

## **Rorty's Pragmatism Undone: The Necessity of Truth to Knowledge**

*Michael Olsen*

Richard Rorty argues in "Solidarity or objectivity?" that the course of philosophy since the time of Plato has concerned two opposing ways of thinking of one's life: objectivity or solidarity. The first is defined as a pursuit of justification for knowledge independent of appearance, or "standing in relation to a nonhuman reality" (Rorty 1991, p. 21). Solidarity is, on the other hand sought among the relations of individuals in a community without the detachment of a "God's eye view." Rorty proposes that we accept solidarity, looking at "knowledge [and truth] as a compliment paid to the beliefs [...] we think so well justified that, for the moment, further justification is not needed" (Rorty 1991, p. 24). Problematic to Rorty's pragmatism is that it leaves us in a regress in attempt to justify our knowledge. Additionally, even if we accept his theory as coherent, coherence can be grounded in falsity and truth alike. At the heart of our desire for objectivity, is not to seek Truth for its own sake as Rorty contends (Rorty 1991, p. 21), but to seek truth for the very purpose of reasoned communal discourse. While we should always be willing to adjust our beliefs and grow, a view that Rorty espouses, his view of knowledge in fact hinders our ability to move forward.

In this article, Rorty claims that the "tradition in Western culture" has been to seek "the idea of Truth as something to be pursued for its own sake... to envisage a common goal of humanity" (Rorty 1991, p. 21). Rorty calls these individuals realists and then goes on to say that an epistemology based on objectivity is one where there is "room for a kind of justification which is not merely social but natural" (Rorty 1991, p. 22). This leads to traditional empirical and rationalistic accounts of the world where there is a difference between reality and appearance, such as Locke's primary and secondary qualities, respectively. On this view, the truth

(and thus our knowledge) is only that which corresponds to primary qualities of the world, or that which is *real*.

Rorty, as a pragmatist, maintains that objectivity should be reduced to solidarity. Our attitudes toward knowledge should be such that "there is always room for improved belief" and thus there is never any truth-ideal to which we progress (Rorty 1991, p. 23). Thus, we do not attempt to know things to understand the inherent nature of them, nor must any of our views "correspond to the nature of things." Pragmatic truth appears to be a relativistic account of the world. To the charge of relativism, Rorty responds that his argument is not a positive theory but he is "making the purely negative point that we should drop the traditional distinction between knowledge and opinion" (Rorty 1991, p. 23). Accordingly, he is not proposing a theory of truth, for "his account of the value of cooperative human inquiry has only an ethical base" (Rorty 1991, p. 24). This conception tells us that something should be accepted as knowledge when it is better, with practical advantages (Rorty 1991, p. 29).

Rorty ultimately argues that solidarity is the only necessity for the purpose of our justifications, and that it is better to accept his view. He says that, "to be ethnocentric is to divide the human race into the people to whom one must justify one's beliefs and the others" (Rorty 1991, p. 30). On this conception, Rorty believes the relativistic objection to be a moot point that presupposes realist premises, for the pragmatist is not concerned with other communities. Rorty makes this point saying, "everybody is ethnocentric when engaged in actual debate" (Rorty 1991, p. 30). Thus, Rorty concludes that we should throw out the idea of transcultural rationality and seek solidarity with conceptions of knowledge brought under a banner of local rather than universal "truths."

There are multiple problems with the postmodern pragmatic conception of truth that Rorty proposes in his article. First, we must address truth as being "a compliment to the beliefs which we think so well justified that, for the moment, further justification is not needed" (Rorty 1991, p. 24). Under this view, what we hold to be true is justified only by being "better." However, an infinite regress looms in the midst of this argument, thus never giving justification. For example, person A comes to the view that it is best to

believe X, but person B comes to believe Y. Let's say our community reaches agreement that we should believe X, we want to know however, is it true *now* that X is better than Y? This question does not entail a realist supposition, as we are questioning the pragmatist within his own conception of truth. He must now give us a criterion that speaks to the fact that something is better than something else. He can claim truth in the traditional sense or offer pragmatic "truth" – X is better because of "various detailed practical advantages" (Rorty 1991, p. 29). We must ask, why is this advantageous? The pragmatist is likely to speak of the effects it has on people, and then we ask, but why want those effects? The pragmatist could go on ad infinitum about the fact that it is "good" or "better" to believe this than not. However, through this, we see the vacuity of the term "better," and as a result, he never supplies us with a reason.

Rorty ultimately would say that the call for a 'reason' is only answerable upon the ethical base he proposes (Rorty 1991, p. 24). Thus, it only would make sense to talk of a reason based upon a value judgment such as something being "better" than something else. It appears, however, even if we allow Rorty's conception, communities will split around differing views and thus reason only with each other. This leads to the problem of constantly shifting community identification based upon the issue at hand and thus, it seems that in order to obtain the ideal community, Rorty would want something with more stability than values or interests. While it may be okay to shift values and interests around big topics (e.g., I can be part of both a certain religion and a certain political party as separate groups), it appears that if we allow ourselves to divide over issues of everyday knowledge, we would fail to keep moving in our communal endeavors.

As we have seen, it is possible for conflict to arise within the same community; however, it is quite often not where one shares the same "ethnos," that such debate arises. It is where our cultures differ when we are concerned with the basis of our knowledge. This is suggested by Rorty when he says "beliefs suggested by another culture must be tested by trying to weave them together with beliefs we already have" (Rorty 1991, p. 26). Rorty wants us to give preferential justification to our group, and as a result, a society may fail

continually at discerning circumstances. In our scientific community, microscopes are used daily. In a third world country, the microscope may have never been seen, it has an arm that acts as a good handle and may be nothing more than a tool to grind corn. I am therefore, not justified in believing I know what this object is, on Rorty's view, unless my community agrees that we could use this in this fashion and that it is better than using it as a hammer or tool for grinding. It appears that such a view of the microscope would be *ultimately* advantageous in some future world, but because this community cannot accept this, due to lack of training, it appears that there is no current reasoning with a community not interested in a micro-structural explanation.

Problematic to the aforementioned stalemate is not the autonomy of these communities, but the differing valuation placed upon the tool that results in a stalemate between the communities. Arguably it is of value to pass on such knowledge to the other community, for we should be concerned with other societies. As is demonstrated in the following arguments, it is the communities of which we are not members where we are most concerned with issues of justification. Additionally, it appears that even if communities may form different evaluations of things and thus blur the line between truth and opinion, there is something common to our experience that we should try to grasp.

A final and important argument to make concerning Rorty is the fact that his idealized version of "us," gives us no tools to push knowledge forward. Rorty says in his article:

For pragmatists, the desire for objectivity is not the desire to escape the limitations of one's community, but simply the desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible, the desire to extend the reference of 'us' as far as we can. (Rorty 1991, p. 23)

Rorty would like his view of knowledge to push us forward in the process of inquiry, yet he hinders us from extending the reference of "us." His self-acknowledged circular justification for "attach[ing] a special privilege to our own community" is nothing more than an ad hoc move, and he fails to give us a reason for this (Rorty 1991, p. 29). In this preference for solidarity, we presuppose our purposes,

never questioning the basis of our knowledge, simply seeking coherence with such knowledge. The Puritans of the 1600's saw witchcraft as responsible for the death of cattle or curdling of milk. Relative to this community, they would have felt disdain at the idea that bacteria or weather were the causes of these things. Would it have done the community good to believe there were natural causes at work? Possibly, however, it would be impossible to convert the society to this view by showing them the supposed "advantage" of another community's way of life, because their intended purpose was to find out *who* was to blame for these events. Until we appeal to something like "human rights" or to "event causation," apparent constituents of the rational criteria rejected by Rorty, then our purpose lays grounded because the practice is satisfying, and no one can tell us we have been misled.

To my first argument Rorty is likely to respond with his reiteration that his claim "is not put forward as a corollary of a metaphysical claim that the objects in the world contain no intrinsically action-guiding properties, nor of an epistemological claim that we lack a faculty of moral sense" (Rorty 1991, p. 33). Yet, we see a clear reason for his inability to make strong epistemological or metaphysical claims, because it is possible that there is a nature to the way things are in reality. Rorty gets into an infinite regress because he denies that we have an ultimate truth such as the value of survival, and the value of human rights. He says "to say that we should treat [people] in certain ways [...] is not to give a *reason* for treating them in those ways" (Rorty 1991, p. 32). Rorty, however, gives us no *reason* for valuing certain alternatives. He would say, "it is simply better" to survive, which is why for example, we have knowledge of tigers and running in the presence of such striped animals. However, why would one think it better to survive if something inherent in one's nature did not feel this was advantageous? Once one sees the vacuities at play in Rorty's account, then it appears that many, if not all action-guiding principles are inherent in the world, tracing back to our impulse to survive.

Rorty denies that human nature ultimately shares some similarity of experience, some similarity of intellect, or a rationality that comes equipped with the same basic features. In opposition to Descartes, Spinoza, and Kantian

rationality, he rejects the idea that human experience shares a common feature, and thus shares some truth. However, it appears that we are led to act in many ways based upon our impulse to survive, and not only survive but to thrive. This is how we come to have knowledge and – even on an ethical conception – why we *value* certain alternatives. For example, from an evolutionary perspective, we value sweet tastes to bitter tastes to increase our chances of surviving (see how quickly the infant spits out bitter fruit or how long it takes for him to acquire the taste for citrus fruits). It is thus how we acquire knowledge of what foods are most appealing. So even if we accept that we should avoid reference to universal truths, it is our primary instincts as humans that stand as the focal point in the formation of such normative evaluations of the world.

The objection to my final argument, that we are unable to move forward, is that “we must, in practice, privilege our own group” and that it does not matter if we cannot expand the reference of “us” further, because there is no footing in those cultures (Rorty 1991, p. 29). However, even if we accept idealized communities on a holistic view of knowledge, it appears most efforts at justifying ourselves will be geared towards those *outside of this social order*. Explaining to those around us that are *not* ‘us,’ why we believe to know the things we know, is where it counts. For example, when the Pilgrims arrived in what is now the current-day United States, culture shock occurred for them and the Indians. While reasoning between cultures is difficult, we should not give up on this task as we learn, grow, and find better avenues for our knowledge and justifications. Rorty suggests that we “want to be able... to justify ourselves to our earlier selves” (Rorty 1991, p. 29). Yet, not only is he skewing the idea of justification to near pointlessness, he is completely relegating the original object of such justifications to the wayside in a brute preference for solidarity.

The history of reasoned thought in philosophy is an overbearing hindrance to Rorty’s account. Rorty would like us to accept that we do not need truth, and he tries to lead us into believing that we cannot “do more interesting things and be more interesting people” unless we cut loose of this contingency (Rorty 1991, p. 28). However, if we segregate

from the real, knowledge is never justified, and our sense of striving for knowledge likewise perishes. Rorty wants us to believe that seeking out truth is not useful; however, unless we question *the way things are*, Rorty is simply sending us on a witch-hunt for something "better" to fit into our scheme, when our scheme was wrong all along. Our normative evaluations of the world appear to be informed by something common to human experience and thus we should seek out these commonalities. Even if no ideal goal truly exists for knowledge, there is an aesthetic value to this goal for mankind. This may be the reason for its lasting influence, and it may be reason enough to keep it from being wholly discredited by many postmodern thinkers. Even if we can never fully justify ourselves to "them," we should continue trying because this is the point of our inquiry. We should keep alive hope of discovering what Rorty has here so readily dismissed.

## REFERENCES

- Rorty, R. (1991) "Objectivity or Solidarity?" In *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers vol.1*, pp. 21-34. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press