 'Liar Paradox'. Convention-T is that bit of philosophy that gives the appearance of 'stating the obvious' whereby we are made aware that "'Snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white'. Of course there is a lot more to it than that, but it is Convention-T, as applied to natural language by Quine, that plays a major part in how Davidson develops his theory of meaning that gives rise to the radical interpretation of the field-linguist (and enables him to be able to recognise the unanalysable primitivism of truth).

By reference to disquotationalism, Rorty is telling us that truth is not a property of the world, or of reality. It is a property of sentences or statements made about reality with the realisation that the beliefs thereby expressed are equally a part of reality – the aim being to remove the veil between the knower and the known that has been firmly secured by the tradition and which leaves us exposed to the incessant nag of the epistemological skeptic. Truth is verified by meaning, and meaning is verified by translatability. This is why we can feel secure that, in the 'plainest cases', our beliefs are true and we do not have to subject ourselves to the extremes of Cartesian anxiety. That it may be objected that this has a limited application to the more complex cases of belief is not a worry for the pragmatist, and neither will it be a worry for the vast majority of practicing scientists, because what justifies holding complex beliefs is how well they carry out the interpretative function of making sense of experience with regards to efficacy of explanation, power of predictability, strategies for coping, and so on; 'truth' in the absolutist sense that the Platonist tradition has presented it becomes something of an irrelevance, and it is because it fails to clarify anything, but only obscures the issues, it is probably best abandoned. As Rorty says in his opening premise, when setting out a description of pragmatism that shows Davidson why he should really consider himself a pragmatist, "'Truth' has no explanatory uses".

For those of you who may be feeling disconcerted by the lack in all of this of the one thing that you thought you knew about pragmatism, which is that it is supposed to have a 'theory of truth', worry no more. Rorty is fairly contemptuous of this notion, and, on closer examination of what is said in regard to truth by the three leading proponents of pragmatism, it is easy to see why. Rorty refers to this idea of there being any homogeneity of opinion as "...a misleading textbook label for a farrago of inconsistent doctrines...", and he has got a point: a fairly superficial comparative analysis of Peirce's 'ideal end of inquiry' thesis, James' provocative assertion that use of the truth-predicate simply points to 'the expedient in our way of thinking', and Dewey's ideas concerning truth as 'warranted assertibility' show there to be very little in the way of common ground. The only thing that they might be said to agree on is that truth isn't correspondence to reality, at least as it is generally understood, although Peirce's cheerfully positive outlook comes uncomfortably close.

Whilst I am reasonably convinced by the Rorty-Davidson approach, there is a worry about how this impacts upon the use of truth in ethical contexts, and when we are considering Winston Smith's predicament or what Primo Levi had to say on the topic of holocaust denial, the disquotationalist reliance upon Convention-T seems to lack a certain empathy, but it is only fair to point out that the correspondence theory of truth lacks something in those circumstances also.

In the final analysis there is an irony here which I am not sure that Rorty, as a self-professed ironist, picks up on which is that disquotationalism is a 'deflationary theory of truth' and in setting out to abjugate philosophy from theories of truth, Rorty ends up giving us one more. Of course, there is the rub: in presenting a premise accompanied by a justification in a philosophical arena, one is going to end up with a theory of something, as sure as x is x!

Thank you for listening.