

Metaphysical Activism: a Wager with Rorty

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The very words which make up the title of this session – *Agency, Normativity, and Practices* – represent what we may call 'the spirit of pragmatism'. Of course this is no mere coincidence, since it is the explicit aim of the organizers of the Conference to invite discussion on the central themes of pragmatism, but reflecting on these words and trying to understand what the best way to read their relationship is leads us to the heart of one of the most important and lively philosophical movements of our time. Both the classical pragmatists and the so-called neo-pragmatists grant primacy to the agent's point of view – i.e. to his or her needs, interests and intuitions – in other words, to our practices of rational criticism and actual interpersonal behavior, and virtually all of them maintain that these practices have a normative dimension – i.e. engaged in their midst we make central use of normative terms such as truth, justification, reference and meaning. I have suggested that there could be a 'best way to read' the relationship between *Agency, Normativity, and Practices*. In fact, this wording drops us a hint that it is possible to deliver different interpretations of the relationship in question. Despite the general agreement on the maxim according to which 'What has no bearing on our practice, shouldn't have a bearing on philosophy', both old and recent debates among pragmatists have failed to register any convergence on what the 'right' interpretation of what happens in the course of these practices should be. For instance, given that one of the things referred to by the claim that primacy should be assigned to practice is that the *norms* which guide our theoretical and practical behavior are not dictated by a radically independent non-human reality, there is little agreement on what the nature of these norms amounts to – little agreement on the proper range normativity actually has. Naturally, this impinges in turn on the notion of *objectivity*.

Indeed, something is a norm insofar as it has the power to regulate practice, and something has this power insofar as it has objective validity. Moreover, the more a norm is coercive, the more it is objective, distancing itself from the desires and interests of the subjects involved in the relevant practice. Hence, trying to understand the nature of a norm facilitates the highlighting of the notion of objectivity.

One could therefore accomplish this task by analyzing the aforementioned concepts, the ones which, as I have said, give substance to the normative dimension of our practices – namely truth, justification, reference and meaning. Of all of these, I propose we focus briefly on the concept of

truth, in order to address some issues which could help us to answer the question: how wide is the scope of the notion of objectivity we humans are entitled to?

But why just truth? One may answer that truth is the fundamental element of our conceptual system, and even point to some clues to this. One may argue that, given a term, its reference is what the term is *true* of, its meaning a function of its reference, and the meaning of a sentence a function of the reference of the terms which make it up; moreover, one may claim that the justification of an assertion amounts to showing how – in the many contexts in which that assertion can be made – its validity depends on its truth. But, even if I feel inclined to this line of reasoning, I do not want to labour the point, since nothing in what follows depends on it.

So, let's see whether we can say that truth – whatever it may come to – is a norm. By the way, the answer could help us to resolve the more general question of whether the debate on the concept of truth has a bearing on our practice – a point some pragmatists (notably Richard Rorty) have categorically denied.

The difficulty of providing an exhaustive and sound analysis of truth aside, it is noteworthy that we can perceive a convergence between two of the leading contemporary neo-pragmatists with regards to the so-called *deflationary conception of truth*. Both Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam have claimed that there is not much to be said about truth beyond the infinite instances of the equivalence schema – '*p*' is true if and only if *p*, for every statement *p*. However, that convergence conceals profound disagreement concerning the motives which lead them to subscribe to deflationism, and (for what we said before) this disagreement reverberates in the questions of normativity and objectivity: on one hand, Putnam maintains that these are concepts endowed with genuine content, on the other, Rorty was willing to use terms such as “norm” and “objectivity” only in a Pickwickian sense. Since I feel inclined to side with Putnam, I will focus on a couple of well-known statements by Rorty and try to point out what I think their weaknesses are.

Rorty's deflationary account of truth revolved around three theses concerning the use of the word “true”. According to him, far from any explanatory use, the uses to which this word can be submitted are solely the following: the *disquotational*, the *commending*, and the *cautionary*. The first is the one referred to a moment ago, the use which equates an attribution of truth to a (quoted) sentence with the sentence itself (without quotes and the phrase “is true”). The second is the use of the word we make when we want to endorse a statement or pay an implicit compliment to its author (for example when we say “The statement she just made is true”). The last use of the word “true” is the one we make when we say that a statement is correct, but we acknowledge at the same time the possibility that it might be mistaken. In a case like this we might say something such as “This statement is fully justified, but perhaps not true”. This is a very important feature of the use of “true”, and I consider it to be closely related to an overall fallibilistic stance, *fallibilism* being the

epistemological perspective according to which we cannot exclude mistakes in the efforts we endlessly make to gain knowledge – a perspective typical of pragmatism.

Rorty's rendering of the cautionary use of “true” amounts to a particular interpretation of the *responsibility* our verbal and non verbal behavior must unavoidably take – if the concept of norm is to have any content at all. According to him the sense of the cautionary use resides in the fact that we cannot exclude that future *audiences* will be able to detect some flaw in a statement we *now* – on the basis of the best theories at our disposal – deem to be true. Our epistemological responsibility, in other words, is just toward future audiences, the ones who could be in a better position than we are to appreciate the correctness of a statement of ours, and not “toward nonhuman entities such as *truth* or *reality*.”¹ Of course, as we may expect on Rorty's part, “there can be no such things as an 'ideal audience' before which justification would be sufficient to ensure truth, anymore than there can be a largest integer. For any audience, one can imagine a better-informed audience and also a more imaginative one – an audience that has thought up hitherto-undreamt-of alternatives to the proposed belief. The limits of justification would be the limits of language, but language (like imagination) has no limits.”²

I think that Rorty's rendering of the cautionary use of the word “true” represents an impoverishment of this use itself, as I hope to make clear in what follows. Before proceeding, however, I want to draw your attention to two other Rortyan points related to this rendering.

First of all, contrary to widespread opinion, Rorty claimed that truth has no normative character. Let's quote a passage from one of his essays: “The need to justify our beliefs and desires to ourselves and to our fellows agents subjects us to norms, and obedience to these norms produces a behavioral pattern that we must detect in others before confidently attributing beliefs to them. But there seems no occasion to look for obedience to an *additional* norm – the commandment to seek the truth.”³ And, by the same token, Rorty maintained that truth isn't even a goal of inquiry. Indeed, he seems to think that there is no substantial difference between saying that truth is a *norm* and saying it is a *goal*.⁴

The second Rortyan point I want to stress is his contention that there is no 'substantial' distinction between truth and justification – again, contrary to widespread opinion. He appeals to the maxim referred to at the outset, namely 'What has no bearing on our practice, shouldn't have a bearing on philosophy', and claims accordingly that the difference between justification and truth “makes no difference to my decisions about what to do. [...] assessment of truth and assessment of

1 R. Rorty & P. Engel, *What's the Use of Truth?*, ed. by P. Savidan, Columbia University Press, New York 2007 (orig. 2005), p. 40.

2 R. Rorty, *Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry? Donald Davidson versus Crispin Wright*, in *The Nature of Truth: Classic and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. by M.P. Lynch, The MIT Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 2001 (orig. 1995), p. 261.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 264.

4 Cf. for instance *ibid.*, p. 277.

justification are, when the question is about what I should believe now, the same activity.”⁵ Thus, in the absence of any extra usefulness in putting things from the point of view of truth, it is more advisable to account for what we do in terms of justification and get rid of truth-talk.

The two points are connected: it is because Rorty did not see any substance (normative or other) to the concept of truth that he thought there is no distinction between justification and truth. And it is because there is no such distinction that, according to him, we don't need to look at anything else besides or beyond the multifarious practices of justification.

However, coming back to the cautionary use of the word “true”, I would like to stress the fact that a clear-cut distinction between truth and justification is already embedded in this use – it is implicitly presupposed in it, so to speak.⁶ Contrary to Rorty's contention, the cautionary use does not simply call for a difference between present and future 'audiences', but between our current skills in justifying an assertion and *objective reality*. This is what we are actually accountable to. And this is what gives objectivity proper content. That is why I said that Rorty acknowledged the concept of objectivity (and that of norm) only in a Pickwickian sense. It goes without saying that future audiences will find some of our current assertions in need of better justification, and some of them utterly false: not only does this reflect what has happened in the course of the human cognitive enterprise thus far, but above all the fact is that we cannot claim to be omniscient. And the actual reason this is so does not reside in the circumstance that, as a matter of fact, human beings have a limited cognitive capacity or in the fact that the historical development of knowledge is an almost endless list of instances involving trial and error. All this calls in turn for an explanation, and the best account one may put forward is the one in terms of an independent reality which continuously resists human efforts at capturing its secrets. I want to suggest that this is part of common sense, part of the stock of pre-theoretical intuitions which human beings share – irrespective of the culture one belongs to. This is why I said that some of Rorty's theses run contrary to widespread opinion.

The ideas by Rorty I have summarized are quite famous, as is his rejoinder that “if contemporary intuitions are to decide the matter, 'realism' and representationalism will always win, and the pragmatists' quietism will seem intellectually irresponsible. So pragmatists should not submit to their judgment. [...] The pragmatist regrets the prevalence of this representationalist picture and of the 'realist' intuitions that go with it, but she cannot get rid of these unfortunate cultural facts by more refined analyses of contemporary common sense. She cannot appeal to neutral premises or to widely shared beliefs.”⁷ So, Rorty didn't accept the claim that it is belief in the existence of an independent reality that gives substance to the cautionary use of “true” and prefers to oppose common sense and any pre-theoretical intuition. But why?

5 Ibid., p. 259.

6 This is a point stressed by a number of scholars. Cf. e.g. Engel in Rorty & Engel, *What's the Use of Truth?*, p. 17.

7 Rorty, *Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry?*, p. 278.

His main great deep worry is essentialism, the idea that there is an intrinsic nature of things, a fixed reality awaiting the mirroring skills of an equally fixed human mind, a mind which has the power of putting itself in correspondence with states of affairs – again, a fixed correspondence, a relation that would subsist in the case of whatever statement you may make, independently of context and purpose. That is why in denying the character of truth as a goal he speaks of a *fixed goal*, as if the only picture of truth and progress toward it be explicated by “reference to [the] metaphysical picture [...] of getting closer to what Bernard Williams calls 'what is there *anyway*'.”⁸ In a word, as if this were the only picture one could give of the realist scenario. I agree with Rorty that that picture is misconceived, but I think he did not pay sufficient attention to the fact that it is not the only construal of realism one can deploy: even a quick glance at the relevant literature can assure us of the existence of realist stances which make no reference whatsoever to a fixed predetermined reality or a fixed predetermined entity called 'truth'. I am not saying that there aren't difficulties in giving a satisfactory account of realism along coordinates that depart from the idea of fixed entities; I just want to say that failing to see the possibility of such coordinates led Rorty to throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. This explains Rorty's fierce opposition to any form of *metaphysical activism* – as he called it.⁹

Interesting enough, Rorty was not only well aware of the impossibility of 'knock-down arguments' in favor of or against a metaphysical view (and this is quite obvious), but he also says something more: as I mentioned, he claims he cannot appeal to widely shared intuitions, because common sense and intuitions are on the realist side. However, instead of taking this as a fundamental feature which is to be carefully scrutinized, he just says he finds himself in the same situation as an atheist within a religious culture. This – he goes on to say – results in his lacking “real arguments” against the realist. All the arguments he can make use of are simply *rhetorical* ones revolving around “rhetorical questions”¹⁰ with the “hope” that they may trigger a sociocultural change replacing our culture “with the culture that James and Dewey foresaw”.¹¹

Now, I think it is far from being true that atheists didn't and don't have *real* arguments, as opposed to just rhetorical ones; however, what I want to do in the remainder of my talk is to concede this point to Rorty and try to direct it against Rorty himself. In other words, since he didn't seem to be very impressed with the battery of arguments numerous colleagues of his (Putnam and Engel being just two) confront him with, and since this was apparently due to the fact that he thought those arguments weren't of the 'right' kind, I will try to concoct an argument of the kind Rorty would surely have found palatable. Accordingly, I will lay a wager on the usefulness of the

8 Ibid., p. 276.

9 Ibid., pp. 275 ff.

10 Ibid., p. 279.

11 Ibid., p. 268.

belief in metaphysical activism¹² along the lines of the well-known wager Pascal laid on the belief in the existence of God. It is clearly a rhetorical argument, one which cannot be taken as an *epistemic reason* in favor of a belief, but just as a *pragmatic one* – not a reason which aims at the *truth* of the belief in question but at the possible *advantages* of upholding that belief.

Pascal's wager aimed to show that it is recommendable to believe in the existence of God because it is the most advantageous option irrespective of the actual existence of God. Indeed, if you do not believe in the Most High and He doesn't exist, you may lead a happy enjoyable but, of course, finite life; whereas, if He does exist, you'll be condemned to eternal suffering; if you believe in God and He does exist, you'll be eternally rewarded; if He doesn't exist, you may have wasted part of your time acting according to His precepts but, all in all, you would lose out on just a finite amount of worldly pleasure (you wouldn't lose much, compared to eternal suffering). Weighing up the four alternatives, it is easy to see that the greatest gain and the least loss lie in the two cases in which you believe in God.

In a similar vein, we can imagine a wager – the *realist wager*, we may call it – that aims to show that it is recommendable to believe in the existence of an objective reality and truth (this is part of what 'metaphysical activism' amounts to, according to Rorty) because it is the most advantageous option irrespective of the actual existence of reality and truth.

To begin with, think of the different metaphysical situations which would subsist in the opposite cases of realism and Rortyan antirealism. Very roughly, if reality doesn't objectively exist and truth, far from being a norm, is devoid of content, then the use of language for cognitive purposes cannot but be subject to the idiosyncratic shifts typical of a human activity regulated by nothing but itself. It would be an activity which finds its possible justifications only within itself, and speakers would end up losing the vital difference between 'being right' and 'thinking one is right'. On the other hand, if reality objectively exists and truth is a norm, human linguistic-cognitive activity may avail itself of constraints which oversee its correct working – even if this doesn't necessarily mean having a guarantee that it works correctly. Moreover, as far as pragmatism is concerned, I would add the remark that an objective external reality may provide us with better theoretical instruments by means of which to give both an adequate rendering of the cautionary use of 'true' and a plausible anti-skeptical strategy (as to the latter, just remember that all the versions of pragmatism fiercely oppose every kind of skepticism).

Of course, in the case of the realist wager we wouldn't have the possibility of an overwhelming advantage such as the *eternal* reward God would give us, nor an overwhelming

12 Cf. the following passage: “The pragmatist who urges our culture to abandon metaphysical activism cannot argue that such activism is inconsistent with a mass of our other beliefs, any more than ancient Greek atheists could say that sacrificing to the Olympians was inconsistent with a mass of other Greek beliefs. All the pragmatist can do is the sort of thing they did: she can point to the seeming futility of metaphysical activity, as they pointed to the seeming futility of religious activity”, *ibid.*, p. 279.

disadvantage such as *eternal* suffering. Nevertheless, we may content ourselves with the possible finite advantages of a life which doesn't fall prey to pure chance and skeptical worries.

Here are the four states of affairs: (1) You don't believe in objective reality and truth, and they don't exist: you don't gain or lose anything; (2) you don't believe in them and they do exist: you lose the opportunity to conform your life to objective moral and linguistic norms, depriving yourself of the possibility of a more successful attainment of your goals; (3) you believe in objective reality and truth, and they exist: you gain; (4) you believe in them and they don't exist: you have been wasting your time trying to conform your behavior to non-existent norms, but you still lived a better life.

As before, by weighing up the four alternatives we can easily see that the greatest gain and the least loss lie in the two cases in which you believe in metaphysical activism.

So, to conclude, the realist wager isn't a very powerful argument, but it meets the constraints Rorty himself put on admissible arguments. It is a kind of rhetorical strategy which consists of a preliminary sheer theoretical appraisal of the probabilities of different states of affairs, thereby assessing the magnitude of potential gains and losses of entertaining a belief independently of whether that which the belief states is actually the case or not. It is not an argument which aims at the truth, but one whose only aim is to convince. However, the rhetorical aspect of the argument apart, I'd like to conclude by underlining the fact that far better arguments are possible to the effect that in the course of our practice we answer to a notion of objectivity which is not of our own making. This in turn can be a first step in an argument aiming to show that this amount of objectivity is what we pre-theoretically deem truth consists of, thereby individuating truth as distinct from justification and a genuine norm presiding over our practices of rational criticism. Finally, insofar as all this can be of some help in fostering a better understanding of ourselves, we can take it as implicit evidence that metaphysical activism makes an actual difference to practice.¹³

¹³ I would like to thank David Brett, Mario De Caro and Antonio Rainone for their helpful advice on the first draft of this paper.