

RORTY, DEWEY, AND TRUTH

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Richard Rorty embraces what he *calls* a coherence theory of truth.¹ For Rorty, the "truth-value" of a proposition is determined by how well it coheres with the set of true propositions approved by a consensus of the leading thinkers of the time. Rorty thinks that he owes this idea to John Dewey. The trouble is that Dewey would object to Rorty's version of Dewey's theory of truth. My analysis in this paper reconstructs a Deweyan objection to Rorty's misappropriation.

Rorty binds himself and Dewey to a conventionalist theory of truth in the following passage from *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*:

If we have a Deweyan conception of knowledge, as what we are justified in believing, then we will not imagine that there are enduring constraints on what can count as knowledge, since we see "justification" as a social phenomenon rather than a transaction between "the knowing subject" and "reality."²

For Dewey, justification is not merely a social phenomenon but, more fundamentally, a transaction between a problem and its solution. Nevertheless, Rorty continues to think that Dewey is a mere conventionalist:

Explaining rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what society lets us say, rather than the latter by the former, is the essence of what I shall call "epistemological behaviorism," an attitude common to Dewey and Wittgenstein.³

And again, Rorty illegitimately binds Dewey's pragmatism to a conventionalist theory of truth:

Shall we take "S knows that p" . . . as a remark about the status of S's report among his peers, or shall we

take it as a remark about the relation between subject and object, between nature and the mirror? The first alternative leads to a pragmatic view of truth. . . . The aim of all such explanations (of common sense realisms) is to make truth something more than what Dewey called "warranted assertability": more than what our peers will, *ceteris paribus*, let us get away with saying.⁴

Unfortunately, Rorty presents both a distorted picture of Dewey's theory of truth and also a false dilemma in the passages above. Either we see the issue of justification in terms of the traditional, dualistic correspondence theory of truth, or we must adopt what Rorty attributes to Dewey--a conventionalist theory. In fact, Dewey's theory represents a third alternative to Rorty's false dilemma and exhibits clearly Rorty's misappropriation of Dewey.

Dewey puts forward his "warranted assertability" in quite a different way than Rorty has it. Dewey's "warranted assertability" is a conjoining of a problem with its solution, and the result is the "warrant" for the assertion that the problematic conditions are improved. This is not Rorty's theory concerning the justification of truth. For Rorty:

. . . justification is not a matter of special relation between ideas (or words) and objects, but of conversation, of social practice. Conversational justification, so to speak, is naturally holistic . . . we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it as accuracy of representation.⁵

As before, Rorty confines the alternatives for a theory of truth to a false dilemma: either we make the traditional mistake of correspondence theory or we "see the light" of a conventionalist theory. Dewey's theory escapes that false dilemma.

We must recall that for Dewey the ultimate *ground* of every settled proposition is the solving of some live problem--it is the transformation of a problematic,

existential situation into a resolved and improved condition. Dewey said, "The ultimate ground of every valid proposition and warranted judgment consists in some existential reconstruction ultimately affected."⁶

The hallmark of truth for Dewey is the existence of improved existential conditions. Truth is found in the relation of the first phase of *inquiry* (the problem) and the final stage (a judgment, resolution, or transformation). Dewey came to call this relation "correspondence." To be sure, Dewey's "correspondence" was not the traditional theory, but rather was a reconstructed version. But neither was Dewey's theory merely conventionalist as Rorty claims. In his *Problems of Men*, Dewey said:

My own view takes correspondence in the operational sense it bears in all cases except the unique epistemological case of an alleged relation between a "subject" and "object": the meaning, namely of *answering*, as the key answers to conditions imposed by a lock, or as two correspondences "answer" each other; or in general, as a reply is adequate answer to a question or a criticism--as, in short, a *solution* answers the requirements of a *problem*. On this view, both partners in "correspondence" are open and above board, instead of one of them being forever out of experience and the other in it by way of a "percept" or whatever . . . wondering at how something in experience could be asserted to correspond to something by definition outside experience, which it is, upon the basis of epistemological doctrine, the sole means of "knowing," is what originally made me suspicious of the whole epistemological industry.

In the sense of correspondence as operational and behavioral (the meaning which has *definite* parallels in ordinary experience), I hold that my *type* of theory is the only one entitled to be called a correspondence theory of truth.⁷

It simply is not the case that Dewey's "court of appeal" for truth is a solitary group of leading intellectuals who judge the truth of propositions. Dewey's "warranted assertion" is a judgment by *inquirers* and "sufferers" that, through problem-solving, a *better* set of existential conditions obtain.

For Rorty, no problem need be solved, no existential conditions need be addressed or improved. All that is required is that a given proposition not *clash* with the congenial atmosphere of the conversation of already approved propositions.

Rorty's "conversation" is antithetical to Dewey's *inquiry*. That in itself is no great mistake. The problem arises when Rorty, in bad faith, believes and tries to market the belief that both he and Dewey are conventionalists and conversational "father and son." Evidently, Rorty does not realize that Dewey's kind of conversation *is* inquiry. Rorty's conversation is not concerned with inquiry nor with solving life problems. It is conversation for its own sake. Rorty says:

To see keeping a conversation going as a sufficient aim of philosophy, to see wisdom as consisting in the ability to sustain a conversation, is to see human beings as generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately.⁸

Rorty offers us yet another false dilemma here. Either we pursue the ancient quest for essences or we just "say something"--*anything* to keep the conversation going. Again, Dewey escapes both horns of Rorty's dilemma. Dewey does offer new descriptions, not of essences but of habit--new descriptions of *traits*.⁹ Dewey's "conversation" is an inquiry into those traits, the best descriptions thereof, and how those descriptions can be used in the enrichment of the human condition.

Dewey's descriptions of traits are neither intended to be eternal nor are they trained upon essences. But neither are they capricious nor are they "optional." Not just any description has utility value in the pursuit of an enriched human condition. "States of affairs" have better and worse

(more useful and less useful) stories told about them. For Dewey, only the better and more useful descriptions of the traits of *res* can serve as true descriptions. In contrast, for Rorty:

The point is always the same--to perform the social function which Dewey called "breaking the crust of convention," preventing man from deluding himself with the notion that he knows himself, or anything else, except under optional descriptions.¹⁰

It is true that Dewey was a "crust breaker" of tradition, but it is just as true that Dewey took the process of inquiry very seriously because its consequences had existential impact. Dewey's inquiry is anything but capricious or giddy.¹¹ Nevertheless, Dewey would agree with Rorty concerning one point: that eternal and fixed truths are fictions that should not be pursued. Dewey said:

The "settlement" of a particular situation by a particular inquiry is no guarantee that *that* settled conclusion will always remain settled. The attainment of settled beliefs is a progressive matter; there is no belief so settled as not to be exposed to further inquiry. It is the convergent and cumulative effect of continued inquiry that defines knowledge in the general meaning. In scientific inquiry, the criterion of what is taken to be settled, or to be knowledge, is being *so* settled that it is available as a resource in further inquiry.

What has been said helps to explain why the term "warranted assertion" is preferred to the terms *belief* and *knowledge*.¹²

Hence, Dewey's "conversation"--inquiry--must be viewed as on-going. That is why Dewey avoids the term "truth" in favor of terms like "truly"¹³ that accommodate the process of settling and resettling issues. However, Dewey did *not* abandon the quest for eternal truths only to pass to the other extreme that Rorty advocates, i.e., that truth is what convention *says* it

is.

Dewey's "truly" is not Rorty's "truism." Rorty's "truth," like his "playful" misappropriations of historical philosophical theories, is capricious. Rorty's "truth" reminds one of the similarly "playful" and conventional truth of the ancient sophists. Those ancients allegedly could convince that day was night and night day. Analogously, Rorty has convinced some that Dewey is not Dewey, but rather that Dewey is Rorty and *vice versa*.

The significant differences between Rorty and Dewey boil down to how each sees the function of philosophy in the "conversation of humankind." For Dewey, the philosopher is a *worker*--a doer whose task is to enrich life by solving its problems. For Rorty, the philosopher is a *talker*--an informed dilettante in a fashionable salon whose task is to keep the talk congenial and continuous, even at the expense of meaning and purpose.

In conclusion, I think that Rorty should be absolved of any debt of gratitude toward Dewey. Perhaps Rorty best sets himself apart from Dewey's kind of truth and Dewey's type of philosophy in the following:

We might just be *saying something*--participating in a conversation rather than contributing to an inquiry. Perhaps saying things is not always saying how things are. . . . We have to drop the notion of correspondence for sentences as well as for thoughts, and see sentences as connected with other sentences rather than with the world. . . . To see edifying philosophers as conversational partners is an alternative to seeing them as holding views on subjects of common concern. . . . One way to see edifying philosophy as the love of wisdom is to see it as the attempt to prevent conversation from degenerating into inquiry, into a research program.¹⁴

Dewey's truth is embedded in the "subjects of common concern" and in the "exchange of views" that contribute to solving existential problems. Dewey's "degenerate inquiry" is at odds with Rorty's conversational truth. But for Rorty that is not

important. All that is important for Rorty is that he keeps *saying something*--even if it is false--and that his peers "let him get away with saying it."

NOTES

¹ Here it is well to note that Rorty's label for his theory of truth, i.e., "coherence," is misleading. Rorty's is more precisely called a conventionalist theory of truth. Ernest Sosa claims that Rorty's theory of truth amounts to "conventionalist foundationalism" ("Nature Unmirrored, Epistemology Naturalized," *Synthese* 55 [1983]: 53-57).

² Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 9.

³ *Ibid.*, 174. Rorty associates his "epistemological behaviorism" with "pragmatism," especially where he says: "Epistemological behaviorism (which might be called simply 'pragmatism,' were this not a bit overladen) . . ." (*ibid.*, 176).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 175-76.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 170. For Rorty's "social context of justification," see 209-10. For his view of the difference between "discovery" (or what Dewey's "inquiry" was designed for) and "hammering out," see 330.

⁶ John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1938), 489.

⁷ John Dewey, *The Problems of Men* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), 343-44.

⁸ Rorty, 378.

⁹ For the best commentary concerning Dewey's concept of "habit," see Victor Kestenbaum, *The Phenomenological Sense of John Dewey: Habit and Meaning* (Jersey City: Humanities

Press, 1977).

¹⁰Rorty, 379.

¹¹Michael Fischer, "Redefining Philosophy as Literature," *Soundings* 17 (Fall 1984): 315. Fisher deserves credit for seeing Rorty's conversation as "giddy." The label is accurate for the kind of talk that Rorty advocates.

¹²Dewey, *Logic*, 8-9.

¹³For Dewey's use of the term "truly," see his *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1920), 156-57.

¹⁴Rorty, 371-72.