

RORTY'S SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

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Richard Rorty is one of the most original and important philosophers who is influential beyond the confines of professional academic philosophy. The views that have made him famous as public intellectual arise out of his specifically philosophical reflections on topics that remain central to the Anglo-American tradition of analytic philosophy: the nature and significance of objective reality and truth, and of our knowledge of them.

Rorty's distinctive and controversial brand of pragmatism expresses itself along two main axes. One is negative – a critical diagnosis of what Rorty takes to be defining projects of modern philosophy. The other is positive – an attempt to show what intellectual culture might look like, once we free ourselves from the governing metaphors of mind and the world in which the traditional problems of epistemology and metaphysics are rooted. The centerpiece of Rorty's critique is the provocative account offered in *Philosophy and The Mirror of Nature* (1979). In this book, and in the closely related essays collected in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982), Rorty's principal target is the philosophical idea of knowledge as representation, as a mental mirroring of a mind-external world. This is the centerpiece of his attack against classical epistemology. In denouncing traditional epistemology, Rorty denounces that there are entities which possess any justificatory force prior to human interpretation and his central contention is that there can be no intrinsically veridical relation between the mind, or language and the world. Rorty has shown that there is no privileged 'grid' of concepts against which the variety of human practices and beliefs can be judged in order to determine them rationally. The pertinent question which crops up is: is Rorty's rejection of mirror imagery in epistemology a rejection of epistemology as such? Or is he sponsoring a novel and different kind of epistemology that is to be subsumed under sociology of knowledge? This paper is an endeavour to outline his sociological theory of knowledge, especially with reference to the notion of truth.

Sociological Turn in Rorty's Epistemology:

The consequence of Rorty's antirepresentationalism is his conversationalism that denies that the world-by-itself rationally constrains choices of vocabulary with which to

cope with it. He claims to find a viable notion of interpretive constraint in the solidarity of interpretive communities. Rorty says:

“...there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones – no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow inquiries... The pragmatist tells us that it is useless to hope that objects will constrain us to believe the truth about them, if only they are approached with an unclouded mental eye, or a rigorous method, or a perspicuous language....The only sense in which we are constrained to truth is that, as Peirce suggested,¹ we can make no sense of the notion that the view which can survive all objections might be false.”²

Rorty thus hammers on the quintessential point of his antirepresentationalist programme that constraints on our knowledge or interpretations are not objective or imposed by the world, but instead are conversational. This is Rorty's conversational epistemology which he espouses as an alternative to traditional representational epistemology. This would be a bone of contention between Rorty and Putnam because Putnam believed that interpretation is not without external constraints. He says: “Internalism does not deny that there are experiential inputs to knowledge; knowledge is not a story with any constraints except internal coherence; ...The very inputs upon which our knowledge is based are conceptually contaminated; but contaminated inputs are better than none.”³ This would be a point of contrast between Putnam and Rorty.

Rorty's conversational epistemology has some important consequences. The consequences of replacing the representational model by his epistemological antifoundationalism are the contingency of language, the contingency of selfhood and the contingency of community. In this chapter I would concentrate only on the contingency of language for contextual reasons. Rorty's antirepresentationalism decries the idea that the world decides which descriptions of the world are true. Those who accept absolute reality admit that there is only one true absolute description of this reality. On the contrary Rorty rejects the idea that the vocabulary is somehow already out there in the world, waiting for us to discover it. The world does not speak. Only we humans can do that. Once we adopt a language which is to be used as a tool to describe the world, then the world can cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only human beings can do that. According to Rorty, the persuasive power of the language of sciences comes not from its relation to reality, but from its historically contingent utility. Thus we do not have access to any objective truth; all we have are the vocabularies we create.

Rorty argues that one who is convinced of this view is a ‘liberal ironist’. And a liberal ironist is one who does not aspire to achieve objectivity. Her goal is different. It is solidarity. It is a transition from objectivity guaranteed by a non-human factual world to human solidarity. The switch from objectivity to solidarity implies freedom from the iron

¹ From this passage it seems that Rorty claims to be following the pragmatist tradition as was propounded by Peirce. But I will argue that Rorty's pragmatism is very different from Peirce's pragmatism insofar as Rorty is a pragmatist antirealist whereas Peirce is a pragmatist realist.

² Rorty, Richard (1982), *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972-1980*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p-165.

³ Putnam, Hilary (1981), *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Pres, p 54.

grasp of an objective world which had long been held to be that which controls and determines our thoughts and activities. The emphasis is on freedom. Thus solidarity has nothing to do with bonding between humans and non-human facts, but according to Rorty, it is to be understood in terms of human bonding. Hence Rorty says that solidarity is not discovered, but is created by increasing our sensitivity to the suffering of other people. On Rorty's account solidarity may be achieved through a social bond between humans. Rorty's ironist is a historicist. She abandons the idea that her central beliefs and desires refer to something beyond the reach of time and chance.

Rorty envisages this solidarity as a process of redescription of ourselves. This can be achieved, according to Rorty, not by theory, but by ethnography, journalists' report, novel, fiction etc. That is why the novel, movie and TV programme have gradually but steadily replaced the Sermon and the Treatise as the principle vehicles of moral change and progress. Rorty wants to give recognition to this replacement and this recognition is tantamount to a general turn against theory and towards narrative. Such a turn would mean that we have given up the attempt to describe the world with a single vocabulary. It would amount to recognition of what Rorty calls contingency of language.

Rorty on Language:

Contingency of language is the fact that there is no way to step outside the various vocabularies employed and find a metavocabulary which sits in judgment over all the vocabularies. One who can reconcile to the idea of contingency of language would accept that languages are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities.⁴ Thus Rorty says that we make truths with our languages. This is clearly a constructivist strain in his thoughts. According to Rorty, since no language is privileged over any other, all languages being contingent in their origins and not mediums for representations, our intellectual and moral progress becomes a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than the understanding of how things really are.

Rorty draws inspiration from Donald Davidson's work in philosophy of language as a manifestation of a willingness to drop the idea of "intrinsic nature", a willingness to face up to the contingency of the language we use. Rorty shows how recognition of this contingency leads to recognition of the contingency of conscience, and how both recognitions lead to a picture of intellectual and moral progress as a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than of increasing understanding of how things really are.

In arguing for the contingency in language, Rorty spells out in clear terms that only sentences are true and that human beings make truths by making languages in which to phrase sentences. Rorty delves into Davidson's treatment of language which breaks completely with the notion of language as something which can be adequate or inadequate to the world or to the self. For Davidson breaks with the notion that language is a medium – a medium either of representation or of expression.

Davidson does not view language as a medium for either expression or representation and thus sets aside the idea that both the self and reality have intrinsic natures which are out there waiting to be known. Davidson like Wittgenstein treats alternative vocabularies as more like alternative tools than like bits of a jigsaw puzzle.

⁴ Rorty, Richard (1989), *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, p 4-7

Davidson's account of linguistic communication dispenses with the picture of language as a third thing intervening between self and reality, and of different languages as barriers between persons or cultures. To say that one's previous language was inappropriate for dealing with some segment of the world is just to say that one is now, having learned a new language, able to handle that segment more easily. Davidson lets us think of the history of language and thus of culture as Darwin taught us to think of the history of a coral reef. Old metaphors are constantly dying off into literalness, and then serving as platform and foil for new metaphors. This analogy lets us think of "our language" – that is, of the science and culture of twentieth century Europe – as something that took shape as a result of a great number of sheer contingencies.

Thus Rorty says that the world does not provide us with any criterion of choice between alternative metaphors, that we can only compare languages or metaphors with one another, not with something beyond language called 'facts'. To drop the idea of languages as representations, and to be thoroughly Wittgensteinian in our approach to language, would be to de-divinize the world. Only if we do that we can accept Rorty's argument that since truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths. It is essential to Rorty's view that we have no prelinguistic consciousness to which language needs to be adequate, no deep sense of how things are which it is the duty of philosophers to spell out in language. If Rorty's arguments for the contingency of language are accepted then a problem arises. It is the problem of constraint in interpretation.

- If the world does not constrain our vocabulary or the descriptions of it then what does?
- Can an utterance or text mean just anything at all, or are there limits to semiosis?
- And if there are constraints then where do they come from?
- Is it the world or the text which constrain our interpretations?

Rorty claims to find a viable notion of interpretive constraint in the solidarity of interpretive communities as noted before. He writes that "there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational one – no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow inquirers."⁵ Like Davidson, Rorty looks to the conditions for intersubjective communication for an account of interpretive constraint, but he casts his argument in different terms. As an alternative to objectivity (any kind of mind-independent and language – independent reality) – Rorty introduces the notion of solidarity (following Dewey and James). Pragmatists would like to replace the desire for objectivity with the desire for solidarity. Solidarity is the desire for as much intersubjective agreement as possible, the desire to extend the reference of 'us' as far as we can.⁶ Rorty's model interpretive community is marked by "the habits of relying on

⁵ Rorty, Richard (1982), *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972-1980*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p-165.

⁶ Rorty, Richard (1991), *Objectivity, relativism, and truth, Philosophical Papers, Volume 1*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p-22-23.

persuasion rather than the force, of respect for the opinions of colleagues, of curiosity and eagerness for new data and ideas.”⁷

Rorty considers those habits to have been historically, most consistently practiced in the scientific community. But in his essay “Texts and Lumps”, he argues that science is no different in kind from literary or other humanistic inquiry. The so-called ‘hard’ subjects like science, he says, have no epistemological superiority to the ‘soft’ subjects like literary criticism. Science has no special method for reaching the truth, Rorty insists; and the lumps that it studies are no different in ontological kind from the texts that humanists study. “Hardness of fact is simply the hardness of the previous agreements within a community about the consequences of a certain event. The same hardness prevails in morality or literary criticism if and only if the relevant community is equally firm about who loses and who wins.”⁸ Rorty’s aim is to replace objectivity, the notion that somehow the world makes our interpretations right or wrong, with solidarity, the unforced agreement achieved by persuasion in a free and open community of inquirers. We see that Rorty has attempted to eradicate the distinction between science and literary studies. He harps on the fact that the constraints on our knowledge or interpretations are not objective or imposed by the world. But instead are conversational. Thus according to Rorty, literature is an important practice in the enlargement of our cultural conversation. He further argues that cultural conversation is possible only when communication is possible. And communication between the two strange individuals will be possible only when each can guess what the other is going to do next, what noises they will make, and their expectation about what they shall do or say under certain circumstances will coincide. Thus on Davidson’s interpretation, to speak the same language is to tend to converge.

According to Rorty, who follows Davidson’s line of thinking, a proposition or a text is not a matter of grasping the meanings of words – meanings that are grounded either by their analytic relations with the other or by their ostensive connections to the world. Meaning belongs to the marks or noises we can call sentences. A sentence is related to another sentence, but a sentence cannot be related to the mind or the world. But for generations thinkers have thought that meaning depends on the mind or the world. It seems that the world does decide whether a sentence is true or false. So, if we have to decide “between alternative sentences (namely, e.g. Between ‘Red wins’ and ‘Black wins’ or between ‘The butler did it’ and ‘The doctor did it’) in such cases, it is easy to run together the fact that the world contains the causes of our being justified in holding a belief with the claim that some nonlinguistic state of the world is itself an example of truth, or that some such state “makes a belief true” by “corresponding to it.”⁹ To decide between alternative sentences we have to turn to the world. However it would not be easy to draw this conclusion when we turn from individual sentences to vocabularies as wholes. When we consider whole vocabularies and not individual sentences “it is difficult to think of the world as making one of these better than another, of the world as deciding between them.”¹⁰

⁷ Ibid, p-39. Emphasis is mine.

⁸ Ibid, P.80.

⁹ Rorty, Richard (1989), *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press,p-5.

¹⁰ Ibid, 5-6.

Thus, Rorty's main target of philosophical criticism is the correspondence theory of truth which characterizes synthetic propositions – the theory that parts of the world, facts, or states of affairs logically correspond to propositions. Rorty notes: It is hard enough to make sense of correspondence in the expression “on the mat” in the proposition “Cat is on the mat”. It seems hopeless to account in correspondence terms to negative propositions like “There is no dog by the window”. Furthermore, the theory generally relies on a verificationist account of meaning and a notion of ostensive definitions of primitive terms that are very problematic.

If all of these arguments seem counterintuitive – if it seems that, in the realm of commonsense observations of glasses and tables that it is the world that surely tells us what is the case – then Rorty reminds us that “there is no way of transferring this nonlinguistic brutality to facts, to the truth of sentences. The way in which a blank takes on the form of the die which stamps it has no analogy to the relation between the truth of a sentence and the event which the sentence is about.”¹¹ The world does not make sentences true, though stimuli may indeed cause speakers to make certain statements. In effect, Rorty tries telling us that the world does not tell us what to say about it.

Against the backdrop of the preceding discussions on the contingency of language which Rorty espouses, I would like to raise a few questions in the context of the sociological view of knowledge which reduces knowledge to a matter of conversation and agreement or consensus. The questions are:

- Who is to take part in the conversation?
- What will constitute agreement?

Rorty does not speak of solidarity of human selves who are ‘selves’ in the absolutist metaphysical sense of the term. Solidarity is of human with selves plunged in history, immersed in and sensitized to culture. So, solidarity is to be conceived with reference to cultural historical groups. If that be so, the answer to the first question would perhaps be that those who take part in the conversation are members of a particular group. Knowledge is supposed to be agreement with the cultural peers of that group. So agreement here is agreement or unanimity within a group, it is not unanimity as such. The answer to the second question raised above, therefore would be conformity to what the peers of that group say. If, however, agreement is said to be constituted by conformity to what the peers say, then, as Putnam remarks, one may ask: “What determines what my cultural peers would say?”¹² Obviously the peers will not say anything which is said to them from outside, for, both the peers and those who follow them are committed to one particular culture and group. None of them can transcend their group-identity. So when they say that something is true they mean that it is true according to the norms of their culture.

This kind of extreme relativism seems to lead to an absurd consequence as Putnam shows. If what Karl says is true according to the norms of his own culture, then Karl can indeed say “...schnee ist weiss” and say that it is true according to his own culture. But

¹¹ Rorty, Richard (1991), *Objectivity, relativism, and truth, Philosophical Papers, Volume 1*, Cambridge: Cambridge

¹² Putnam, Hilary (1992), *Renewing Philosophy*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, Harvard University Press, p-69.

suppose somebody also wants to say this, she cannot take a transcendent stance and make a similar utterance. For this utterance itself, when made by her, would be true according to the norms of her culture, say, the American culture. She would be driven into saying "What Karl says is true, as determined by the norms of German culture, is true according to the norms of American culture." This is the absurdity to which any consistent relativist would be driven.

The question about agreement and the Rortian response to it reminds one of similar questions which had been raised about Thomas Kuhn's notion of unanimity and consensus within a group. Kuhn strongly sponsored a sociological account of scientific rationality. Scientific rationality, according to him, was a paradigm-bound rationality rooted in a concrete tradition and not a transcendent kind of rationality drawing on abstract and universal criteria. What guided a scientist belonging to a community in exercising her choice therefore were not abstract paramount criteria like 'unanimity as such'. Rather the agreement or unanimity which conditioned the scientist's choice was 'unanimity of one particular group'. ¹³ This swing in the direction of rules and criteria governing concrete research tradition is a patently sociological account of rationality. But if the scientist's choice depended thus on her submission to a particular paradigm-bound criterion then there can be no comparison and trans-valuation between what she chooses and what the others belonging to a different scientific community would choose. This would lead ultimately to a collapse of communication between proponents of different scientific paradigms. Even Kuhn had to retreat from this drastic thesis of incommensurability in his later works.

Rorty, too, as we have seen forbids any reference to transcendent criteria, to a non-human power to which humans are responsible,¹⁴ to objective truth, correspondence to reality, method and "criteria for (scientific) success laid down in advance"¹⁵ Rather he understands rationality in terms of reasonableness, tolerance, respect for the opinions of those around, willingness to listen, reliance on persuasion rather than force. Members of a group must possess these virtues.¹⁶ Thus Rorty's sociology of knowledge leads to this extreme relativistic corollary. He insists on group-unanimity. Rorty himself raises a question about this notion of agreement and answers it. "Unforced agreement among whom? Us? Any arbitrary culture or group?" The answer of course is 'us'¹⁷

Rorty's answer seems to suggest that the members of a group engaged in conversation are hermetically sealed within their own group. They are imprisoned within the walls of their own culture. They have no option but to crawl within their own groups. They can be said to be living in a cultural island where though conversation within the island is possible, but members of that particular island cannot enter into conversation with people belonging to other such cultural islands. Conversation is thus group-bound. If that be so, then it would ring the bell for total collapse of communication.

¹³ See M.D. King, 'Reason, Tradition and the Progressiveness in Science' in G. Gutting (ed.) *Paradigms and Revolutions*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1980, p.113. Also see Gupta, Chhanda (1995), *Realism Versus Realism*, Calcutta, Allied Publishers, p.176.

¹⁴ Rorty, Richard (1991), *Objectivity, relativism, and truth, Philosophical Papers, Volume 1*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.39.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.36.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.37.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.38.

Communication between members of the various cultural islands would be impossible. Rorty's human self which has a cultural anchorage would then seem to close the doors of conversation. So the very foundation on which Rorty develops his sociology of knowledge, that is, conversation, can only be group-bound. How would Rorty steer away from the mess which his ethnocentrism had created? What kind of human solidarity is Rorty talking about? Rorty must answer the question with reference to solidarity which has a cultural anchorage, nevertheless, which does not lead to an extreme kind of relativism and consequently to incommensurability.

To be fair we must remember that Rorty does have a response to the points being raised. He himself has vehemently opposed the characterization of his work as a kind of extreme relativism. He establishes why he is not a relativist. He says: "But the pragmatist, dominated by the desire for solidarity, can only be criticized for taking his own community too seriously. He can only be criticized for ethnocentrism, not for relativism."¹⁸ How far this response is satisfactory would be discussed in the final chapter. I would confine myself in this chapter to a consideration of Rorty's sociological view of truth.

Rorty on Truth:

Rorty insists that the notion of truth which he espouses is a sociological or a communitarian construal of the notion of truth. He believes that truth, like, knowledge, is simply a compliment paid to the beliefs which we think so well justified that for the moment, further justification is not needed. Thus, according to Rorty, an inquiry into the nature of truth can only be a sociohistorical account of how various people have tried to reach agreement on what to believe. In the formation of his sociological construal of truth, Rorty is highly influenced by Nietzsche and he writes: "Nietzsche thought that the test of human character was the ability to live with the thought that there was no convergence. He wanted us to be able to think of truth as: a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically and which after long use can seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people."¹⁹

Rorty derives his inspiration to think of truth as entirely a matter of solidarity from Nietzsche. He therefore says: "...I think we need to say, despite Putnam, 'there is only the dialogue,' only us, and to throw out the last residues of the notion of "trans-cultural rationality"."²⁰

Besides acknowledging his debt to Nietzsche, Rorty also recognizes his debt to Davidson and William James as both helped him in shaping the notion of truth. All the three, James, Davidson and Rorty were content to have dissolved traditional representationalist problems concerning truth. For they were unanimous in rejecting the traditional correspondence theory of truth where correspondence is understood with reference to the image of mirroring or representing. They urged that the only reason why philosophers thought they needed an explanation of what truths consists in was that they

¹⁸ Rorty, Richard (1991), *Objectivity, relativism, and truth, Philosophical Papers, Volume 1*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p-30.

¹⁹ Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense", in the *Viking Portable Nietzsche*, Walter Kaufmann, ed. And trans., pp-46-47.

²⁰ Rorty, Richard (1991), *Objectivity, relativism, and truth, Philosophical Papers, Volume 1*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p-32

were held captive by a representationalist picture of dualism between scheme and content. The upshot of their critique of this correspondist notion of truth is their pragmatic theory of truth. However, notwithstanding their unanimity in rejection of the traditional classical notion of truth, they differ widely in their respective views on the positive theory of truth.

Rorty's notion of truth does not retain objectivity. He does not consider truth to be an objective concept. Rorty denounces the foundationalist attempts to represent reality and distances himself from the associated idea that truth is a matter of correspondence to reality. Rorty is convinced that there is no theory of truth at all. He seems inclined to dispense with the notion of truth altogether. Following Davidson and James, he says that truth can be said to have the following uses:

- An endorsing use
- A cautionary use
- A disquotational use

Truth can be said to have an endorsing use as it can be understood as a term which we use to endorse or praise. It is not a term referring to some actual state-of-affairs, the existence of which is supposed to explain the success of those who hold true beliefs.

The cautionary use of truth is the most significant use and the neglect of the cautionary use leads to the association of Rorty's view of truth with relativism. I will expand on this remark when I discuss relativism in Rorty in the final chapter. For now I would only explain what Rorty meant by the cautionary use. In a paper entitled "Universality and Truth",²¹ Rorty compares 'truth' with 'danger'. He argues that the principal reason we have a word like 'danger' in the language is to caution people: to warn them that they may not have envisaged all the consequences of their proposed action. Rorty compares truth with danger and holds that it is no more necessary to have a philosophical theory about the nature of truth than it is to have one about the nature of danger. "True" is not a word used for describing or portraying or mirroring or representing which underpins the correspondence account of truth. Rorty says that people who think beliefs are habits of action rather than attempts to correspond to reality see the cautionary use of the word 'true' as flagging a special sort of danger. He writes:

"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."²²

The third is the disquotational use of truth. In disquotation, we specify the truth-condition of a sentence in the following manner: we first put the sentence in quotation marks as this is the standard way of talking about the sentence. Then we append the words 'is true' followed by the bi-conditional connective. This is followed by the very same sentence whose truth-condition we are thus specifying, but without quotes. Thus the familiar bi-conditional: " "Snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white." Rorty embraces this disquotational property of 'is true' because it does not bring with it claims about the 'representational' nature of thought and language, and therefore is not accompanied by the associated claim to how truth is a form of 'correspondence' to the

²¹ Brandom, B. (1999), (ed.), *Rorty and His Critics*, in "Truth Rehabilitated" by Donald, Davidson, Blackwell Publishers, p-1.

²² Brandom, Robert B. (ed.) (1999), *Rorty and His Critics*, Blackwell Publishers Richard Rorty's 'Universality and Truth', p-4.

world. In disquotation, the role of truth is justified as making sense of an agent's behaviour and so it meets the pragmatists' demand that truth must make a difference to practice. Rorty thus thinks that disquotation is an acceptable characterization of 'is true'. Rorty has thus identified these three uses of truth. Following Davidson and James, Rorty gives a definition of pragmatism. He writes: Pragmatism can be understood as signifying "adherence to the following theses:

- 'True' has no explanatory uses.
- We understand all there is to know about the relation of beliefs to the world when we understand their causal relations with the world; ...
- There are no relations of 'being made true' which hold between beliefs and the world.
- There is no point to debates between realism and antirealism, for such debates presuppose the empty and misleading idea of beliefs 'being made true'.²³

Rorty's views on Pragmatism intend to dispense with the notion of objective truth as correspondence to reality. Rorty is ready to accept truth as one concept among a number of other related concepts which we use in describing, explaining and predicting human behaviour. Rorty in fact asks: "But why ... is truth anymore important than such concepts as intention, belief, desire and so on?"²⁴

Rorty indeed does not consider truth to be important. He is convinced that truth cannot be a goal of inquiry. He says: "... because I do not know how to aim at it, I do not think that "truth" names such a goal. I know how to aim at greater honesty, greater charity, greater patience, and greater inclusiveness and so on... But I do not see that it helps things to add "truth" or "universality" or "unconditionality" to our list of goals, for I do not see what we shall do differently if such additions are made."²⁵ Rather than make a hue and cry about truth which the traditional epistemologists have done, Rorty feels that we "should leave truth alone, as a sublimely undiscussable topic, and instead turn to the question of how to persuade people to broaden the size of the audience they take to be competent, to increase the size of the relevant community of justification.

Here we find Rorty's emphasis on the community. Rorty harps on the fact that making a truth claim is nothing more than informing one's interlocutor about one's habits of actions, giving her hints about how to predict and control one's future conversational and non-conversational behaviour. Thus, on Rorty's account, truth has been reduced to mere conversation. Rorty does agree with Davidson that the cautionary aspect of truth shows that truth is beyond all justification and that is why we cannot ever know when any of our beliefs is true, as opposed to justified. Using the term 'true' in a cautionary sense is to win the approval of future audiences for our beliefs. Since there will never be a final future audience we have to go on seeking the approval of ever newer audiences. And since this process goes on ad infinitum truth can never be achieved. For Rorty justification is always to an audience. And the gap between truth and justification emerges when we find that even when we have satisfactorily justified a certain belief or

²³ Rorty, Richard (1991), *Objectivity, relativism, and truth, Philosophical Papers, Volume 1*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p-128.

²⁴ Rorty, Richard (1995), "Is Truth a goal of inquiry?" Davidson vs. Wright" in *Philosophical Quarterly*, July 1995, Vol. 45, No.180, p-286.

²⁵ Brandom, Robert B. (ed.) (1999), *Rorty And His Critics*, Blackwell Publishers Richard Rorty's 'Universality and Truth', p-7.

sentence to the currently available audience, there can always be newer audiences to whom we still have to justify it. The idea of truth will then have to be the impossible ideal of a justification after which no further justification is needed. Truth is thus not a reachable goal, and so it is no goal at all. Rorty's premise is couched in terms of justification to audiences, but in effect Rorty says the same thing as Davidson that we can never know when one of our beliefs (however justified we take it to be) is true. Rorty, is therefore, happy to reject truth as a goal and commit that the only goal can be justification. We have seen earlier that Davidson has also made a similar commitment. They both go from the so-called cautionary aspect of truth to the conclusion that truth cannot be a goal of inquiry, on the ground that the cautionary aspect of truth forces the idea that we can never tell which of our beliefs is true. Truth cannot be a goal of inquiry on the ground that there are inexhaustible audiences to whom we might have to justify a belief of ours.

Despite their affinity, they do have differences. Rorty differs from Davidson insofar as he draws a further conclusion which Davidson does not. Rorty argues that if truth is not a goal of inquiry, it does not deserve the attention which philosophers have given to it. This is a pragmatic lesson which lays down that any bit of philosophy which is not relevant to practice is not of genuine interest. To be relevant to practice, truth must be a goal of inquiry. Since it is not such a goal, it is of no particular interest. Rorty writes: "Truth neither comes nor goes. That is not because it is an entity that enjoys an atemporal existence, but because it is not an entity at all."²⁶ Davidson does not reduce truth to a non-entity. Davidson is very much aware of his differences with Rorty on the issue of truth and notes his point of departure from Rorty when he writes: "Where we differ, if we do, is on whether there remains a question how, given that we cannot 'get outside' our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other coherence', we nevertheless can have knowledge of, and talk about, an objective public world which is not our own making. I think this question does remain, while I suspect that Rorty does not think so."²⁷

From this it is evident that Rorty questions our very urge to find truth. He thus is a coherentist who denounces foundationalist correspondence but differs from other coherentists like Davidson and Putnam who denounce correspondence but do not jettison the objectivity of the notion of truth. We have here two groups of antifoundationalist philosophers who remain divided on what needs to be said about truth. This division has been well accepted by Rorty when he says: "I think that, once one has explicated the distinction between justification and truth by that between present and future justifiability, there is little more to be said. My fellow-coherentists – Apel, Habermas, and Putnam – think, as Peirce also did, that there is a lot more to be said, and saying it is important for democratic politics."²⁸

The view which Rorty's fellow-coherentists held was the celebrated view sponsored by C. S. Peirce. The pragmatist tradition in philosophy actually follows from

²⁶ Rorty, Richard (1993), 'Putnam and the relativist menace' in *Journal of Philosophy*, September 1993, XC, p. 444.

²⁷ Malachowski, Alan R. (ed.) (1990), *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (and Beyond)*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd, Donald Davidson's "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge", p.123.

²⁸ Ibid,p.5.

the founder, Charles Sanders Peirce whom the pragmatists like Rorty claim to have followed. Even Putnam seems to be highly influenced by Peirce and Peirce's concept of reality seems to move in the direction of Putnamian realism famously known as internal realism. The first pragmatist seeds sprouted in Peirce's work who upheld the 'externalist' ideal of achieving a true description of the totality of real things, nevertheless, maintaining that 'reality' is not a thing existing independently of all relation to the mind's conception of it. Peirce did not conceive the 'real' as having an intrinsic nature independently of how it appears to us. The mind which Peirce refers to is not to be understood as the mind of the ultimate community of inquirers, who are supposed to reach final agreement at the end of the long journey of inquiry. Thus we see that Peirce had in mind the idea of convergence upon One Truth. Peirce does not say that reality is one and truth corresponds to that One Reality, rather he says that convergence is gradually achieved through the road of self-corrective inquiry. And this road of self-corrective inquiry ultimately would lead to the 'one true description'. The goal of the inquiry of the ultimate community of inquirers is a stable set of beliefs about the real world. Peirce's reference to the community of inquirers need not slide into a communitarian or sociological view of truth. Because despite reference to the human mind, Peirce did retain reference to the 'external' which has no effect on our thinking. He says: "What the inquirers ultimately agree to, that is truth, is determined 'by nothing human, but by some external permanency – by something upon which our thinking has no effect.'²⁹

Hence Peirce, unlike Rorty, did not subscribe to a pure consensus view of truth. He does not hold the view that truth is created by the consensus ultimately destined to be reached by all inquirers. Retention of this objective external reality in Peirce's pragmatism is clearly illustrated in the following passage cited below. He believed "that there are Real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them ..." and "... we can ascertain by reasoning how things really and truly are; and any man, if he has sufficient experience and he reason enough about it, will be led to the one true conclusion."³⁰

In the above passage, Peirce says that the characters of Real things are entirely independent of 'our opinions'. This seems to be self-contradictory on the face of it because Peirce seems to hold two inconsistent views simultaneously – the first is that reality does not exist independently of the mind's conception of it and the second view is that reality is entirely independent of 'our opinions'. This apparent contradiction can be dissolved if we realize that Peirce was actually referring to two different interpretations of the human mind in the two views. In the first view, mind referred to the mind of the ultimate community of inquirers and in the second view by 'our opinions', Peirce means our present opinions in the individual minds and not the opinions which will appear to the mind of the ultimate community of inquirers.

Having dissolved the apparent contradiction in Peirce's notion of truth, it is important that Peirce's view must not be misunderstood as sliding in the direction of external, old style metaphysical realism. Like Rorty, Peirce also does not adhere to the traditional representational picture of truth as correspondence with reality. But unlike Rorty, he does not dismiss the notion of 'truth' as unimportant. He retains the notion of

²⁹ Gupta, Chhanda (1995), *Realism versus Realism*, Calcutta, Allied Publishers, p.141.

³⁰ Ibid, p.137.

truth and understands it as ‘agreement with reality’. But this agreement is neither to be achieved by mirroring facts nor is to be achieved by solidarity or unanimity among peer members. Rather Peirce understands agreement with reality as James had understood it. “Both James and Peirce held that a true belief is one which a person is prepared to act, and by acting upon it, the subsequent experiences do not come as unpleasant surprises. This is a far cry from the ‘copying’ metaphor which the correspondence theorist tries to explain agreement with reality.”³¹

We find the echo of Peircean amalgamation of the externalist and the internalist perspectives of truth in Putnam. Putnam agrees with Rorty insofar as he understands truth in an internalist way which is opposed to the absolute conception of truth or the externalist interpretation of truth as something absolute, radically non-epistemic and recognition-transcendent. Whether or not we are able to justify our claim that a theory is true hardly matters. A theory is simply true ‘in itself’ apart from all observers, according to external realists. Internal realism rejects this idea and understands truth as something that involves a reference to human observers. Putnam and Rorty both share this rejection of the absolute conception of truth and this may be a point of contact between them. But when it comes to understanding truth as agreement with reality, we see a sharp contrast between them. Putnam offers an explanationist argument to defend the realist commitment to truth. I give a brief account of the explanationist argument here.

Putnam argues that through long-drawn out investigations by trial and error, some conceptions may be given up and some may be replaced by others. These conceptions may then be shared and also assumed to be true. Gradually the truth-seeking investigators agree on a stable set of conceptions and beliefs. These beliefs may be taken as justified true beliefs. The explanationist argument shows that this is the best explanation of the successful predictions made on the basis of such shared beliefs. If these beliefs were not assumed to be true, success of science would then be a miracle. This explanationist defense of the truth of beliefs as agreement with reality is a development of the view of C. S. Peirce which has been discussed above.

Following Peirce, Putnam also maintained that provisionally accepted beliefs fixed by investigators through a long-drawn process of self-corrective and adaptive inquiry should be regarded as knowledge. For this is the best explanation of success. If the “real” had not really been what it appears to be in its effect upon us, then the success we achieve in predicting these effects will seem to be fortuitous. The assumption about the truth of some shared beliefs offers the rationale-and the best explanation of experimental success.

Putnam may be criticized for equating truth with success. Putnam’s response to this criticism is available in his response to remove a misconception about William James’s view on truth. James does not equate ‘truth’ with usefulness – as many believe. On the contrary, James thinks, as Putnam points out, that the usefulness of true ideas is the result of their ‘agreement’ with reality; their usefulness alone does not constitute that agreement. They are useful by ‘leading’ us to act in such a way that our subsequent experiences do not come as unpleasant surprises.³² The warrant for saying that such ideas are true then is issued by agreement with reality. This agreement is not to be understood

³¹ Gupta, Chhanda (1995), *Realism versus Realism*, Calcutta, Allied Publishers, p-143

³² Putnam, Hilary (1992), *Renewing Philosophy*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, Harvard University Press, p-221. See also Gupta’s *Realism versus Realism*, p-156.

in the way traditional correspondence theorists understood it, that is, as a representational or copying relation. An idea agrees with fact in the sense that it works in leading us to what it purports. Peirce and Putnam are not suggesting that an idea agrees with fact because it works. Rather it works because it agrees with fact, that is, because it is true.

Putnam's conception of truth as agreement with reality belongs to the Peircean pragmatist tradition and we have seen already how it differs from Rortian view and even Rorty's acceptance of the difference. So this is a point of contrast between Putnam and Rorty. Putnam strongly objects to Rorty's reduction of truth to a purely emotive practice of social consensus based on choices of peers. He voices his disagreement when he says:

“Although my view has points of agreement with some of the views Richard Rorty has defended, I do not share his skepticism about the very existence of a substantial notion of truth...I try to explain ...how Rortian relativism cum pragmatism fails as an alternative to metaphysical realism. Rorty's present ‘position’ is not so much a position as the illusion or mirage of a position; in this respect it resembles solipsism, which looks like a possible (if unbelievable) position from a distance, but which disappears into thin air when closely examined. Indeed, Rorty's view is just solipsism with a “we” instead of an “I”.³³

Putnam opposes Rorty's attempt to relativize truth to any particular cultural practice. He holds that truth is a normative notion and normativity cannot be relativized. Putnam retains objectivity in truth and says that we have no reason to doubt that there are tables and chairs, houses and trees in our environment because they are real. Putnam's pragmatism involves his pragmatic conceptions of truth from his realistic positions whereas Rorty's pragmatism seems to slant towards anti-realist notion of solidarity and conversation. Rorty grounds truth in the community. Putnam does not disapprove of conversation and solidarity – both are essential to inquiry. But he would insist that what prompts the inquiry is interactions between a human organism and its environment. Thus Putnam acknowledges Rorty's emphasis on inquiry, on practice, on the agent's point of view. But he shuns a complete subscription to a communitarian view of truth and knowledge. Rather he considers Rorty's sociological construal of truth as relapsing into relativism. Rorty's argument on truth can be formulated in the following way:

- *Only sentences can be true as truth is a property of sentences.*
- *Sentences are dependent for their existence on vocabularies.*
- *Vocabularies are made by human beings.*
- *Therefore, truths are made by human beings.*

In the above argument, it is seen that Rorty's account of a fact is merely an exotic illustration of the way he 'describes' or 'explains' what is actually a *construct* of his own current linguistic or conceptual scheme. Rorty's conception of truth is relative to human beings and hence involves relativism. Since he claims that truths are *made* by human beings, he also seems to sponsor constructivism. *Rorty's rejection of mirror imagery and his sociological account of knowledge and truth seem to lead to the acceptance of relativism.*

³³ Putnam, Hilary (1990), *Realism with a Human Face*, ed. And int. James Conant, Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, p.IX.