

Truth as Convenient Friction

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1. Introduction

In a recent paper, Richard Rorty begins by telling us why pragmatists such as himself are inclined to identify truth with justification:

‘Pragmatists think that if something makes no difference to practice, it should make no difference to philosophy. This conviction makes them suspicious of the distinction between justification and truth, for that distinction makes no difference to my decisions about what to do.’ (1995, p. 19)

Rorty goes on to discuss the claim, defended by Crispin Wright, that truth is a normative constraint on assertion. He argues that this claim runs foul of this principle of no difference without a practical difference:

‘The need to justify our beliefs to ourselves and our fellow agents subjects us to norms, and obedience to these norms produces a behavioural pattern that we must detect in others before confidently attributing beliefs to them. But there seems to be no occasion to look for obedience to an *additional* norm – the commandment to seek the truth. For – to return to the pragmatist doubt with which I began – obedience to that commandment will produce no behaviour not produced by the need to offer justification.’ (1995, p. 26)

Again, then, Rorty appeals to the claim that a commitment to a norm of truth rather than a norm of justification makes no behavioural difference.

This is an empirical claim, testable in principle by comparing the behaviour of a community of realists (in Rorty’s sense) to that of a community of pragmatists. In my view, the experiment would show that the claim is unjustified, indeed false. I think that there is an important and widespread behavioural pattern that depends on the fact that speakers do take themselves to be subject to such an additional norm. Moreover, it is a

behavioural pattern so central to what we presently regard as a worthwhile human life that no reasonable person would knowingly condone the experiment. Ironically, it is also a pattern that Rorty of all people cannot afford to dismiss as a pathological and dispensable by-product of bad philosophy. For it is conversation itself, or at any rate a central and indispensable part of conversation as we know it – roughly, interpersonal dialogue about ‘factual’ matters.¹

In other words, I want to maintain that in order to account for a core part of ordinary conversational practice, we must allow that speakers take themselves and their fellows to be governed by a norm stronger than that of justification. Not only is this a norm which speakers acknowledge they may fail to meet, even if their claims are well-justified – this much is true of what Rorty (1986, p. 128) calls the cautionary use of truth – but also, more significantly, it is a norm which speakers immediately assume to be breached by someone with whom they disagree, *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.

This fact about truth has been overlooked, I think, because the norm in question is *so* familiar, so much a given of ordinary linguistic practice, that it is very hard to see. Ordinarily we look through it, rather than at it. In order to make it visible, we need a sense of how things would be different without it. Hence, in part, my reason for beginning with Rorty. Though I disagree with Rorty about the behavioural consequences of a commitment to ‘a distinction between justification and truth’, I think that the issue of the behavioural consequences of such a commitment embodies precisely the perspective we need, in order to bring into focus this fundamental aspect of the normative structure of dialogue.

¹Irony aside, nothing here turns on whether by ‘conversation’ I mean the same as Rorty. For me, what matters is the role of truth in the kind of interpersonal linguistic interaction I’ll call factual or assertoric dialogue, or simply dialogue. I don’t claim that dialogue exhausts conversation, in Rorty’s sense or any other. I used scare quotes on ‘factual’ above in anticipation of the suggestion that the notion of factuality in play might depend on that of truth, in a way which would create problems for my own account of the role of truth in dialogue. There is no such difficulty, in my view. On the contrary, I take the perceived ‘factuality’ or ‘truth-aptness’ of the utterances in question to be part of the *explanandum* of the kind of account here proposed; cf. footnote 17.

In sharing Rorty's concern with the role of truth in linguistic practice, I share one key element of his pragmatism. But my kind of pragmatism about truth is not well marked on contemporary maps, and hence my second reason for beginning with Rorty. Rorty has explored the landscape of pragmatist approaches to truth more extensively than most pragmatist writers, past or present, and at different times has been inclined to settle in different parts of it. By locating my own kind of pragmatism with respect to views that Rorty has visited or canvassed, I hope to show that there is a promising position that he and others pragmatists have overlooked.

As noted, my view rests on the claim that a norm of truth plays an essential and little-recognised role in assertoric dialogue. In pursuit of this conclusion, it will turn out to be helpful to distinguish three norms, in order of increasing strength: roughly, sincerity, justification and truth itself. Though somewhat crudely drawn, these distinctions will suffice to throw into relief the crucial role of the third norm in linguistic practice. My strategy will be to contrast assertion as we know it with some non-assertoric uses of language. In these latter cases, I'll argue, the two weaker norms still apply. Moreover, it turns out that some of the basic functions of assertoric discourse could be fulfilled in an analogous way, by a practice which lacked the third norm. But it will be clear, I hope, that that practice would not support dialogue as we know it. What is missing – what the third norm provides – is the automatic and quite unconscious sense of engagement in common purpose that distinguishes assertoric dialogue from a mere roll call of individual opinion. Truth is the grit that makes our individual opinions engage with one another. Truth puts the cogs in cognition, at least in its public manifestations.²

To use a Rylean metaphor, my view is thus that truth supplies factual dialogue with its essential *esprit de corps*. As the metaphor is meant to suggest, what matters is that speakers *think* that there is such a norm – that they *take themselves* to be governed by it – not that their view be somehow confirmed by science or metaphysics. Science has already done its work, in pointing out the function of the thought in the lives of creatures like us.

²If private cognition depends on the norms of public dialogue then truth plays the same role, at second hand, in the private sphere. This is a plausible extension of the present claim, in my view, but I won't try to defend it here.

This may suggest that a commitment to truth is like a commitment to theism, an analogy which Rorty himself draws, against Wright, in the paper with which I began. In effect, Rorty's point is that it is one thing to establish that we *do* employ a realist notion of truth, a normative notion stronger than justification; quite another to establish that we ought to do so. As in the case of theism, we might do better to wean ourselves of bad realist habits.

However, there are several important differences between the two cases. First, the behavioural consequences of giving up theism are significant but hardly devastating.³ But if I am right about the behavioural role of truth, the consequences of giving up truth would be very serious indeed, reducing the dialogue of mankind to a chatter of disengaged monologues.⁴

Second, it is doubtful whether giving up truth is really an option open to us. I suspect that people who think it is an option haven't realised how deeply embedded the idea of truth is in linguistic practice, and therefore underestimate the extent of the required change, in two ways. They fail to see how radically different from current practice a linguistic practice without truth would have to be, and they overestimate our capacity to change our practices in general to move from here to there (underestimating the practical inflexibility of admittedly contingent practices⁵).

Third, and most interestingly of all, the issue of the status of truth is enmeshed with the terms of the problem, in a way which is quite uncharacteristic of the theism case. Metaphysical conclusions tend to be cast in semantic vocabulary. Theism is said to be in error in virtue of the fact that its claims are not *true*, that its terms fail to *refer*. For this reason, it is uniquely difficult to formulate a meaningful antirealism about the semantic terms themselves. In my view the right response to this is not to think (with Paul

³At least compared to the alternative.

⁴Global *Waiting for Godot*, as a member of an audience in Dundee suggested I put it. Even more seriously, as noted above, giving up truth might silence our own 'internal' rational dialogues.

⁵Jonathon Rée (1998) makes a point of this kind against Rorty: '[C]ontingencies can last a very long time. Our preoccupations with love and death may not be absolute necessities, but they are not a passing fad either, and it is a safe bet that they will last as long as we do.'

Boghossian 1990) that we thereby have a transcendental argument for semantic realism. Without an intelligible denial, realism is no more intelligible than antirealism. The right response – as Rorty himself in any case urges – is to be suspicious of the realist–antirealist debate itself.⁶ However, Rorty ties rejection of the realist–antirealist debate to rejection of a notion of truth distinct from justification, and of the idea of representation. I think this is the wrong path to the right conclusion. We should reject the metaphysical stance not by rejecting truth and representation, but by recognising that in virtue of the most plausible story about the function and origins of these notions, they simply don't sustain that sort of metaphysical weight.

Concerning his own view of truth, Rorty describes himself as oscillating between Jamesian pragmatism, on the one hand, and deflationism, on the other: 'swing[ing] back and forth between trying to reduce truth to justification and propounding some sort of minimalism about truth.' (1995, p. 21) My own view is neither of these alternatives, but has something in common with each. On the one hand, it is certainly some sort of minimalism about truth, but not the familiar sort that Rorty has in mind – not 'Tarski's breezy disquotationalism', as he calls it (Rorty 1995, p. 21). I agree with familiar disquotationalist minimalists such as Quine (1970) and Horwich (1990) that truth is not a substantial property, about the nature of which there is an interesting philosophical issue. Like them, I think that the right approach to truth is to investigate its function in human discourse – to ask what difference it makes to us to have such a concept. Unlike such minimalists, however, I don't think the right answer to this question is that truth is merely a grammatical device for disquotation. I think that it has a far more important function, which requires that it be the expression of a norm. But like other minimalists, again, I think that there is no further question of interest to philosophy, once the question about function has been answered.

On the other hand, my view of truth is also pragmatist, for it explicates truth in terms of its role in practice. (This is also true of standard disquotational views, of course,

⁶A realist could object that a commitment to the third norm might be useful and yet in error, but Rorty can't. It is fair for him to object *against Wright* that this commitment might be like theism, because Wright takes metaphysics seriously. By Wright's professed standards, then, the theism objection poses a real threat.

although they ascribe the truth predicate a different role in practice.) In another sense, it conflicts with pragmatism, for it opposes the proposal that we identify truth with justification. This contrast reflects a deep tension within pragmatism. From Peirce and James on, pragmatists have often been unable to resist the urge to join their opponents in asking ‘What is truth?’ (Indeed, the pragmatist position as a whole is often characterised in terms of its answer to this question.) Pragmatism thus turns its back on alternative paths to philosophical illumination about truth, even though these alternative paths – explanatory and genealogical approaches – are at least compatible with, if not mandated by, the pragmatist doctrine that we understand problematic notions in terms of their practical significance.

Rorty himself is well aware of this tension within pragmatism. In ‘Pragmatism, Davidson and Truth’, for example, he notes that James is less prone than Peirce to try to answer the ‘ontological’ or reductive question about truth, and suggests that Davidson may be thought of as a pragmatist in the preferable non-reductive sense.⁷ As he swings between pragmatism and deflationism, then, Rorty himself is at worst only intermittently subject to this craving for an *analysis* of truth. All the same, it seems to me that he is never properly aware of the range of possibilities for non-reductive pragmatism about truth. In particular, he is not properly aware of the possibility that such a pragmatism might find itself explaining the fact that the notion of truth in ordinary use is (and perhaps ought to be, in whatever sense we might make of this) one that *conflicts* with the identification of truth with justification: a normative goal of inquiry, stronger than any norm of justification, of the very kind that realists about truth – opponents both of pragmatism and of minimalism – mistakenly sought to analyse. In other words, Rorty seems to miss the possibility that the right thing for the explanatory pragmatist to say might be that truth is a goal of inquiry distinct from norms of justification, and that the realist’s mistake is to try to *analyse* this normative notion, rather than simply to investigate its function and genealogy. It is this latter possibility that I want to defend.

⁷ Rorty 1986; Robert Brandom makes a similar point in ‘Pragmatism, Phenomenalism, and Truth Talk’ (Brandom 1988).

2. *Falsity and lesser evils*

As I have said, I want to argue that truth plays a crucial role as a norm of assertoric discourse. It is not the only such norm, however, and a good way to highlight the distinctive role of truth is to distinguish certain weaker norms, and to imagine a linguistic practice which had those norms but not truth.⁸ By seeing what such a practice lacks, we see what truth adds.

There are at least two weaker norms of assertion, in addition to any distinctive norm of truth.⁹ The weakest relevant norm seems to be that embodied in the principle that it is *prima facie* appropriate to assert that p only when one believes that p – *prima facie*, because of course many other factors may come into play, in determining the appropriateness of a particular assertion in a particular context. Let's call this the norm of *subjective assertibility*.¹⁰ The norm is perhaps best characterised in negative form – that is, in terms of the conditions under which a speaker may be censured for failing to meet it:

(Subjective assertibility)

A speaker is incorrect to assert that p if she does not believe that p; to assert that p in these circumstances provides *prima facie* grounds for censure, or disapprobation.

The easiest way to see that this norm has very little to do with truth is to note that it is analogous to norms which operate with respect to utterances which we don't take to be truth-apt. *Prima facie*, it is inappropriate to request a cup of coffee when one doesn't want a cup of coffee, but this doesn't show that requests or expressions of desires are subject to a norm of truth. In effect, this norm is simply that of sincerity, and some such

⁸For present purposes I can remain open-minded on the question as to whether such a practice is really possible. Perhaps a truth-like norm is essential to any practice which deserves to be called linguistic. At any rate, my use of the following linguistic thought experiment does not depend on denying this possibility.

⁹In what sense 'weaker'? In the sense, at least, that they apply to a wider range of linguistic behaviours. 'Less specialised' might be a better term.

¹⁰This corresponds to a common use of the term 'assertibility condition', as for example when it is said that the subjective assertibility condition for the indicative conditional 'If p then q' is a high conditional credence in q given p.

norm seems to govern much conventional behaviour. Conventions often depend on the fact that communities censure those who break them in this specific sense, by acting in bad faith.

The second norm is that of (personal) *warranted assertibility*. Roughly, ‘p’ is warrantably assertible by a speaker who not only believes that p, but is *justified* in doing so. The qualification ‘personal’ recognises the fact that there are different kinds and degrees of warrant or justification, some of them more subjective than others. For example, is justification to be assessed with reference to a speaker’s actual evidence as she (presently?) sees it, or by some less subjective lights? For the moment, for a degree of definiteness, let us think of it in terms of subjective coherence – a belief is justified if supported by a speaker’s other current beliefs. This is what I shall mean by *personal warranted assertibility*.

Again, this second norm is usefully characterised in negative or censure form:

(Personal warranted assertibility)

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.

A person who meets both the norms just identified may be said to have done as much as possible, *by her own current lights*, to ensure that her assertion that p is in order. Obviously, realists will say that her assertion may nevertheless be incorrect. Subjective assertibility and (personal) warranted assertibility do not guarantee truth. To an extent, moreover, most pragmatists are likely to agree. Few people who advocate reducing truth to (or replacing truth by) a notion of warranted assertibility have personal warranted assertibility in mind. Rather, they imagine some more objective, community-based variant, according to which a belief is justified if it coheres appropriately with the other beliefs of one’s community. If we call this *communal warranted assertibility*, then the point is that we can make sense of a gap between the personal and communal notions. A belief may be justified in one sense but not the other.

Pragmatists and realists may thus agree that there is a normative dimension distinct from subjective assertibility and personal warranted assertibility – an assertion may be *wrong*, despite meeting these norms. This does not yet establish that the normative standard in question need be marked in ordinary discourse. In principle, it might be a privileged or theoretical notion, useful in expert second-order reflection on linguistic practice but unnecessary in folk talk about other matters. In practice, however, there seems a very good reason why it should not remain restricted in this way. Unless individual speakers recognise such a norm, the idea that they might *improve* their views by consultation with the wider community is simply incoherent to them. (It would be as if we gave a student full marks in an exam, and then told him that he would have done better if his answers had agreed with those of other students.)

It may seem that as yet, this argument doesn't favour realism over pragmatism. If the normative standard an individual speaker needs to acknowledge is that of the community as a whole, there is as yet no pressure to a notion of truth beyond community-wide warranted assertibility. But what constitutes the relevant community? At any given stage, isn't the relation of a given community to its possible present and future extensions just like that of the individual to her community? If so, then the same argument applies at this level. At each stage, the actual community needs to recognise that it may be wrong by the standards of some broader community.¹¹

The pragmatist might now seem obliged to follow Peirce, in identifying truth with warranted assertibility in the ideal limit of inquiry. The useful thing about this limit, in this context, is that it transcends any actual community. But in my view, as I'll explain below (and as Rorty in some moods already case agrees), a better move for a pragmatist is to resist the pressure to *identify* truth with anything – in other words, simply to reject the assumption that an adequate philosophical account of truth needs to answer the question 'What is truth?' Better questions for a pragmatist to ask are the explanatory ones: Why do we have such a notion? What job does it do in language? What features

¹¹Cf. Rorty 1995, p. 22: 'For any audience, one can imagine a better-informed audience.'

does it need to have to play this role? And how would things be different if we didn't have it?

For the moment, we have the beginnings of an answer to the last question. If we didn't have a normative notion in addition to the norms of subjective assertibility and personal warranted assertibility, the idea that we might improve our commitments by seeking to align them with those of our community would be simply incoherent. I'll call this the passive account of the role of the third norm – passive, because it doesn't yet provide an active or causal role for a commitment to truth. Later, I'll argue that the third norm not only creates the conceptual space for argument, in this passive sense, but actively encourages speakers to participate.¹²

3. *The third norm in focus*

The best way to bring the third norm into focus is again to consider its negative or censure form:

(Truth)

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.

The important point is that this provides a norm of assertion which we take it that a speaker may fail to meet, even if she does meet the norms of subjective assertibility and (personal) warranted assertibility. We are prepared to make the judgement that a speaker is *incorrect*, or *mistaken*, in this sense, simply on the basis that we are prepared to make a

¹²This account has prescriptive and non-prescriptive readings. The former uses the notion of improvement full-voice, saying that if speakers are to *improve* their commitments, they need the idea of the third norm. But as N. J. J. Smith pointed out to me, it could well be objected that the relevant notion of improvement simply presupposes the third norm, and therefore can't provide any independent rationale for adopting it. However, no such circularity undermines the non-prescriptive reading, whose point is that because our existing conversational practice does take for granted such a notion of improvement, it thereby reveals its commitment to a third norm.

contrary assertion; in advance, in other words, of any judgement that she fails to meet one or other of the two weaker norms.¹³

One of the reasons why this third norm is hard to distinguish from the two weaker norms of assertibility is that when we apply it in judging a fellow speaker right or wrong, the basis for our judgement lies in our own beliefs and evidence. It is not as though we are in a position to make the judgement from the stance of reality itself, as it were. I think this can make it seem as if application of this norm involves nothing more than re-assertion of the original claim (in the case in which we judge it correct), or assertion of the negation of the original claim (in the case in which we judge it incorrect). Construed in these terms, our response contains nothing problematic for orthodox disquotational versions of the deflationary view, of course. Re-assertion of this sort is precisely one of the linguistic activities which disquotational truth facilitates. Construed in these terms, then, there is no need for truth to be a distinct *norm*.

However, our response is not merely re-assertion, or assertion of the negation of the original claim. If it were, it would involve no commendation or criticism of the original utterance. This non-normative alternative is hard to see, I think, because the norm in question is so familiar and so basic. As a result, it is difficult to see the immense difference the norm makes to the character of disagreements. But it comes into focus, I think, if we allow ourselves to imagine a linguistic practice which allowed re-assertion and contrary assertion, *but without this third normative dimension*. What we need to imagine, in other words, is a linguistic community who use sentences to express their beliefs, and have a purely disquotational truth predicate, but for whom disagreements have no normative significance, except in so far as it is related to the weaker norms of assertibility.

This imaginative project is not straightforward, of course. Indeed, it isn't clear that it is entirely coherent. If there is a third norm of the kind in question, isn't it likely to be

¹³Note the contrast with Rorty's cautionary use of true. In that use we say of a claim that we take to be well-justified that it *might* not be true. In the present use we say of a claim that we might even allow to be well-justified by its speaker's own lights that it *is* not true. It is the difference between mere caution and actual censure.

constitutive of the very notions of assertion and belief? If so, what sense is there in trying to imagine an assertoric practice which lacked this norm?

Well, let's see. What we need is the idea of a community who take an assertion – or rather the closest thing they have to what we call an assertion – to be *merely* an expression of the speaker's opinion. The relevant idea is familiar in the case of expressions of desires and preferences. It is easy to imagine a community – we are at least close to it ourselves – who have a language in which they give voice to psychological states of these kinds, not by *reporting* that they hold them (which would depend on assertion), but directly, in conventional linguistic forms tailored specifically for this purpose.

Think of a community who use language primarily for expressing preferences in restaurants, for example. (Perhaps the development of such a restricted language from scratch is incoherent, but surely we might approach it from the other direction. Imagine a community of dedicated lunchers, whose language atrophies to the bare essentials.) In this community we would expect a norm analogous to subjective assertibility: essentially, a normative requirement that speakers use these conventional expressions sincerely. Less obviously, such a practice might also involve a norm analogous to personal warranted assertibility. In other words, expressed preferences might be censured on the grounds that they were not well-founded, by the speaker's own lights (for example, on the grounds they did not cohere with the speaker's other preferences and desires). However, in this practice there need be no place for a norm analogous to truth – no idea of an objective standard, over and above personal warranted assertibility, which preferences properly aim to meet.

At least to a first approximation, we can imagine a community who treat expressions of beliefs in the same way. They express their beliefs – that is, let us say, the kind of behavioural dispositions which we would characterise as beliefs – by means of a speech act we might call the *merely-opinionated assertion* ('MOA', for short). These speakers – 'Mo'ans', as I called them in another paper¹⁴ – criticise each other for insincerity and for lack of coherence, or personal warranted assertibility. But they go no

¹⁴Price 1998. The present section and the next draw significantly on this paper.

further than this. In particular, they do not treat a disagreement between two speakers as an indication that, necessarily, one speaker or other is mistaken – in violation of some norm. On the contrary, they allow that in such a case it may turn out that both speakers have spoken correctly, by the only two standards the community takes to be operable. Both may be sincere, and both, in their own terms, may have good grounds for their assertion.¹⁵

A speech community of this imagined kind could make use of a disquotational truth predicate, as a device to facilitate agreement with an expression of opinion made by another speaker. ‘That’s true’ would function much like ‘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. The crucial point is that if the only norms in play are subjective assertibility and personal warranted assertibility, introducing disquotational truth leaves everything as it is. It doesn’t import a third norm.

The difficulty we have in holding on to the idea of such a community stems from our almost irresistible urge to see the situation in terms of our own normative standards. There really is a third norm, we are inclined to think, even if these simple creatures don’t know it. If two of them make incompatible assertions then one of them must be objectively incorrect, even if by their lights they both meet the only norms they themselves recognise. (I think even pragmatists will be inclined to say this, even though they want to equate the relevant kind of incorrectness not with falsity but with lack of some kind of justification more objective than that of personal warrant.) But the point of the story is precisely to bring this third norm into sharp relief, and hence I am quite happy to allow challenges to the story on these grounds, which rely on the very conclusion I want to draw. *For us*, there is a third norm. But why is that so? Where does

¹⁵As I noted earlier, my use of this example does not depend on the claim that such a linguistic practice be possible. It is doubtful whether notions such as belief, assertion and opinion are really load-bearing, in the imagined context. However, much of the effect of the example could be achieved in another way, by imposing suitable restrictions on real linguistic practices – by imagining self-imposed restrictions on what we are allowed to say. One way to approach the Mo’an predicament from our own current practice would be to adopt the convention that whenever we would ordinarily assert ‘p’, we express ourselves instead by saying ‘My own opinion is that p’.

the third norm come from? What job does it do – what difference does it make to our lives? And what features must it have in order to do this job?

4. *What difference does the third norm make?*

Let's return to the Mo'ans, and their merely-opinionated assertions. Recall that Mo'ans use linguistic utterances to express their 'beliefs', as well as other psychological states, such as preferences and desires. Where they differ from us is in the fact that they do not take a disagreement between two speakers in this belief-expressing linguistic dimension to indicate that one or other speaker must be at fault. They recognise the possibility of fault consisting in failure to observe one of the two norms of subjective assertibility or personal warranted assertibility, but lack the idea of the third norm, that of truth itself. This shows up in the fact that by default, disagreements are of a no-fault kind, in the way that expression of different preferences often are for us.

What does it take to add the third norm to such a practice? Do the Mo'ans need to come to believe that there is a substantial property that the attitudes they use MOAs to express may have or lack – perhaps the property of corresponding to how things are in the world, perhaps that of being what their opinions are fated to converge on in the long run? Does adoption of the third norm depend on a piece of folk metaphysics of this kind? Not at all, in my view. The practice the Mo'ans need to adopt is simply that whenever they are prepared to assert (in the old MOA sense) that p, they also be prepared to ascribe fault to anyone who asserts not-p, *independently of any grounds for thinking that that person fails one of the first two norms of assertibility*. Perhaps they also need to be prepared to commend anyone who asserts that p, or perhaps failure-to-find-fault is motivation enough in this case. At any rate, what matters is that disagreement itself be treated as grounds for disapproval, as grounds for thinking that one's interlocutor has fallen short of some normative standard.

At this point it is worth noting what may seem a serious difficulty. If the Mo'ans don't *already* care about disagreements, why should they care about disagreements about normative matters? Suppose that we two are Mo'ans, that you assert that p, and that I

assert that not-p. If this initial disagreement doesn't bother me, why should it bother me when – trying to implement the third norm – you go on to assert that I am 'at fault', or 'incorrect'? Again, I simply disagree; and if the former disagreement doesn't bite then nor will the latter. And if what was needed to motivate me to resolve our disagreement was *my* acceptance that I am 'at fault', then motivation would always come too late. If I accept this at all, it is only after the fact – after the disagreement has been resolved in your favour.

To get the sequence right, then, I must be motivated by your disapproval itself. This is an important point. It shows that if there could be an assertoric practice which lacked the third norm, we couldn't add that norm simply by adding a normative predicate. In so far – so very far, in my view – as terms such as *true* and *false* carry this normative force in natural languages, they must be giving voice to something more basic: a fundamental practice of expressions of attitudes of approval and disapproval, in response to perceptions of agreement and disagreement between expressed commitments. I'll return to this point, for it is the basis of an important objection to certain other accounts of truth.

Imagine for the moment that the Mo'ans could add the third norm by adding a normative predicate, or pair of predicates (*correct* and *incorrect*, say). What would be the usage rule for these predicates? Simply that one be prepared to assert that p is *correct* if and only if one is prepared to assert that p; and to assert that p is *incorrect* if and only if one is prepared to assert that not-p. In other words, the usage rule is something very close to the disquotational schema ('p' is true if and only if p). As a result, the present proposal, that the truth predicate is an explicit expression of the third norm, already seems well on the way to an explanation of the disquotational functions of truth. We have already noted that the converse argument does not go through. A practice which lacked the third norm could still make use of a disquotational truth predicate.¹⁶

¹⁶A defender of the disquotational view might argue that although there is a third norm, it is not the function of the truth predicate to express it. This will be a difficult position to defend, however. If any predicate – *correct*, for example – expresses the third norm, then that predicate will function as a disquotational predicate, for the reason just mentioned. Hence it will have been pointless to maintain that *true* itself is not normative.

For the moment, we are interested in the function of the third norm. Why might the invention of such a norm be useful? What distinctive job does it do? We already have one answer to the latter question, and hence possibly to the former, in the passive account. Without a norm stronger than that of warranted assertibility *for me*, or *for us*, the idea of improving *my*, or *our*, current commitments would be incoherent. The third norm functions to create the conceptual space for the idea of further improvement. To do this job, we need a norm stronger than that of warranted assertibility for any *actual* community. (Of course, this doesn't yet show that we need something more than Peircean ideal assertibility, but one thing at a time.)

However, we can do better than the passive account. The third norm doesn't just hold open the conceptual space for the idea of improvement. It positively encourages such improvement, by motivating speakers who disagree to try to resolve their disagreement. Without the third norm, differences of opinion would simply slide past one another. Differences of opinion would seem as inconsequential as differences of preference. With the third norm, however, disagreement automatically becomes normatively loaded. The third norm makes what would otherwise be no-fault disagreements into unstable social situations, whose instability is only resolved by argument and consequent agreement – and it provides an immediate incentive for argument, in that it holds out to the successful arguer the reward consisting in her community's positive evaluation of her dialectical position. If reasoned argument is generally beneficial – beneficial in some long-run sense – then a community of Mo'ans who adopt this practice will tend to prosper, compared to a community who do not.

I'll call this the active account of the role of the third norm. In effect, it contends that the fact that speakers take their belief-expressing utterances to be subject to the third norm plays a causal, carrot-and-stick role in encouraging them to settle their differences, in cases in which initially they disagree. The force of these carrots and sticks should not be over-stated, however. In any given case, we are free not to give voice to our third-norm-grounded disapproval. If we do express it, the speakers with whom we disagree are

So the disquotationalist needs to claim that the third norm is not expressed at all in this predicative form, and that seems implausible.

free not to rise to the bait. Many factors may determine what happens in any particular case. My claim is simply that the third norm adds something new to the preferential mix. In particular, it gives rise to a new preferential pressure towards resolution of the disagreement in question – a pressure which would not exist in its absence, which does not exist for the Mo'ans, and which could not exist for us, if we did not care in general about the approval and disapproval of our fellows. The third norm depends on the fact that (to varying extents in varying circumstances) we do care about these things. It exploits this fact about us to make disagreements matter, in a way in which they would not otherwise matter. But the third norm does not come for free, with a general disposition to seek the approval of our fellows. What we have but the Mo'ans lack is an additional, special purpose, disposition: the disposition to disapprove of speakers with whom we disagree. This disposition is the mark of the third norm.

As in the case of the passive account of the role of the third norm, we need to be careful that this active account does not viciously presuppose the very notions for which it seeks to account. The notion of disagreement requires particular care. For one thing, recognition that one differs from a previous speaker must take some form more basic than the belief that he or she has said something 'false', for otherwise there could not be a convention of applying this normative predicate when one perceives that one differs. For another, there is an important sense in which on the proposed account, it is the practice of applying the third norm which creates the disagreement, where initially there was mere difference. Properly developed, the view seems likely to be something like this. There is a primitive incompatibility between certain behavioural commitments¹⁷ of a single individual, which turns on the impossibility of both doing and not doing any given action A – both having and not having a cup of coffee, for example. All else – both the

¹⁷This is another place where circularity threatens. We need to be sure that the psychological states mentioned at this point are not thought of as already 'factual' or 'representational' in character, in a way which presupposes truth. In so far as it is truth-involving, the 'factual' character of the domain in question needs to be part of the explanandum – something that emerges from, rather than being presupposed by, the pragmatic account of the origins and consequences of 'truth talk'. In my view, one of the attractive features of this approach is that it offers the prospect that the uniformity of 'factual', truth-involving talk might be compatible with considerable plurality in the nature and functions of the underlying psychological states. It thus offers an attractive new form for expressivist intuitions. Cf. Price, 1988, Ch. 8, Price, 1992, §IV.

public perceived incompatibility of ‘conflicting’ assertions by different speakers, and the private perceived incompatibility essential to reasoning – is by convention, and depends on the third norm.

Obviously, much more needs to be said about this. At another level, much also needs to be said about possible advantages of such a mechanism for resolving differences – about its long-run advantages, for example, both compared to the case in which there is no such mechanism and compared to the case in which there is some different mechanism, such as deference to social rank. For immediate purposes, however, my claim does not depend on this latter work. For the present, my claim is simply that truth does play the role of this third norm, in providing the friction characteristic of factual dialogue as we know it. (I also claim, roughly, that this is perhaps the most interesting fact about truth, from a philosophical perspective.) In principle, this claim could be true, even though the practice in question was not advantageous. In principle, truth, and with it dialogue, could turn out to be a bad thing for the species, biologically considered¹⁸. No matter. It would still be true that we wouldn’t have understood truth until we understood its role in this debilitating practice.

Is talk of dialogue really essential here? Couldn’t we say simply that the third norm is what distinguishes a genuinely assertoric linguistic practice from the ‘merely opinionated’ assertoric practice of the Mo’ans? The distinguishing mark of genuine assertion is thus that by default, difference is taken as a sign of *fault*, of *breach of a normative standard*.

It would not strictly be incorrect to say this, in my view, but it ought to seem unsatisfying, by pragmatist lights. A pragmatist is interested in the practical significance of the notions of truth and falsity, in the issue of what difference possession of these notions makes to our lives. According to the view just suggested, the answer will be something like this. The difference that truth and falsity make is that they make our

¹⁸Even if not dangerous on its own, the third norm might become so in combination with some particularly deadly source of intractable disagreements, such as religion commitment. More generally, the thought that argument is sometimes dangerous suggests a link between the concerns of this paper and the motivations of the Pyrrhonian sceptics. On the present view of truth, the question whether we could get by without truth seems closely related to that as to whether we could live as thoroughgoing Pyrrhonian sceptics.

linguistic practice genuinely assertoric, rather than Mo'an. 'I see that,' the pragmatist will then say, 'But what practical difference does *that* difference make, over and above the obvious difference – that is, over and above the fact that we approve and disapprove of some of our fellow speakers on occasions on which we wouldn't otherwise do so?'

My own answer to the new question is that these habits of approval and disapproval tend to encourage dialogue, by providing speakers with an incentive to resolve disagreements. It is true that at this point the pragmatist's question – 'What difference does *that* make?' – can be (indeed, should be) asked all over again. The importance I have here attached to dialogue rests in part on the gamble that this question will turn out to have an interesting answer, in terms of the long-run advantages of pooled cognitive resources, agreement on shared projects, and so on. But not entirely. Dialogue seems such a central part of our linguistic and social lives, that the difference between a world without dialogue and our world is much greater than *merely* the difference between MOAs and genuine assertions. So even if were to turn out that the development of dialogue had been an historical accident, of no great value to the species biologically considered, it would still be true that the most interesting behavioural consequence of the third norm would be dialogue, and not merely the more-than-merely-Moa'an assertion which makes dialogue possible.¹⁹

Recall that I began by challenging Rorty's claim that no behavioural consequences flow from a distinction between justification and truth. In one sense, my challenge does indeed amount to pointing out that the third norm – a notion of truth stronger than justification – brings with it the following behavioural difference: a disposition to criticise, or at least disapprove of, those with whom one disagrees. But if this were all the challenge amounted to, Rorty would be entitled to reply that *of course* there is this difference, but that this difference makes no interesting further difference. Hence the importance of dialogue, in my view, which turns a small difference in normative practice

¹⁹This point would acquire new and even stronger force, if it were to be established that private cognition rests on the norms of public dialogue, in the way suggested in fn. 2.

into a big difference in the way in which speakers engage with one another (and thereby ensures that Rorty's claim fails in an interesting rather than an insignificant way).

5. Peirce regained?

Now to the question deferred above. Does the third norm need to be other than a more-than-merely-personal notion of justification? In particular, couldn't it be a Peircean flavour of ideal warranted assertibility? I have several responses to this suggestion.

First, I think that the proposal is mistakenly motivated. As I said in the introduction, I think it stems from the tendency, still too strong in Peirce, to ask the wrong question about truth. If we think that the philosophical issue is 'What is truth?', then naturally we'll want to find an answer – something with which we may identify truth. Then, given standard objections to metaphysical answers, it is understandable that Peirce's alternative should seem attractive. But the attraction is that of methadone compared to heroin. Far better, surely, from a pragmatist's point of view, to rid ourselves of the craving for analysis altogether. To do this, we need to see that the basic philosophical needs that analysis seemed to serve can be met in another mode altogether: by explanation of the *practices*, rather than reduction of their *objects*. (Moreover, the explanatory project has the potential to allow us realist truth without the metaphysical disadvantages. The apparent disadvantages of realist truth emerge *in the light of* the reductive project, for it is from this perspective that it seems mysterious what truth could *be*. If we no longer feel obliged to ask the question, we won't be troubled by the fact that it is so hard to answer. We lose the motivation for seeking something else – something less 'mysterious' than correspondence – with which to identify truth.)

'I accept all that,' the pragmatist might say. 'Nevertheless, perhaps it is true of the notion of truth (as we find it in practice), that it is identical (in some interesting sense) to ideal warranted assertibility. Shouldn't you therefore allow, at least, the possibility that a Peircean account is the correct one?'

Two points in response to this. The first, an old objection, is that it is very unclear what the notion of the ideal limit might amount to, or even that it is coherent. For

example, couldn't actual practice be improved or idealised in several dimensions, not necessarily consistent with one another. In this sense, then, the Peircean pragmatist seems a long way from offering us a concrete proposal.²⁰

The second point – also an old point, for as Putnam (1978, p. 108) observes, it is essentially the naturalistic fallacy – concerns the nature of the proposed identification of truth with ideal warranted assertibility. Truth is essentially a normative notion. Its role in making disagreements matter depends on its immediate motivational character. Why should ideal warranted assertibility have this character? If someone tells me that my beliefs are not those of our infinitely refined future enquirers, why should that bother me? My manners are not those of the palace, but so what? In other words, it is hard to see how such an identification could generate the immediate normativity of truth.²¹ (It seems more plausible that we begin with truth and define the notion of the ideal limit in terms of it: what makes the limit ideal is that it reaches truth. This doesn't tell us how and why we get into this particular normative circle in the first place.)

I haven't yet mentioned what seems to me to be the most telling argument against the pragmatist identification of truth with warranted assertibility (in Peircean form or otherwise). It often seems to be suggested (by Rorty himself, among others – see the quotes with which I began), that instead of arguing about truth, we could argue about warranted assertibility. This seems to me to miss a crucial point. Without truth, the wheels of argument do not engage; disagreements slide past one another. This is true of disagreements about any matter whatsoever. In particular, it is true of disagreements about warranted assertibility. *If we didn't already have truth, in other words, we simply*

²⁰As Rorty (1986, p. 130) notes, Michael Williams (1980, p. 269) makes a point of this kind: '[W]e have no idea what it would be for a theory to be ideally complete and comprehensive ... or of what it would be for inquiry to have an end.'

²¹It may seem that this argument begs the question against the pragmatist, by assuming that there is an epistemologically relevant gap between ideal warranted assertibility and truth. (I am grateful to a referee at this point.) But the issue is not whether we need some norm *in addition* to ideal warranted assertibility, but whether ideal warranted assertibility itself could be immediately normative, in the way in which truth is. No one disputes that the manners of the palace are normative for those who live there – that's what it is to be manners – but it is an open question whether they are or should be normative for the rest of us. Similarly for ideal assertibility, except that in this case no one lives at the limit, so that there is no one for whom the question is not open.

couldn't argue about warranted assertibility. For we could be aware that we have different opinions about what is warrantably assertible, *without that difference of opinion seeming to matter.* What makes it matter is the fact that we subscribe to a practice according to which disagreement is an indication of culpable error, on one side or other; in another words, that we already take ourselves to be subject to the norms of truth and falsity.²²

The crucial point is thus that assertoric dialogue requires an intolerance of disagreement. This needs to be present already in the background, a pragmatic presupposition of judgement itself. I am not a maker of assertions, a judge, at all, unless I am already playing the game to win, in the sense defined by the third norm. Since winning is already characterised in terms of truth, the idea of a conversational game with some alternative point is incoherent. It is like the idea of a game in which the primary aim is to compete – this idea is incoherent, because the notion of competition already presupposes a different goal.²³

There is a connection here with an old objection to relativism, which tries to corner the relativist by asking her whether she takes her own relativistic doctrine to be true, and if so in what sense. The best option for the relativist is to say that she takes the doctrine to be true in the only sense she allows, namely, the relativistic one. When her opponent replies, 'Well, in that case you shouldn't be troubled by the fact that I disagree, because you recognise that what is true for me need not be true for you, and vice versa,' the

²²I noted above that the same point applies to the normative predicates themselves. If we weren't already disposed to take disagreement to matter, we couldn't do so simply by adding normative predicates, for disagreement about the application of those predicates would be as frictionless as disagreement about anything else. My claim is thus that the notions of truth and falsity give voice to more primitive implicit norms, which themselves underpin the very possibility of 'giving voice' at all. In effect, the above argument rests on the observation that this genealogy cannot be reversed: if we start with a predicate – *warrantably assertible* or any other – then we have started too late. (I suspect that by 'giving voice', I mean something close to 'making explicit', in Brandom's 1996 sense.)

²³Here, incidentally, we see the essential flaw in the pious sentiments of Grantland Rice (1880–1954):

For when the One Great Scorer comes,
To write against your name,
He marks – not that you won or lost –
But how you played the game.

The One Great Scorer might assign marks on this basis, for divine purposes. *Pace* Rice, however, we couldn't play the game in question with such marks as our primary goal, for then it would be a different game altogether.

relativist has a reply. She can argue that truth is relative to communities, not to individual speakers, and hence that disagreements don't necessarily dissolve in this way.

My pragmatist opponents fare less well against an analogous argument, I think. The basic objection to their position is that in engaging with me in argument about the nature of truth (as about anything else), they reveal that they take themselves to be subject to the norm whose existence they are denying. If they didn't take themselves to be subject to it, they would be in the same boat as the Mo'ans, with no reason to treat the disagreement between us as a cause for concern. They affirm *p*, I affirm not-*p*; but by their lights, this should be like the case in which they say 'Yes' and I say 'No', in answer to the question 'Would you like coffee?' (This is what it should be like even if *p* is of the form '*q* is warrantably assertible'.) The disagreement simply wouldn't bite.

6. *Truth as convenient fiction?*

The third norm thus requires a notion of truth that differs from justification, even of a Peircean ideal variety. In this sense, then, the present account is realist rather than pragmatist about truth. In another sense, however, the view surely seems antirealist. After all, I have argued that what matters is that speakers take there to be a norm of truth, not that there actually be such a norm, in some speaker-independent sense. Isn't this antirealism, or more precisely, in the current jargon, a form of *fictionalism* about truth?

If so, could this be a satisfactory outcome? If truth does play the role I have claimed for it in dialogue, wouldn't the realisation that it is a fiction undermine that linguistic practice, by making it the case that we could no longer consistently feel bound by the relevant norms?

Let's call this objection the threat of dialogical nihilism. In my view, it isn't a practical threat. I think that in practice we find it impossible to stop caring about truth. This isn't an argument for realism, of course. The discovery that our biological appetites are not driven by perception of pre-existing properties – the properties of being tasty, sexually attractive, or whatever – does not lessen the force of those appetites, but no one thinks that this requires a realist view the properties concerned. Even if nihilism were a

practical threat, this wouldn't be reason for thinking that the claim that truth is a fiction is *false*, by the lights of the game as currently played. It might be a pragmatic reason for keeping the conclusion quiet, but that is a different matter altogether (especially according to my realist opponents).

So even if the present view is correctly characterised as a form of fictionalism about truth, the nihilism objection is far from conclusive. But are the labels 'fictionalism' or 'antirealism' really appropriate? The need for caution stems from the fact that this approach to truth threatens to deprive both sides of the realism–antirealism debate of conceptual resources on which the debate seems to depend. As I noted earlier, the relevant metaphysical issues tend themselves to be framed in terms of truth, and related notions. A theory is said to be in error if its claims are not *true*, or if its terms fail to *refer*, for example. So the issue of the status of truth is here enmeshed with the terms of the problem, in a way which is quite uncharacteristic of metaphysical issues about other notions. As a result, it may be impossible to formulate a meaningful antirealism or fictionalism about the semantic terms themselves. This doesn't mean that we have to be realists about semantic notions, but only that if we are not realists we should be cautious about calling ourselves antirealists (or fictionalists), if these categories presuppose the very notions we want to avoid being realist about.

This may sound like an impossible trick, but in fact the kind of distinction we need is familiar elsewhere. It is the distinction between someone who 'talks god talk' and espouses atheism, and someone who rejects the theological language game altogether (on Carnapian pragmatic grounds, say). These are two very different ways of rejecting theism. In the present case, the point is that we may consistently reject semantically-grounded realism about the semantic notions themselves, so long as we do so by avoiding theoretical use of semantic notions altogether, rather than by relying on those notions to characterise our departure from realism. (Why 'theoretical use'? Because there is nothing to stop us continuing to use these semantic notions in a deflationary or disquotational sense.)

It might be suggested that we can sidestep this difficulty altogether by casting the relevant metaphysical issues in ontological rather than semantic terms. On this view, the relevant issue is whether truth exists, not whether (some) truth-ascriptions are true. Against this suggestion, however, it is arguable that the relevant metaphysical issues arise initially from data concerning human linguistic usage, and only become metaphysical in the light of substantial semantic assumptions about the functions of the language concerned – for example, that it is truth-conditional, or referential, in function. If so, then truth is once again enmeshed with the terms of the problem. And even if we concede the possibility of the ontological shift, the authority of Quine, Carnap and others may perhaps be invoked in support of a deflationary attitude to ontology, with the result that the realist–antirealist issue still dissolves.²⁴

These issues are complex, and deserve a much more detailed examination than I can give them here. For present purposes, I simply flag the following as a possible outcome (of considerable plausibility, in my view). In common with other deflationary approaches to truth, the present account not only rejects the idea that there is a substantial metaphysical issue about truth (a substantial issue about the truthmakers of claims about truth, for example). Because it is about truth, it also positively prevents ‘re-inflation’. In other words, it seems to support a general deflationary attitude to issues of realism and antirealism. If so, then deflationism about truth is not only not to be equated with fictionalism, but tends to undermine the fictional–nonfictional distinction, as applied in the metaphysical realm.²⁵

As I noted at the beginning, the present account of truth is hard to find on contemporary maps. In part, as should now be clear, this is because it combines elements not normally thought to be compatible. In one sense it is impeccably pragmatist, for example, for it appeals to nothing more than the role of truth in linguistic practice. Yet it

²⁴I defend these two options in Price (forthcoming) and Price (1992, 1997), respectively.

²⁵Rorty often says that he wants to walk away from realist–antirealist disputes. In other words, he doesn’t think that there is an interesting philosophical question as to whether our commitments ‘mirror’ reality. The above argument suggests that like other deflationists about truth, I have reason to follow Rorty in walking away from these issues. (In particular, my defence of truth over justification does not force me to stay.)

rejects the pragmatist's *ur-ur*, to try to identify truth with justification. Again, it defends a kind of truth commonly seen as realist, but does so from a pragmatist starting point, without the metaphysics that typically accompanies such a realist view of truth. So in thinking about how to characterise this account of truth, we should be sensitive to the possibility that our existing categories – fictionalism, realism, and perhaps pragmatism itself – may need to be reconfigured. If so, then putting the position on the map is not like noticing a small country (Lichtenstein, perhaps) that previously we'd overlooked. It is more like discovering a geographical analogue of the platypus, a region which our pre-existing cartographical conventions seemed *a priori* to disallow.

I began with Rorty's claim that the distinction between justification and truth makes no difference in practical life, no difference to our 'decisions about what to do'. Rorty regards a commitment to a notion of truth stronger than justification as a relic of a kind of religious deference to external authority. He recommends that just as we have begun to rid ourselves of theism, we should rid ourselves of the 'representationalist' dogma that our beliefs are answerable to standards beyond ourselves. For Rorty, then, realist truth is a quasi-religious myth, which we'd do better without.

Despite my reservations about the fictionalist label, I have agreed that truth is in some sense a myth, or at least a human creation.²⁶ But I have denied that in providing a norm stronger than justification, a commitment to truth makes no behavioural difference. On the contrary, I've argued, it plays an essential role in a linguistic practice of great importance to us, *as we currently are*. It is not clear whether we could coherently be otherwise, whether we could get by without the third norm. If so, however, then the result would be a very different language game. My main claim is that we haven't understood truth until we understand its role in the game we currently play.²⁷

²⁶In the light of the argument above, this is a point more about the genealogy than about the reality of truth.

²⁷The first version of this paper was written for a conference in honour of Richard Rorty at ANU in 1999. I am grateful to participants in that conference and to many subsequent audiences for much insightful discussion of these ideas; and also to an anonymous referee for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

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