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***PRAGMATISM, TRUTH, AND INQUIRY***

***0 Introduction***

C. S. Peirce once defined pragmatism as the

opinion that metaphysics is to be largely cleared up by the application of the following maxim for attaining clearness of apprehension: ‘Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearings we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.’ (Peirce 1982a: 48)

More succinctly, Richard Rorty has described the position in this way:

Pragmatists think that if something makes no difference to practice, it should make no difference to philosophy. (1998: 19)

In thinking about truth, pragmatists will thus ask what practical difference we conceive the truth of a proposition to make. Some pragmatists have thought they could define truth, as “what it works to believe” or “the good in the way of belief,” for example, but Rorty has a different view. Consider the proposition that snow is white. Though it makes a practical difference whether snow is white or not, Rorty thinks it makes no *additional* difference whether the proposition is true. That is, the truth of the proposition makes no difference that snow’s being white does not *already* make. When we think of the practical difference we conceive truth itself to make, Rorty thinks we will find none. If he is right, pragmatists should probably not consider truth to be a philosophically important property of propositions.

Not only pragmatists have taken the view that truth is not a property or, at least, not a philosophically important one. Versions of this view have been known as “disquotationalism,” “deflationism,” and “minimalism.” Characteristically, the minimalist denies that a claim such as ‘‘Snow is white’ is true’’ ascribes the property of truth to the proposition that snow is white. Rather, it just ascribes the property of whiteness to snow. There is, for the minimalist, no such property as truth to ascribe.

The minimalist view of truth may conflict with the common intuition that truth is a goal of inquiry. After all, it is hard to see how inquiry could aim at truth if truth is not an interesting, metaphysically substantial property of beliefs. My aim here is to show that pragmatic minimalists can consistently consider truth a goal of inquiry, and that they probably should do so.

As a foil to my position, I will consider Richard Rorty’s argument for the opposite conclusion. Rorty adds to pragmatism and minimalism a relativistic view of epistemic justification. On that view, a belief is justified to an audience just in case it satisfies their standards of acceptable belief (which I will call their *epistemic standards*). He thinks it then follows that there is no practical difference between pursuing the truth and trying to be persuasive; and, since minimalism tells us there is no such thing as truth toward which inquiry could aim, he concludes that there is no interesting sense in which truth is a goal of inquiry. I outline Rorty’s view and his argument in Section 1, and in Sections 2 and 3, I argue that there *are* practical differences between pursuing the truth and pursuing audience-relative epistemic justification. This makes room for pragmatic minimalists who accept relativism about justification to consider truth a goal of inquiry. In Section 4, I extend my argument to apply if epistemic justification is not relative to an audience. Though in that case there may be no practical difference between pursuing justification and pursuing truth, there are still good reasons for pragmatic minimalists to consider truth a goal of inquiry. I make some concluding remarks in Section 5.

A cautionary note before going further: I am not about to launch a general criticism of Rorty’s alleged “relativism” or “antirealism,” nor do I attack pragmatism (in general or as Rorty conceives it) below. My concern is the compatibility of philosophical pragmatism, minimalism about truth, and the view that truth is a goal of inquiry. Rorty thinks they are mutually inconsistent, and I disagree. Below, I take pragmatism and minimalism as common ground between Rorty and me, and I show how to make room for truth as a goal within that context. Discharging that task, of course, will also require some discussion of why Rorty is mistaken in thinking it impossible.

***1 Rorty’s Argument***

Rorty’s argument against truth as a goal of inquiry turns on three assumptions. The first two I will not question in this paper: pragmatism and minimalism. The third assumption is Rorty’s audience-relative conception of epistemic justification. I will grant that assumption until Section 4. This section sketches both Rorty’s minimalism and his view of epistemic justification, and it shows how he uses them against the claim that truth is a goal of inquiry.

Minimalism contrasts with two other common philosophical approaches to truth. The first is *representationalism*, typified by “correspondence” theories of truth. On a representationalist account, there is more to the truth of ‘Snow is white’ than just snow’s being white. In addition, there is a relation of “correspondence” or “accurate representation” between the proposition that snow is white and the world. The job of a theory of truth, on this view, is to give a philosophical explanation of what the correspondence relation comes to.

The second contrasting approach is *epistemicism*. This is the view that truth is somehow reducible to epistemic justification. For example, an epistemicist might claim that a proposition is true just in case it is believed with justification, or it could be, or it would be by an ideal inquirer. The details of these theories often depend on an underlying theory of epistemic justification. For example, coherence theories of truth often rely on the view that a belief is justified just in case it coheres with a comprehensive system of beliefs. The so-called “pragmatic” theory of truth presupposes that a belief is justified whenever it is effective or beneficial for one to adopt it. We should keep in mind that *pragmatism* is not equivalent to the pragmatic theory of truth. Rorty, for example, has flirted with pragmatic theories of truth, but his considered view is that that is a mistake.

Along with many other philosophers, Rorty is a minimalist about truth. Minimalists deny that there is any interesting relation of “correspondence” or “accurate representation” in virtue of which true propositions are true. They also deny that truth is a property reducible to epistemic justification. In short, they deny that truth is a property at all. For ‘Snow is white’ to be true, on this view, is no more and no less than for snow to be white. According to minimalism, the word ‘true’ no more identifies an interesting property than the word ‘nothing’ identifies an interesting because un-thing-like thing. We understand the conceptual system behind our uses of ‘nothing’ by understanding the logic of the word. Similarly, minimalists believe that one can understand everything there is to understand about truth by understanding the uses of the word ‘true’. Ordinarily, they also believe that the most important aspect of our uses of ‘true’ is given by a version of Tarski’s Convention T: The proposition that *p* is true if and only if *p*.

Rorty’s own version of minimalism acknowledges only three important uses of ‘true’. These are:

(a) an endorsing use  
(b) a cautionary use, in such remarks as ‘Your belief that S is perfectly justified, but perhaps not true’ -- reminding ourselves that justification is relative to, and no better than, the beliefs cited as grounds for S, and that such justification is no guarantee that things will go well if we take S as a ‘rule of action’ (Peirce’s definition of belief)  
(c) a disquotational use: to say metalinguistic things of the form ‘‘S’ is true iff ----.’ (Rorty 1991: 128)

To understand these uses of ‘true’, Rorty thinks it is unnecessary to say anything with metaphysical bite, especially anything that involves treating truth as a real property exemplified by some propositions and not others. In the endorsing use of ‘true’, use (a), one might say something like ‘It is true that snow is white’ or ‘What Grandma told you about saving money is true’. The function of ‘true’ here is just to mark one’s endorsement of the claim or claims it modifies. One might as well have said simply ‘Snow is white’ or repeated what Grandma told you about saving money. It is useful to have a predicate like this in a language, especially when one wishes to make blanket endorsements of sets of claims too large to assert individually. For example, we do not have time for me to repeat everything Grandma told you about saving money. Nevertheless, we do have time for me to say that it was all true.

This naturally brings us to the disquotational use of ‘true’, use (c). Here the predicate is a logical operator for bringing sentences (or classes of them) up from an object language into a metalanguage. This too can be useful. For example, I am unable use the language of number theory to state every theorem of number theory, for there are infinitely many theorems and I have only finite time. I could achieve the same effect, though, by using the truth predicate in a metalanguage and saying something like ‘All the theorems of number theory are true’. As W. V. Quine puts the point, “The logician talks of sentences only as a means of achieving generality along a dimension he cannot sweep out by quantifying over objects. The truth predicate then preserves his contact with the world, where his heart is” (1970: 35). One might wonder, then, just how the endorsing and disquotational uses of ‘true’ differ.

Rorty is little help in answering that question; I have been unable to find a place where he discusses it. At risk of putting words into his mouth, then, let me make the following suggestion. The endorsing use of ‘true’ is a species of the disquotational use, but the disquotational use is broader. Whenever one uses ‘true’ to talk simultaneously of sentences and the world, or to talk about the logical relationships among sentences, the use is disquotational. Sometimes this commits a speaker to the claims ‘true’ modifies. When it does, ‘true’ has an endorsing use. When it does not, as in the following examples, the use of ‘true’ is disquotational but not endorsing:

It’s going to be a lean winter if Madame Seesalot’s predictions are true.   
‘Snow is white’ is true if and only if snow is white.  
Frank’s stories could be true, but I doubt his life has been that interesting.

The cautionary use of ‘true’ requires delicate handling. Considering it could easily lead one to a more substantive view of truth than minimalism allows. *Why*, one might ask, do some of our beliefs hold up longer and work for us better than others? *Why*, one might go on, do we need to be reminded that even our most justified beliefs may not pan out in the long run? A natural answer is this:

Some of our beliefs serve us better than others *because they are true*. They accurately represent reality independent of our minds. Our most justified beliefs, however, are never guaranteed to be true in this sense. So, we need to remind ourselves occasionally that our justified beliefs might turn out not to be apt rules for action, for they may not correspond to the way things really are.

This answer leads to representationalism, and it gets there by treating truth as a property with explanatory power. In Rorty’s view, no appeal to truth is able to produce a real explanation. He writes:

[It] would be a mistake to think of ‘true’ as having an explanatory use on the basis of such examples as ‘He found the correct house because his belief about its location was true’ and ‘Priestley failed to understand the nature of oxygen because his beliefs about the nature of combustion were false’. The quoted sentences are not explanations but promissory notes for explanations. To get them cashed, to get real explanations, we need to say things like ‘He found the correct house because he believed that it was located at ...’ or ‘Priestley failed because he thought that phlogiston ...’. The explanation of success and failure is given by the details of about what was true or what was false, not by the truth or falsity itself -- just as the explanation of the praiseworthiness of an action is not ‘it was the right thing to do’ but the details of the circumstances in which it was done. (Rorty 1991: 140)

We do not need to construe cautionary uses of ‘true’ as warnings about the possibility of inaccurate representation. Instead, Rorty considers them reminders that:

justification is relative to an audience and that we can never exclude the possibility that some better audience might exist, or come to exist, to whom a belief that is justifiable to us would not be justifiable. But, as Putnam’s “naturalistic fallacy” argument shows, there can be no such thing as an “ideal audience” before which justification would be sufficient to ensure truth. For any audience, one can imagine a better-informed audience and also a more imaginative one -- an audience that has thought up hitherto-undreamt-of alternatives to the proposed belief. (1998: 22)

Here Rorty invokes relativism about epistemic justificationbut the invocation is not essential to his main point, which is only that justification is always fallible. No matter how well justified one of our beliefs might seem to us today, something could could force us to give it up tomorrow. The claim that *p* is true simply does not follow from the claim that someone is well justified in believing that *p*. For Rorty, cautionary uses of ‘true’ are reminders that truth is *not* epistemic, not reminders that it *is* representational.

In at least one place, Rorty insists that the disquotational use of ‘true’ does not account for its cautionary use (1998: 60), but that is somewhat misleading. The point of the cautionary use of ‘true’ is that we should not close the book on *p* once and for all just because our belief that *p* passes muster with our present epistemic standards. We, our standards, or our information might improve in such a way that we feel compelled to replace our belief that *p* with the belief that Not-*p*. What matters here is less the possibility of better audiences than the present audience’s fallibility, which ‘true’ highlights in its cautionary use. Despite what Rorty says, then, we could assimilate the cautionary use of ‘true’ to the disquotational use after all. ‘S’s belief that *p* is justified but perhaps not true’ would then amount to ‘S’s belief that *p* is justified, but maybe Not-*p* anyway’. The latter claim would do what Rorty intends the cautionary use of ‘true’ to do; it would remind us that the standards that make for S’s justification in believing that *p* are not enough to guarantee that *p*.

Though it is not essential to his explication of the cautionary use of ‘true’, Rorty’s relativism about justification does figure in his rejection of truth as a goal of inquiry. That relativism amounts to the following analysis of justification:

For any *S* who believes that *p* and any audience *A*, *S*’s belief that *p* is justified to *A* if and only if it satisfies *A*’s epistemic standards

where an audience’s “epistemic standards” are its standards of acceptable belief. There is no such thing on this view as justification apart from justification relative to an audience and its standards. If there is any such thing as epistemic justification full stop, then, it is justification relative *us* and what *we* take our best epistemic standards to be. For Rorty, “justification is relative to an audience” (1998: 22), and it has a lot to do with how convincing a case one could make to an audience for believing as one does.

Given pragmatism, minimalism, and the audience-relativity of epistemic justification, Rorty acknowledges only a trivial sense in which truth can be a goal of inquiry. That is the sense of ‘goal’ in which a person has whatever goals she thinks she has. For example, an ancient archer might think she is trying both to hit bull’s-eyes and to please the goddess Diana. In the trivial sense, this archer has two separate goals. However, as there is no such goddess as Diana and no such thing as pleasing her, there is no nontrivial sense in which this archer is trying to do any more than to hit bull’s-eyes. If we say truth is a goal of inquiry, Rorty thinks, we might mean only that inquirers often think they are trying to get beliefs that are not only justified but true. In the trivial sense of ‘goal’, we would be right, but we would also be saying nothing about the nature or aims of inquiry. We would only be describing the state of mind of certain inquirers who, in Rorty’s view, are making a mistake analogous to the Dianic archer’s (Rorty 1998: 29).

His case for this view begins with pragmatism. The only way we can try to get true beliefs, Rorty thinks, is by trying to get beliefs that accord well with our epistemic standards. This indicates that there is no difference in practice between aiming for truth and aiming for increased epistemic justification; whatever you *think* your goals are, you will *do* exactly the same things. As a pragmatist, Rorty is suspicious of positing two distinct goals when there is no difference between their pursuits.

By itself, this is not enough to undermine the view that truth is a goal of inquiry over and above mere epistemic justification. Consider our archer again, but now suppose Diana does exist and we mortals can please her only by hitting bull’s-eyes. In this case, hitting bull’s-eyes and pleasing Diana *are* two different things, even though we can do the latter only by doing the former. There would still be no practical difference between trying to please Diana and trying to hit bull’s-eyes, but religious archers *would* be trying to bring about two separate states of affairs. One involves the relative positions of arrows and targets, and the other involves Diana’s mood.

Here is where minimalism comes into the argument. According to minimalism, there is no such thing as “truth” for us to seek in inquiry, just as there is no such goddess as Diana for us to please in archery. It would therefore be a mistake to consider the justification of our beliefs to be a property making it more likely that they have the additional property of being true. Instead, Rorty thinks we must fall back on the audience-relative conception of epistemic justification. In inquiry, then, our aim is to get beliefs that are justified in the sense that they satisfy our community’s epistemic standards. There is no practical difference between doing this and trying to get true beliefs, and there is no property of truth over and above justification at which we could aim. Except in the trivial sense, then, Rorty concludes that truth is not a real goal of inquiry.

***2 One Practical Difference Between Pursuing Truth and Pursuing Justification***

The non-existence truth as a possible goal over and above epistemic justification would not entail the reducibility of truth to justification. It would mean only that we *can* aim for justification, for there is such a property our beliefs could have, but we *cannot* aim for truth because (a) there is no such property and (b) there is no practical difference between what we call “pursuing the truth” and trying to get beliefs that are justified in Rorty’s sense of the word.

Rorty’s case, it should be clear, depends on there being no practical difference between pursuing the truth and pursuing epistemic justification relative to one’s community. He arrives at this claim by considering what one does in making assessments of truth and justification. As he puts it, “assessment of justification and assessment of truth are, when the question is about what I should believe now, the same activity” (1998: 22). If they should turn out to be *different* activities, though, we could make sense of inquiry as the pursuit of truth rather than just an effort to be as persuasive as one can be. In this section and the following one, I will argue that there *are* practical differences between pursuing truth and pursuing justification relative to an audience.

Rorty bases his identification of assessing truth with assessing justification on the first-person case, “when the question is what I should believe now.” I think he is wrong about this case, but it will be helpful to begin with a case of a different sort. Suppose Marge makes one of the following claims:

(1) Homer believes that Bart has been arrested.  
(2) Homer’s belief that Bart has been arrested is justified.  
(3) Homer’s belief that Bart has been arrested is true.

It makes a practical difference which assertion Marge makes. If she asserts (1), she attributes a belief to Homer but commits herself no further. She could be entitled to attribute that belief whether or not she agrees with Homer and whether or not she approves of his grounds for believing as he does.

Marge’s commitments in asserting (2) are more complicated. First, asserting (2) would commit her to everything asserting (1) would, for all Homer’s *justified* beliefs are Homer’s beliefs. Furthermore, in keeping with the Rortyan conception of justification we are assuming until Section 4, asserting (2) would commit Marge to considering Homer’s so believing to be acceptable by the lights of whatever audience is relevant in the context. In the simplest case, Marge is a member of that audience and she endorses its standards. Consequently, asserting (2) would conditionally commit Marge to agreeing with Homer. Unless she has relevant, outweighing evidence Homer lacks, she is acknowledging that the standards she endorses commend agreement with Homer to her.

Asserting (3) would involve Marge in commitments orthogonal to those of asserting (2). Where (2) carries a *conditional* commitment to agree with Homer, (3) carries an *unconditional* one. Marge is never entitled to call Homer’s belief true while disagreeing with him. Yet there is a normative element present in (2) that is absent in (3). Marge can legitimately call Homer’s belief true without taking *any* particular position on its standing vis-à-vis any epistemic standards. For example, she might agree with Homer that Bart has been arrested, while insisting that his belief is unjustified because it is based on hallucinations induced by a Guatemalan insanity pepper.

These are practical differences between merely attributing a belief to someone, calling the belief justified, and calling it true. Appreciating those differences can help us to see how assessing justification and assessing truth differ in third-person cases. To assess the justification of someone else’s belief is to decide what stance to take toward a claim like (2). On the Rortyan conception of justification, this means deciding whether the belief satisfies a community’s epistemic standards. To assess the *truth* of someone’s belief is to decide what stance to take toward a claim like (3). It is a matter of seeing whether things are as this person says they are; given she believes that *p*, it is a matter of finding out whether *p* or Not-*p*.

For example, if Marge were assessing Homer’s belief’s justification, she would be concerned with some questions about *Homer*. Why does he think Bart has been arrested? Are his reasons the kind we would ordinarily accept or find convincing? Has he ignored any relevant evidence available to him? When she finally decides whether to consider the belief justified or not, she will not necessarily have come to *any* particular views about Bart. On the other hand, in assessing Homer’s belief’s truth, Marge is mainly concerned with just one question: Has Bart been arrested? This is a question about Bart, and Marge is interested in the grounds of Homer’s belief only as a possible source of information about what has happened to Bart.

The question of Homer’s belief’s justification is a question about Homer and not Bart. The question of its truth is a question about Bart and not Homer. Insofar as these are different questions, looking for answers to them are different activities. Their outcomes are independent in the sense that all the logical possibilities are open: Marge might find Homer’s belief justified and true, justified and untrue, unjustified and true, or unjustified and untrue. At least in third-person cases, assessing justification and assessing truth are *not* the same activity.

But maybe we have moved too fast. One might object that the activities I have associated with assessing the truth of someone else’s beliefs bear no practical difference to those associated with assessing the *justification* of one’s own beliefs. That is, one might contend that I decide whether *your* beliefs are true by considering whether *I* am justified in agreeing with you. If so, then all I have really shown so far is that third-person assessments of justification differ from first-person assessments of justification. Furthermore, the first-person case seems far more relevant to the question whether truth can be one’s goal in inquiry. To deal with this objection fully, we need to consider the first-person case in more detail.

***3 Truth and First-person Justification***

I am still assuming relativism about epistemic justification. I discharge that assumption in Section 4. To see the practical difference between concern for truth and concern for audience-relative first-person justification, we can start by considering some points made by a pair of Rorty’s pragmatist forebears: C. S. Peirce and John Dewey.

Both Peirce and Dewey were interested in distinguishing better from worse forms of inquiry. Peirce conceives of inquiry as a struggle to move from the “uneasy and dissatisfied” state of doubt to the more settled state of belief, in which one can act confidently. In “The Fixation of Belief,” he considers four ways of making that move: the method of tenacity (i.e., sticking to one’s doxastic guns come what may), the method of authority (i.e., believing what the powerful tell one to believe), the *a priori* method of “what is agreeable to reason,” and the scientific method. He finds that only the last method is correct, for he thinks it is the only one with mechanisms built in to make sure that the world as we experience it has a say in both what we believe and how we form our beliefs (Peirce 1982b: 75).

Dewey defines inquiry as “the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole” (Dewey 1982: 319-20). Like Peirce, he thinks of inquiry as a response to a certain kind of predicament, in which one does not know what to *do* because one does not know what to *think*. Also, for Dewey, not just any response to such a predicament will do. “Men think in ways they should not,” he writes, “when they follow methods of inquiry that experience of past inquiries shows are not competent to reach the intended end of the inquiries in question” (1982: 318-9). Just as Peirce believes our inquiries should tune our beliefs to the world as we experience it, Dewey believes that the world as we have it through experience of past inquiries should inform our conduct in future inquiries.

For both Peirce and Dewey, maintaining contact with the world as we experience it requires us to take a critical and fallibilistic stance toward *both* our beliefs *and* our methods of acquiring them. It is not enough, in their view, simply to apply heuristics or existing community standards blindly, nor is it correct to form one’s beliefs haphazardly without applying any particular standards or strategies. Inquirers should be willing to ask two different sorts of question. The first sort asks whether candidate beliefs satisfy existing epistemic standards. The second kind asks whether beliefs that accord with those standards tend to hold up over time, as we accumulate more experience.

Now let us consider an inquiry whose topic is Bart’s alleged arrest. Rorty would say there is no practical difference between trying to decide whether it is true that Bart has been arrested and trying to decide whether I would be justified in believing he has been. Furthermore, on the audience-relative conception of justification, to decide whether I am justified in thinking Bart has been arrested is to decide whether I would satisfy my community’s standards if I believed he had been. Notice that the question of those standards’ adequacy does not arise if I am interested in justification alone. That question is simply irrelevant to whether my belief would satisfy the standards. Just as the question of Homer’s belief’s justification was about Homer but not Bart, the question of *my own* audience-relative justification is about *me* but not Bart. If all I want is a justified belief, then all I’m interested in doing is what would enable me to get away with believing what I come to believe and, perhaps, to convince others in my community. I am indifferent to whether I come to believe that Bart has been arrested only if he has been.

Now imagine that I am interested in more than just the Rortyan justification of my belief; I am interested in its truth. That is, I want to believe that Bart has been arrested if and only if Bart *has* been arrested. In these circumstances, I want more than just to get a belief my peers will find convincing. My getting away with thinking Bart has been arrested is not necessarily any indication that he has been. I want to form my belief in such a way that it is unlikely to be overturned by future experience. At the very least, that means avoiding methods of inquiry I have found to be unreliable, and it may also involve *using* methods I have found to be reliable in the past.

The practical difference between judging one’s own justification and judging the truth of one’s beliefs, then, consists in one’s preparedness to take a critical stance towards one’s epistemic standards. For my beliefs to be justified, in Rorty’s audience-relative way, they need only to satisfy my community’s epistemic standards. Assessing my own belief’s justification, then, is a simple matter of applying the standards, *and it does not require evaluating their adequacy or reliability*. Now, it may be that I can judge the truth of my beliefs only by applying epistemic standards (for example, by judging the quality of my evidence for believing one way or another), but assessing the truth of my beliefs goes beyond the *mere* application of those standards. It also includes a concern for their adequacy. If Peirce and Dewey are right, this means that inquiry at its best does include a concern for truth over and above a concern for Rortyan justification. At its best, that is, inquiry aims at truth.

On the account I am suggesting, then, one’s goal is truth when one’s goal is to believe that *p* only if *p*, and one’s goal is justification when one’s goal is to believe that *p* only if doing so would satisfy one’s community’s epistemic standards. The practical difference between these two states is that, in the former case but not necessarily the latter, one’s attitude towards one’s community’s standards is critical and fallibilistic.

Note that distinguishing the assessment of justification from the assessment of truth requires us to sacrifice neither minimalism nor pragmatism. This is because neither minimalism nor pragmatism conflicts with the view that epistemic standards can be more or less adequate. For example, minimalists can say that standards are adequate insofar as they tend to give the nod to true (and not false) beliefs, where ‘true’ is used disquotationally. Good standards to apply in deciding whether Bart has been arrested, on such a view, are those whose satisfaction makes it likely that, if I believe Bart has been arrested, then he has been. Pragmatists need only add that we can tell whether our standards are adequate in this sense only by seeing how well beliefs that accord with them hold up in the face of future experience.

Rorty has his own view of what makes epistemic standards better or worse. We can ask not only what our epistemic standards *are*, but what they *would be* if we were at our reflective best, that is, if we were the “educated, sophisticated, tolerant, wet liberals” (1998: 52) we strive to be. He maintains that this is the only sense to be made of the idea of “better standards,” once we have given up the representationalist view of truth. Consequently, Rorty might concede that there is a practical difference between pursuing truth and *unreflectively* pursuing audience-relative epistemic justification, but he could go on to claim that there is not a practical difference between pursuing truth and pursuing justification relative to our best standards. But, he might go on, since there is no such property as truth and there is such a property as justification relative to those standards, there is no goal of truth.

This objection abandons the audience-relative conception of justification in favor of an ethnocentric conception. On such a view, to be *really* justified is not just to satisfy an audience’s epistemic standards, but to satisfy *our best* standards, which are the standards we think we would embrace if we were at what we conceive to be our best. Because the objection gives up relativism about justification, I will not answer it in this section, where my aim has been to show there is a practical difference between pursuing truth and pursuing audience-relative epistemic justification. In the next section, I consider whether a non-relativistic account of justification leaves room for truth as a goal of inquiry.

***4 Extending the Argument***

My argument above depends on Rorty’s relativistic conception of epistemic justification. Given pragmatism, minimalism, and that view, there are practical differences between trying to get true beliefs and trying only to get justified beliefs. On Rorty’s grounds, then, pragmatists can and probably should count truth among the goals of inquiry. Though all pragmatic minimalists will agree with Rorty that what makes no difference to practice should make no difference to philosophy, not all will agree with his relativism about justification. Even Rorty himself often seems to favor the “ethnocentric” view. We should therefore consider whether there is sense to be made of truth as a goal of inquiry on a non-relativistic construal of epistemic justification. I argue in this section that there is.

The argument here differs from that of Section 3. I do not argue that there is a practical difference between pursuing non-relativistic justification and pursuing truth. Rather, I will be arguing that the conjunction of pragmatism, minimalism, and non-relativism about epistemic justification actually *implies* that truth is a goal of inquiry. Given non-relativism about justification, it would be inconsistent for the pragmatic minimalist to follow Rorty’s lead and deny that truth is a goal of inquiry.

There are two forms of non-relativism to take into account. Both forms construe epistemic justification as more than just satisfying an audience’s epistemic standards. Instead, they treat justification as a matter of conformity with *adequate* epistemic standards, and a belief is more justified the more adequate the standards. In keeping with pragmatism and minimalism, though, we cannot construe adequacy here in terms of a tendency to produce “accurate representations.” That would be to fall back into the representationalist picture of truth as correspondence to the mind-independent world, and the pragmatic minimalist rejects that picture. There are two forms of non-relativism that avoid this picture, however.

The first such form is Rorty’s ethnocentric conception of justification. On this conception, for standards to be better or worse is for them to be better or worse by *our best lights*, that is, by what we take to be our own best judgment. The relevant “we,” says Rorty, comprises “us educated, sophisticated, tolerant, wet liberals, the people who are always willing to hear the other side, to think out all the implications, and so on – the sort of people, in short, whom Putnam and I hope, at our best, to be” (1998: 52). Needless to say, Rorty denies epistemic justification in this sense is sufficient for truth.

A second form of non-relativism draws heavily on the disquotational use of the word ‘true’. One can say that epistemic standards are adequate to the extent that they tend to give the nod to true beliefs, but ‘true’ is here being used disquotationally. Adequacy on this conception is not a matter of promoting accurate representation in the metaphysically robust sense of representationalism. It is just a matter of having a tendency to approve the belief that *p* only if *p*.

Given pragmatism, these two non-relativistic conceptions come to the same thing; there is no practical difference between them. The only way to tell whether a set of standards is adequate in the ethnocentric sense is to see whether it tends to approve beliefs that hold up under scrutiny as we improve ourselves epistemically, by becoming better informed and more imaginative. That, however, is no different from our only way of telling whether a set of standards tends to approve true beliefs. All we can do is see whether the beliefs the standards approve tend to hold up even as we become more imaginative and better informed, i.e., whether they hold up in the face of future experience.

I say more about well-informed, imaginative audiences below. For now, though, let us take non-relativism about epistemic justification to be the view that epistemic justification derives from the satisfaction of adequate epistemic standards, and let us take standards to be adequate to the extent that they tend to promote beliefs that hold up under the scrutiny as we become more imaginative and better-informed.

Now let us try to imagine inquiry not aimed at truth. To keep things concrete, let the subject of our inquiry be the question whether protons are larger than electrons. For pragmatists, the *meaning* of the claim:

Protons are larger than electrons

consists of the practical difference it would make for protons to be larger than electrons. For minimalists, the *truth* of the claim simply consists in protons’ *being* larger than electrons. By minimalism, our inquiry unconcerned with truth is unconcerned with whether protons are larger than electrons. By pragmatism, this means our inquiry is unconcerned with whether the practical consequences of protons’ being larger than electrons obtain.

An imaginative audience is one that can see the practical differences it would make for protons to be larger, smaller, or the same size as electrons. They can imagine in detail how things would seem or what experience would be like in each case. An audience is well-informed to the extent that it is aware of how things *do* seem or of what experience *is* like. The more imaginative and well-informed an audience is, the better they can tell whether things *do* seem as they *would* seem if protons were larger than electrons. Our inquiry unconcerned with truth, then, is also unconcerned with producing beliefs that will hold up under the scrutiny of well-informed, imaginative audiences. This is because it is unconcerned with whether protons are larger than electrons, and for protons to be larger than electrons is for the practical consequences of ‘Protons are larger than electrons’ to obtain. By our non-relativism about epistemic justification, it now follows that the inquiry is unconcerned with *justification* as well. Pragmatic minimalists who are not relativists about justification cannot consistently maintain that inquiry aims at justification but not truth.

But, one might object, doesn’t this argument trade on the fact that there is no practical difference between pursuing non-relativistic justification and pursuing truth? And wasn’t that supposed to be a reason to *deny* that truth is a goal of inquiry? Wouldn’t we do just as well to say only that inquiry aims at producing more or better non-relativistically justified beliefs, without mentioning truth at all?

My argument may take advantage of the sameness in practice between pursuing non-relativistically justified beliefs and pursuing true beliefs, but I do not think this is a reason to deny that truth is a goal of inquiry. The argument shows that truth mustbe a goal of inquiry if non-relativistic justification is. It would be inconsistent for pragmatic minimalists to deny that. The force of the objection, then, must be that there are overriding reasons not to *say* that truth is a goal of inquiry, even though that is a consequence of minimalist pragmatism. At one point, Rorty seems to argue that there are such overriding reasons. He thinks the old-fashioned and highfalutin rhetoric of truth is inferior to his own newfangled rhetoric of “solidarity” and “intersubjective, unforced agreement” because the former invites representationalism and bad metaphysics. He writes (1998: 39):

Some pragmatists might see no reason why they too should not say, ringingly, robustly, and commonsensically, that the goal of inquiry is *truth*. But they cannot say this without misleading the public. For when they go on to add that they are, of course, not saying that the goal of inquiry is correspondence to the intrinsic nature of things, the common sense of the vulgar will feel betrayed. For “truth” sounds like the name of a goal only if it is thought to name a *fixed* goal -- that is, if progress toward truth is explicated by reference to a metaphysical picture, that of getting closer to what Bernard Williams calls “what is there anyway.” Without that picture, to say that truth is our goal is merely to say something like: we hope to justify our beliefs to as many and as large audiences as possible. But to say that is to offer only an ever-retreating goal, one that fades forever and forever when we move. It is not what common sense would call a goal. (1998: 39)

This line of argument strikes me as very bad. For one thing, giving up the metaphysics of representationalist truth does *not* force pragmatic minimalists to construe aiming at truth only as hoping to justify our beliefs to lots of people. Rather, they can say quite simply that we aim for truth when we try, for any *p*, to believe that *p* if and only if *p*. As pragmatists, they would then add that the best symptom of *p* is that it seems to be the case to those in a position to tell both how things do seem and how they would seem if *p*. There is no spooky metaphysics here.

Another problem is Rorty’s claim that pragmatists who call truth a goal of inquiry will mislead the public. As philosophers interested in being clear, we might want to avoid saying misleading things. By the same token, though, we should acknowledge the important difference between *invitation* and *implication*. It might *invite* bad metaphysics to call truth a goal of inquiry, but it *implies* neither representationalism nor any substantive metaphysical theses. Pragmatic minimalists should not be afraid to say that truth is a goal of inquiry, especially if that is consequence of their view. If “the common sense of the vulgar will feel betrayed,” then too bad for the vulgar. Pragmatists should respond to their feelings of betrayal by saying what they mean when they call truth a goal of inquiry and by arguing for their preferred views of justification, truth, and inquiry. They should not try to conceal the consequences of their views just because they might be hard to explain.

My point here is just that dropping relativism about justification does not force us to stop considering truth a goal of inquiry. To the contrary, a non-relativist conception of justification consistent with pragmatism and minimalism is *inconsistent* with the claim that truth is *not* a goal of inquiry.

Another possible objection, though, is that the case has been overstated. The argument I have offered supports the conclusion that truth is a goal of inquiry if non-relativistic justification is, but I have not yet argued for the antecedent. Rorty might thus deny that non-relativistic justification is properly considered a goal. He might say such justification, like truth, is “an ever retreating goal” we can never know we have attained. Thus, he could go on, it is better to maintain that *neither* truth nor non-relativistic justification is a goal of inquiry.

The objection depends on the claims (a) that non-relativistic justification is epistemically isolated in the sense that we can never know we have attained it and (b) that it is a mistake to construe an epistemically isolated state as a goal. Both claims are too dubious to accept.

Consider (a). Why should we think non-relativistic justification is epistemically isolated? Presumably, this is because we can never be infallibly certain a belief will hold up under the scrutiny of audiences better informed and more imaginative than we are. That is no strike against non-relativistic justification, though. We can never be infallibly certain we have attained *any* goal, but surely there are some goals we can know we have attained. Non-relativistic justification appears to be no more epistemically isolated than anything else. When a belief holds up under the scrutiny of more imaginative, better informed audiences, we have evidence it is non-relativistically justified. When it does not, we have evidence it is not. As with any goal, knowing we have attained this one is primarily a matter of, first, attaining it and, second, having good evidence we have attained it. There is no reason to think either is impossible.

Even if non-relativistic justification were epistemically isolated, however, it would not follow that it cannot be a goal. For different reasons, dying for one’s country and proving π=3 are epistemically isolated, but they are possible goals. More to the point, perhaps, it might be impossible for me to know I have designed the most efficient refrigerator possible, but that could still be my goal. Having the goal would motivate me to keep trying out new ideas in hopes of improving my designs. It keeps my mind open to the possibility that there are possible improvements no one has thought up yet. Similarly, the aim of non-relativistic justification can motivate a person to keep trying to improve her beliefs and to keep subjecting them to the scrutiny of better and more imaginative audiences. All that really follows from the epistemic isolation of a goal is that we might keep aiming for it after we have already (but unknowingly) achieved it. In the case of non-relativistic justification, that just means keeping a critical and open mind even if one’s beliefs are bound to hold up under the scrutiny of better audiences. Its putative epistemic isolation is no good reason to deny non-relativistic justification’s status as a goal.

***5 Conclusion***

By design, minimalism is an approach to truth with few consequences of metaphysical or epistemological interest. Surely the claim that truth is not a goal of inquiry is epistemologically interesting, so minimalists should hope they are not committed to it. Some minimalists may want to go even further. They may want to claim that the question whether truth is a goal of inquiry is *independent* of their theory of truth. That is, they may want to say that their theory is compatible with either accepting or rejecting truth as a goal of inquiry.

I have not argued that minimalism by itself is committed to treating truth as a goal of inquiry. Instead of considering minimalism in isolation, I have considered it in conjunction with pragmatism. This conjunction of views leads Rorty to reject truth as a goal of inquiry. Minimalism forces him to deny that inquiry aims at producing beliefs with the property of being true, and he sees no practical difference between what we call pursuing the truth and our efforts to be as convincing as possible. He thinks his pragmatism then forces him to deny that truth is a goal.

But Rorty is mistaken. There *are* practical differences between pursuing the truth and simply trying to be convincing. In third-person cases of belief evaluation, we can aptly describe the difference by saying that the question whether *S*’s belief that *p* is justified is a question about *S*, but the question whether it is true is equivalent to the question whether *p*. In the first-person case, the difference comes down to one’s attitude toward the standards and methods used in forming one’s beliefs. When one’s aim is truth, over and above convincingness or audience-relative justification, one is willing to view one’s standards critically and fallibilistically.

If we think of justification non-relativistically, there may indeed be no practical difference between pursuing truth and pursuing justification. Yet if that difference does disappear, it is not a reason for pragmatic minimalists to deny that truth is a goal of inquiry. If anything, it is a reason for them to explain why we do not need to consider truth a metaphysically substantive property to pursue it, and why pursuing truth might be a good idea anyway. Whether justification is relative to an audience or not, pragmatic minimalists can and probably should count truth a goal of inquiry.

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