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## It Doesn't Matter if You Agree; I Just Want to Know the Truth

### Introduction

The decision of where to start when responding to Richard Rorty never comes easily. So much of his philosophy cries out for rejection. Of course, we must take his point of view seriously. If we did not, we would be just as bad as one of the worst parts of his view. Namely, when he says, “there are lots of views which we simply cannot take seriously” (29)<sup>1</sup>.

Rather than just dismissing Rorty out of hand – which is, admittedly, very tempting – his view must be criticized carefully. The normal, knee-jerk reaction of the realist to brand Rorty as a “mere relativist” does not really do justice to either Rorty’s or the realists’ position. One good thing that can be said of Rorty, though, is that he does say just where one might criticize him.

Therefore, taking my cue from Rorty, we will proceed through this criticism by the very avenues that he himself lays before me. Rorty gives a glimmer of the first avenue for criticism by denying that he can be criticized as a relativist. Rather, says Rorty, he is a pragmatist, “dominated by the desire for solidarity...[who]...can only be criticized for ethnocentrism” (30). Though the fact that he is not a relativist is dubious, we will take him at his word, for now. There is surely much to say in criticism of his ethnocentrism without resorting to criticize his (possible) relativism.

As a second avenue, we must take to heart something Rorty puts forth in a footnote. Therein, he says, “On the pragmatist or ethnocentric view I am suggesting, all that critique can or should do is play of elements in ‘what the ordinary person believes’ against other elements” (30). That seems like very good advice, in fact. Rorty goes beyond even this in his next sentence

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<sup>1</sup> All parenthetical citations are from: Richard Rorty, “Solidarity or objectivity?” *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth (Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1)* (Cambridge, 1991).

wherein he asserts that, “To attempt to do more than this is to fantasize rather than to converse” (30). By this maxim, Rorty should reject his position if it does not bear any relation to “what the ordinary person believes,” as should the realist. It remains to be seen which view captures just what ordinary people believe.

Once the journey down those particular avenues is complete, there must be some sort of defense of the realist position. For if the realist position were not defended, we would be left in more dire straits than when we were before; i.e., rather than a merely bad position, we would have no position at all. This, too, will lead to much criticism. While Rorty thinks that the realist’s criticism of his position is unfair, it might just be that it is his criticism of the realist that turns out to be unfair; that remains to be seen.

#### Critique of Ethnocentrism

If finding the starting point for a general critique of Rorty is difficult, then finding a starting point for this specific critique is doubly difficult. This is mainly due to the fact that ethnocentrism is such a sensitive issue. Ethnocentrism, as Rorty uses the word, is really only, as Hilary Putnam would say, a euphemism for cultural imperialism, and no one in these times can claim not to understand just how dangerous that is. However, it is Rorty’s position, so it must be examined as closely and as fairly as possible. Since it is so difficult, then the best thing to do is focus on just exactly what Rorty says.

Late in his paper, Rorty asserts that, “We Western liberal intellectuals should accept the fact that we have to start from where we are, and that this means that there are lots of views which we simply cannot take seriously” (29). It is hard to be fair to this statement; it is a rather awful thing to say. It may be that certain views are not as good as others. However, they should be judged on their own merit.

That is, every point of view has a right to be heard at least once. Once given their due, of course, it might just turn out that they were foolish or substandard in some way. But, no view should be dismissed merely because it does not come from the mind of a “Western liberal intellectual.”

Such a view is, frankly, abhorrent. This is the sort of view that forces people around the world to distrust, or even hate, Americans. It is pompous and arrogant. There are many minds in the world, and many do not come from the West or from the Western Tradition. The world is full of beautiful diversity.

This last sentence bears more development. Being born and raised in another part of the world, or as a different gender, or with a different sexual orientation, or whatever else, should not be considered a bad thing. It should be counted as a blessing that such a diversity of viewpoints and opinions exists. We will return to this point later on.

To return to the critique, it must be remembered that once Western intellectuals would have sneered at ideas presented by women, by Africans, by Arabs, by homosexuals, and far too many others. However, only someone truly arrogant or ignorant would say that the contributions of these peoples were not significant. Or even worse, that their views were unworthy of even being “taken seriously.”

The only other possibility Rorty entertains is what he takes the realist to be saying. Namely that, “the realist thinks that the whole point of philosophical thought is to detach oneself from any particular community and look down at it from a more universal standpoint” (30). However, it is not obvious that this is what the realist does indeed think.

Rather, a *sensible* realist<sup>2</sup> knows that it is impossible to ever detach oneself from any particular community. No matter how rational our thinking, it is *we* who are thinking. By our very natures, we exist in a particular time, at a particular place, etc. No matter what, our knowledge is always situated to some degree or another. Thus, the only way to truly “get at” the truth, for this sort of realist, is to gather together as many knowers as possible, with all their particular, situated points of view and then blend these viewpoints into a more coherent and comprehensive whole.

Oddly, though, Rorty takes the realist position to have an implicit belief that “man will prevail” (31). In other words, “that something reasonably like *our* world-view, *our* virtues, *our* art, will bob up again whenever human beings are left alone to cultivate their inner natures” (31). Rorty believes that this gives the realist some comfort, because realists believe they know what the future holds, namely, that there will always be a convergence towards our sort of society. Rorty takes this to mean that there is an “inevitable ethnocentrism to which we are all condemned” (31-32). However, this view rests on unstable foundations. It requires far more argumentation than Rorty provides.

Returning to the point that was set aside a while back, it must be said that a realist of the given kind understands that the most plentiful thing to be found in nature – which actually exists “out there” – is diversity. The realist position provides no good reason to believe that, for example, something like the Greek *polis* will ever again exist, nor would a realist desire such a thing. Endless repetition seems more a curse than a comfort. The realist wishes to learn from the past, not repeat it.

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<sup>2</sup> By “*sensible* realist,” I mean – in all modesty – the sort of realist that I am. That is, a realist who understands that all particular knowers are situated, but believes that collections of knowers can escape a particular situated system to some degree or another. The more diversity in the community of knowers involved, the better the approximation of transcendence of situated knowledge is achieved.

While Rorty takes the pragmatist's general program to be one of, "toleration, free inquiry, and the quest for undistorted communication" (29), it hardly seems that the specifics of that view bear it out. On the contrary, it seems that the realist position described above does that job much more comprehensively, more holistically, to borrow Rorty's own term. As mentioned, the realist encourages diversity in society and marvels at it in nature. Ethnocentrism does neither of these. Thus, by his own logic, Rorty's view fails in this regard, and the realist's position carries the day.

#### "What the Ordinary Person Believes"

There is one concession that must be made to Rorty. In the preceding critique, the polemic was set up between the pragmatist and the realist. Neither, however, are particularly "ordinary" people; no philosopher ever really is. Thus, the reasoned arguments mustered by such odd people cannot *really* settle the issue – at least, according to Rorty.

Of course, being a philosopher, it is hard to check one's own intuitions and hope they agree with those of ordinary people. Thus, we philosophers must check our musings with the intuitions of the ordinary people. So, the only hope for settling this issue is to ask such people what exactly they think words like "true" and "knowledge" mean.

As it turns out, most people think "true" means something very close to what the realist's correspondence theory of truth says it means. Likewise, most people tend to agree with the realist about what the definition of "knowledge" is. In fact, I have thus far been unable to find a non-philosopher who agrees with Rorty's view in its entirety.

The view to which this refers appears when Rorty says that truth is, "what is good for *us* to believe" (22). Now, I must admit that I am not certain exactly what this means. Even from a realist position, it makes a sort of sense. But, what the realist takes it to mean cannot be quite what Rorty means, because Rorty is offering a position opposed to the realist's.

So, following the early advice, the ordinary person's view must be examined. I assume that if Rorty offered this definition for review to an ordinary person, that person would most probably agree with at least that much. Given a moment to think, though, the ordinary person would probably also amend the agreement to a statement that a realist would endorse to make the sentence more fully true, e.g., "but that is not all that 'truth' is."

For it is true that it is good for us to believe in such truths as the Law of Gravity. This is because it is true that gravity does affect all bodies. It is good to remember this, because if people were to forget, they might just start jumping off rooftops in the hope of flying. Many other such foolish behaviors could occur if a person did not believe certain truths were "good for *us* to believe."

However, things like the Law of Gravity are not true *because* they are good for us to believe. Rather, the opposite is (again) the case. In spite of what Rorty says, most people believe that things are good for them to believe because they are *true*.

So, if it is the case that "ordinary people" do not agree with Rorty's position,<sup>3</sup> there can be only one conclusion. By Rorty's own standards, he is not engaging in conversation. What Rorty is asserting is removed from "what the ordinary person believes." He is only addressing at most half of what the ordinary person would say about the word "true." Thus, he is going beyond their beliefs in a certain way, i.e., by negating part of them. He is, in his own words, fantasizing.

#### A Defense of Realism

At this point, Rorty has two strikes against him. However, he is still in the game, as it were. For the end game to really be complete, one more strike must be pitched against him. The

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<sup>3</sup> I did, in fact, talk to a number of "ordinary people," i.e., non-philosophers. All of my assertions about what they would say in the various cases are what they did, in fact, say.

final pitch consists of a certain sort of defense of realism. Mostly, this defense will show that Rorty does not understand the realist position as well as he might think he does.

To do this within the context of this conversation with Rorty, a deeper look must be taken at his view and the realists' understanding of – or befuddlement at – it. Rorty puts forth the view that, “there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification in a given society – *ours* – uses in one or another area of inquiry” (23).

The realist dismisses this as utter nonsense. The *whole point* of conversation is to gather descriptions of various procedures of justifications. While it can be said that every society has different procedures, it is equally true that most individual people do as well. Just as two individuals can enter into conversation and come out wiser from the sharing of viewpoints, so too can two societies.

If we take the word “societies” to encompass not only ethnic and cultural groupings, but also various intellectual societies as well, this last statement becomes far more obvious. Take, for example, a given interdisciplinary endeavor like cognitive science. In such an endeavor, computer scientists, logicians, mathematicians, neurologists, neurophysicists, philosophers of mind and others come together to understand the human mind. Each of these disciplines has its own procedures of justification, but they can still communicate and cross-pollinate their knowledge. The guiding thread of this paper has been that is what, in fact, realists do; they bring together disparate viewpoints to form a coherent and comprehensive whole.

Another look back at Rorty's view brings forth an even odder point of view. Rorty says of the pragmatist that, “He thinks that his views are better than the realists', but he does not think that his views correspond to the nature of things” (23). This sentence, from a realist standpoint, is

exceptionally hard to understand. It amounts to, basically, saying something like, “I like green M&Ms, so you can keep your dumb ol’ brown ones.” It is just a bald assertion without any good reason to back it up.

Of course, Rorty is not unintelligent. To his credit, he understands that he is just paying his view a compliment and nothing more. However, it is not clear why anyone else should take his compliment more seriously than they would take the statement about green M&Ms.

There is one more set of statements, at least, that Rorty presents that bears some scrutiny. At one point, Rorty says, “As a partisan of solidarity, [the pragmatist’s] account of the value of cooperative human inquiry has only an ethical base” (24). Already, we have seen just how ethical the account is, i.e., not very. So, there is no need to delve too deeply once again, but we ought to bear it in mind. He goes on to say that the account does not have “an epistemological or metaphysical one” (24). That is plausible; perhaps he just has not thought about it yet.

However, he then says something rather odd, “Not having *any* epistemology, *a fortiori* he does not have a relativistic one” (24). This statement seems not to make any sense whatsoever from a realist perspective. At least two important questions arise. First, how does the pragmatist *know* what is ethical? The probable answer is that he gets it from solidarity. Well, then the second question arises. How does the pragmatist ever *know* that he is in agreement with his society, i.e., that he has achieved solidarity?

Even in a position that says it has no epistemology or metaphysics, an implicit epistemology and metaphysics exists. To even posit the possibility of conversation is to assert a metaphysical claim, i.e., that there are other people “out there.” The existence of interlocutors is not an agreed upon truth; it is a fact that even a pragmatist cannot boil down to a compliment.

That the pragmatist *knows* about the interlocutors brings to the fore the previous epistemic questions.

At every step of the way, Rorty's position is self-refuting. His ethical standards are negated by his ethnocentrism. His standards of conversation are negated by the rejection of his views by "ordinary people." And, finally, his misunderstanding of the realist position at every level leaves him arguing with no one but straw men.

#### Final Thoughts

At this point, we shall return to a point that was left to the side in the beginning. Originally, labeling Rorty as a "mere relativist" was considered unfair; it put us in no better position than his. However, after giving Rorty a chance, that is, after looking more closely and judging him by his own standards, more can be said about that particular issue. The best reading of Rorty still does not label him a mere relativist; nothing so limited works, really. Be that as it may, Rorty is still a relativist of a very pernicious kind.

His ethnocentrism is truly relativism, by his own definition of the term. Moreover, it is the worst kind of relativism. It is the kind of relativism that says it alone is right and thereby attempts to force its views on others rather than the more innocuous version that lives and let lives, as it were. Worse still, his version of relativism is based on a wrong-headed way of going about philosophy.

Proper philosophy should begin with a clear metaphysics or, at the very least, a certain epistemology. Only by having a point of view about what exists – or how to gain knowledge about what does or does not exist – can any other philosophy be done. It is confused to say that a philosophy has only an ethical standard and not an epistemology. It is only by understanding

how one knows what has value that any value can be attributed. In the end, this is where Rorty's philosophy fails.

One final thing I want to say is that I truly did try to give Rorty a chance, despite my widely known distaste of his work. Despite that, I still cannot agree with his views. In fact, I think that his sort of philosophical point of view is just what I said it was – pernicious and dangerous. Though I think relativism in general is self-refuting, I do not mind the sort of relativist I called innocuous earlier. They are rather harmless in the end. Rorty's sort of philosophy, however, can only lead to resentment or worse.