

*Neo-pragmatist accounts of
truth:*

*Rorty's "ethnocentrism" and
Putnam's "internal realism"*

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Introduction

The notion of truth forms one of the central pre-occupations of philosophy, which has traditionally sought to clarify what it is that makes certain beliefs true, to determine the common feature that unites all true propositions. This work will discuss a recent series of public exchanges that took place between the two founding figures of neopragmatism, Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam, regarding truth and its relation to justification.¹ Like the classical pragmatists Peirce, James, and Dewey, both Rorty and Putnam argue that we should refrain from taking the term “true” to denote a successful correspondence between a proposition and a single, fixed, absolute reality.² Given this substantial common ground, their exchanges provide a direct insight into a tension that lies right at the heart of neopragmatism. Both attempt to interpret truth as importantly related to the prospect of justification amongst peers, without simply providing a reductive definition of “true” as synonymous with “whatever happens to be the contemporary consensus.” Rorty and Putnam thus attempt to navigate an approach to the notion of truth that avoids the problems associated with “absolute” theories of truth on one extreme, and utter “relativism” about truth on the other. In this essay I will attempt to clarify the points of compatibility and points of departure between Rorty and Putnam’s views by closely examining the debates that occurred between the two. In investigating these exchanges we may be able to illuminate the path towards a satisfactory neopragmatist approach to the notion of “truth.”

¹ The series of exchanges that shall be considered stretched roughly from the early 1980s into the early 90s. In chronological order, the major contributions to this debate were Hilary Putnam’s “Why Reason Can’t Be Naturalized,” *Synthese* 52 (1982) pp. 3-23, Richard Rorty’s “Solidarity or Objectivity?” in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, John Rajchman and Cornel West, eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 3-19, Putnam’s “Realism with a Human Face,” in *Realism With a Human Face*, James Conant, ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) pp. 18-26, Rorty’s “Putnam on Truth,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* vol. 52, no. 2 (1992) pp. 415-418, Putnam’s “Truth, Activation Vectors and Possession Conditions for Concepts,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* vol. 52 (1992): 431-447, and Rorty’s “Putnam and the Relativist Menace,” *The Journal of Philosophy* vol. 90, no. 9 (1993): 443-461.

² Putnam’s tendency to place his own views under intense scrutiny and thus frequently change his mind is legendary, leading John Passmore to note that trying to characterize “...Putnam’s philosophy is like trying to capture the wind with a fishing net.” (John Passmore, *Recent Philosophers* (London: Duckworth, 1988), p. 92). In this essay I have restricted myself to considering only Putnam’s “internal realist” period, as it during this period that the debates with Rorty that I shall be considering occurred. Addressing Putnam’s revised, contemporary views, and how they may provoke a re-evaluation of this debate was not possible within the scope provided by the current work, though offers a promising avenue for further research.

In Part I of this essay, I shall attempt to draw together the criticisms of “Realist” accounts of truth that are offered by both Rorty and Putnam in order to indicate the striking similarities between the two philosophers in this regard. Both reject philosophical attempts to identify how and when we are discovering a singular true description of the world, which they see as misleading attempts to achieve a detached, and ultimately unobtainable, God’s Eye View of the World. The debates between Rorty and Putnam that shall be discussed in Parts II and III can therefore be seen as attempts to understand the notion of truth once the traditional picture of a correspondence with a single, fixed set of language-independent “objects” has been abandoned.

Following this attempt to draw Rorty and Putnam’s views together somewhat, in Part II I shall discuss the most conspicuous grounds for suggesting that these philosophers are fundamentally opposed: Putnam’s accusation that Rorty’s view boils down to nothing more than self-refuting cultural relativism. In this section I will argue that such a criticism portrays Rorty as providing a reductive definition of truth when this is not his project, and hence fails to appreciate Rorty’s attempt to move beyond an essentialist conception of truth. By then emphasizing the way in which *both* philosophers recognise a vital separation between truth and current justification, I will indicate how and why each avoids the type of truth-relativism that conflates these two concepts.

While holding to positions far more subtle than such a straightforward relativism, both Rorty and Putnam do nevertheless undertake to provide an account of truth that importantly ties this notion to those of rational acceptability or justification. In Part III, I shall consider a problem that must be addressed by such a conception of truth. This problem is raised by Putnam in the course of their debates, and concerns a possible scenario in which a neo-Nazi revolution seizes control of society. If this were to successfully occur, many utterly abhorrent beliefs would come to be viewed as perfectly justified by the citizens of this state. So it would seem that a satisfactory neopragmatist account must not take this form of justification to be appropriate for, or relevant to, the attribution of truth. I will suggest that despite Rorty and Putnam’s apparent disagreements on this particular matter, their respective arguments provide potentially complementary insights, for they both suggest that our understanding of

truth is aligned with the specific kind of justification sought after in the giving and taking of reasons in open debate.

PART I – anti-Realism

Introduction

When reading Rorty and Putnam’s work, it often seems that the closer their opinions converge, the more they insist on emphasizing the points of contention by which they are separated. When not directly engaged with one another, both broadly criticize the same philosophical tendencies and employ similar theoretical approaches, and yet this apparent common ground is punctuated by frequent reminders that each finds aspects of the other’s work completely untenable. Clarifying this situation and identifying the precise nature of their differences thus poses a major challenge for my current work. I intend to commence by focusing almost exclusively on the complementary aspects of their respective thought, as hopefully this will establish a useful groundwork for my later attempts to explore some of the more specific issues that divide the two thinkers. In this section, I will therefore be tracing the resemblance between Rorty and Putnam’s attacks on “Realist” accounts of truth. Loosely speaking, this “Realism” with a capital “R” that Rorty and Putnam both criticize is the attempt to construe “truth” as denoting a correspondence between human beliefs and an absolute, fixed, external “way that things are.”³ This Realism could be characterized in terms of the following three theses (1) That the world consists of a fixed totality of mind-independent objects; (2) That there is exactly one true and complete description of “the way the world is”; (3) That truth involves some correspondence between words or thoughts and these objects.⁴ In this section, I shall be focusing on the way in which both philosophers see this as an attempt to escape from the contingency of our place in the world, by bestowing an absolute validity on certain human representations. By first recognising this significant parallel between the two, we will be able to regard their subsequent disagreements as indicative of a divergence in their vision of what must be salvaged from the notion of truth once a “Realist” conception is disavowed, instead of seeing these disagreements as indicative of a fundamental disconnect between their entire approaches.

³ The Realism with a capital “R” that Rorty and Putnam criticise is a rather broad manner of conceiving of *what truth is* that they both find to be endemic in the philosophical tradition. Consequently, their characterizations of this position do not provide a direct description of the views of any one particular philosopher. Instead, they object to the general philosophical tendency to think of truth in terms of an absolute, singular description of the way the world is. Such a tendency could be seen as a prominent feature of many philosophical approaches to truth from Platonism through to modern Scientific Realism.

⁴ Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) p. 49

Admittedly, this approach to their work belies many of the current accounts of Rorty and Putnam's disagreements, as many commentators argue that the two are separated by more fundamental, irreconcilable differences.⁵ However, others have suggested that these differences are routinely overstated, and that Rorty and Putnam's views are almost inseparable.⁶ Broadly speaking, in this paper I aim to steer a middle ground between these two interpretations. I wish to suggest that both philosophers are indeed engaged in a compatible and complementary attempt to reassess the notion of truth, and that their significant similarities in this regard should not be overlooked. Nevertheless, I believe that their explicit disagreements do merit further examination; for they provide revealing and suggestive insights into some of the concerns associated with this neopragmatist project in general.

The difficult task of interpreting the differences between Rorty and Putnam is not particularly aided by their own explicit verdicts on the matter, which if anything perhaps suggest that their disagreements are more significant than I intend to argue. While Putnam does recognise that his "view has points of agreement with some of the views Richard Rorty has defended,"⁷ he also consistently claims that Rorty's position collapses into a self-refuting relativism, and has thus made sure to emphasize his distance from Rorty's work.⁸ For his part, Rorty also acknowledges that they share significant similarities, even going as far as to state that his position is "almost, but not quite, the same as...[Putnam's]... internalist conception."⁹ However, he too feels that there is an ineliminable and fundamental difference between their views, which

⁵ For a particularly damning account of Rorty's position as separate from, and inferior to, Putnam's, see Jennifer Case, "Rorty and Putnam, Separate and Unequal," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 33 (1995), pp. 169-184. Case argues that "either [Rorty's] ethnocentrism is fraught with self-referential difficulties, or his noncognitivism puts him at a philosophical disadvantage" (p. 183). Putnam himself seems to concur with this verdict, for he commends Case's article as an "excellent analysis and criticism of Rorty's arguments" in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert B. Brandom (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), p. 87, endnote 14.

⁶ For a defense of Rorty that aligns his views closely with those of Putnam, see Paul D. Forster's "What Is at Stake Between Putnam and Rorty," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52, no. 3 (1992): 585-603. Barry Allen also offers an excellent commentary on Putnam and Rorty's debates in "Critical Notice of Hilary Putnam," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 24, no. 4 (1994): 665-688, in which he concludes that there is "little to choose between Rorty's ethnocentric pragmatism and Putnam's 'realism with a human face'" (p. 684).

⁷ Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, p. ix.

⁸ As we shall see, this accusation is particularly explicit in Putnam's *Why Reason Can't Be Naturalized*, but Rorty is also associated with extravagant and inconsistent forms of "Relativism" in *Reason, Truth and History* (p. 216) and *Realism with a Human Face* (pp. 18, 125, 139, 200).

⁹ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 24.

he attributes to Putnam's temptation to slip back towards a disconcertingly "substantial" notion of truth.¹⁰ So, while the lines that separate these two thinkers may seem a little blurred and difficult to discern, there nevertheless appears to be a prominent conviction in their work that, *somewhere*, there is a fundamental clash of intuitions prising them apart. Rorty is accused of an irresponsible streak that leads him to take his critique of Realism too far, and thus descend into relativism, while Putnam is criticized for not following his rejection of Realism through far enough, and instead lapsing back into the metaphysical picture they both seek to dispel.

In this section, I wish to establish the groundwork necessary to suggest that these apparently rather devastating differences only emerge given a substantial common ground and prior agreement between the two. It thus seems a shame that their subsequent disagreements have often managed to overshadow and obscure this considerable common purpose. In this section, then, I shall be portraying Rorty and Putnam as engaging in the same effort to move away from a conception of truth that they see as unhelpful and deceptive, and as encouraging an understanding of truth that is in line with a more humble, deflated recognition of human contingency and finitude.

Realism as a flight from the human

Rorty and Putnam are both suspicious of accounts of "truth" that see this term as denoting a successful correspondence between human beliefs or assertions on the one hand, and some fixed, absolute, external "way the world is" on the other. These accounts, loosely referred to here as forms of "Realism," entail an absolute, essentialist notion of truth. Under this conception, propositions are made true by being a part of "Nature's Own" singular, timelessly correct, vocabulary, and human inquiry is conceived of as striving to attain alignment with this external standard. Both Rorty and Putnam see this picture as indicative of a regrettable tendency in philosophy to shy away from, rather than embrace, the contingent nature of human knowledge. This leads them to criticize this conception of truth as an attempt to find comfort in an ultimately inconceivable, all-encompassing God's Eye View of the

¹⁰ See, for instance, Rorty's "hunch" that "Putnam still suffers from a nagging 'realistic intuition.'" In "Putnam on Truth," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* vol. 52, no. 2 (1992), p. 418

world.¹¹ Consequently, in their work, the motivation behind these Realist conceptions of truth comes under intense scrutiny.

It seems to me that an important facet of both Rorty and Putnam's approaches to the notion of "truth" is their emphasis on knowledge claims being historically and culturally situated. That is, both agree that what is considered to constitute a justified belief, and therefore taken as "true" evolves over time, and that such beliefs, and the processes by which they are attained, are constantly up for re-evaluation.¹² It is this recognition of the contingency of human knowledge claims that seems to be at the heart of both of their work. Both highlight that one can only ever work from within a particular culture's descriptions and understandings, and that later these understandings often come to be improved, refuted or revised. Given this, we are therefore obliged to acknowledge that the vocabularies with which we are furnished in any given period may later be found to be inadequate, and that for this reason they must be understood as to some extent only correct for a certain time and place.

Realist accounts of truth can consequently be seen as a reaction to, and denial of, the instability and insecurity that this situation seems to imply. The apparent transience of human knowledge can be overcome if truth is established as a fixed, enduring property of certain privileged propositions.¹³ Thus the notion of "truth" is analysed as denoting a relation between human discourses and a permanent, stable, external Reality. Rorty and Putnam seem to suggest that it is this craving for absolute correctness that motivates, for instance, modern philosophy's preoccupation with the epistemological project of identifying how and when our vocabularies most closely

¹¹ Putnam frequently attacks a "God's Eye view of truth, or, more accurately, a No Eye view of truth" as a conception of "truth as independent of observers altogether" (*Reason, Truth and History*, p. 50) Rorty, for his part, claims that "no description of how things are from a God's-eye point of view, no skyhook provided by some contemporary or yet-to-be-developed science, is going to free us from the contingency of having been acculturated as we were" (*Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 13)

¹² In *Realism with a Human Face*, Putnam lays out a useful list of five principles that underly his understanding of "warranted assertability" and asks Rorty to indicate those that he accepts, and those that he rejects (p. 21). Rorty immediately indicates that he is in vigorous agreement with (3) "Our norms and standards of warranted assertibility are historical products; they evolve in time," (4) "Our norms and standards always reflect our interests and values," and (5) "Our norms and standards of *anything* – including warranted assertibility – are capable of reform" ("Putnam and the Relativist Menace", p. 449)

¹³ Rorty provides a fascinating suggestion that this craving for an absolute objectivity first arises upon the startling and unsettling recognition of provinciality provoked by encountering foreign cultures with radically divergent beliefs and practices from one's own, in: "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 21-34

approach the world *as it is in itself*.¹⁴ They view this as an attempt to find something external to our practices that holds the power to make our claims true, as an attempt to construe the justification of a belief in terms of a transaction between “the knowing subject” and “Reality” rather than in terms of a sociological process within a human community.¹⁵ Thus Realism, according to Rorty and Putnam, is a fanciful escape from the contingency of our position in the world.

Rorty and Putnam thus argue that, despite its historical prominence, the metaphor of correspondence with Reality leads to a misleading and unproductive framework for understanding the term “truth.” They emphasize that both the correspondence theory of truth and the epistemological problematic with which it is tied up are optional, and hence that an alternative approach to understanding this term is both possible and preferable.

It seems to me that both philosophers are best read as primarily engaged in a broadly therapeutic attempt to display that the conception of “truth” as metaphysical correspondence is both unnecessary and unhelpful, and indeed even a form of self-deception. Both begin by emphasizing the difficulties and persistent failures with which this particular manner of theorizing about truth has been met historically.¹⁶ They then are crucially concerned to explain why this approach continues to be so intuitively appealing, in spite of the lack of clear insight it has been able to provide. By coming to recognise why this picture is so compelling, it seems that they hope to provide the critical distance necessary to move towards a new, more fruitful account of “truth.” Their accounts attempt to explain why an absolute notion of truth has been so historically predominant, and why we find it so hard to give up. Through these diagnoses, both Rorty and Putnam attempt to wean us from the desire to see our

¹⁴ Putnam claims that “the notion of a ‘thing in itself’ makes no sense... [not because] ‘we cannot know the things in themselves’ [but because] we don’t know what we are talking about when we talk about ‘things in themselves.’” *The Many Faces of Realism*, p. 36

¹⁵ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 9

¹⁶ Putnam, for instance, states that “the enterprises of providing a *foundation* for Being and Knowledge – a successful description of the Furniture of the World...have disastrously failed, and we could not have seen this until these enterprises had been given time to prove their futility” (*Realism with a Human Face*, p 19) Rorty, meanwhile, claims that his “*only* argument for thinking that these intuitions and vocabularies should be eradicated is that the intellectual tradition to which they belong has not paid off, is more trouble than it is worth, has become an incubus” (*Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. xxxvii)

vocabularies as containing propositions that are rendered absolute truths because of a correspondence with Reality.

Rorty and Putnam's therapeutic work

A scientific image of the world

Tracing the specific impetus behind the Realist accounts of truth that have come to dominate modern philosophy seems a common theme of Rorty and Putnam's work. In particular, both importantly link this occurrence with the seventeenth and eighteenth century attempts to come to grips with the New Science.¹⁷ This analysis seems designed to imply that such an approach to the notion of "truth" is neither compulsory nor necessarily intuitive, but instead the product of rather specific circumstances. In turn, this suggests that it is a philosophical approach that could be superseded, and replaced by a more modest account, because it does not represent a perennial, timeless problematic. Both Rorty and Putnam suggest that, in the early modern period, the stunning and unprecedented success of the new scientific discourse precipitated an epochal shift in the intellectual climate. Rorty proposes that modern philosophy, in its origins, was in fact caught up in the struggle to replace rational theology with empirical experimentation as the primary model for inquiry. Thus the picture of the scientific method accessing an absolute, fixed, external truth by accurately reflecting Reality should be understood as an academic self-image that played an important part in the process of "liberating intellectual life from ecclesiastical institutions."¹⁸ Consequently, the notion of truth as correspondence should be seen as importantly influenced by, and closely tied to, the attempt to "make the intellectual world safe for Copernicus and Galileo."¹⁹ This account of truth therefore seems to derive its historical importance from legitimating a shift of attention towards empirical inquiry and mechanical explanations of the world.

In the light of this account of its historical emergence, the Realist account of truth therefore loses an element of its apparently overwhelming intuitive appeal. While it

¹⁷ In his discussion of this particular heritage of our philosophical problematics in *The Many Faces of Realism* (pp. 6-11), Putnam claims that "The kind of scientific realism we have inherited from the seventeenth century has not lost all its prestige even yet, but it has saddled us with a disastrous picture of the world" (p. 8) In giving this brief account here though, I have opted to draw from Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

¹⁸ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 131

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

can still be seen as contributing importantly to a historical development that was enormously productive and influential, the analysis provided by both Rorty and Putnam leaves open the possibility that such a philosophical approach may now have ultimately outlived its usefulness. By showing that modern attempts to understand truth as correspondence with Reality have this very particular heritage, this picture seems to relinquish the grasp it had in seeming to provide obligatory and timeless problems for philosophy.

Given this historical account, Rorty and Putnam suggest that the considerable successes achieved by the scientific community should therefore not be seen as indicative of science's ability to inform us of how the world is *in itself*.²⁰ Rorty counters this suggestion by arguing that we should take this success simply as recommending these particular practices and vocabularies as useful tools, as liberating and empowering ways of talking about and interacting with the natural world.²¹ For his part, Putnam too argues that the scientific vocabulary is just one of many descriptions, and while it is useful in particular contexts and for particular purposes, this should not afford it an epistemological or metaphysical primacy. They both thus suggests that we should refrain from paying scientific practices the additional, unnecessary and empty compliment that they "accurately portray reality." When we have a deflated conception of science as a particularly effective tool, or as a useful set of descriptions in given contexts and circumstances, the epistemological problem of elaborating how "true" statements successfully correspond with Reality simply dissipates. Clearing our account of "truth," and our understanding of science's ability to discover "truths," from this essentialism thus continues the still incomplete Enlightenment task of understanding our relation to the world in entirely humanistic, deflated terms.

²⁰ Sadly, however, Putnam argues that the discovery that many of our commonsense notions, such as, for instance, colour, were not recognized in mathematical physics has led to the disastrous "dualistic picture of the physical world and its primary qualities, on the one hand, and the mind and its sense data, on the other, that philosophers have been wrangling over since the time of Galileo" *The Many Faces of Realism* (p. 6-7) For one of Rorty's criticisms of this dichotomy in which science is seen as keeping us in touch with something beyond ourselves see: "Science as Solidarity" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, pp. 35-45

²¹ For instance, Rorty remarks that "modern science does not enable us to cope because it corresponds, it just plain enables us to cope" in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. xvii

A theological image of the world

In light of this analysis, both Rorty and Putnam suggest that the enduring appeal of Realist accounts of truth can be partially attributed to the lingering, quasi-religious worldview they evoke. In this way, they suggest that the conception of truth as metaphysical correspondence deceptively retains, only now in a subtly transmuted form, an appeal to the absolute validity of a divine perspective. Putnam thus argues that the immense appeal of the idea that scientific inquiry could provide an equivalent to such a perspective has dictated philosophy's response to its emergence. Seeing the success of some beliefs as indicative of a correspondence with a singular, fixed Reality is alluring and compelling because it evokes a perspective that is detached from any particular, contingent, human understanding.

In fact, Putnam argues that the deceptiveness of such a picture has led to philosophy's utter failure to adequately respond to the actual developments that have occurred in the scientific community. In particular, Putnam suggests that quantum theory, which relies on a "cut between the observer and system" in its method, does not possess the features of the Newtonian *Weltanschauung* that may have suggested that science could provide a "God's Eye View" of the world."²² As a consequence, he argues that this significant development in contemporary physics has either been largely ignored by philosophy, or received a philosophical re-interpretation, in the Many-Worlds Interpretation, that re-conceives of the theory as if it provides a familiar and comforting external description of the *entire cosmological universe*. The temptation towards conceiving of truth in terms of an absolute, detached perspective has thus resulted either in a complete failure to acknowledge the actual procedures of contemporary scientific practice, or forced our hand into producing "metaphysically dramatic" accounts of the world that seem "more like something from the latest science fiction best-seller than like a theory expounded by serious scientists."²³

Underlying this inability to adequately account for the procedures involved in our actual forms of inquiry is, according to Rorty and Putnam, the failure of Realism to acknowledge the influence that the specific intensions, interests, values and purposes

²² Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, p. 7

²³ Ibid.

of human inquirers have on the truths that are established in the course of their inquiry. Thus Putnam claims that “the mind does not simply ‘copy’ a world which admits of description by One True Theory... the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world.”²⁴ It is the active participation of the inquirer in forming beliefs and claims that can even be taken to be “true” that is lost on the Realist picture, which sees true beliefs as caused by a direct, one-way, “copying” of Reality. Both Rorty and Putnam thus argue that the misleading idea that there is One True Theory of the world only continues to suggest itself to us because it contains the last manifestation of an “Objective” spectator’s all-encompassing gaze, and thus promises to lift us out of contingency and into a realm of absolute correctness.²⁵

realism with a small “r”

Both Putnam and Rorty suggest that understanding truth in terms of a perspective that is “objective” in the sense of being “from no particular point of view” is a fundamentally misleading paradigm for understanding what claims of truth are intended to convey. They therefore attempt to bring into disrepute the conception of truth as denoting a substantial metaphysical relation between bare reality and assertions by emphasizing the penetration of human language and categorization into all of our forms of knowledge. For Putnam, this suggests that many of the pressing problems that arise for Realism are unnecessary, as:

*the ‘same world’ can be described as consisting of tables and chairs (and these described as coloured, possessing dispositional properties, etc.) in one version, and as consisting of space-time regions, particles and fields etc. in other versions*²⁶

without any major dilemma arising as to which of these captures a single, fixed truth. Truth does not necessarily have to be singular or absolute, but can be attributed to these various descriptions depending on their success and adequacy in an appropriate context. These alternative descriptions should be seen therefore as merely different

²⁴ Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, p. xi

²⁵ Rorty describes this as “the impossible attempt to step outside our skins – the traditions, linguistic and other, within which we do our thinking and self-criticism – and compare ourselves with something absolute” in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. xix

²⁶ Putnam, *The Many Faces Realism*, p. 20

ways of formalizing or reconstructing our language, rather than competing attempts to describe a language independent set of objects.²⁷

In contrast to this Realist project, Putnam and Rorty see themselves as “realists” with a small “r” in the rather uncontroversial and unremarkable sense that it is no part of their project to question that a causal interaction occurs between humans and a material world that is causally and logically independent from us.²⁸ Both insist that our theories, statements, and beliefs are ways of coping with, dealing with and interacting with the world; what they deny is that they can be understood as attempts to construct a singular, accurate representation of it. This approach entails a conceptual pluralism in which there may be multiple correct descriptions of the same situation, with each description positing incommensurable basic properties.²⁹

Given this critique of Realism, we are left with an understanding of truth not in terms of correspondence with the world as it is in itself, but rather in terms of the appropriateness and success of a claim given a particular situation and context. Our understanding of truth is therefore brought back down to more human parameters. However, it seems important that this critique does not lead to a “relativism” in which truth is simply and reductively equated with current acceptability. Despite our attributions of truth being importantly tied to criteria of appropriateness and justifiability, our understanding of truth cannot simply end here. For this would fail to capture our intuition that truth is separate from, and superior to, merely current justification. Indeed, as we shall see, Putnam argues that the relativist conflation of truth with current justification ends up as a self-refuting and unintelligible position. Understanding truth as importantly tied to the rational acceptability amongst peers without being reduced to relativism in regards to truth is a major task for both Rorty and Putnam. This shall form the major theme of Part II

²⁷ Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, p. 27

²⁸ Rorty acknowledges that we are in touch with the world “in a sense of ‘in touch with’ which does not mean ‘representing reasonable accurately’ but simply ‘caused by and causing’” *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 9

²⁹ Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, p. 40

Conclusion

In this section I have attempted to track Rorty and Putnam's rejection of the notion of metaphysical correspondence that has preoccupied Realist accounts of truth. This rejection entails a new approach that understands our uses of the term "true" in terms of justificatory interactions between peers. Rorty and Putnam's subsequent disagreements, which shall be examined in Parts II and III, are thus concerned with which features of the term "true" must be salvaged subsequent to this abandonment of Realism. It is only in the context of this substantial common purpose that these later differences, that shall now be examined, are fully intelligible.

PART II – truth and justification

Introduction

As we have seen, the work of both Rorty and Putnam is suggestive of an alternative philosophical approach to the notion of truth. Instead of understanding truth in terms of an external relation between certain statements and bare particulars in the world, they propose that we investigate the way in which appeals to “truth” influence our forms of conversation and inquiry. It often seems, however, that the cordial agreement between the two only stretches this far, and here sharply breaks off. This perception is particularly encouraged by Putnam, who on many occasions makes a concerted effort to distance himself from Rorty’s views, which he sees as simply equating truth with justification, and therefore collapsing into a deeply contradictory form of relativism.³⁰ In this section, I intend first and foremost on addressing this claim that Rorty’s pragmatism is trivially self-refuting. There seems to me to be significant merit in treating this matter prior to, and separately from, any discussions of the further details of Rorty’s particularly ethnocentric position. This is in part because the accusation of relativism, if correct, would presumably drain Rorty’s work of any further philosophical interest. Additionally, however, I feel that the issue of relativism actually provides a revealing platform for understanding both Rorty *and* Putnam’s accounts of truth. As we have seen in Part I, *both* of their attempts to overcome absolute accounts of truth hinge upon a stark recognition of human contingency, and the relativity this brings. Even in the paper most critical of Rorty’s relativism, Putnam acknowledges that “Traditions, cultures and history deserve to be emphasized, as they are not by those who seek Archimedean points in metaphysics or epistemology,”³¹ and his account too rests on this relativity. The delicate balance required to embrace relativity without collapsing into a full-blown, self-refuting truth-relativism thus demands close examination. This section could therefore be read as attempting to clarify the manner in which Rorty and Putnam go about avoiding complete relativism about truth.

³⁰ It may seem somewhat unproductive to retrospectively rehearse Putnam’s arguments here and then go on to provide a response that draws upon comments made by Rorty that were only published at a later date, particularly as Rorty seems to have become progressively clearer on this matter as his thought developed. However, the association of Rorty with relativism recurs throughout Putnam’s later work, even after Rorty had produced the arguments that I am going to be drawn from here. See for instance *Realism with a Human Face* (pp. 18, 125, 139, 200)

³¹ Putnam, “Why Reason Can’t Be Naturalized,” p. 14

The relativism fallacy

Putnam on many occasions argues that Rorty holds an untenable view of the relationship between truth and justification. In *Why Reason Can't Be Naturalized*, he sets out to demonstrate the deep and unavoidable problems with that he takes to be Rorty's "[identification of] truth with right assertability by the standards of one's cultural peers."³² Let us call this preceding identification the "Relativism Thesis," so that it can now be stated in the form of the following definition; "To say that a statement is true is just to say that it is accepted by the particular culture in which it is made." Now, this definition of "truth" clearly has some very serious flaws. I intend here on outlining three of the problems with this thesis that Putnam has raised. However, all three difficulties are very closely related, and for this reason it is perhaps somewhat misleading that they shall be treated separately. In fact, underlying all of these various difficulties is what I take to be a central, fundamental problem with the Relativist Thesis; its attempt to provide a *reductive definition* of truth. As we shall see later, there are considerable reasons to doubt that this very enterprise of providing a definition of "truth" is advisable.

The first problem with the Relativism Thesis, and Putnam particularly emphasizes this point, is that there is a dissonance between its attempt to provide a general definition of the term "truth," and the restricted critical perspective that is entailed by its relativist conclusions. It is this inconsistency that leads to relativism being simply self-refuting, or at least a deeply contradictory doctrine to hold. The Relativism Thesis clearly intends to provide a definition of Truth *simpliciter*, to say something significant about the application of the term "truth" *in general*. However, it is vital to notice that it also asserts that a statement can only be true relative to the culture in which it is made. Being such a statement *itself*, the Relativism Thesis by its own lights cannot therefore function as a general definition of truth at all.

This is particularly well illustrated when one attempts to use the Relativist Thesis for what is presumably its intended purpose; to describe the truth claims of another culture. Let us assume that, for instance, a contemporary relativist claims that: "*the*

³² Putnam, "Why Reason Can't Be Naturalized," p. 9

Jews are solely responsible for all of Germany's social, cultural and economic problems' was true in Nazi Germany." If we are to take the Relativism Thesis seriously, however, we must apply it to the relativist's claim itself, so that the relativist's claim will now become: "the statement '*the Jews are solely responsible for all of Germany's social, cultural and economic problems* was true in the time of the Third Reich' is true in twenty-first century Western culture" (the culture in which the relativist claim was made).³³ Consequently, the Relativism Thesis entails a situation in which the content of every statement must be re-interpreted so that it reflects nothing but the culture in which it was made. The relativist's claim ceases to say anything substantial about Nazi Germany, and the relativist is reduced to making claims about what is accepted in his own culture. In fact, if the relativist is to be consistent, he must apply the Relativism Thesis to itself, so that it will now only read: "the statement '*To say that a statement is true is just to say that it is accepted by the particular culture in which it is made*' is true by the standards of twenty-first century Western culture." Consequently, it quickly becomes apparent that the Relativism Thesis is incapable of saying anything interesting or useful about the way in which truth functions across different cultures at all. When relativism itself is relativised, it becomes viscerally self-defeating. Indeed "our grasp on what the position even means begins to wobble."³⁴

As Putnam elsewhere notes, these prominent and well known failures of the Relativism Thesis have resulted in its rejection by the majority of Rorty's cultural peers.³⁵ Strikingly, this very lack of acceptance should also render the Thesis formally incorrect by its own standards.³⁶ Roughly, this forms the second refutation with which the Relativism Thesis could be met. If the truth of the Relativist Thesis is indeed dependent upon its acceptance within the culture in which it is made, then in actual fact it turns out to be quite simply false. For there are almost no twenty-first century Western intellectuals who agree that the Relativism Thesis is an adequate definition

³³ Putnam, "Why Reason Can't Be Naturalized," p. 11

³⁴ Putnam, *Reason Truth and History*, p. 121

³⁵ This leads him to note with perplexity that "the cultural relativists themselves do not stop believing that their own views are right just because they cannot get the agreement of *their* "cultural peers" that their relativist views are right" Putnam, "On Truth," in *How Many Questions: Essays in Honor of Sidney Morgenbesser*, ed. Leigh S. et al Cauman, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company), p. 49

³⁶ "Do the standards of Rorty's culture (which he identifies as 'European culture') really require Rorty's "cultural peers" to assent to what he has written? Fortunately the answer is negative." Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, p. 125

of truth. Therefore, just in virtue of this lack of recognition, the Relativism Thesis must be acknowledged by any consistent relativist to be false. Conceiving of truth simply and exclusively in terms of current acceptance amongst cultural peers is deeply unsatisfactory, because it appears that the majority of our current cultural peers just will not accept a majoritarian account of truth.

Apart from the self referential difficulties just discussed, a third and final major reason why relativism is roundly rejected is that it conflates truth entirely with justification. The Relativism Thesis therefore fails to adequately account for the ways in which the predicate “true” is actually used, for it fails to acknowledge the separation between truth and justification that is a vital feature of our use of both of these terms. For, as Putnam points out, it is *always* sensible to contrast truth with acceptance amongst cultural peers. This can be demonstrated by the eminently sensible assertion: “While it may have been considered a completely justified claim at the time, it was still not true that the Jews were solely responsible for Germany’s fiscal problems in the 1930s.” In this prominent usage, the term “true” is employed in such a way that it explicitly outruns justification amongst cultural peers at a particular time. An important function of the term “true” is that it can be contrasted with and set against justification, and in this way indicate the prospect of a perspective beyond that of the contemporary cultural consensus. For it is always possible to make broad statements of the sort: “What you say may be perfectly acceptable to everyone, and considered completely justified, but still it may not be *true*.” The definition provided by the Relativism Thesis fails to account for this important feature of the term “true.”

Rorty’s rejection of truth-relativism

Relativism in regards to truth does not therefore appear to provide a very promising approach to understanding this notion at all. So, the fact that Rorty is frequently associated with such a view should be a serious cause for concern. If the Relativism Thesis is indeed an accurate and exhaustive expression of Rorty’s position, then his views would be severely flawed and probably not worth any further consideration. However, from a rather early point - indeed, even before the publication of *Why Reason Can’t Be Naturalized* - Rorty has explicitly recognised that relativism in regards to truth is self-refuting and deeply flawed, and consequently suggested that

his own position should in no way be associated with relativism.³⁷ So, why do these accusations continue to be frequently levelled against him?

The accusation of relativism seems most appropriate as a response to an unguarded passage in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in which Rorty criticizes the philosophical tradition for trying 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.”³⁸ Despite this off-hand remark perhaps deserving a little more leniency in interpretation than it has received, it does indeed seem rather suggestive of the crude Relativism Thesis outlined above. So, if Rorty’s account of truth was exhausted by this apparent identification of “truth” with “what our peers will let us get away with saying” this certainly would be problematic. However, when read in context, it is evident that this passage is simply intended to encourage a philosophical treatment of truth as a sociological matter. The “something more” that Rorty’s polemic is directed against in this passage is quite explicitly the conception of truth as metaphysical correspondence that was outlined in Part I, which Putnam similarly rejects.

Nevertheless, given the outrage that the aforementioned passage has provoked, Rorty’s view is definitely in need of clarification. Importantly, it must be shown that Rorty is able to recognise that, this time on a sociological level, truth must be understood as something more than simply “what our peers will let us get away with saying.” And Rorty himself even appears to have later acknowledged as much, for he concedes that Putnam’s arguments against Relativism are “very effective against some of [his] own (hasty, dumb) earlier remarks about truth.”³⁹ It is now our task to examine how Rorty subsequently clarifies his view so that it is able to avoid these worrying, comprehensive refutations. I believe that an insightful framework for pursuing this task is provided by focusing on Rorty’s rejection of the entire project to

³⁷ “If there *were* any relativists, they would, of course, be easy to refute. One would merely use some variant of the self-referential arguments Socrates used against Protagoras. But such neat little dialectical strategies only work against lightly-sketched fictional characters.” Rorty, “Pragmatism, Relativism and Irrationalism,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association*, LIII (1980): 719-738, reprinted in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p.167

³⁸ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 176

³⁹ Richard Rorty, “Putnam on Truth,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52, no. 2 (1992) p. 418.

define “truth.” This refusal to define truth leads to Rorty’s subsequent emphasis on the various different *uses* to which the term “true” is put. A great deal of the misinterpretations of Rorty’s view therefore seem to stem from the attempt to discern a singular definition of truth in his work when in fact it seems that he intentionally avoids ever providing one. Rorty should not be read as claiming that the predicates “is true” and “is culturally accepted” are equivalent or co-extensive, for this pre-supposes that one of his major goals is to answer the question “What is Truth?” And when in fact we take a closer look at his work, we find that it is precisely this question that he spends a great deal of time warning against.

In Rorty’s work, there are numerous warnings against the urge to provide a definition of truth. In fact, he appears to argue that this urge may be the product of the misleading grammatical form that attributions of truth take. Significantly, this suggests that the “absolute” theories of truth discussed in Part I may be importantly driven by a misinterpretation of the function that truth plays in our linguistic practices. In holding a familiar subject-predicate grammatical form, “*p* is true” appears at first glance to be an instance in which the predicate “...is true” attributes a specific property to the proposition *p*.⁴⁰ Presumably this can be put down to the fact that predicates such as “...is red,” “...is triangular” “...is ugly” and “...is wooden” describe features of their referent, or, in other words, indicate a property that the described object possesses. It is therefore tempting to assume that the predicate “...is true” ascribes a property to propositions in much the same way. If this assumption is made, it would then appear that philosophical analysis may be able to provide insights into both 1) what the characteristic and distinguishing features of this property are, and 2) how specific propositions come to possess this property and others don’t. Consequently providing a definition of truth presents itself as a pressing and vital philosophical task. In contrast to this traditional interpretation, however, Rorty argues that truth is “not the sort of thing one should expect to have a philosophically interesting theory about.”⁴¹ This is because it is a mistake to see truth as a substantial property at all.

⁴⁰ This general approach to understanding Rorty’s account of truth was suggested to me by Robert Brandom’s “Pragmatism, Phenomenalism, and Truth Talk,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 12 (1987): 75-93.

⁴¹ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p.xiii

It may be helpful here to draw on an analogy that Rorty makes between the terms “good” and “true.” Rorty proposes that our use of the predicate “...is good,” should not be taken as implying that there is a property called “The Good” about which we can have fruitful theories, but instead should be interpreted as an act of complimenting certain actions. In the same vein, Rorty suggests that we should generally understand attributions of “...is true” as instances in which one indicates that one is willing to assert and act upon a certain proposition. This draws us away from the temptation to see the term “true” as designating a relation between certain propositions and a mysterious entity named “the Truth.” Rorty has notoriously expressed this distinction in terms of the difference between “uncapitalized truth” and “capitalized Truth.” We should disavow the attempt to see our frequent uses of “...is true” as implying a far more substantial “capitalized Truth,” which is a “proper name of [an] object – [a] goal which can be loved with all one’s heart and soul and mind, [an] object of ultimate concern.”⁴² The preoccupation with Truth as an object leads to a dead-end, because Rorty argues it is unlikely that there is anything useful and general that could be said about what makes all good actions good, or all true statements true.

Thus Rorty concludes that:

*...the history of attempts to isolate the True or the Good, or to define the word “true” or “good,” supports [the] suspicion that there is no interesting work to be done in this area.*⁴³

This analysis, then, seems if anything to complement, rather than crumble under Putnam’s arguments against relativist theories of truth. Putnam’s argument is precisely designed to display the impossibility of defining truth in terms of another property, whilst Rorty’s insights also indicate that it is a mistake to try to define Truth as a property at all.⁴⁴ In taking a proposition to be “true,” one is expressing or establishing one’s own relation to the proposition in a manner analogous to instances

⁴² Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. xiv

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Putnam also seems to recognise that one of the major problems with Relativism is its attempt to provide a definition of truth. In order for the definition that the Relativism Thesis provides not to be relativized, it must be understood to be expressed from an absolute, God’s Eye Perspective, and hence not be subject to the consequences of its own doctrine. Thus Putnam claims that “Relativism, just as much as Realism, assumes that one can stand within one’s language and outside it at the same time.” (*Realism with a Human Face*, p. 23)

in which one takes an action to be “good,” rather than recognising some independent property that this proposition already possesses. Therefore attempts to define Truth as a property that propositions hold will inevitably lead to untenable reductionism, because they misunderstand the function that “...is true” plays in language.

Consequently, I believe that Rorty is best read as urging us to resist the question “What is Truth?” in general. His views seem most sensibly approached when he is seen as not providing an answer to this question at all, but instead offering an alternative approach to understanding our use of the term “true.” Central to Rorty’s methodology, then, is a resistance to the philosophical craving for an *analysis* of truth. In its place, he proposes a focus on the various *uses* to which the term “true” is put in our linguistic interaction. Focusing on the different *uses* of this term ensures that truth is not identified with some other property or phenomenon. For this would be to provide a reductive definition which, as we have seen, is bound to fail. Instead of providing a definition of truth, a Rortian focus on *uses* of “true” insists that the more important questions to ask are “What function does talk of truth play in our language?” or “What difference does our employment of the term “true” make to our practices?”⁴⁵

Rorty and three uses of “true”

At one point, Rorty helpfully offers a concise list of what he takes to be the three most prominent and important uses of the term “true.” These are: 1) a disquotational use, 2) an endorsing use, and 3) a cautionary use.⁴⁶ In the following discussion I wish to give a brief overview of these three different uses and suggest that, when considered together, they are able to provide an account of truth that overcomes Putnam’s concerns with relativism. Indeed, in his account of the various uses of the term “true,” Rorty recognises the vital distinction between “truth” and “present justification” that Putnam is so dedicated to defending and preserving.

⁴⁵ This approach was suggested to me by Huw Price’s sympathetic engagement with Rorty in “Truth as Convenient Friction,” in *Naturalism and Normativity*, ed. David Macarthur and Mario De Caro, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 229-252. Sadly a consideration of Price’s disagreements with Rorty proved to be outside the scope of this paper.

⁴⁶ Rorty, “Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth” in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 128

The disquotational use

The first of these three uses that I wish to discuss is the disquotational use. This is in part because it seems a somewhat confined, academic (and particularly philosophical) use of the truth predicate. The endorsing and cautionary uses, on the other hand, both feature prominently in our understanding of everyday language, and therefore are perhaps more relevant to our greater interests in this paper on the whole.

The philosophical use of the truth predicate for the purposes of disquotation seems to arise from the observation that the proposition “*p* is true” has the same assertoric force as simply stating “*p*”. This particular function of the truth predicate was perhaps first noted by Frege, who drew attention to the fact that “the sentence ‘I smell the scent of violets’ has the same content as the sentence ‘it is true that I smell the scent of violets.’” Frege thus concluded that “nothing is added to the thought by my ascribing to it the property of truth.”⁴⁷ In one sense, then, this disquotational use of the predicate “...is true” boils down to simply re-asserting a proposition. Nevertheless, this peculiar feature of the truth predicate can be exploited in order to construct interesting metalinguistic statements. In particular, Tarski famously uses this feature of the truth predicate in order to provide commentary on an object language in a metalanguage. In its disquotational use here, “truth” is employed as a device for achieving semantic ascent, so that one can construct T-Sentences of the form: “*Der Schnee ist weiss*” is true if and only if snow is white.⁴⁸

Rorty sees Donald Davidson’s work in particular as employing this use of “true” in order to provide an important continuation of neopragmatism’s anti-metaphysical project.⁴⁹ In Davidson’s work, the meaning of a natural language can be constructed through observing a language user’s interaction with their environment, and employing T-sentences in the process of “radical interpretation.” This methodological approach, which importantly employs the disquotational use of true, allows us to bypass the scheme/content distinction, and conceive of truth in a way in which the

⁴⁷ Gottlob Frege, “Thoughts,” in *Logical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977).

⁴⁸ In Quine’s words, the use of disquotation here “make[s] all the difference between talking about words and talking about snow.” W.V.O Quine, *Philosophy of Logic* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1970).

⁴⁹ Davidson, however, is rather wary of Rorty’s attempts to recruit him into the pragmatist ranks. See “Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth,” or their discussion entitled “Truth Rehabilitated” in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert B. Brandom (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), pp. 65-80

question of losing touch with the world never arises.⁵⁰ Perhaps because of the great importance he attaches to Davidson's work, Rorty thus considers the disquotational use as one of the three most important uses of the word "true."

Putnam however is particularly wary of this "disquotational use" being seen as providing a definitive conclusion to any and all discussions of truth. While he acknowledges that, as far as it goes, it may be helpful for certain projects, Putnam insists that "the idea that the philosophical ideas surrounding the notion of truth have been solved once and for all by the idea of disquotation...is simply an error."⁵¹ Putnam believes that any satisfactory discussion of truth needs to contain a normative account of the notion, as we shall see below. Here, however, I once again do not believe that this marks an irreconcilable difference with Rorty, for he too is not content to leave the philosophical discussion of truth at rest with the disquotational use. In addition, he considers two further important uses that are made of the word "true" in our everyday interactions. In particular, I shall be arguing that Rorty's investigation of the tension between the endorsing and cautionary uses of "true" provides an alternative gloss to Putnam's normative account, and that both are driven by similar considerations of the gap between truth and present justification.

The endorsing use

The endorsing use of truth has already been encountered fairly heavily in this essay. In Part I, it was importantly drawn upon by Rorty in his objections to Realist accounts of truth. Furthermore, the previous discussions of "...is true" being used to indicate a willingness to assert and act upon a certain proposition focused exclusively on this endorsing use of true. Rorty's point in all of these cases is that truth is often simply employed as a term of endorsement. In these instances, calling a belief "true" is just a way of praising and recommending this belief. In focusing on this endorsing use, he follows William James's account of truth as "the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons."⁵² Thus, in its endorsing use, Rorty claims that truth is just "a compliment paid to sentences that

⁵⁰ Sadly, it is outside of the scope of this essay to consider Rorty's fascinating attempts to appropriate Davidson's insights. See, however; "The World Well Lost" in *Consequences of Pragmatism*, pp. 3-18, or even *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 299-311

⁵¹ Putnam, "On Truth," p. 35

⁵² William James, *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 42

seem to be paying their way and that fit in with other sentences which are doing so.”⁵³ We attribute truth to those beliefs that have proved themselves to be expedient and have not resulted in any nasty surprises to date.

As we have seen, this focus on the endorsing use of truth provides a deflationary alternative to absolute theories of truth, for if truth is just a compliment that we give to certain beliefs, this seems to imply that one need not take true beliefs to hold a privileged relation to singular, fixed, external Reality. If we understand truth as an endorsement, then we will see that it is not an explanatory notion; it does not explain why certain beliefs are successful. Rather, it is a compliment that we pay to those beliefs because they *are* successful. For, as Rorty reminds us: “there is no pragmatic difference, no difference that makes a difference, between ‘it works because it’s true’ and ‘it’s true because it works.’”⁵⁴ Rorty’s recommendation that the project to understand what *makes* statements true should be dropped is therefore an important consequence of his discussion of the endorsing use of true.

However, as Rorty warns, if undue emphasis is placed on the endorsing use, there is a temptation to suggest that this provides an exhaustive account of all of our uses of “true” in everyday life. For if truth is understood exclusively as a term of endorsement, then this seems to come close to equating “truth” with “that which is accepted and recommended within a particular culture.” And as Putnam’s arguments above have shown, this sort of conflation is deeply unsatisfactory. It is therefore crucial to recognise a significant, and in many ways inverse, use that is made of truth in our linguistic practices. In addition to the endorsing use, Rorty therefore discusses a further, cautionary use of true. On Rorty’s analysis, this cautionary use holds great importance, for it is the “the neglect of the [cautionary use] [that has] led to the association of pragmatism with relativism”⁵⁵

The cautionary use

The cautionary use of true can be seen as warning against being completely satisfied with present acceptability. Recognising the contrast between the cautionary and

⁵³ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. xxv

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xxix

⁵⁵ Rorty, “Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth,” p. 128

endorsing uses of the term “true” therefore plays an important part in allowing Rorty to avoid relativism. A paradigmatic instance of the cautionary use of true would be that previously discussed in Putnam’s refutation of relativism: “Your belief is currently considered to be perfectly justified, as no one is yet aware of any significant objections or preferable alternatives, but it still perhaps may not be *true*.”⁵⁶ In this cautionary use, truth is therefore contrasted with current acceptability, and indicates the possibility of a type of correctness that is not yet available.

If we take this paradigmatic instance of the cautionary use, and attempt to substitute in the place of “*true*” the reductive definition of truth provided by the Relativism Thesis (“*accepted within this particular culture*”) it will soon become evident just how untenable this definition can be. For the sentence would now read: “Your belief is considered perfectly justified, as no one is currently aware of any significant objections or preferable alternatives, but it still perhaps may not be *accepted within this particular culture*.” And this is a clear contradiction. There seems to be two important lessons that can be immediately drawn from this. First, Rorty’s acknowledgement of the cautionary use of true clearly shows that he recognises that there is a gap between truth and justification, and that he does not wish to reduce truth to current justification. He therefore does not hold to the Relativism Thesis. And secondly, Rorty’s discussion of the various, and in some ways conflicting, *uses* that we make of “true” suggests that providing a singular definition of this term may be an unadvisable attempt to squeeze three quite different and incompatible phenomena under one roof. This would explain the, at times, apparent impossibility of this task at times.

On this reading of Rorty, the cautionary use of true therefore takes on a particular importance. Whilst agreeing that truth is often best understood as an endorsement, Rorty makes a vital contribution to the pragmatist project of understanding truth in terms of its practical significance by recognising an additional use to which truth can be put; providing a caution. When used as a caution, “true” carries a warning against intellectual hubris, an explicit reminder that justification is relative to, and only as good as, the currently accepted beliefs of the community in which it is made. As these

⁵⁶ Rorty, “Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth,” p. 128

beliefs develop and change over time, this justification may well be altered or disintegrate. The cautionary use of true thus provides a warning not to become complacent once a belief has been justified to the current audience. The prominence of this use of “true” thus has a significant impact on our practices, as it is employed as a reminder to keep the avenues of inquiry open, and holds us from a blind and complacent faith in our current practices.

It appears Rorty himself came to recognise the importance of this move as his thought developed, as in his later work he afforded the cautionary use of true an increasing prominence, claiming:

There are many uses for the word ‘true’, but the only one which could not be eliminated from our linguistic practice with relative ease is the cautionary use... We pragmatists... see the cautionary use of the word ‘true’ as flagging a special sort of danger. We use it to remind ourselves that people in different circumstances – people facing future audiences – may not be able to justify the belief which we have triumphantly justified to all the audiences we have encountered.⁵⁷

In his later thought at least, the cautionary use of true therefore seems to be of vital importance to Rorty, as it even seems to be the most ineliminable and significant use of “true.” In this context, the notion of truth functions as a reminder to avoid the dogmatism of being permanently satisfied by the current consensus.⁵⁸ Central to this use is the prospect of audiences that have yet to be encountered. This may be a hypothetical future audience, which possesses insights that have not yet occurred to us, or, as Rorty comments at other times, the prospect of an outsider’s perspective, a strange or foreign way of thinking that we have not yet been exposed to. Indeed, the thrust of the cautionary use of true is reminiscent of Peirce’s emphasis on the importance of creating an ever larger and more widely encompassing community of inquirers. The more points of view that are incorporated in deliberation, the more satisfactory and comprehensive its results will be.

⁵⁷ Rorty, “Universality and Truth” in *Rorty and His Critics*, p. 4

⁵⁸ This point is rather reminiscent of William James’s warning that “what meets expediently all the experience in sight won’t necessarily meet all farther experiences equally satisfactorily. Experience, as we know, has ways of *boiling over*, and making us correct our present formulas” William James, *Pragmatism* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1981), p. 100. Though Rorty does provide a slight twist on this, emphasizing the social aspect encountering new audiences and accomodating new viewpoints

The cautionary use of true thus holds open the doors of inquiry, for it explicitly sets truth against current justification, and poses a challenge to consider ever wider and more diverse perspectives. By interpreting Rorty as refusing to provide a definition of truth, and by bringing attention to his important discussions of the cautionary use of true, I hope to have shown that attributing the Relativist Thesis to him is a mistake. Rorty simply does not argue that “To say that a statement is true is just to say that it is accepted by the particular culture in which it is made.”

Putnam’s “internal realism”

Putnam similarly provides an account of truth that allows for this notion to be understood as importantly separate from that of mere current acceptance. In opposition to the truth-relativism that he criticizes at length in *Why Reason Can’t Be Naturalized*, he provides a definition of truth as “rational acceptability under sufficiently good epistemic conditions.”⁵⁹ This stipulation of “sufficiently good epistemic conditions” importantly differentiates Putnam’s view from the relativism he attacks, for it brings out a factor that could, in certain circumstances, be contrasted with present conditions. Furthermore, it seems perhaps that the notion of *rational* acceptability could also be importantly employed to criticize certain currently accepted claims, for these may be the product of a dogmatic acceptance, or a coerced acceptance. These considerations will be of particular significance in Part III. For now though, we need to further investigate the details of this account of truth that characterized Putnam’s “internal realism” period. In his debates with Rorty, Putnam frequently speaks of truth as an “idealization” of rational acceptability, and it is this “idealized” element of his definition which allows for a possible difference between truth and a currently secured justification:

*...truth is an idealization of rational acceptability. We speak as if there were such things as epistemically ideal conditions, and we call a statement ‘true’ if it would be justified under such conditions... we cannot really attain epistemically ideal conditions, or even be absolutely certain that we have come sufficiently close to them... [but] we can approximate them to a very high degree of approximation... truth is independent of justification here and now, but not independent of all justification. To claim a statement is true is to claim it could be justified.*⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Putnam, *Why Reason Can’t Be Naturalized*, p. 5

⁶⁰ Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, pp. 55-56

Due to this “idealized” nature of truth, it necessarily surpasses current standards of acceptability, for it is “independent of justification here and now.” While differently stated, Putnam’s “idealized justification” in this way functions similarly to Rorty’s “cautionary use of true.” Both are used to express the notion that truth entails more than merely acceptance amongst cultural peers. Putnam’s definition of truth as “idealized rational acceptability” thus allows for the possibility of there being at times a disconnect between truth and present justification without needing to resort to the metaphysical Realism discussed in Part I. The definition of truth as “idealized rational acceptability” works where reductionism doesn’t, for it is plausible enough to claim: “your statement may be considered justified in present circumstances, but it still might not be true, i.e not justified in *ideal* circumstances.”⁶¹ But because truth is importantly tied to human concerns of making and defending claims, and of constructing theories based on interests and values, truth on Putnam’s account is “not independent of all justification.” He therefore provides an alternative to the metaphysical urge to see truth as corresponding with the “way the world is.”

According to Putnam’s internal realist account, when truth is attributed to a claim, as it is in instances which Rorty characterizes as endorsements, this would be a case of asserting that the claim could, or would, be justified ideally. On the other hand, when doubt is cast as to the truth of a claim, as it is in instances that Rorty characterizes as cautions, we are expressing reservations that the claim would be capable of justification in ideal circumstances.

Rorty’s critique of idealized justification

Putnam’s account of truth as “idealized justification,” then, seems to provide a framework for understanding these two different uses of true that we have previously discussed. However, in order to understand Rorty’s reservations about this approach, it is important to note that the Realist’s account of truth is equally successful at accounting for these different uses. According to Realism, when we endorse a

⁶¹ It is important to note that Putnam did come to revise or clarify this aspect of his “internal realism” in the Preface to *Realism with a Human Face*, in which he argues that his position should not be seen as positing an ideal end of inquiry or an “ideal epistemic situation” in a “fantastic” or “utopian” sense. Instead, he suggests that there are merely “*better or worse epistemic situations with respect to particular statements*”. (p. viii) Nevertheless, one could presumably still employ the notion of truth in contrast to current justification on this picture by claiming that current circumstances are considerably worse than required.

statement by calling it “true,” we are asserting that it corresponds with the way the world is. This then of course explains why we can contrast truth with current justification, because while a claim may have achieved universal acceptance, we can still argue that it may not correspond with reality. Because justification and correspondence are separate matters, this account, on the surface, provides an analysis of “truth” that explains our important uses of the term. Rorty and Putnam, however, reject this account by arguing that the metaphysical correspondence it evokes is ultimately unintelligible, and hence that the Realist’s account of truth is, after all, unhelpful and misleading. Their attacks on this account of truth thus rest on noting that the “correspondence” it relies on is unrecognisable; that it is unclear what could possibly indicate when correspondence has been successfully achieved. In Rorty and Putnam’s eyes, the Realist account fails because we cannot discern what “metaphysical correspondence” actually entails.

Rorty argues that the definition of truth as “idealized rational acceptability” falls into this same trap as Realism, as it equates truth with a similarly unrecognisable and unintelligible standard.⁶² It could perhaps be suggested that this difficulty is the result of Putnam coming rather close to providing a *definition* of truth. A single characterization of truth must be broad enough to incorporate all of the different uses to which the term “true” is put. And in achieving this level of generality, it could be argued that it must descend into positing notions that are unrecognisable. Rorty does not explicitly make this argument, but he does state that he finds the term “ideal” just as fishy as the term “corresponds.”⁶³ In order to flesh this notion of “idealized justification” out, and to give it some practical content, Rorty argues that one would need to indicate “How we would know that we were at the end of inquiry, as opposed to merely having gotten tired or unimaginative?”⁶⁴ Rorty suggests that we have no idea what it would look like for inquiry to have an ideal end. In sum, he flatly denies that we can, as Putnam claims, “approximate [ideal conditions] to a very high degree

⁶² It is also important to note here that Rorty did at one point agree with the Peircian understanding of truth as that which is to be accepted at the idealized end of inquiry. For he once suggested that “The only sense in which we are constrained to truth is that, as Peirce suggested, we can make no sense of the notion that the view which can survive all objections might be false.” *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 165. He came to explicitly reject this earlier position, when discussing the three different uses of “true” in “Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth” p. 130

⁶³ Rorty, “Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth,” p. 131

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

of approximation.” What these “approximate ideal conditions” constitute, and how one could be aware that they are present, remains problematic. For this reason, Rorty takes this explanation of an absolute truth as an ideal limiting concept to be as deceptive as are appeals to “correspondence with reality.”⁶⁵

While we know what present justification looks like, and can roughly understand how to go about attempting to achieve it, “ideal justification” is, in Rorty’s eyes, an extension of this phenomenon that we are unable to get a grasp on. He suggests that there is no way of knowing when our descriptions are such that they shall never be superseded. In short, Rorty doubts that idealized rational acceptability “can be cashed out into anything that will clarify the notion of ‘absolute truth.’”⁶⁶ Consequently, Rorty suggests that we should just do without any absolute notion of truth at all.

Rorty’s “ethnocentrism”

Instead, Rorty argues that while we can’t understand rational acceptability under “epistemically ideal conditions,” what we can understand is the notion of potential future audiences. As we have seen in our discussions of the cautionary use of true, Rorty conceives of the contrast that we can make between truth and current justification in our language in terms of an appeal to possible future audiences. And it is this very notion of future audiences that informs his ethnocentric response to Putnam’s definition of truth as “idealized rational acceptability.” Rorty insists that the only sense we can make of truth as “ideal acceptability” is by interpreting this as “acceptability to an ideal community.”⁶⁷ As we saw in Rorty’s discussion of the cautionary use of true, an important feature of the term “true” is that it can be used in order to bring us to recognize that what happens to be acceptable now may not be so for a possible future audience. But, it clearly is not just any possible future audience that is of interest to us here. For Rorty concurs there must be some level of “idealization” in this projection; we must be able to see this future audience as an important continuation of our own community. Therefore “this ideal community [cannot] be anything more than *us* as we should like to be,” where the “*us*” here is

⁶⁵ Or, if Rorty is to address Putnam’s revised formulation of “better and worse” rather than “idealized” conditions, how do we know when conditions are good enough to attribute truth, or poor enough to warn against over-hasty attributions of truth?

⁶⁶ Rorty, Introduction to: John P. Murphy, *Pragmatism: From Peirce to Davidson* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), p. 4

⁶⁷ Rorty, “Putnam and the Relativist Menace,” p. 451

interpreted by Rorty as “us educated, sophisticated, tolerant, wet liberals.”⁶⁸ When we contrast truth with justification, it can only be by appealing to the possibility of a community that has achieved a greater and more extensive understanding than us, but also a community that we can recognise as a legitimate continuation of our own. The understanding of a future audience can only really be thought to *surpass* our own if it is achieved through a continuation of the open minded and inclusive form of inquiry that we value. Therefore the notion of truth as outstripping current justification can only serve as a concrete guide, it can only have a practical significance, if it is understood as the idealization of the practices of our own, current, community. This thought is at the heart of Rorty’s ethnocentrism.

It also seems important to note here that it seems to be precisely “educated, sophisticated, tolerant, wet liberals” who would be most disposed to employing the cautionary use of true at all. Remaining open to new possibilities and engaging with ever wider and more diverse perspectives seems a key concern of this type of community, which is unlikely to ever be satisfied with settling permanently for a current consensus. There is, however, no fundamental inconsistency or failure of rationality on Rorty’s account in a closed-minded community having no interest in contrasting its current understanding with a further, more enlightened viewpoint, and instead maintaining a dogmatic conservatism. Such a community may only employ the cautionary use of true rarely, if at all. While the cautionary use of true may be vitally important to the way that *we* speak and interact, and while we may be able to point to the very powerful and tangible benefits that this open-minded inquisitiveness provides, it can receive, on Rorty’s account, no further validation. Therefore both the community that is idealized in our speaking of a truth that transcends the current consensus, and *this very act itself* of contrasting an idealized truth with our current viewpoint, seem to be given an ethnocentric explanation by Rorty.

Putnam, on the other hand, is reluctant to align his treatment of truth as “idealized rational acceptability” with a specific cultural tradition. In contrast to Rorty’s ethnocentrism, Putnam seems to be committed to anchoring his account of truth in the very nature of human rationality itself, rather than in a contingent tradition. And this

⁶⁸ Rorty, “Putnam and the Relativist Menace,” p. 451

indeed seems to form a major point of contention between himself and Rorty. It is this conflict that we shall be considering in Part III.

Conclusion

In this section, we have moved from considerations of truth-relativism, to the specific accounts of truth formulated by Rorty and Putnam. Putnam's arguments against relativism are vitally important in showing that a reductive equation of truth with present justification is bound to fail. In doing so, it provides a clear insight into the motivation behind Rorty and Putnam's divergent understandings of truth, both of which are anxious to account for the possible difference between truth and current justification. Part III shall now consider the comparative merit of Rorty's "ethnocentric" account of our justificatory practices, and Putnam's account of truth in terms of general cognitive virtues that define human rationality.

PART III – rationality and ethnocentrism

Introduction

Rorty's ethnocentrism seems to tie our understanding of the term "true" to the very specific type of community in which we reside. It appears that, for Rorty, our notion of truth as transcending current acceptability can be understood as a product of the open-ended, tolerant, and fallibilist spirit of inquiry that we practice. And as Rorty notes, these forms of interaction are rather a historical curiosity. Certainly they do not appear to have played such a prominent role at other times in human history. Instead, they seem rather specific to, and most developed in, the post-Enlightenment, democratic, secular, West.⁶⁹ Of course, this is not to overlook the atrocities that have been committed by and within modern Western societies, nor the intolerance that continues to plague them. Failing to notice these shortcomings would be to wilfully turn a blind eye, and this is not Rorty's intention at all. Rorty's account of our uses of the word "true", then, is built on considering a type of community that we have often only imperfectly attained in the West. But it is the broad, general features of democratic, liberal societies that renders these at least roughly the type of community in which inclusiveness and open deliberation constitute the foundational grounds for inquiry. And it is only within this particular type of society that our particular "cautionary use" of true is prominently employed.

Putnam, however, raises some serious concerns with this approach. A major shortcoming that he appears to identify in Rorty's account is an association of our understanding of truth with whatever arbitrary fate happens to befall Western society. If this is indeed the case, then Rorty seems surely to be providing an unsatisfactory account of what we actually mean when using the word "true." In this section I will give a brief overview of some of the key features of Rorty's ethnocentrism before considering Putnam's criticism of this approach. Subsequently, I shall attempt to draw together the insights that can be derived from the both philosophers' arguments.

⁶⁹ "Such fallibilism is not, in fact, a feature of all human beings. It is much more prevalent among inhabitants of wealthy, secure, tolerant, inclusivist societies than elsewhere." Rorty, "Universality and Truth," in *Rorty and His Critics*, p. 4

Rorty's provincial anti-provincialism

A particularly striking feature of tolerant, open-minded communities such as those found in the modern, democratic West at its best, is the lack of authority that is afforded to the beliefs currently held by its members, and its openness to incorporating the perspectives of those previously outside of its bounds. As successors of the Enlightenment, our culture is therefore a “culture which prides itself on *not* being monolithic – on its tolerance for a plurality of subcultures and its willingness to listen to neighbouring cultures.”⁷⁰ It is perhaps on this very point that the term “ethnocentrism” can immediately be a little misleading. For this term could be interpreted as affording a substantial and concrete privilege to the beliefs of the inhabitants of Western cultures, and I do not think that Rorty’s position is tenable if taken in this way. Rather, I shall be taking Rorty to suggest that our uses of “true” are rather particular to the cultural tradition of deliberation and argumentation to which we are committed.

The major intention of Rorty’s ethnocentrism is therefore to highlight that our particularly inclusivist and open-ended practices cannot be said to exemplify a universal feature of human rationality. There happens to be an inclusivist rule underlying our own particular culture’s deliberative conduct, but it is precisely this that sets us apart from most other human communities. Such an inclusivist rule, which I shall refer to as a “tolerance stipulation,” asserts something like:

*“no putative contribution to a conversation can be rejected simply because it comes from somebody who has some attribute which can vary independently of his or her opinions – an attribute like being Jewish, or black, or homosexual”*⁷¹

This “toleration stipulation” opposes a narrow minded, exclusivist, parochialism by allowing everyone equal footing in deliberation. But as Rorty notes, this very stipulation could in another sense be seen as very “provincial” itself, for it “violates the intuitions of a lot of people outside the province in which we heirs of the Enlightenment run the educational institutions.”⁷² This “tolerance stipulation”

⁷⁰ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p 13-14

⁷¹ Rorty, “Universality and Truth” in *Rorty and His Critics*, p. 23

⁷² *Ibid.*

therefore characterizes only a particular environment for making assertions, and is not indicative of human communities at large. When we describe our practices of asserting and understanding the notion of “truth,” we are therefore describing forms of interaction that are limited to a particular time and place in human history, and in this sense our work here has only a provincial application. But, as we have seen, an ethnocentric privileging of this type of community is in another sense a privileging of a community that has a resolutely anti-provincial outlook.

Furthermore, as heirs of the Enlightenment we accept, in fact we expect, that a whole raft of our currently held beliefs will come to be improved upon or surpassed by future generations. This very fact about our form of community is central to Rorty’s account of our uses of “true”, for he seems to argue that when we evoke a correctness beyond our currently justified beliefs, we do so in terms of a future point in this continual process of incorporating more perspectives and suggestions. On Rorty’s view, we can only understand truth as more than just present justification in terms of the continuation of this line of inquiry, which in the future will have applied further scrutiny to a greater range of viewpoints.⁷³ These new viewpoints could come from those who were previously outside of our community, and in these cases “tolerance stipulations” like the one described above are directly relevant in ensuring that no arbitrary discrimination leads to these suggestions being neglected. However, inventive and playful new viewpoints may also emerge spontaneously from within the community, and in these instances the nature of a “tolerance stipulation” must be understood more loosely. Here, the tolerance extends to giving even the most apparently shocking, counter-intuitive or contrarian suggestions appropriate consideration, rather than dismissing these immediately and unreservedly. Hence our understanding of truth as transcending current acceptability is tied to these kinds of tolerant practices. For in the “cautionary use” of true we not only invoke our current cultural tradition of open inquiry, but also the prospect of this line of inquiry continuing into the future, and a greater, broader, wider understanding being located there.

⁷³ “To say ‘I’ll try to defend this against all comers’ is often, depending upon the circumstances, a commendable attitude. But to say ‘I can successfully defend this against all comers’ is silly. Maybe you can, but you are no more in a position to claim that you can than the village champion is to claim that he can beat the world champion” Ibid., p. 6

Because, as we have seen, this post-Enlightenment form of community is itself only a contingent occurrence for Rorty, his account of our uses of “true” does not constitute a model for conceiving of truth that is a natural starting point distinct from cultural traditions. Our particular understanding of truth is therefore intimately tied to the practices of modern Western culture. It is within *this* culture that we:

*[play] vocabularies and cultures off against one another, [and] produce new and better ways of talking and acting – not better by reference to a previously known standard, but just better in the sense that they come to seem clearly better than their predecessors.*⁷⁴

There does not therefore seem to be any formulaic account of rationality that will indicate how this future development will occur. The specific *content* of future beliefs has no guarantees or restrictions, but rather is left open to be determined by “whatever comes to seem better” to those within Western culture. Given this, there seems to be some concern that Rorty is tying our understanding of the transcendence of truth to the future development of Western culture *whatever* that happens to be.

Putnam’s critique of ethnocentrism

It is this proposed assimilation of truth with the future development of Western culture that concerns Putnam, who provides a convincing argument as to why this alignment can’t be made too closely. For, as Putnam suggests, this leaves too much open to the possibility of this culture developing in a shocking and unsavoury direction. The preceding quote in which Rorty speaks of evaluating the development of our culture in terms of a retrospective “coming to seem better” is of great concern to Putnam. Particularly troubling is the fact that this account seems to align the transcendence of truth with whatever comes to be the *majority opinion* in future Western societies. As we know only too well, a majority can be brainwashed, or intolerant, or uninformed. So, because it seems fairly uncontroversial that a majority is capable of being wrong, Putnam does not believe that an appeal to future opinions should affect our understanding of truth. An ethnocentrism that unconditionally ties its standards of truth to the future development of our culture is therefore severely flawed, and would disallow us from distinguishing between moral atrocities and emancipatory reforms.

⁷⁴ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. xxxvii. Emphasis in original

The central thrust of Putnam's argument seems to rest on the fact that *both* in an instance in which Western societies continue down the path of open and tolerant liberal democracies, *and* in an instance in which everyone is brainwashed through the fear mongering, torture and propaganda of a neo-Nazi regime, the population will eventually come to see their new beliefs as clearly better than those of their predecessors. If a brutally efficient and effective brainwashing campaign eventually manages to establish a neo-Nazi society in the West, it will "come to seem to them that they are coping better" by dealing savagely with "those terrible Jews, foreigners and communists."⁷⁵ And this neo-Nazi population will undoubtedly look back on what they take to be their wrong-headed, foolish, and weak forebears with a mixture of confusion, pity and disgust. Yet we can also, and more happily, imagine that "the forces of good win out" against such a neo-Nazi revolution. And in this case too, "it seems to people that they are clearly coping better" as their beliefs slowly develop and grow through free negotiation.⁷⁶

So, from the perspective of those fully submerged in either of these new paradigms, it will retrospectively appear as a positive reform, and not an undesirable development. Given Rorty's apparent alignment of truth with the future development of Western culture, it seems therefore that we have surrendered the critical position from which the worrying, neo-Nazi development could be denounced. For, problematically, the transcendent notion of truth seems to have been exclusively aligned with whatever arbitrary development happens to befall the Western world.

One seems to be left in a rather troubling position, then, if the transcendent element of our use of the word "true" is given this particular interpretation. For if the kind of development that Putnam describes did occur, there would be no idealized notion of truth that could be contrasted with the beliefs of this horrific neo-Nazi state. Consequently, there would be no manner in which we could say from within this neo-Nazi society that our peers do not hold "true" beliefs. And this does not seem to adequately capture the way in which we wish to make truth claims. For as Putnam notes, it is "internal to our concept of reform that whether the outcome of a change is

⁷⁵ Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, p. 23

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

good or bad is logically independent of whether most people take it to be a reform.”⁷⁷ Even if the vast majority, or all, of the Western world developed into a neo-Nazi society, this should not necessarily lead us to acknowledge that the claims accepted by this society, or any continuation of this society, are true. The kind of claim we make in saying truth is more than current justification thus cannot be understood in terms of the opinion of the majority in future Western cultures.

Consequently, Putnam may be seen as suggesting that these problems can be overcome by a more flexible, and less ethnocentric, account of truth as “rational acceptability under idealized conditions.” The idea that truth is a “useful and necessary idealization of warranted assertability”⁷⁸ allows for this notion to maintain a sufficient distance from present or future actualities to avoid the shortfalls of Rorty’s approach. Putnam’s account of truth is therefore to be understood in terms of very general features of human rationality, such as the “cognitive values of coherence, simplicity, and instrumental efficacy.”⁷⁹ This account of truth proceeds by recognising “what ordinary people consider rational to accept.”⁸⁰ Using these broad, general, standards, Putnam implies that the shortcomings of the neo-Nazi’s most horrifying and disturbing beliefs will soon become apparent, because the neo-Nazi “*in fact...* talks rubbish.”⁸¹ The requirements of a “good argument” are for Putnam *internal* to ordinary discourse, and so when the neo-Nazi attempts to justify himself by giving arguments he will fail spectacularly:

*He will assert all kinds of false ‘factual’ propositions, e.g. that the democracies are run by a ‘Jewish conspiracy’; and he will advance moral propositions (e.g. that, if one is an ‘Aryan’, one has a duty to subjugate non-Aryan races to the ‘master race’) for which he has no good arguments.*⁸²

These beliefs can therefore be denied a status as “truths,” despite the fact that they may be accepted by the majority of the society in which they are made.

For Putnam, the basic features of rationality upon which his account of truth is based are so fundamental that they are “simply a part of our idea of total human flourishing,

⁷⁷ Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, p. 24

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 223

⁷⁹ Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, p. 134

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 212

⁸² *Ibid.*

of Eudaemonia.”⁸³ These are such general features of what we take a rationally acceptable belief to be, that we need not consider them as relative to a particular culture. And the troubling beliefs of a neo-Nazi society will completely fail to convincingly satisfy any of these criteria, leaving us with a fairly concrete ground by which to criticize them.⁸⁴ In fact, it may appear that the neo-Nazi regime acknowledges something like this, for their methods of persuasion involve terror, torture, and the use of the secret police. Their goal seems to be to establish an absolute and unquestionable obedience, rather than to persuade and convince. This, then, is an attempt to avoid open rational scrutiny, for in participating in our ordinary rational forms of discourse the neo-Nazi is bound to fail in defending his more outlandish beliefs. So, given this analysis, if we conceive of truth as “idealized rational acceptability” this can remain as a standard that even an Orwellian Last Man in Europe could hold up against the majority consensus of a neo-Nazi state. In this way we can sensibly claim that a future Western majority may well hold beliefs that are false, because these beliefs could fail to meet the basic standards required by human rationality.

However, this is not to say that our standards of rationality are themselves complete and unchanging. For, as Putnam recognises, our specific conceptions of what constitutes coherence, simplicity and justification are themselves “historically conditioned” and the subject of “perennial philosophical controversies.”⁸⁵ As such, they do not constitute a God’s Eye View, or a timeless, absolute standard against which all claims can be neutrally evaluated. Our precise conceptions of what these cognitive values entail, and the beliefs they consequently recommend, is up for constant contestation and debate. Yet in this very intentional activity of negotiation, a common recognition of basic rational standards must in another sense be pre-

⁸³ Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, p. 134

⁸⁴ For the sake of this essay, it is assumed that the Nazis employ torture, force, and fear-mongering in order to achieve their goals and brainwash the population into tacit support. It is this example that is discussed by Rorty and Putnam, and so I am adopting it in attempting to draw their views together somewhat. This ignores the possibility of the Nazis being successful in a legitimate attempt to persuade and convince. In this case, through a process facilitated by our own tolerant practices of rational debate, liberal democracies would be gradually replaced by Fascist states. It would appear that in this scenario we could no longer point to a failure of *rationality* with such confidence, as this would be an appeal to a notion of rationality entirely separate from considerations of what people actually find to be rationally acceptable. Sadly a full discussion of the repercussions of this possibility is not possible in the present work.

⁸⁵ Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, p. 136

supposed. For if there were not such a common commitment, there would be no ground upon which this search for better conceptions of rationality could take place.⁸⁶

Rationality and giving reasons

Putnam's arguments, then, are designed to show that an ethnocentric account of truth must not tie this notion too closely to the actual beliefs of a particular culture. For if it did, this position would become a relativism in which we could no longer sensibly talk of the deliberative act of giving and receiving reasons for holding certain beliefs, and of some reasons being better or worse than others.⁸⁷ If ethnocentrism simply reduced our understanding of the word "true" to whatever our particular culture believes, or whatever it comes to believe, then the reasons for which these claims and beliefs are accepted need not be relevant. And this seems to end up forming a deeply unsatisfactory account of our actual notion of truth. Putnam's criticism does therefore successfully display that our uses of the word "true" cannot be understood in terms of an arbitrary commitment to the beliefs of current or future Western societies. Consequently, it seems that certain nuances must be read into Rorty's position in order to avoid these problems, and to achieve an account of truth that is responsive to, and compatible with, Putnam's insights.

In attempting to reconcile these two positions, it shall first be important to clarify why Rorty is so reluctant to conceive of truth as an idealized, transcendent standard that *must* have a claim on all of humankind. For it seems to be a mistrust of this project that leads to his uneasiness with Putnam's discussions of truth. Rorty's major worry is that Putnam's work attempts "to smuggle our own social practices into the definition of something universal and ineluctable."⁸⁸ In order to clarify the nature of Rorty's concern here, I will portray him as arguing that our understanding of truth is only relevant given the forms of inquiry that we practice. For it is only in a community that evaluates the correctness of a claim through the giving and taking of reasons that the notion of "rational acceptability" will be relevant to truth. Given this interpretation, it seems that Rorty's ethnocentrism intends to underline that our notion of truth is applicable only to communities that participate in these kinds of deliberative

⁸⁶ Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, p. 137

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 166

⁸⁸ Rorty, "Universality and Truth," p. 2

practices. If Rorty's account is thus seen as tying our uses of "true" to a commitment to rational debate, rather than to the specific, concrete beliefs of a particular culture, then it will seem to complement, rather than clash with, Putnam's work.

If we take this step, Rorty's account of truth no longer appears to be so crude and culturally self-absorbed, nor insistent that we must be particularly concerned with actual Western beliefs in accounting for our uses of "true." As we have seen, this latter move would appear to uncomfortably tie our understanding of truth with whatever this culture comes to accept. Rather, it seems Rorty wishes to point out that, when accounting for our uses of "true," we proceed by reference to a community that thinks of truth in terms of a process of negotiation, and hence in terms of the notion of "acceptability," and the giving and receiving of reasons. It is therefore important to keep in mind that this form of interaction is not universally observed. For, in Rorty's words, "the answer to [the] question 'do our democratic and liberal principles define just *one* possible political language game among others' is an unqualified 'yes.'"⁸⁹ These very practices of giving and taking reasons, and the corresponding treatment of truth that flows on from it, can only be savoured as a "lucky accident,"⁹⁰ a fortunate development that has only occurred in limited and specific instances. Consequently, the notion of truth that we have in *this* type of community is going to be radically different from that of a community which does not participate in these sorts of practices. Rorty should not therefore be seen as conceiving of truth in terms of beliefs that we can recognise as sufficiently similar to, or improvements upon, our own. Instead, his ethnocentrism is concerned with communities that engage in our very practices of giving and taking reasons themselves. And it is within these practices that the truth of a given claim will indeed be evaluated in terms of the cognitive virtues that Putnam lists above.

In this way, one could see Rorty to be arguing that we must recognise the limited applicability of our own understanding of truth. For it is only certain types of communities that will understand truth as a matter to be arrived at through negotiation, argumentation and deliberation. In order to illustrate this point, it may be profitable to examine possible societies in which utterances of "true" are not always

⁸⁹ Rorty, "Universality and Truth," p. 12

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14

so closely connected to these processes of rational argument, and hence whose understanding of this term is fairly different from our own. In circumstances in which truth is not conceived of as in any way related to the giving and taking of reasons, the notion of truth as “rational acceptability under idealized conditions” does not seem to apply.

To begin with, let us consider the neo-Nazi society previously discussed. This society does not engage in practices of openly listening to or producing arguments on certain matters. Beliefs that imply the unconditional rejection of the perspective of certain groups, such as “The Aryan master race has a responsibility to suppress the Jews” do not seem to be open to reconsideration. This belief, then, seems for a neo-Nazi to constitute an absolute truth. An interesting way of noting this may be to consider that it provides an instance in which our important “cautionary use” of true is for them utterly inapplicable. For the citizens of a resolutely neo-Nazi state, the claim “While we accept now that the Aryan race has a responsibility to suppress the Jews, this may not turn out to be *true*” would be simply incomprehensible. This is a belief that they refuse to even consider the possibility of being talked out of - they will not be swayed by any quantity of protests from their Jewish counterparts. Any disputing this belief will fall on resolutely deaf ears, for it is not conceived of as a subject for debate.

The questioning or contesting of these particular beliefs is not a live option, for in these cases all “tolerance stipulations” are abandoned. Consequently, these beliefs are taken to be “true” in an absolute manner - there is no idealized, transcendent notion against which this sense of “true” can be contrasted. The significant differences between this understanding of truth and our own can perhaps be drawn out by reconsidering what a “tolerance stipulation” implies. At times, Rorty seems to imply that our stipulations of this sort are to be understood as particular and provincial beliefs too. For instance, we may hold the belief that different races have comparable cognitive capacities, and hence should be accorded an equal hearing. But it seems to be more illuminating to view these “Tolerance Stipulations” instead as indicative of a general rule underlying our particular forms of inquiry; a rule which demands that

contestable, engaged, and detailed reasons are required in order to dismiss any particular contribution.⁹¹

Indeed, it seems that one could take this example further and imagine a community that does not find any use for “true” at all as a transcendent notion that could be contrasted with their current understanding. The members of this community may well continue to use the vocable “true”, but they would understand by it only an absolute and unrevisable standard, of which they are currently in possession. This absolute truth could be determined by, for instance, what the dictator says, or the commands of the Party, or the eternal wisdom contained within a holy book. Admittedly, in all actual cases that we are aware of, such an incredibly extreme absolutism has not quite occurred. Even the Nazis’ bomb making, car manufacturing, and road building, for instance, continued as an open search for better theories, employing experimental practises and engaging in deliberative exchanges that are comparable to our own. Generally, only beliefs regarding aspects of life that are deemed sufficiently important or morally significant have received an absolute interpretation, and other mundane matters have been left to be explored through more open forms of inquiry.

However, it does seem that, broadly, we could imagine a community perhaps of secluded monks living according to a meticulously detailed book of scripture. The set of beliefs set out in their holy book is explicitly stated to be definitive and eternally constant, never to be altered or re-interpreted. With a further stretch of the imagination, we could suppose that these ways of understanding the world were so wide ranging as to provide necessary and sufficient legislation for every aspect of life. In this monastic life, the idea that a belief could be in accordance with this scripture but not “true” is a contradiction, as is the inverse suggestion that a belief which contradicts the scripture could be “true”. The only sense of “true” that is grasped and employed by this community applies to the standard set by an absolute authority, which is all that they consult when assessing the validity of a claim. From the partial

⁹¹ It does certainly seem that this procedural rule comes close to being indistinguishable from any other form of absolute belief itself, and therefore that a false distinction is being drawn here. However, even the open discussion demanded by a “Tolerance Stipulation” could, at least theoretically, be susceptible to re-negotiation, for instance in cases when a consensus is reached to suspend these practices in a state of emergency.

examples that human history has provided us, we can have at least some notion of what a community with this conception of truth may look like. For it has often occurred that certain beliefs have been afforded an absolute validity, and have thus been exempt from contrast with the understanding of future audiences, or with idealized justification. And hence they have never been candidates for evaluation in terms of the giving and taking of reasons at all.

An epistemic community vs. a cultural community

This discussion of truth should put us in a position to consider Rorty and Putnam's differences. Putnam's criticisms do indeed seem to be effective against an ethnocentrism that purely privileges Western culture. However, far from rendering Rorty's position obsolete, I believe that these criticisms could be seen to bring out the subtle distinctions necessary to make his ethnocentrism more insightful. In particular, it seems an important task to clarify why Rorty's account need not see the persuading of a majority to be an ultimate determinant of truth. I feel the key to unravelling Rorty's ethnocentric account of this matter is to make a distinction between the privileging of a particular cultural community on the one hand, and the defence of a type of epistemic community on the other. Ethnocentrism would indeed be an unsatisfactory account of our uses of "true" if our understanding of truth was conflated with whatever rather arbitrary fate befalls our Western cultural community at large. On the other hand, if our understanding of truth as a transcendent context surpassing notion is accounted for in terms of the projected continuation of a specific form of epistemic community, then Putnam's neo-Nazi example can be responded to. With these clarifications in place, it seems that something like Rorty's position is able to avoid flat refutation, although this position will have accommodated many of Putnam's insights.

Rorty's major task in responding to Putnam's neo-Nazi example seems to be to explain why not just *any* majority in the future development of our Western cultural community provides the kind of potential audience relevant to our current understanding of truth. It seems to me that a Rortian response would be best served to stress that while tolerant and inclusive practices have been particularly prominent in our modern Western cultural community, Western culture *per se* does not therefore come to hold particular interest for us. Instead, it is with these forms of inquiry, and

this type of epistemic community that our uses of “true” are importantly tied. Rorty’s self-professed “ethnocentrism” should thus not mislead us into thinking that he is privileging and exclusively interested in the fate of Western culture for its own sake. For while all Western cultures could indeed fall to a ruthless and successful Fascist revolution, we are not obliged to recognise this as a continuation of *us*, or as having any important implications for *our* uses of “true” purely due to the fact that this population is endowed with similar genetic features to our own, or because this society exists in similar geographic regions to those we inhabit, or because these people share with us a common history.⁹²

It is certainly the case that from *within* this brainwashed neo-Nazi society, the vast majority of the population will hold as “true” many propositions that *we* are desperate to reject. Despite these beliefs having “come to seem clearly better” to them, and despite these beliefs receiving the full assent of their cultural peers, this still does not seem to stop us from wanting to deny that they are true. And on the interpretation that I am proposing, I believe that Rorty can account for this. However, it is not necessarily because the *content* of the neo-Nazis’ beliefs is fundamentally opposed to our current understanding of the world (although it seems quite clear that this will be the case) that we are entitled to reject them as possible truths. Instead, the important factor is that these beliefs were acquired through a process which marked a clear break from our community’s form of life and modes of interaction, from our deliberative methods of giving and receiving reasons. An unhindered continuation of our forms of inquiry will presumably *also* result in a future culture which holds beliefs with content vastly different to our own. Yet we can still recognise this potential future audience as being in all relevant aspects a continuation of *us*. So it cannot be the literal difference in content that is the deciding factor in our discrimination between the two cases here. Rather, it seems that if it is only through torture and fear-mongering that a society is (over a succession of generations) comprehensively brain-washed into holding certain beliefs, we will not consider this a

⁹² Rorty seems to give a response along these lines when he states that “coming to seem better than their predecessors” should be glossed as “coming to seem *to us* clearly better than their predecessors.” Furthermore, he explains the *us* here as “language users whom we can recognize as better versions of ourselves.” Rorty, “Putnam and the Relativist Menace,” 453-454 In this section I have attempted to show that the relevant factor to consider when determining whether a future community is a “better version of ourselves” should be the forms of justificatory deliberation they practice, rather than the beliefs they hold.

continuation of our own epistemic community. And this is easily reconcilable with the fact that the majority of our Western cultural community in the future may, if these procedures have been followed through to completion, come to assert these beliefs with no reservations.

So, Rorty's ethnocentric understanding of truth should not be seen as concerned with the majority opinion of future Western cultural communities. Instead, the *manner* or *procedure* in which beliefs are transformed and acquired in this community is what makes the vital difference to our assessment of truth. Importantly, it is exactly these characteristics of open deliberation and argumentation that Putnam is drawing from in discussing truth in terms of rational acceptability. However, as Rorty notes, this whole conception of truth, and the fascinating work and philosophic debate it entails, requires in advance a community that proceeds through the giving and taking of reasons.

Conclusion

It seems appropriate to conclude with the following remark from Putnam, a remark that could just as easily have been found in Rorty's work. Here, Putnam draws our ever evolving conception of rationality (and consequently, our notion of truth) to a cultural heritage that has seen the expansion of our sympathetic involvements and the development of radically new forms of argument:

*We can only hope to produce a more rational conception of rationality or a better conception of morality if we operate from **within** our tradition (with its echoes of the Greek agora, of Newton and so on, in the case of rationality, and with its echoes of scripture, of the philosophers, of the democratic revolutions, and so on, in the case of morality); but this is not at all to say that all is entirely reasonable and well with the conceptions we now have. We are...invited to engage in a truly human dialogue; one which combines collectivity with individual responsibility.⁹³*

This history of expanding discursive horizons forms the tradition within which we now engage in our interactions and negotiations. But a central feature of such a tradition is that it will not accept an indiscriminant relativism, will not accept that any opinion is just as good as any other. For it is only when we engage in a human dialogue, when we consider and debate the merits of different perspectives, that we

⁹³ Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, p. 216. (Original emphasis)

can come to any insightful and worthwhile conclusion. But this very process of deliberation itself is only indicative of the type of epistemic community that we have developed. We are therefore left without an absolute position on which to ground these practices, to justify what we do, and to universalize our conception of truth. However, this perhaps should not come as a surprise, as it is this very notion of an absolute grounding that both Rorty and Putnam commenced by attacking.

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