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Rorty

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Richard Rorty (1931– CE) has stressed his adherence to *antirepresenta-tionalism,* by which he means an account "which does not view knowl-edge as a matter of getting reality right, but rather as a matter of acquiring habits of action for coping with reality" (Rorty, 1991a, p. 1). Rorty is frequently accused of being an antirealist, but that is to confuse antirealism with antirepresentationalism. Both realists and antirealists are representationalists. To be a realist is to believe that most of the kinds of things that exist, and what they are like, are independent of us and of the ways we find out about them. Antirealists deny this. Antirepre-sentationalists, by contrast, reject the very idea that beliefs can represent reality; they are neither realists nor antirealists. They deny that truth is an explanatory property and assert that the correct but platitudinous sentence "'S' is true if and only if S" makes no claim that "S" corre-sponds to anything. They reject the whole antirealist/realist problem-atic, denying "that the notion of 'representation' or that of 'fact of the matter' has any useful role in philosophy" (Rorty, 1991a, p. 2).

Antirepresentationalism, which goes with the perspectivism and con-textualism of pragmatism, rejects the so-called discipline of epistemol-ogy as well as metaphysics. There is no grand Appearance/Reality distinction, as we find in PLATO, DESCARTES, or KANT, for, on an anti-representionalist account, there can be no gaining a glimpse at how things are in themselves. Some allegedly privileged types of vocabulary – say physics – are thought by representationalists accurately to repre-sent reality, while the other discourses are said to be mired in appear-ance. But with the demise of representationalism goes the very idea that there is some determinate way the world is, there to be discovered and accurately represented by some "true philosophy" – perhaps an episte-mology or a philosophy of language (*à la* Michael Dummett) taken as First Philosophy, a philosophical foundation for the rest. Moreover, there is no science or yet-to-be-developed science that is going to be able

to step in and do the job – giving the one true description of the world – that philosophy failed to do. There is no sense, if antirepresentationalism is on the mark, in claiming that one vocabulary is "closer to reality" than another. There just are different forms of discourse answering to different interests.

Rorty, consistently with his antirepresentationalism, is a *minimalist* about truth. He rejects correspondence, coherentist, and pragmatist theories of truth. Indeed, he thinks, we should have no *theory* of truth at all, though, given the long history of theories of truth, it is a good idea to have a descriptive account of how "true" functions in our language-games. His minimalist account says that a sentence "S" is true if and only if S. Thus "'The cat is on the mat' is true" if and only if the cat is on the mat. This bare and correct statement of what it means to assert something to be true does not commit one to a correspondence, coherence, or pragmatic theory of truth or indeed to any *theory* of truth at all. It does not say "that behind the true sentence 'S', there is a sentence-shaped piece of non-linguistic reality called 'the fact of S' – a set of relations between objects which hold independently of language – which makes 'S' true" (Rorty, 199la, p. 4). We do not have any understanding of what it would be for such a correspondence to obtain. But this denial of correspondence must not lead us to think that truth is something we make up or construct. Our linguistic practices do not determine what is true, though we can only *speak* of something being true or false by engaging in the appropriate linguistic practices. That, however, is a different thing from saying our linguistic practices produce truth or make certain things true. However, Rorty also rejects claims made by correspondence theories of truth to a correspondence between language and the world. They require of us the impossible, namely to be able to stand somewhere outside of language and to compare language and the world to see whether they do or do not correspond to each other like a map corresponds to what is mapped or a photograph to what is photographed.

Thought for Rorty, as for Wittgenstein, is inescapably linguistic. There is no having a thought and then finding the words for it. There can be no necessarily private languages. With a language we can, of course, invent another language as in inventing a secret code. But we cannot without already having a language construct a language afresh. There can be no language-less or notation-less thoughts or beliefs. So there can be no standing outside of language and comparing it with the world for fit.

There are, of course, links between our language and the rest of the world, but these links are *causal*, not *epistemological*. Our language, like our bodies, is shaped by our environment. Indeed, our language could

no more be "out of touch" with our environment – grandiosely the world – than our bodies could. What Rorty denies is that there is any *explanatory* or *epistemic* point in trying to pick out and then choose among the contents of our language – or of our minds – and then claiming that this or that item "corresponds" to reality in a way some other item of a different type does not, e.g. the claim that all ethical characterizations of our situation are out of touch with reality, while the correct characterizations of physics are not. Moreover, the property truth is neither a normative property giving us criteria for correcting our beliefs nor an explanatory property explaining why we have the beliefs we have or regard some beliefs as justified and warranted and other beliefs not.

When it comes to determining what we are justified in believing and doing, what is needed is as thorough a coherence of beliefs as we can attain, though crucially some of those beliefs will be considered judgments that will be taken to have some *initial* credibility. They are part of our inescapable cultural given. There will be some such givens in all cultures, though the content will vary *in part*. However, there will also be a considerable overlap from culture to culture. But if some of our considered judgments, even our firmest ones, do not fit into a wide coherentist pattern, then they should either be modified until they do fit or be rejected. And this could be true of any of them. None are immune from the *possibility* of rejection. Attaining this pattern of coherence will be a matter of winnowing some of them out but not *holes bolus* trying to throw out all of them or even the bulk of them. We justify one belief in terms of others by weaving and unweaving our web of beliefs until we, for a time, get the most coherent pattern we can forge. But we never escape fallibilism and historicism. What we are justified in believing – taking for true – comes to forging what for a time is the widest and most coherent pattern of beliefs that we can muster. We also need to have an intersubjective consensus concerning this. It is these two things which, Rorty has it, give us the only viable conception of objectivity that we can have or need (Rorty, 1991a, pp. 175–96).

Such a coherentist account is not only antirepresentationalist, but antifoundationalist and holist as well. Foundationalists claim that a belief, to be justified, must either be justified by direct apprehension (observation, rational intuition, or introspection) or be inferentially justified by appeal to such beliefs. Antifoundationalists reject this either by denying that such direct apprehension is possible or by denying that all of our beliefs must be ultimately justified by any of these forms of direct apprehension. Holists take the very identity of a belief to be determined by the web of beliefs of the form of life of the person having the belief, thereby ruling out any form of direct apprehension. There are no basic

beliefs yielding certainties or even near certainties on which all the rest of our knowledge and justified beliefs are based. Neither science nor philosophy, nor anything else, can deliver such beliefs. There is no point at which our words or thoughts just represent our sense impressions or atomic facts on which all our other knowledge is based. We have no such simple certainties or foundational knowledge. What we have instead is a fallibilistic, coherentist method of fixing belief replacing epistemology and replacing as well a deductivist model of justification with a coherentist one.

   With the abandonment of foundationalism and with it a Kantian understanding of the key task of epistemology, we abandon a classical self-image of the philosopher as someone who stands in some privileged perspective and can tell us in all domains, or indeed in any substantive domain, what counts as genuine knowledge. We give up the deceptive self-conceit that the philosopher can know things that no one can else can know so well. There is no possible transcendental perspective where, independently of some particular social practices and some particular domains, we can say what knowledge is, and correct the ways of science or common sense or our common life by appealing to some conception of superior *philosophical* knowledge which enables us to judge common-sense beliefs and science and give the "real foundations of knowledge."

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