

EXCHANGE ON "TRUTH AS CONVENIENT FRICTION"

Richard Rorty and Huw Price

I. RORTY: INITIAL RESPONSE (FEBRUARY 2003)

My off-the-cuff reaction is: why wouldn't the need for cooperative action take the place of your third norm? We don't automatically disapprove when we encounter disagreement in belief. I think chocolate disgusting; you think it delicious. I affirm and you reject the filioque clause in the Creed. But, as genial, tolerant, easygoing types we wouldn't dream of disapproving of each other for that reason. But if we are building a house together and I think we need fifteen rafters to make sure the roof holds up and you think ten will do, we have a problem, and we start disapproving of each other. The line between the disagreements that we think worth resolving and those we don't is the same, I should think, as the line between the ones where we need to cooperate on some project and the ones where we don't. (The line shifts, of course. If the Ministry of Plenty declares that from now on only one flavor of ice cream will be produced, the issue about chocolate becomes what James called a "live, momentous and forced option" in the way that the filioque clause used to be but is, thank Heaven, no longer.)

In short, I think that the necessary friction is provided by the need to get together on what is to be done. The tradition says: some disagreements are over what is objectively the case, others, over mere matters of taste or value or

something like that. I think it would be better to say: some disagreements are over what is to be done together, others, over what is to be done in independence of one another. It seems to me that these two lines fall in roughly the same place but that the former is drawn in rather mystifying terms and the latter is not.

II. PRICE: INITIAL REPLY (FEBRUARY 2003)

I don't think your principle divides the cases anywhere near where we in fact draw the line. For example, the present disagreement between us seems to matter in a sense in which our differing preferences concerning chocolate does not, even though (presumably) no cooperative action turns on the issue. Perhaps you might say that "disapproval" is too strong for our view of each other, but I think we do think each other *mistaken*, in a sense not true of the chocolate case. So there's a norm there, whatever we call it.

Or perhaps you might say that in drawing the line in the wrong place, we are still in the grip of the old realist mistake. In that case I'd say, first, that a major part of my claim is that conversation is like this, and that this is independent of the question as to whether it should be (in whatever sense we make of "should" here). But second, I'd be skeptical whether your alternative is really workable. What's supposed to happen when we simply don't know whether cooperative action turns on the issue in question? Or when we have different views about whether it does so? Does the meta-issue get in or out, and by whose lights?

I suspect that the only way it can work is the way it does work, namely for the application of the norm to be "positive presumptive"—we take disagreements to matter, and then cancel it where it seems appropriate, to avoid some unproductive conflicts (as in the chocolate case).

Of course, the more basic point is that if it's true that conversation needs to work like this, there's nothing here to alarm a pragmatist—truth is still explained in terms of its role in practice, not via metaphysics, even though the practice ends up looking more realist than pragmatists have usually recommended.

III. RORTY: FURTHER REMARKS (FEBRUARY 2005)

Huw Price argues that we need to distinguish "three norms, in order of increasing strength: roughly, sincerity, justification and truth" (231). The second of these is what he calls "personal warranted assertibility." A person has obeyed this norm if she has "done as much as possible, *by her own current*

lights, to ensure that her assertion that *p* is in order” (235). But if she tries to go beyond those current lights, she must do more—she must try to justify her assertion that *p* to other people. When she takes that further step, Price says, she is obeying the third norm, the “norm of truth.”

Price asks us to imagine a community in which there are no attempts at intersubjective justification, but in which its members nevertheless express “the kind of behavioral dispositions which we would characterize as beliefs . . . by means of a speech act we might call the *merely-opinionated assertion* (MOA, for short)” (238). He admits that one might doubt the possibility of such a community: perhaps, he says, “a truth-like norm is essential to any practice which deserves to be called linguistic” (249n. 16). But he thinks this possibility irrelevant to his thought experiment.

It seems relevant to me. I doubt that we can tell a plausible story about a Mo’an community. In particular, I do not see why a radical interpreter would construe as *assertions* the noises made by organisms that never attempt to correct one another’s behavioral dispositions—never try to get others to make the same noise they do. I would advance arguments familiar from Wittgenstein, Davidson, and Brandom to urge that there must be social cooperation on projects of shared interest before language can get very far off the ground. One cannot justify by one’s own lights if one does not know what it is to justify by the lights of others. Price’s “chatter of disengaged monologues” (231) is possible only as an enclave within a culture in which there is lots of engaged dialogue.

But suppose we set the question of the possibility of a Mo’an community to one side. Then the disagreement between Price and myself boils down to whether the practice of intersubjective justification is evidence of obedience to a big wholesale norm (“the norm of truth”) or just to a recognition of the many concrete benefits resulting from social cooperation. Price seems to think that we started off by adopting his “norm of truth” and then, as a result, began to justify our assertions to one another. He says that “unless individual speakers recognize such a norm, the idea that they might *improve* their views by consultation with the wider community is simply incoherent to them” (235). I think that we acquired the latter idea in the same way we acquired the idea that we might improve our chances of hunting down a woolly mammoth if we first consulted on tactics.

To state Price’s big wholesale norm, one has to nominalize the adjective “true” and treat the result as the name of a goal (just as Plato nominalized “good” into “the good,” thus luring his readers down the garden path of metaphysics). But we humans might have carried out our cooperative enterprises equally well if nominalization had never occurred to us and if no philosopher

had ever suggested that we had wholesale goals in addition to retail ones. The use of “true” in such contexts as “What you have said is not true” would have sufficed to provoke conversational exchange. For that use is enough to put an interlocutor on notice that cooperation will remain difficult until a disagreement in belief (about which way the mammoth went, for example) has been resolved.

Price and I agree that “truth is not a substantial property, about the nature of which there is an interesting philosophical issue” (232). But since it is not, I cannot see what “Seek the truth!” could add to something like “Listen to other people’s noises, figure out why they make different noises than you do, and try to find nonviolent ways of getting everybody to make roughly the same noises on the same occasions!”

Our ancestors’ attempts to find such ways led to the adoption of lots of little retail norms. Examples are “If it looks like a cloudless sky, call it blue!”; “Don’t all talk at once!”; “If you have asserted *p* and ‘if *p*, then *q*,’ do not deny *q*!”; “Hear the other side!”; and “Describe the result of putting two pairs of things together as four things!” When enough such norms are in place, social cooperation of a sort unknown to ants and bowerbirds becomes possible. So does intellectual and moral progress—the constant replacement of old norms with new, ever more complex and nuanced ones. Such progress does not require that people think of themselves as striving for Truth or for Goodness.

IV. PRICE: REPLY TO RORTY’S FURTHER REMARKS (FEBRUARY 2008)

Could We Be Mo’an?

Rorty begins his comments by pressing me on something that, as he notes, I flagged as a possible objection. As he says, I admitted “that one might doubt the possibility” of a Mo’an community—perhaps, as I put it, on the grounds that “a truth-like norm is essential to any practice which deserves to be called linguistic.” But as Rorty also notes, I said that this possibility is “irrelevant to [my] thought experiment.” “It seems relevant to me,” Rorty replies, “I doubt that we can tell a plausible story about a Mo’an community. . . . Price’s ‘chatter of disengaged monologues’ . . . is possible only as an enclave within a culture in which there is lots of engaged dialogue.”

I’m happy to agree with Rorty about the underlying point here—the impossibility of a thoroughly Mo’an community. However, I think the objection backfires, from Rorty’s point of view, because Rorty’s alternative to my view of how language *actually* works is almost as implausible, on these same

grounds, as the Mo'ans themselves. Rorty seems to think that my "third norm" (i.e., the norm I take to be made explicit in responses such as "That's true" and "That's false") is merely an *occasional* constraint on our assertoric practice, a local product of the need for cooperative action, on a case-by-case basis. Whereas I think that the kind of considerations that show the Mo'ans to be impossible show that nothing can count as an assertoric practice unless the third norm is at least "on" by default: a normative constraint that is always *presumed* to apply, unless canceled by agreement in particular cases.

More on this below, but first, to the issue of the relevance of the Mo'ans themselves, irenic but impossible creatures as Rorty and I agree in taking them to be. For my purposes, what mattered about the Mo'ans was that by seeing what their linguistic practice would lack, we see what truth adds to our own. What's missing for the Mo'ans—what the third norm provides for us—is (as I put it) "the automatic and quite unconscious sense of engagement in common purpose that distinguishes assertoric dialogue from a mere roll call of individual opinion." Let's agree, with Rorty, that when we consider the Mo'ans in the light of "arguments familiar from Wittgenstein, Davidson, and Brandom," we realize that there can be no such community. Removing that sense of engagement amounts to removing anything that might count as an assertion, or indeed as an expression of opinion, in the full-blown sense of the term. This is no reason to forget the lesson we learnt by trying to imagine the Mo'ans—on the contrary, as in many cases, the point of the thought experiment lies *precisely* in the fact that it leads us, in thought, to an impossible destination. (The lesson lies in the nature of the impossibility.)

The Mo'ans themselves aside, Rorty says that he doesn't see "why a radical interpreter would construe as *assertions* the noises made by organisms that *never* attempt to correct one another's behavioral dispositions—*never* try to get others to make the same noise they do." (The emphasis on "never" is mine.) As I've said, I don't see this, either. But nor do I see why "a radical interpreter would construe as *assertions* the noises made by organisms" who have a 'retail' (Rorty's term) or "opt-in" attitude to whether making different noises matter—who merely *sometimes* "try to get others to make the same noise they do." I claim that the "chatter of disengaged monologues is possible only as an enclave within a culture in which" the *default* is "engaged dialogue"—and that to recognize that is to see that there is a norm at work (a norm from whose constraints we need to opt out when we don't want disagreements to matter).

Before explaining this idea further, and contrasting it to what seems to be Rorty's view, I want to set aside some possible misinterpretations of my view, highlighted by Rorty's remarks.

Explicit and Implicit Norms

Rorty takes me to be committed to (what I agree to be) an implausible view of how this kind of norm could operate. However, we don't need to *state* the norm for it to be at work. I agree entirely with Rorty that "the use of 'true' in such contexts as 'What you have said is not true' would" suffice "to provoke conversational exchange." But that's *because* these expressions have a normative force—quite unlike, for example, my use of "Not for me!" when you have just asked the waiter for another beer, and I want to indicate that my preferences differ.

Quoting me again, Rorty notes that we "agree that 'truth is not a substantial property, about the nature of which there is an interesting philosophical issue.' . . . But since it is not," he says, "I cannot see what 'Seek the truth!' could add to something like 'Listen to other people's noises, figure out why they make different noises than you do, and try to find nonviolent ways of getting everybody to make roughly the same noises on the same occasions!'"

Well, I agree that "Seek the truth!" *by itself* doesn't do anything essential, any more than "Don't eat the ones that smell bad" adds anything essential, for creatures who already make the olfactory discrimination in question—or *could* add anything, for creatures who don't. In both cases, the explicit advice may enhance and sharpen the discriminative behavior of creatures who possess these abilities, but it doesn't produce such behavior where none existed before. In both cases, however, we can see the discrimination in question at work, in the behavior of creatures who don't have the vocabulary to make their own practices explicit, in the relevant respects. We see them discriminating by smell among otherwise similar pieces of food, eating some and rejecting others, and we see them discriminating among the utterances of their fellows, favoring some, disfavoring others. (It is true that in both cases we might be hard pressed to characterize the behavior if it wasn't something we do ourselves. But this is no objection to the claim that *they* make the discriminations without being able to say explicitly what it is that they are doing.)

My claim is that our practice of exposing our assertions to this kind of disfavor by other speakers is part and parcel of what *makes them* assertions—moves in a communal game, with a particular normative structure. The game doesn't require that its players can make its rules explicit, however. This is not to deny that the ability to state the rules explicitly (e.g., perhaps, by nominalizing "true") might enhance or refine the game, just as the availability of explicit evaluative language enables us to refine our judgments about many matters of taste and discrimination. But the *practice* of discrimination comes

first—as it needs to, in the linguistic case, because the explicit step depends on the discriminatory practice in question.

Rorty's Alternative

In place of my “wholesale norm,” as he calls it, Rorty wants to propose “lots of little retail norms,” including “‘If it looks like a cloudless sky, call it blue!’; ‘Don’t all talk at once!’; and ‘If you have asserted *p* and ‘if *p*, then *q*,’ do not deny *q*!’” I’ve already agreed on the last point. My wholesale norm doesn’t need to be explicit. It is not clear whether the same is true of Rorty’s “little retail norms,” though apparently they could only be formulated in terms that presuppose assertion or related notions: “call,” “describe,” “deny,” “asserted.” If I’m right, asserting, calling, describing, and denying are all activities that already embody the third norm—not in the sense that they depend on an ability to make it explicit, to describe oneself as “seeking the Truth,” but simply in the sense that to do any of these things is to engage in a social practice, one key feature of which turns on the default normative status of disagreements.

What alternative view can Rorty offer of these matters? He says: “The disagreement between Price and myself boils down to whether the practice of intersubjective justification is evidence of obedience to a big wholesale norm (‘the norm of truth’) or just to a recognition of the many concrete benefits resulting from social cooperation.” Once more, I’ve already distanced myself from the view that we need *explicitly* to adopt a norm of truth. However—so long as “recognize” is *not* read as “can formulate explicitly” but merely as something like “feel the force of”—I do want to reiterate the claim that Rorty objects to here, that “unless individual speakers recognize such a norm, the idea that they might *improve* their views by consultation with the wider community is simply incoherent to them.” It seems to me that the extra-subjective notion of improvement depends on the third norm—and, moreover, that this point is entirely in keeping with the insights of Wittgenstein, Davidson, and Brandom to which Rorty alludes.

In saying this, I’m not venturing any claim about how our ancestors came to play the game in the first place. Presumably the specifically linguistic norm arose on the back of other intersubjective norms and more basic inclinations to cooperative action. It has become something more than this, however—a norm with a life of its own, a norm that lives independently of particular, local projects of cooperation. Indeed, its effect is that *language itself* becomes a project of cooperation, a project that depends on the norm in question.

The difference between my position and Rorty’s on this matter is illustrated by some comments from an exchange in 2003 (presented earlier in this chapter). Against Rorty, I think that his examples about chocolate and the Creed are exceptions. They are cases in which—not only “as genial, tolerant, easygoing types” but also, crucially, as types who know that food preferences and religion are special cases—we make a space for no-fault disagreement. The existence of such exceptions is no argument against my claim that the third norm applies by default (and that it is not, as Rorty here seems to suggest, a norm we “turn on” when resolving disagreement matters, by virtue of collaborative projects). There are countless ordinary cases that illustrate that this is so. For example, imagine that I hear a stranger advising a tourist to take the 378 bus to Bondi Beach. Believing (*correctly*, as it happens, though this doesn’t matter to the example) that the 378 goes to Bronte Beach, not Bondi, I believe that the stranger is *mistaken* and has led the tourist into *error*. I have no common projects with the stranger, let alone with our foreign visitor, and I may be too lazy, too busy, too shy, or too constrained by a competing norm about talking to strangers or foreigners to step in and make their projects mine. Nevertheless, I take it that the stranger was *wrong*, and that the visitor is now *mistaken* about how to get to Bondi. I take examples such as bus routes to show Rorty’s principle doesn’t divide the cases anywhere near where we in fact draw the line.¹

Am I in the grip of some philosopher’s commitment to a Platonic ideal? Not at all: I’m just playing the common conversational game in the ordinary instinctive way, in which disagreements matter by default. As the case illustrates, they don’t always matter *enough* to prompt the kind of behavior that might resolve them—perhaps they seldom do, in fact, in large communities—but by default, they always provide a normative pressure in that direction. Rorty’s examples simply illustrate that the default can be cancelled fairly systematically for particular topics—but the fact that he had to choose religion and matters of taste is surely revealing. (Just try it with bus timetables or the location of ATMs.)

A rather different kind of response to Rorty’s suggestion is provided by the case of philosophical disagreements themselves. Clearly, Rorty and I took the disagreement between us to “matter,” in a sense in which our differing preferences concerning chocolate do not—even though, apparently, no cooperative action turned on the issue. We each took the other to be *mistaken* about something, in a sense not true of the chocolate case.

It seems to me that Rorty has two alternatives in response to this kind of example. He could say that our philosophical disagreements were a sign that even we pragmatists were still in the grip of the old Platonist mistake and that

further therapy was necessary. Or he could say that we'd embarked on a common project, after all, albeit one with fewer immediate practical consequences than the number of rafters we put in the roof.

The first option wouldn't have called for an answer. It is an expression of a desire to leave this particular instantiation of the assertoric game, and the appropriate response is simply to wish the speaker well, in whatever alternative activities he chooses to pursue. As for the second option, I think it needs to be endorsed and returned with interest. I think that the case of philosophy merely illustrates (as an extreme and rarified case) the fact that language itself is a cooperative project—a project to which all normally functioning human beings are already signed up, long before they reach adulthood. Of course, many other factors determine to what extent, and in what ways, each of us chooses to participate in this common game, on particular occasions. But this variability is no challenge to the thesis that there is a fundamental game and a fundamental norm at the heart of the game. That was my claim, and I think that Rorty has not offered us any workable alternative.

After all, what's supposed to happen, in Rorty's view, when we simply *don't know* whether cooperative action turns on the issue in question? Or when we have different views about whether it does so? (Does the meta-issue get in or out, and by whose lights?) Moreover, if it was just *agreement* that mattered—where the need for cooperative action requires it—why not achieve it in some other way, such as deference to norms of social status?

In other words, I think that the only way that an assertoric, reason-eliciting practice can work is the way it actually does work: viz., for the application of the third norm to be positive presumptive. We take disagreements to matter by default and then cancel, hedge, or qualify that presupposition where necessary to avoid unproductive disputes about matters such as chocolate and religion and to bring some civility to the conflicts the norm induces.

“Realist” Truth Without Metaphysics

I want to close by emphasizing a more basic point from my paper, a point with which Rorty's comments did not engage. Even if it is true that conversation needs to work like this, there is nothing here to alarm a pragmatist. Truth is still explained in terms of its role in practice, not via metaphysics, even though the practice ends up looking more “realist” than pragmatists have usually recommended. As I say in the paper, I think that Rorty missed this option, of a pragmatist grounding for what has traditionally been thought of as a realist notion of truth. Here, as in other cases, the right course for a pragmatist is not to reject the practice but to reject the interpretation

that the opposing, metaphysical tradition has placed on the practice. And the right way to do so is to show that we can account for the practice in homely, practical terms, without metaphysics. That's what I've tried to do by suggesting that we understand truth as a “convenient friction”—a norm that plays a particular vital and central role in our linguistic and cognitive lives.

NOTE

1. To the extent that there is a line, at any rate. I'm with Rorty in rejecting this “bifurcation thesis,” as he calls it elsewhere, and I have myself argued that the possibility of no-fault disagreements is entirely a matter of degree. Different discourses admit them to different degrees and for different reasons, and no discourse is wholly free of them, for reasons related to the rule-following considerations. See my *Facts and the Function of Truth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), chap. 8.