

## TRUTH FROM THE AGENT POINT OF VIEW

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**Abstract:** I defend a novel pragmatist account of truth that I call ‘truth from the agent point of view’ or ‘agential truth’, drawing on insights from Hilary Putnam. According to the agential view, as inquirers, when we take something to be truth-apt, we are taking ourselves and all other thinkers to be accountable to getting right a shared target that is independent of any individual’s or community’s view of that target. That we have this relationship to truth is what enables our practices of disagreement and agreement, even when subject to the glare of self-conscious reflection, and represents a crucial ingredient in our capacity for rational thought. The resulting account shares elements with Huw Price’s and Cheryl Misak’s views, but also has important advantages over both. It also yields a surprising conclusion – that our best pragmatist account of truth may well be a version of the correspondence theory of truth.

**Keywords:** pragmatism; truth; inquiry; samesaying; deflationism; metaphysics

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Contemporary pragmatists embrace the thought that we cannot step outside of ourselves – our language, our beliefs, our needs – in order to observe an unvarnished reality. W.V.O. Quine puts this thought as follows: ‘We cannot detach ourselves from’ our conceptual scheme and ‘compare it objectively with an unconceptualized reality’ (1980: 79) Donald Davidson follows suit: ‘[T]here is no chance that someone can take up a vantage point for comparing conceptual schemes by temporarily shedding’ their own (1984: 185). Famously (or infamously, depending on your view), Richard Rorty takes up this insight by arguing that insofar as we cannot occupy, or even make sense of, a God’s-eye view and an attendant notion of absolute reality, we should ‘throw out the whole cluster of concepts’ such as ‘reference or correspondence to an “antecedently determinate” reality’ that seem to depend on our being able to detach from ourselves and observing the world, somehow, as it is independent of ourselves (1991: 6). For Rorty, the desire to retain these concepts despite their dubious intelligibility is an artifact of a theological impulse to remain answerable to a nonhuman reality. We should instead fully embrace the Jamesian thought that the trail of the human serpent lies

over everything.<sup>1</sup> We should not be fooled by the fact that many of our utterances and thoughts are truth-apt; they do not therefore grant us access to a reality independent of ourselves. Instead, we should say with the deflationist that ‘our purposes would be served best by ceasing to see truth as a deep matter, as a topic of philosophical interest, or “true” as a term which repays “analysis”’ (1989: 8).

Many contemporary pragmatists have recoiled at Rorty’s conclusions. They remain unconvinced that he can avoid collapsing pragmatism into a crude relativism or idealism. If we are only ever answerable to ourselves rather than some independent reality or standard, how can we say anything is right or wrong, correct or incorrect, except by the lights of the community we happen to inhabit? Disastrous consequences would seem to follow. For some, the key question facing contemporary pragmatism is how we avoid these Rortyeen excesses – how, as Cheryl Misak puts it, ‘we make sense of our standards of rationality, truth, and value as genuinely normative or binding while recognizing that they are profoundly human phenomena? How do normativity and authority arise from within a world of human experience and practice?’ (2013: ix). Jeffrey Stout calls this type of project ‘a non-narcissistic pragmatism, a pragmatism that can do justice to the objective dimension of inquiry’ (2007: 17).

In this discussion, I defend a novel version of non-narcissistic pragmatism, and I do so by developing a pragmatist account of truth that can meet these requirements. I begin by drawing on certain insights of Hilary Putnam’s. Putnam’s views on truth evolved throughout his career, and here I am not attempting anything like a synthesis of these permutations.<sup>2</sup> I focus instead on a specific phase of Putnam’s work and, within that phase, a specific set of criticisms – namely, Putnam’s objections to deflationist views of truth, particularly when this deflationism is wielded by

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<sup>1</sup> James’s line is the epigraph for Stout’s (2007).

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of this kind, see Stoutland (2002).

pragmatists. I use these criticisms to develop a positive pragmatist account of what I call ‘truth from the agent point or view’ or, more succinctly, ‘agential truth’. I do not claim that Putnam would agree with my account or elaborations of his observations, nor would I be perturbed if he disagreed. But the view I present takes Putnam’s arguments as a jumping off point and is inspired by his broader claim that the ‘heart of pragmatism’ is ‘the insistence on the supremacy of the agent point of view’ (1987: 70). According to the agential view I defend, as inquirers, when we take something to be truth-apt, we are taking ourselves and all other thinkers to be accountable to getting right a shared target that is independent of any individual’s or community’s view of that target. That we have this relationship to truth is what enables our practices of disagreement and agreement, including when those practices are subject to the glare of self-conscious reflection, and represents a crucial ingredient in our capacity for rational thought.

Although the resulting account shares elements with other recent influential pragmatist views of truth, such as Huw Price’s and Cheryl Misak’s, it also has important advantages over both. In particular, it can explain why what Price calls the ‘norm of truth’ has the hold on us that it does – a datum Price’s account leaves obscure. It also explains why a non-deflationist concept of truth is uniquely advantageous for the kinds of inquiring creatures we are in a way that Misak’s account cannot. The resulting account also yields a surprising conclusion – that our best pragmatist account of truth may well be a version of the correspondence theory of truth.

In the paper’s first section, I lay out Putnam’s critique of pragmatists’ use of deflationism to establish the groundwork for the rest of the discussion and present an initial account of agential truth. In the second section, I develop this positive view in more detail and compare it to Price’s view of truth. In the third and final section, I compare my account to Misak’s and conclude by explaining why pragmatists have nothing to fear from the agential view bringing us closer to the correspondence theory of truth.

## ***I. Putnam's critique of deflationism***

The deflationary view of truth holds that there is nothing more to what truth is than the equivalence schema: the declarative sentence ‘ $S$  is true if and only if  $S$  (or: the proposition that  $p$  is true if and only if  $p$ ).’<sup>3</sup> Again, it is not hard to see why deflationism has been an appealing move for pragmatists.<sup>4</sup> If the nature of truth is indeed deflationary, then it seems that we will not be tempted to infer from a certain mental state or linguistic structure’s being truth-apt that this state or structure represents some raw reality, nor we will be tempted to infer that anything substantive about that state or structure follows.

Putnam shares the repudiation of a God’s-eye view on our relationship to the world, but nonetheless objects to pragmatist invocations of deflationism. For sake of brevity and clarity, I will focus on Putnam’s critique of Rorty. Putnam agrees with Rorty that our ways of making sense of the world, and so our reasons for belief and action, are importantly inherited from the traditions in which we have been raised and are immersed. But when these insights are combined with Rorty’s embrace of deflationism about truth, we end up ignoring or, worse yet, indicting crucial practices of inquiry: ‘There are two points that must be *balanced*... (1) talk of what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in any area only makes sense against the background of an *inherited tradition*; but (2) traditions themselves can be *criticized*’ (Putnam 1989b: 234). The problem, however, is that projects such as Rorty’s do not seem to leave room for this latter possibility and so fail to do justice to the agent point of view and therefore as adequate pragmatist accounts of truth.

To see why, consider Rorty’s account of how our languages are structured. They consist of what he calls a ‘final vocabulary’ – the set of terms or concepts that play a fundamental role in how

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<sup>3</sup> There is of course an enormous literature on deflationary views of truth that I cannot do justice to here. For an overview, see Armour-Garb, Stoljar, Woodbridge (2022).

<sup>4</sup> Citations for Rorty’s deflationism are included throughout. For Quine’s apparent deflationism, see his (1970). (For a dissent regarding Quine as a deflationist (at least by the lights of contemporary deflationism), see Schwarz (2016).)

we make sense of a given domain. The vast majority of our final vocabularies are made up of tradition-specific, ‘thicker, more rigid, and more parochial terms, for example, “Christ,” “England,” “professional standards,” “decency,” “kindness,” “the Revolution,” “the Church,” “progressive,” “rigorous,” “creative.” The more parochial terms do most of the work’ (Rorty 1989: 73). Suppose, for example, I am a Newtonian physicist: I understand terms such as ‘orbit’, ‘space’, and ‘time’ that make up part of my final vocabulary in the domain of physics in line with Newtonian mechanics. Because of how I understand these terms and concepts, I have reasons to interpret and engage with phenomena in various ways – for example, I have a reason to treat Mercury’s perihelion as an anomaly. But I will not have this same reason if I have been inducted into the general theory of relativity and operate with different understandings of these terms: Mercury’s perihelion accords with how I understand ‘orbit’, ‘space’, and ‘time’. Or suppose, for example, I am a monotheist, who understands ‘God’ or ‘the divine’ to correspond to something singular. Given this part of my final vocabulary, I have a reason to reject polytheistic practices – a reason those from other religious backgrounds will lack. Or suppose I am a fervent nationalist: I have a reason to treat the suffering of citizens of my nation state as more significant than the suffering of individuals in other countries – a reason I do not have if I am a critic of nationalism. On Rorty’s view, my reasons for believing and acting will trace back to our understanding of these terms and concepts, i.e., the terms and concepts that play a fundamental role in how we make sense of a given domain.

When, however, our final vocabulary is challenged or alternative views of these terms and concepts appear, Rorty claims that we will lack any ‘noncircular argumentative recourse’ to justify our own views (73). Our final vocabulary represents ‘as far as [we] can go with language’; when this vocabulary is challenged or alternatives appear, ‘there is only helpless passivity or a resort to force’ (73). Evidence for this view comes from reflection on periods of revolutionary conceptual change, where figures talk and think in ways that challenge or transcend other speakers’ and inquirers’ final

vocabularies. The views of these revolutionary figures are often viewed as ‘inconceivable, absurd, unratifiable’ because they depart from our own final vocabularies (van Fraassen 2002: xix). Though these views can eventually be endorsed and retrospectively rationalized, it is unclear if inquirers can rationally endorse these views *prospectively* given their very nature as final vocabulary-transcending, revolutionary views. Rorty concludes that any changes in our final vocabulary can therefore only be characterized in causal terms: they result from ‘constellations of causal forces’ (Rorty 1989: 17). We can shift to different ways of making sense of a domain or the world generally, but these shifts are only effected causally; we never have reason to do so.<sup>5</sup>

Putnam, however, argues that it is clear that we *can* have such arguments – that we can rationally criticize our traditions and final vocabularies. We do not exclusively treat one another in these moments of conceptual upheaval and change as pure dogmatists or as inscrutable prophets, ‘beneath the level of conversation – a matter to be turned over to psychologists or, if necessary, the police’ (Rorty 1989: 48). We also observe thinkers giving and asking for reasons, engaging in genuine disagreement.

Furthermore, it is Rorty’s *own* project that can serve as demonstrations of the coherence of rational engagement at this register: ‘[A]rguing about the nature of rationality is an activity that *presupposes* a notion of rational justification wider...than institutionalized criterial rationality’ (Putnam 1989a: 191). In other words, Rorty is himself giving and asking for reasons concerning our fundamental commitments and our final vocabularies (in particular concerning our understanding of the concept of rationality). But if we can coherently give and ask for reasons in this context, then our reasons cannot be exhausted by the specific traditions we inhabit: our arguments questioning and criticizing those traditions demonstrate that we are still within the space of reasons when we converse in ways that transcend our respective traditions.

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<sup>5</sup> I critique these aspects of Rorty’s view from a different direction than the current discussion in my (2021).

Why, then, does Rorty insist on this exhaustively tradition-bound account of reason and language? His fidelity to deflationism is a key culprit. For Rorty, the pragmatist is best off simply reducing ‘truth to justification’ or, if they want to say something more, embracing ‘Tarski’s breezy disquotationalism’ as ‘exhaust[ive]’ of ‘the topic of truth’ (Rorty 1998b: 21). Rorty’s appeal to deflationism, however, means he can only account for how ‘talk of truth and falsity only make sense against the background of an ‘inherited tradition’; he cannot explain ‘that we constantly remake our language, that we make new versions out of old ones, and that we have to use reason to do all this’ (Putnam 1989b: 240).

For Putnam, these rationally sensitive arguments and disagreements over how to understand a concept or term that plays a fundamental role in how we make sense of the world – whether during periods of radical conceptual change or in the course of philosophical disagreement itself – are part of a much broader feature of inquiry where ‘speakers who accept very different theories apparently use the same terms to make incompatible assertions’ (Ebbs 2017: 206). For example, in Putnam’s earlier work on reference, he argues that Niels Bohr ‘would have been referring to electrons when he used the word ‘electron’, notwithstanding the fact that some of his beliefs about electrons were mistaken, and we are referring to those same particles notwithstanding the fact that some of our beliefs – even beliefs included in our scientific ‘definition’ of the term ‘electron’ – may very likely turn out to be equally mistaken’ (1986: 197).<sup>6</sup> Despite being part of fundamentally different traditions in physics, there would be no barrier to successful communication among Bohr and a contemporary physicist. In fact, to even argue that Bohr had certain mistaken beliefs about electrons, it would have to be the case that we take Bohr to be talking and thinking about the very same thing we are – that we are samesaying and *de jure* co-referring when we use the term ‘electron’.

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<sup>6</sup> For a different take on Bohr’s reception (more in line with a Rorty-style account), see van Fraassen (2002: 67).

On Putnam’s view, our practices of disagreeing with one another in this way and of successfully communicating and thinking with speakers who have radically different beliefs or are from very different traditions from our own is a crucial dimension of inquiry. In fact, Putnam argues that ‘my knowledge that *I disagree with what you just said*, is also knowledge that is as sure as any that we have. Such knowledge must be taken seriously by philosophers, not treated as an illusion to be explained away’ (1994b: 322). If we follow Rorty, however, Putnam believes that we will be forced to issue armchair revisionary denials of this kind – forced to claim that speakers are systematically mistaken when they take themselves to be talking and thinking about the very same subject matter when their understanding of that subject matter substantially diverges. This is because on any view where our understanding of terms and concepts is tradition-bound and where truth is deflationary, speakers from different traditions will necessarily be talking past one another. Speakers’ beliefs, thoughts, and utterances will not have a relationship to anything over and above the traditions they inhabit, and differences in traditions will therefore entail that speakers and inquirers are talking and thinking about fundamentally different (because tradition-specific) concepts, kinds, states of affairs, objects, or subject matters even if the speakers from these different traditions all happen to use the same words.<sup>7</sup> On this view, for example, our ‘electron’ has a fundamentally different meaning from Bohr’s, and there is no further tradition-independent reality that our beliefs, thoughts, and utterances are “hooking onto” that could make it the case that we and Bohr are all talking and thinking about the same thing and therefore genuinely disagreeing or even communicating with one another. It is therefore the combination of accepting the tradition-bound nature of reasoning *and* a deflationary

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<sup>7</sup> I give several different characterizations of the possible targets of talk and thought in these exchanges because agential truth allows us to remain non-committal about the ontological status of these targets. For recent discussions of the ontology of samesaying, see Cappelen on ‘topics’ in his (2018), Sawyer on concepts in her (2018), and Deutsch on ‘phenomena’ in his (2021).



view of truth that requires contradicting and indicting the practices of inquirers, rather than doing justice to them.<sup>8</sup>

Rather than viewing other speakers and thinkers as hermetically sealed off from us semantically, our default assumption is that others are talking and thinking about the very same things as we are. Garry Ebbs has used this Putnam-inspired line of thought to develop his own version of deflationism, where the ‘motivating insight is that agreements and disagreements are typically identified in contexts in which speakers take each other’s words at face value’ (2017: 222). When we encounter other speakers’ words, whether in mundane or more rarified contexts of inquiry, our default assumption is that they mean the very same thing by their words as we do and that they are referring to the very same things as we are. Ebbs calls these judgments ‘a practical judgment of sameness of denotation’, and such judgments can take place ‘at a given time’ or concerning speakers spread out ‘across time’ (218).<sup>9</sup> For example, if another contemporary speaker uses the word ‘water’, I automatically assume that they are talking and thinking about the very same thing I am. Even if it turns out they have very idiosyncratic beliefs – for example, they call a can of coke ‘water’ because, they say, it mostly consists of water – I still assume we are samesaying and *de jure* co-referring when we both use the word ‘water’. Similarly, when I read passages from a centuries-old text where they use ‘water’, I assume the author has the same meaning in mind as I do and is therefore picking out the same objects I am, even if I also know that their beliefs differ radically from mine. For example, if I read a 17<sup>th</sup>-century text that says that water is composed of corpuscles, I still assume that by ‘water’ the writer is talking and thinking about the very same thing I am; I assume that they simply have various false beliefs about water and do not take them to be talking and thinking about something else altogether. On Ebbs’s version of deflationism, we can

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<sup>8</sup> See Misak (2022: 13-14) for discussion of related insights from Ramsey.

<sup>9</sup> Italics and bold removed.

take our ‘practical judgements of sameness of denotation’ as inputs for equivalence schemas, rather than the sentences or words of abstract, isolated speakers and thereby avoid Putnam’s misgivings regarding deflationism.

I do not have space here for a detailed discussion of Ebbs’s view. But more importantly for our purposes, I am not convinced that Ebbs’s reading gets at the heart of Putnam’s account.<sup>10</sup> Our practical judgments of sameness of denotation are downstream from what I take to be the more important phenomenon – from the way speakers engaged in certain forms of inquiry have a non-deflationary relationship to truth.

In summing up his reservations regarding deflationism, Putnam explains that the notion that ‘truth is not *just* “disquotational,” that truth genuinely depends on what is *distant*, is part of a picture with enormous human weight’ (1994a: 277). What does Putnam mean by ‘distant’ here exactly? He does not tell us. But here is what I take to be the key insight for an alternative pragmatist, inflationary account of truth. When we are engaged in inquiry, we take for granted that there is a gap between our views – our language and thought – and whatever we are trying to get right. And it is this *distance*, this assumption that there is something over and above ours and our interlocutors’ idiolects that we are both attempting to get right, that in turn enables the very possibility of our agreeing or disagreeing with one another, no matter how different our conceptual backgrounds.

Consider again the cases of conceptual disagreement that Putnam invokes to explain his views, such as disagreement over the concept ELECTRON or over the concept RATIONALITY. When we inquire into the nature of some concept or topic X, our default assumption is that there is something X is – something we can get right or wrong. We also assume that other inquirers are after

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<sup>10</sup> The original version of Ebbs’s paper receives an overall positive judgment from Putnam, who says he agrees with Ebbs that ‘the behaviorist story makes no real sense of practices of agreement and disagreement’ (2002: 186). Interestingly, though, Putnam does not say he endorses Ebbs’s novel version of deflationism. Even supposing Putnam did endorse Ebbs’s account, however, I would still argue that Putnam’s own observations about how truth inflates for inquirers should lead us to resist any primarily deflationist view.

this very same X. That is why we do not, in these contexts, take these other inquirers' different understandings of X to correspond to an entirely different concept. Rather, we assume that they are mistaken – that they are talking and thinking about the very same thing (the very same X) that we are, but that they have it wrong and we have it right. If we did not make this assumption that X exists over and above our respective understandings, then our default orientation would be that we are simply talking past one another. Because my understanding fundamentally diverges from yours, we must be talking and thinking about different concepts, kinds, objects, states of affairs, or subject matters.

Ebbs is therefore right to highlight that our judgments of agreement and disagreement, including cases of deep conceptual disagreement, play a key role in Putnam's view. They are a datum we must take seriously. But the upshot of centering these judgments and practices is that they crucially depend on inquirers' adopting a *non*-deflationary notion of truth. Yes, inquirers in these contexts take one another's words at face value. I assume, for example, that someone who insists that, say, art is necessarily representational is still talking and thinking about the very same thing I am (the concept or kind of art) even if I reject any necessary connection between art and representation. But this appearance of samesaying – the assumption that we are talking and thinking about the same thing – *itself* depends on truth being non-deflationary for us: there is something independent of our beliefs, thoughts, and utterances that we are both attempting to get right. I assume that my beliefs, thoughts, and utterances have captured this X correctly whereas yours have captured X incorrectly.<sup>11</sup>

This, then, is our initial characterization of the agential view of truth. By examining our practices of inquiry, especially our practices of disagreement and agreement, we find that when we

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<sup>11</sup> The agential view is aligned here with Joseph Rouse's account of temporal externalism, which is concerned to characterize "the intentional and normative directedness of performances of a practice toward 'something' (an issue of divergence or conflict among performances, and what is at stake in settling that issue in one way or another) that potentially outruns any particular expression of what it is" (2014: 30). I discuss related issues in my (2020).

treat something as truth-apt, we are taking ourselves and all others to be accountable to getting right a shared target that we treat as independent of any of us.

Two further points are important here. First, we now have a response to Rorty's objection that Putnam is insufficiently pragmatist in yearning for an inflationary view of truth. Rorty explains the dividing line between his and Putnam's views as follows: "The idea of "some kind of correctness which is substantial" is the point at which I break off from Putnam' (Rorty 1998a: 60). Putnam's insistence that our account of truth should be non-deflationary, that truth involves a "mysterious "something more"" is what 'causes him to take seriously realistic talk about the presence or absence of a "matter of fact"' rather than embrace a genuine pragmatism (61). What Rorty is missing here, however, is that this 'something more' that Putnam is after need not be the metaphysical realist's absolute, language-independent reality. It is from within our perspective as inquirers that we take there to be 'something more', that is, something over and above their respective linguistic and conceptual traditions that we and our fellow inquirers (including those who disagree) are all trying to get right. This perceived 'something more' is a phenomenon that grows out of and within the inquirer's perspective. It need not be construed as the metaphysical realist insists we take it, nor does the fact that it emerges from within the agent point of view mean that it is therefore a fabrication of inquirers, some kind of subjective illusion. We are not required to commit to *any* metaphysical characterization of this phenomenon – of what inquirers take themselves to be accountable to – because we are limiting ourselves to giving an account of how and why this phenomenon shows up for inquirers.

Second, the path I carve out in this paper is different than the one Putnam himself takes up during his subsequent natural realist phase.<sup>12</sup> By advocating for natural realism, Putnam's primary

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<sup>12</sup> In Part I of his (1999), a version of his (1994c) Dewey Lectures, Putnam seems to suggest that the papers I have engaged with in this discussion may be too close to a form of metaphysical realism (194, fn 33). I hope to have made the

concern is to vindicate the agent point of view against the excesses of various philosophical theories, and his emphasis on the disquotational aspect of truth aids in this project by preserving our attributions of truth without embracing the extremes of metaphysical realism and deflationism that both threaten the agent point of view. The project I am undertaking in light of Putnam's earlier observations is that beyond both acknowledging and protecting the agent or inquirer point of view from philosophical trespass, we can also *analyse* this point of view. We can do so by carefully observing our activity as inquirers and then asking what role different aspects of this activity play for creatures like us or what functions they perform – questions I address in more detail in the following section.<sup>13</sup>

## ***II. Price and the agential view of truth***

We have, then, an initial characterization of the Putnam-inspired, agential view of truth: to treat something as truth-apt is to take all thinkers to be accountable to getting right a shared target (or targets) that is independent of any individual's or community's view of that target. In this section, I turn to the crucial question for any pragmatist account of a phenomenon: why the phenomenon is useful for creatures like us – why, in this case, it is useful for creatures like us to have this relationship to truth. Here I will tease apart two separate threads Putnam runs together. Each gives us an important and independent argument for why an inflationary view of truth is useful for the kinds of inquiring creatures we are: the first explains how our practices of disagreement and

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case here that there is no need – indeed that it would be a serious mistake – to view truth from the agent point of view in the terms of metaphysical realism.

<sup>13</sup> As we will see in the next sections, Huw Price and Cheryl Misak take up a similar methodological approach to the question of truth. Other examples of contemporary philosophical projects in this spirit are Amie Thomasson's and Robert Brandom's accounts of the role of modal discourse in our linguistic and cognitive lives (Thomasson 2020; Brandom 2008).

agreement depend on an inflated notion of truth, the second lays out an argument for why it is unclear whether we could think rationally *at all* if truth did not work in this way.

We have already seen that a large part of the motivation behind Putnam's critique of deflationism is his concern with doing justice to our practices of agreement and disagreement. Some readers will have recognized similarities to the views of another contemporary pragmatist, Huw Price. Price has similarly argued that we should, in good pragmatist fashion, take up an 'approach to truth' that 'investigate[s] its function in human discourse – to ask what difference it makes to us to have such a concept' (2011: 167). To answer this question, Price asks us to consider a community that only subscribes to a weaker assertoric norm – a norm of (personal) warranted assertibility, according to which: 'A speaker is incorrect to assert that P if she does not have adequate (personal) grounds for believing that P; to assert that P in these circumstances provides *prima facie* grounds for censure' (169). Price's target in imagining such a community is also Rorty's position that truth plays no substantial role for creatures like us – that truth is best characterized in either deflationary terms or fully reduced to justification. If Rorty is right, then this hypothetical community that has only an assertoric norm of personal warranted assertibility should be able to generate all relevant practices for creatures like us. The absence of a stronger assertoric norm for this community should make no meaningful difference.

This hypothetical community of speakers 'express their beliefs' or 'the kind of behavioral dispositions that we would characterize as beliefs – by means of a speech act we might call the *merely-opinionated assertion* (MOA, for short). These speakers – 'Mo'ans'... – criticize each other for insincerity and for lack of coherence, or personal warranted assertibility. But they go no further than this' (172). More specifically, Mo'ans do not take one speaker's assertion that *p* and another's assertion that  $\sim p$  as a reason to treat one of the speakers as mistaken or incorrect: '[T]hey allow that in such a case it may turn out that both speakers have spoken correctly, by the only...standards the

community takes to be operable', that is, Mo'ans allow that each speaker has met all the relevant norms for their assertions because each speaker has fully adequate personal grounds for believing and therefore asserting that  $p$  (172). There is no further fault to ascribe to speakers – no further norm violated – in virtue of other speakers arriving at apparently contradictory conclusions. What is missing from Mo'an society, then, in Price's view, is the ability to disagree.

Now we might think this problem can be solved by introducing a disquotational truth predicate. Price explains, however, that this kind of predicate in Mo'an society would be equivalent to saying "Same again," or "Ditto," used in a bar or restaurant. Just as "Same again" serves to indicate that one has the same preference as a previous speaker, "That's true" would serve to indicate that one holds the same opinion as the previous speaker' (172). The introduction of a disquotational truth predicate will not expand Mo'ans' sense of accountability to anything beyond counting as justified by one's own lights. In order to generate our practices of disagreeing with one another – rather than taking justified beliefs that result in incompatible conclusions to be a no-fault state of affairs – we will need to introduce a stronger norm: the norm of truth.

For Price, we can best formulate the norm of truth by considering how it is deployed when censuring speakers: 'If not-P, then it is *incorrect* to assert that P; if not-P, there are prima facie grounds for censure of an assertion that P' (172). For the Mo'ans to be the kinds of creatures we are, when they assert that  $p$ , they need to treat assertions of  $\sim p$  as an immediate violation of a norm '*independently of any diagnosis of the source of the disagreement*. Indeed, this is the very essence of the norm of truth, in my view. It gives disagreement its immediate normative character, a character on which dialogue depends, and a character which no lesser norm could provide' (164). In other words, a practice we have that the Mo'ans lack is that even when we take a speaker to be fully justified by their own lights, we still think they are capable of being mistaken or incorrect if they make an assertion that contradicts our own. For Price, it is the norm of truth that equips us with this further

register of normative assessment; it enables ‘a fundamental practice of expressions of attitudes of approval and disapproval, in response to perceptions of agreement and disagreement between expressed commitments’ (174). Truth is therefore a ‘convenient friction’ because when we assert that  $p$ , it allows us to perceive assertions of  $\sim p$  as a disagreement that we must then aim to resolve; it is ‘the grit that makes our individual opinions engage with one another’ (165).

On the face of it, Price and the agential view seem to overlap. Price similarly wants a pragmatist account of truth that does not attempt to give a God’s-eye view of the concept; he wants us to think through the role truth plays for the kinds of speaking and thinking creatures we are. Price’s account of the norm of truth as enabling our practices of agreement and disagreement also looks very close to the agential view, which similarly takes inquirers’ self-conceptions and practices of agreement and disagreement as a crucial datum for a theory of truth. But there is nonetheless a key difference between the two views. For both Ebbs and Price, to have truth operative in our cognitive and linguistic lives is to automatically take other speakers to be samesaying with us and therefore as capable of agreeing or disagreeing with us, rather than viewing each other as producing a ‘chatter of disengaged monologues’ (166). But *why* do speakers and thinkers embrace this norm exactly?

Consider: I take myself to assert that  $p$ , my interlocutor takes themselves to assert that  $\sim p$ , and we immediately take ourselves to be engaged in a disagreement. But now I ask my interlocutor why we have made this assumption: ‘Why assume my understanding of ‘ $p$ ’ or the concepts that make up my utterance of ‘ $p$ ’ are the same as yours? Why are we taking this for granted?’. Such self-conscious reflection is certainly not uncommon; it is arguably even characteristic of philosophical reflection itself. And yet, absent any further account of the norm of truth, it is unclear what answers we could meaningfully give to this question. Within the terms of Price’s account, this norm is simply one we find ourselves with and unable to resist. But given that we are the kinds of self-conscious



creatures who can question the norms to which we find ourselves bound, why would we persist in abiding by this norm if no answer can be given? Why, in other words, would we continue to assume that we are samesaying with one another if there is nothing further grounding this default assumption?

Price will likely reply that such a question does not generally arise for speakers because the norm of truth is ‘*so* familiar, so much a given of ordinary linguistic practice, that it is very hard to see’ (164). The ‘threat of dialogical nihilism’ – of exposing the truth norm and its grip thereby loosening on our linguistic and cognitive lives – is not a serious one: ‘in practice we find it impossible to stop caring about truth’ (180). But Price’s dismissal here leaves obscure why we would be so steadfast in our commitment to this norm, even in the face of explicit scrutiny and when such scrutiny is not uncommon – when, again, it seems to be characteristic of philosophy itself.

The agential account has a compelling answer to these worries and provides a more thoroughgoing explanation for why this norm has the profound grip on us that it does. As inquirers, we do not simply take one another’s words at face value in a vacuum. We assume there is *something* we are all trying to get right and that our words, utterances, and beliefs are aiming to capture. When we disagree, I assume that you are talking and thinking about the very same thing I am, but that you have the target wrong whereas I have it right. It is therefore not just that disagreement generates an immediate normative tension for us that we feel compelled to address and resolve. We also take this disagreement to be *meaningfully* grounded. We take ourselves to have a reason for treating one another as samesaying and disagreeing: we are both trying to get the same thing (whether best thought of as a kind, an object, a topic, a state of affairs, a concept, a subject matter) right. The agential account of truth therefore gives us clear answers to the questions raised in the previous

paragraph: I assume we are samesaying when we each say ‘*p*’ despite our radically different beliefs because I assume each of our utterances are trying to capture the same “something”.<sup>14</sup>

Putnam’s discussion is particularly helpful for appreciating this dimension of truth because he is concerned with examples at the very limits of inquiry – examples where we would most expect speakers to conclude that they are talking past one another if the nature of truth were deflationary and reason tradition-bound. Consider again the examples of Bohr or of Rorty on rationality. In these cases, despite being aware that we understand the target concept or subject matter in different ways and despite the fact that the target concept or subject matter plays a fundamental role in how we make sense of some domain, inquirers in these cases nonetheless take one another to be samesaying and disagreeing. They take one another to be samesaying and disagreeing because they assume that they are all trying to get right and are all accountable to something over and above their respective languages and conceptual schemes.

If my and Putnam’s gloss of these cases is right, then the norm of truth is not just reflected in the immediate normative character of their disagreement, as Price claims; it is also, and even more fundamentally, reflected in inquirers’ assumption that there is something that outstrips any inquirer’s language or thought to which inquirers are all accountable – a “something” the nature of which our account of truth need take no metaphysical stand on.

Our practices of agreement and disagreement therefore seem to require the agential, inflationary view of truth. And absent our practices of agreement and disagreement, it is hard to

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<sup>14</sup> Diana Heney seems to be after a similar criticism when she writes that Price’s account “does not seem capable of making sense of the fact that our responsibilities are not merely to our conversational partners but also to the way the world is” (2015: 513). Elements of this Peircean view of reality are congenial to the agential view: “The method of inquiry relies on the supposition that there are real things with which we want our beliefs to be in harmony, but Peirce does not claim anything specific for the content or nature of that reality” (511). But other commitments – such as the claim that “reality is that which impinges” on experience – are not incurred by an agential view (512).

imagine how we could undertake the highly complex, cooperative projects that have contributed to the flourishing of our species.

There is also a second argument for why such an inflationary notion of truth is crucial for creatures like us – one that again we find a sketch of in Putnam: ‘[O]ne of our fundamental self-conceptualizations, one of our fundamental ‘self-descriptions’...is that we are *thinkers*, and that *as* thinkers we are committed to there being *some* kind of truth, some kind of correctness which is substantial and not merely ‘disquotational’ (1989b: 246). He expands elsewhere: ‘We are committed by our fundamental conceptions to treating not just our present time-slices, but also our past selves, our ancestors, and members of other cultures past and present, as *persons*; and that means, I have argued, attributing to them shared references and shared concepts, however different the *conceptions* that we also attribute’ (1989a: 196). The considerations Putnam alludes to here are related, but also importantly distinct from the above argument. It seems at least possible that we could lack our practices of agreement and disagreement and nonetheless remain a type of thinker. (In such a case, it seems that we would be Price’s Mo’ans.) Here, however, Putnam argues that absent an inflationary notion of truth, we might be unable to think rationally *at all*. Why?

To draw out Putnam’s insight, consider what it is to change one’s mind about a topic. Suppose, for example, I go from believing that veganism is a curious affectation I would never adopt to – after having, say, a series of transformative encounters with nonhuman animals – believing that veganism is morally obligatory in a way that structures substantial aspects of my life. My beliefs about veganism have fundamentally changed, but I still take myself to be talking and thinking about the very same thing or topic throughout – namely, veganism. I have corrected my once false beliefs (I assume), I have made a discovery about moral life (I assume), but I am *not* now talking and thinking about a separate topic as a result of this fundamental change in my beliefs. I was not, in other words, previously talking and thinking about one topic – veganism<sub>1</sub> – and now am talking and

thinking about an entirely different topic – veganism<sub>2</sub> – due to a fundamental shift in my beliefs. There is something – veganism – I am getting right that I once had wrong. If I did not take there to be an independent target to which my beliefs and utterances were accountable, then I would have to conclude that my fundamental change in beliefs gave rise to different concepts or topics: veganism<sub>1</sub> and veganism<sub>2</sub>. I would therefore not think of myself as correcting a previous belief or even as holding a belief that contradicted my previous belief; I would simply view my previous beliefs or utterances as thinking and talking about something else altogether.

The flexibility we permit ourselves in changing our beliefs without thereby generating changes in topic is particularly apparent in cases such as the above, where we fundamentally change our mind. But it is also crucial whenever we need to update or change our views about some topic: if, for example, I think that Sheila is a journalist, and it turns out that she isn't, then for me to treat my previous belief as mistaken, I have to treat my updated belief as tracking and accountable to the very same thing – namely, Sheila – that my previously false belief was also trying to get right. Absent this accountability to the same target, it is not clear that there could be any direct logical relations among my thoughts. Laura Schroeter pursues a version of this point: 'Your appreciation of an apparent logical contradiction is grounded in the appearance of de jure sameness: when you entertain the two suppositions it seems obvious, incontrovertible, and primitive that there is just one object in question (that woman) and just one property in question (being a journalist). And this sameness of subject matter is the basis for your taking the two claims to be logically incompatible' (2012: 183). Schroeter generalizes: 'Apparent de jure sameness is important because it reflects subjects' most basic ways of keeping track of a subject matter in reasoning, memory, and conversation, and it grounds subjects' recognition of direct logical relations in thought and talk' (183-4). The 'sameness of subject matter' or appearance of 'de jure sameness' in thought and talk is, on the agential view, grounded in our taking truth-apt thought and talk to be accountable to

something that outstrips that thought and talk, such that changes in belief will show up as all concerning the very same subject matter, rather than perpetually throwing up novel topics or subject matters that have no bearing on one another. We hit here ‘epistemological bedrock’, our ‘most basic ways of keeping track of a putative subject matter in thought’ (182).

There are, of course, striking parallels between this line of thought and semantic externalist insights generally (including Putnam’s) – where changes in belief, including radical ones, need not entail changes in meaning. The additional point here is that it is not at all obvious that anything like the direct logical relations of, for example, contradiction and entailment – relations rational thought characteristically involves – can obtain without the assumption that there is something our belief or utterance is accountable to that is distinct from us. If this is right, then this accountability to an independent target must be built into our truth-apt thoughts and utterances for us to reason at all and to enjoy the enormous advantages for our species that come with these rational capacities.

### ***III. The agential view, Peircean truth, and correspondence***

The agential view therefore has a clear account of why truth inflates for inquirers. In addition to Price’s, however, there is another influential contemporary pragmatist view of truth with important similarities to the agential view: Cheryl Misak’s Peircean account of truth. On Misak’s account, we similarly start from the agent point of view: ‘our philosophical theory must take seriously the picture’ inquirers ‘have of themselves’ (2000: 52). In light of these practices of inquiry, Misak argues that when we say a belief is true, we are saying that if inquiry were pursued as far and as well as it could be, then the belief ‘would encounter no recalcitrant experience, broadly construed’ that would overturn it (2004: 160). Such a belief would satisfy all the aims we have for inquiry; it would therefore not be doubted. It would be, in other words, ‘indefeasible’ (2000: 58; 2004; 2010).

There is a great deal that Misak’s account shares with the agential view. Both aim to give a kind of inflationary, pragmatist view of truth that moves ‘beyond the triviality expressed by the

disquotational schema' without in turn committing to the kind of metaphysics pragmatists eschew. But there are three key differences between Misak's account and the agential view (2000: 57).

The first is that there is little daylight between justification and truth on Misak's picture. A belief that would be resistant to doubt, we might think, would be best characterized as a maximally *justified* belief, rather than, necessarily, a true one.<sup>15</sup> Misak will reply that once inquiry is pursued as far and well as it can go, this blurring of justification and truth is just what we should expect to find. If we have indeed arrived at the 'the very best beliefs we could have', then the pragmatist should say 'that there would be no point in withholding the title 'true' from these beliefs' (2004: 162-3).

But we might nonetheless think that, for inquirers, 'being true amounts to' more than 'being the belief which would best fit with reasons and experience' (2000: 104). As I have argued here, there is also an independent target that our inquiries aim at getting right, and this goal seems to be distinct from having our beliefs be the best they can be – distinct from making sure we dot all our justificatory i's. For example, I might in principle be concerned to make sure my beliefs were formulated according to the best standards and be indifferent to whether they end up capturing the target of my inquiry; I might be, in other words, be a Pricean Mo'an or, alternatively, a justification fetishist, i.e., someone concerned exclusively with making sure I cannot be criticized as falling short of my own or my communal grounds while being unconcerned with whether I end up getting my target right. But inquirers also have this latter goal, and, as I have argued, it is hard to see how we could be the inquirers we are without it.

Absent this additional dimension of inquiry that truth – rather than justification – seems to uniquely provide, Misak's picture also ends up curiously close to Rorty's, despite Rorty representing her key foil. On Rorty's deflationism, 'to say that truth is our goal is merely to say something like: we hope to justify our belief to as many and as large audiences as possible' (1998b: 39). But this sounds

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<sup>15</sup> I am, in fact, broadly sympathetic to Misak's account as a pragmatist view of justification.

very close to Misak's picture. In fact, in a reply to Misak specifically, Rorty protests that 'the burden is on Peirceans to explain what actions are motivated by a desire for indefeasibility that are not motivated by a desire for justification' (2010, 45). Misak herself concedes that in his more careful moments, Rorty is in fact 'extraordinarily close to Peirce's view', with the difference primarily lying in the key role experience plays for Peirce in commanding agreement as inquiry unfolds (2013: 236). The agential view, by contrast, does not run any risk of collapsing truth into justification because it identifies a goal beyond ideal justification that inquirers have – namely, of actually getting the shared, independent target of their inquiries right.

The second key difference is that the agential view has a clearer account of the advantages its inflationary view of truth brings. Misak argues that her Peircean account of truth explains why inquirers are motivated to improve their beliefs: '[O]nly a pragmatically legitimate conception of truth will be able to serve as this guide, for only it will result in a set of expectations. An inquirer who accepts such a conception of truth can incorporate those expectations into the practice of inquiry' (2004: 159). Or as she puts the points elsewhere, Peircean inquirers have 'an enhanced willingness to seek out and take seriously new evidence and argument' (2013: 233). But it is unclear why truth construed as indefeasibility is *uniquely* able to generate this behavioral difference for inquirers.

Suppose, for example, we endorsed the caricatured version of the pragmatist view of truth, according to which truth is whatever belief proves most useful for inquirers. If this view of truth were right, then, as an inquirer, I would *still* have reason to 'seek out and take seriously new evidence and argument' to determine whether my current belief works best or whether there is something better on offer. Suppose, to extend the point, we instead viewed the goal of inquiry to be producing the most creative or revolutionary beliefs (more in line with a Rortyeian picture), where these beliefs solve seemingly intractable problems and reframe how we make sense of the world. It seems that we

would still have reason to work to improve our beliefs, to ‘take seriously new evidence and argument’, to make sure we meet these goals as well as possible.

By contrast, the agential view explains what truth provides us with that no other goal can. Truth does not merely motivate improvement of belief; it gives us reason to engage with one another and makes possible our characteristic patterns of rational thought because it generates the appearance that there is a shared, independent target to which our and others’ utterances and thoughts are accountable. It therefore also directly answers Rorty’s challenge to locate a behavioral difference between inquirers who pursue maximal justification and those who pursue truth. Absent a goal of getting right an independent target, our thoughts and utterances both intra and interpersonally would spin in their own idiosyncratic semantic voids, never affirming, contradicting, or implicating one another.

The third difference between the two views is that the agential account ends up as a version of the correspondence view of truth, whereas Misak insists that ‘[i]t should be clear that pragmatism, of any stripe, will be set against versions of the correspondence theory of truth, on which a statement is true if it gets right or mirrors the human-independent world’ (2018: 283). The agential view is indeed that a statement is true just in case it gets right the human-independent world. But a great deal turns on what we mean by ‘human-independent world’. Misak takes this notion to be unacceptable from a pragmatist perspective because ‘the very idea of the believer-independent world, and the items within it to which beliefs or sentences might correspond, seem graspable only if we could somehow step outside of our corpus of belief, our practices, or that with which we have dealings’, and the pragmatist of course rejects this God’s-eye view (284). But we should distinguish at least two notions of ‘independence’: there is, first, the notion Misak is operating with here, whereby something is independent if it transcends anything in principle graspable by human beings. The agential view does not endorse this notion. But there is a second, more nuanced version of



independence, whereby something is independent of us if no individual or community has the authority to settle the question of what the target is – if all inquirers hold themselves accountable to something that they could in principle all get wrong. This independence appears *within* and is a necessary feature of our practices of inquiry – or so the agential view claims.<sup>16</sup> No God’s-eye view is adopted.

Now, at points, Misak herself seems to accept this distinction. She writes that, on Peirce’s view, we must assume ‘that there is a reality independent of our beliefs about it, whose character we can discover’ (288). But while ‘Peirce’s assumption that there is a reality independent of beliefs invites the claim that he really holds some kind of correspondence theory...this would be a mistake, for the assumption is one made *within* inquiry’ (289). I see no reason, however, to resist identifying this line thought with the correspondence theory. If the pragmatist accepts that, from within our practices of inquiry, we treat something as truth-apt when we take it to be accountable to some independent target, then they are accepting a version of correspondence theory, even if it is one that is different from most incarnations of the view.

The concern with making this identification is likely that the correspondence theory is closely associated with metaphysical doctrines and theorizing pragmatists reject. But, as Andrew Howat has recently pointed out, there is no necessary connection between correspondence theory and the type of armchair metaphysics from which pragmatists recoil. The correspondence theory

says nothing at all about what reality *is* nor about how we ought to understand it...It does not require us to understand reality as consisting *only* of particulars, nor does it entail that those particulars are mind-independent in some epistemologically problematic sense. The reason, I suspect, why so many leap to the contrary assumptions is that they dominate traditional metaphysics – they are taken for granted by virtually everyone who has ever advocated CT (Howat 2021: 697).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Stout is very close to the agential view here: ‘[W]hat we say is correct in this objective sense is not to be understood as conforming to social consensus, for all of us could be wrong about the topic being discussed’ (2007: 7). But he resists developing these insights into views about truth because the latter would lead to a ‘pseudo-explanatory conception of correspondence to the real’ (19). My discussion here is intended to show that this need not be the case. See also Lane (2018: 396) for an alternative Peircean formulation of ‘independence’.

<sup>17</sup> Both Howat (2021) and Lane (2018) argue that Misak overlooks that Peirce’s embrace of the correspondence theory goes beyond the latter merely serving as a nominal definition.

Matti Eklund similarly points out that while the correspondence theory is ‘sometimes claimed to be bound up with metaphysical realism...[This] is not so...One can say that a proposition is true by virtue of how things stand in non-propositional reality’ without undertaking any specific commitments concerning the nature of this ‘reality’ (2012: 200). Gerald Vision explains that his account of ‘correspondence doesn’t explain the more specific character of the worldly, truth-constituting correlate. It seems eminently reasonable to leave this open’ (2004: 61). Marian David similarly opts for a non-committal view of the correspondence theory, according to which ‘truth is a relational property involving a characteristic relation (to be specified) to some portion of reality (to be specified)’ (2022). The agential view, along with other pragmatist accounts, will insist that any such further specifications are worthwhile only if they are grounded in our best, ongoing practices of inquiry (perhaps paradigmatically, but not exclusively, the sciences). Shorn of any metaphysical trappings, the correspondence theory provides us with a framework for making sense of the ‘distance’ – the gap between language and thought on the one side and the apparent independent target of that language/thought on the other – that Putnam and the agential view argue is necessary to be the kinds of speaking and thinking creatures we are. To do justice to the latter, pragmatists have nothing to fear, and a great deal to gain, from embracing this connection.<sup>18</sup>

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