

## Feeling Good About Truth<sup>1</sup>

There is not a subject in philosophy that has such a noble and contentious history than that of the subject of truth and how to reconcile reality (or nature) and our perception of it. When Plato (c.427 BCE) through the mouth of Socrates challenged Euthyphro as to whether something was true because the gods said it or was there an external standard of truth by which *we* (mortals) should *judge* what the gods say is true, we have the first recorded salvo in Western philosophy as to what was the proper conception of truth (Jowett, 2019). What Plato was shining a light on was whether he should be bound to the self-justifying ethical subjectivity of the gods or whether he was to seek ethical objectivity and ultimate authority in a realm he would call “Truth”. Plato understood that for him to maintain the integrity of Greek civilisation against the relativism and self-interested pragmatism of the Sophists and to speak of objectivity at all, he needed to ground his knowledge or *science*<sup>2</sup> in a transcendent source of authority (his world of “forms”). However, consequently, he found that he could say very little about the nature of the objective realm because of that same transcendence. Plato was maybe the first objectivist to be troubled with our relationship with reality, but he certainly has not been the last. Aristotle (b.384 BCE), Plato’s pupil, dissatisfied with positing such an abstract realm beyond nature about which we can know nothing (but which is required to make true knowledge of the world work), preferred to deal much more concretely with the world of experience of the subject. This he felt was intuitively safer than relying on ghostly metaphysics for justification, but he too desired to protect Greek civilisation from the Sophists by preserving objectivity by a strong theory of nature (reality) knowable by experience. The Sophist

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<sup>2</sup> Both the Greek ἐπιστήμη (*epistēmē*) from which we get the word “epistemology” and the Latin *scientia* from which we get the word “science” both have the basic meaning of “knowledge”.

Protagoras (b.490 BCE) had denied any conception of objective truth but had claimed he could still teach the young Hippocrates to be a “good citizen” (Brown, 2005). He clearly felt he could separate goodness and truth. This is because Protagoras had a simple position regarding truth, there are truths for me and truths for you but no such thing as *the* Truth. Thus, you are able to provide ethical justifications for murder, torture, lying, cheating and stealing if it wins you the argument (or the war) amid competing political factions and the historical contingencies of your day. Your lack of conviction regarding ethical truths provides the pragmatic and democratic justification for the moral atrocities committed by both sides during the Peloponnesian War. Both Plato and Aristotle writing and living in the wake of this war, believed such approaches to ethics would completely unravel Greek civilisation. Thus, despite their differences, their common goal was to establish an objective basis for the ‘unity of the virtues’ or the ‘forms of knowledge’ that permitted the solid foundation for ethical truths and secured the foundation for a renewed Greek civilisation.

Thus, in summary, we shall be arguing that it is the acceptance of truth as something other than the fashion of the day that admits the very possibility of history and that provides the ability to judge with sufficient objectivity what is right and wrong thus ensuring the health and future of our culture. It might seem strange that we began by revisiting the arguments of ancient Greece, but modern philosophy grew out of the Renaissance and its rediscovery of Greek humanism. The story of modern Western philosophy is the attempt to answer the same questions the classical philosophers had enunciated, and it will be evident that there is a strong parallelism between the position of our modern protagonists and their classical ancestors. In the pragmatic and subjectivist corner, occupying and modernising much of the position taken by Protagoras and the Sophists, will be Richard Rorty<sup>3</sup>. In the objectivist and realist corner, wanting to preserve Western civilisation from

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rorty/#1> for a brief biography of Rorty.

collapse, will be his peer Simon Blackburn<sup>4</sup>. Rorty (d. 2007) enjoyed an enormous reputation both in the positive and negative sense within philosophy, and it is his destroying philosophy whilst simultaneously establishing his reputation in it by the publication of his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Rorty R. , 2018 (1979)) , that we examine. Blackburn described Rorty as an “[un]usually well-informed opponent of mainstream, or analytical philosophy” (Blackburn, 1998, p. 287) and he engaged directly with Rorty<sup>5</sup> on the issues of truth and realism with his critiques increasing in intensity culminating in his comprehensive rejection of Rorty’s arguments for a pragmatic conception of truth and its corollary of ethical relativism. It is the contention of this paper that Blackburn succeeds in conclusively undermining Rorty’s position by demonstrating that Rorty’s commitment to a postmodern pragmatic relativism leaves him no ethical ground on which he can stand or on which he can ask others to stand if he is consistent with his own positions. It argues that Blackburn is correct to assert that such a position is untenable, and it is not irrational to take a strong view of ethical truth even in the face of Rorty’s sustained and comprehensive criticism of objectivity and truth.

Rorty saw himself firstly as a pragmatist (Rorty R. , 2011 (1982), pp. xiii-xlvi), an heir of James and especially Dewey, the movement that had dominated American philosophy in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and had helped to shape the other analytic naturalisms but had to a greater or lesser degree been subsumed by them. However, Rorty was keen to freshly re-appropriate swathes of modern philosophy to the pragmatist cause and indeed, to find the pragmatic turn as a reformation of philosophy generally. For Rorty, the story of philosophy, culminating in 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy, was of ill-conceived Platonic philosophical notions asking questions to which there could

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.phil.cam.ac.uk/people/teaching-research-pages/blackburn/blackburn-page> for a brief biography of Blackburn.

<sup>5</sup> Rorty acknowledges his critique and contributions in Rorty R. , 2011 (1982), xlvn25,xlvn30.

only ever be dead-end answers and pragmatism, in one form or another, was the antidote (Rorty R. , 2011 (1982), p. xvii). Central to the pragmatist view was the programme of Epicurus (b.341 BCE), who moved from empirical methods to *empiricism*, that is the view that *all* knowledge is perceptual. This is because it has had an enduring and strong appeal for those who wish to dispense with metaphysics (often religious metaphysics) as a foundation for knowledge, truth is rather that which works and has some practical utility for us, that nature has any underlying unity or reality is not of interest to us. This found a particular imperative in the post-Darwinian world of Comte's positivism and the analytical logical positivism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but has the fundamental weakness that it is itself a proposition that cannot be verified empirically. Empiricists are forced to claim the proposition is logically analytic, i.e. "knowledge" *is* (in the existential sense) that which can be verified empirically. However, the "dogmatism" of this "scientific" position was brought into sharp focus in the late 1950s by Quine, perhaps the most rigorous of the post-positivist naturalist philosophers. He claimed that the twin planks foundational to the "scientific account of the world"<sup>6</sup> posited by logical positivism<sup>7</sup>, the analytic-synthetic distinction and the view that a meaningful statement must be able to be reduced to immediate items of experience (viz. "reductionism") were "ill-founded" (Quine W. V., 1980 (1953), p. 20). Quine's own conception of truth was a *disquotational* account, e.g. "snow is white" is a proposition that is "true" if and only if snow *is* white, i.e. we have removed the quotation marks.

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<sup>6</sup> Carnap, Rudolf, Hans Hahn and Otto Neurath, 1929, *Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung – Der Wiener Kreis*, Wien: Wolf, partial transl. in Neurath 1973, pp. 299–318, full trans. in Stadler and Uebel 2012, pp. 75–116. See Uebel, Thomas, "Vienna Circle", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/vienna-circle/>>

<sup>7</sup> Quine's mentor in his early years was Rudolf Carnap, a foundational figure in that movement.

For Rorty, the lesson of this progression is seen in that Truth here is a rarefied property of sentences only and is a transparent property, to say  $x$  is true is just to say  $x$ ; the “truth predicate” is a redundant predicate. For Rorty, truth is a concept drained of every trace of the Platonic realm where Truth reigns, its redundancy and transparency mean for Rorty it has no significance. It may be *true* that snow is white or that grass is green but there is nothing more about Truth revealed by these statements, nor can there ever be:

[The pragmatic theory of truth] says that truth is not the sort of thing one should expect to have a philosophically interesting theory about...“truth” is just the name of a property which all true statements share. (Rorty R. , 2011 (1982), p. xiii)

However, Rorty’s attack on truth is more comprehensive because the problems with empirical methods as the foundation for knowledge are not just at the extremes of empiricism. Rorty draws heavily on aspects of Kant’s response to Humean scepticism about the natural world. Hume had demonstrated that the inductive reasoning of Aristotle *assumed* that causality was not just a mental habit but could offer no reasons (evidence) that this was so other than the same experience it was supposed to be explaining, i.e. we see that A follows B and therefore we conclude that B will always precede A but we only know that because we have seen in the past that A follows B. The causal necessity was contrived, it may be tomorrow that A does not follow B, but we can offer no *reasoning* independent of that same experience as to why this would be the case, i.e. the path from experience to theory is non-deductive. That is, a belief in the reasonableness of causal reasoning was irrevocably circular and it threatened to undo the empirical methods that provided the basis for the new natural sciences. Such were the implications of Hume’s critique for the possibility of knowledge of the world and the truth question, it had alarmed Kant so much that it “*awoke him from his dogmatic slumbers*” (Kant, 2004, p. 4). Kant’s answer to Hume was to “save” science by inverting the relationship between reality and the subject. As Copernicus had revolutionised astronomy by putting the Sun at the centre of the solar system, Kant envisaged his own programme as a

Copernican revolution in philosophy (Kant, 2007, p. 18). The mind of humanity was not a passive observer of nature which then, via the sensory data, would assemble reality but rather it imposed on nature patterns of causality because the mind could not but help operate in that way (Kant, 2007, pp. 163-164). Thus, although he “saved” science, he did so at the cost of losing touch with reality as it is in itself (the *noumena*), and we were left with the phenomenal world alone. Thus, truth about the world as it is really is, that is, objective reality, was lost to us and provides justification to Rorty for his position. In the post-Kantian world, philosophy was no longer a discipline that was to provide answers to the fundamental questions of human existence and experience, for the answers to those questions were unreachable.

Thus, Rorty in his most influential work castigated philosophy and philosophers for attempting to maintain the fiction of objectivity claiming the post-Kantian world precludes such a conception but he also dismissed Kant’s transcendental *a priori* – he asserts that Kant’s attempt to provide the preconditions for human knowledge were vain<sup>8</sup> and misguided (Rorty R. , 2018 (1979), p. 149ff). However, Rorty is a post-Kantian in the sense that his pragmatism positioned reality as it is in itself beyond the reach of the human mind. Metaphysical “Truth” was an impossible goal that lay beyond the reach of our cognitive faculties if it had any existence at all and we should give the pursuit of it up as a meaningless exercise. There were merely “our own” answers that originated within our own communities. Philosophy might well have residual tasks of a more technical nature in that it can clarify and illuminate salient issues for a culture and thus assist science or the wider cultural conversation. Yet philosophy has no claim to unique knowledge at all and the “philosopher” is not an expert that requires an exalted position as one that lays the foundation for a worldview, or puts

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<sup>8</sup> Rorty held Kant the most responsible for turning philosophy into a technical discipline divorced from the consciousness of the general populace and remote to their needs or concerns. It is thus ironic that, he nevertheless, owes a substantial debt to Kant.

the roof over all other disciplines so that we have a coherent account of all disciplines, or that exposes the conceptual muddles that hinder the understanding of those disciplines (Bahnsen, 1992). Philosophers were rather far more like poets and therapists that helped us understand our contingent existence. There are no great governing principles of knowledge other than what suits us at a point in time for pragmatic solutions to immediate cultural priorities. Philosophy and science become much more like subsets of the cultural conversation, a particular way of speaking about issues that may or may not offer recommendations for solving the problems of our current contingencies.

Thus, in summary, Rorty's ambivalence to science as just one among many cultural tools rather than the exalted position the hard sciences enjoyed within the Western world in his brave new world of post-*Wissenschaft* post-philosophical culture, owes much to the critique of Hume but he also synthesises important features from Kant's "answer" to Hume as part of his justification for rejecting the objective realm and conceiving of science as instrumental rather than objective research about nature. Science is a useful tool as far as it predicts 'X' will happen if I do 'Y', but it does not inform me of reality in any intrinsic sense. Rorty was keen to appropriate a post-Wittgensteinian hermeneutic, we might question whether there really is any such thing as "science" at all other than a contextualised, specialised and descriptive form of life that happens to have nature as its subject.

Rorty wanted to push the redefinition of science further though. Science is not really about method at all, it is a way of speaking that is only valuable "*as [it] render men's minds more sensitive to the life about them*" (Dewey, 1948, p. v.). Science then becomes "social science" (for we have dispensed with discovery and objectivity):

By an antirepresentationalist account I mean one which does not view knowledge as a matter of getting reality right, but rather as a matter of acquiring habits of action for

coping with reality...[I recognize] sociological but not epistemological, differences between such disciplinary matrices as theoretical physics and literary criticism. (Rorty R. , 2011 (1991), p. 1)

Social science is also recast as "*continuous with literature*" as a means of interpreting our and the experience of others, "*enlarging and deepening our sense of community*" (Rorty R. , 1989, p. 203). Similarly, the philosopher's activities as a variety of the literary critic may be therapeutic for the culture; they may help to explicate and make the issues clear to whatever problems we might have today, but the solutions are found elsewhere within the culture, in that enlarged and deepened sense of community. Truth and its relation to knowledge is thus retired as a subject on any philosophical interest:

It is certainly the case that "truth" is not a possible object of study, any more than is "knowledge". Neither has a nature to be understood. The kind of true beliefs that mathematicians acquire, the kind politicians acquire, the kind...are not usefully viewed as species of a single genus. The idea that human beings are primarily knowers, that knowing and truth seeking are what makes them wonderfully different from animals, is a bad one... (Rorty R. , 2006, p. 95)

It stands to reason then that philosophers and the natural scientists are also made redundant or need to accept a serious pay-cut by Rorty at this stage.

There is another primary element of Rorty's thinking and that is his usage, some would say his development of, post-modernism. Even for those who were not taking up the post-Kantian programme explicitly, the cultural upheavals and totalitarianism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century served to radically alter philosophy's conception of itself. We have seen already that the traditional task of philosophy was in providing a theory of everything, providing the "metanarrative" that cohered the different spheres of human activity. It was to provide substructure to the relationship between the arts and the sciences, principles for politics and to set the aims and goals of education. This was the



“modern” prerogative and science was its prophet, at least for the positivists. However, with the excesses of 20<sup>th</sup> century totalitarianism founded on what were deemed coherent materialist philosophies that regulated and authorised all human experience and activity, it seemed to some philosophers to be the confirmation that no such answers are possible nor was it desirable to conceive of philosophy in that way. The modern must give way to the post-modern. Rorty is credited as moving pragmatism in the post-modern direction, modernising and “reviving”<sup>9</sup> it. The single idea that might be the unifying concept behind the diverse post-modern movement is that any attempt to provide objective, cohering or regulatory principles should be resisted; spontaneity, fragmentation, superficiality, irony and playfulness should be celebrated (Heelas, 1999, p. 4). Rorty’s deconstruction of Western philosophy, the rejection of its conception of knowledge, truth and his celebration of situational irony as an integral part of the contingent human condition clearly display his debt to this type of thought. Indeed, it might be said he was one of its most skilled expositors and his ethical thought is particularly post-modern and should be understood as such.

Ethical relativism is often perceived as the necessary corollary of the post-modern position, it was Kant’s autonomous person freed from Kant’s moral imperative. It individualised and subjectivized truth, turning it into a possession of the subject such that incoherent sentences such as “*your truth and my truth*” suddenly were conceived of as coherent (Beckford, 1999). However, Rorty was ambivalent to the label “relativist” for very similar reasons to those of the controversial philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend who heavily qualified his use of it. The sticking point for both was that a relativism that posits clearly separated domains or localised expressions of “*clear rules, criteria and ways of seeing things...is simply objectivism broken into pieces and multiplied*” (Feyerabend, 1999 (1987)). Both Feyerabend and Rorty argued for a position *beyond* relativism.

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<sup>9</sup> Williams, Michael. Introduction *in* Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton Classics) (p. xiii). Princeton University Press. 2009.

That is, it is not so much that there is a different ethical “truth” for you and me because of our cultural situation but that truth itself is deconstructed or de-differentiated and what remains is a pluralism of possible moral states, none of which has any intrinsic merit or claim to objectivity than the other. This is pushing postmodernism as far as it will go, and the ethical implications of this position are radical and far-reaching. If knowledge was justified, true belief it was as if intersubjective moral knowledge was not possible at all, at least in any way that was said to represent the world as it really was for all of us. Rorty’s world free of the categories of knowledge, essence and moral imperatives was complete, it was his foundational position:

I do not think there are any plain moral facts out there in the world, nor any truths independent of language, nor any neutral ground on which to stand and argue that either torture or kindness are preferable to the other (Rorty R. , 1989, p. 173)

What is more, it does not matter that we are not representing the world for that is irrelevant to the contingencies of the moment:

[We] agree...about the need to abandon traditional notions of rationality, objectivity, method and truth...rationality is what history and society make it – there is no overarching ahistorical structure (the Nature of Man, the laws of human behaviour, the Moral Law, the Nature of Society) (Rorty R. , 2011 (1982), p. 204)

So, in summary for Rorty, the philosopher or the scientist has no special claim to make authoritative statements that are normative for the rest of us, they are technicians with a linguistic specialisation. Like the Sophists of ancient Greece before him, Rorty believes the authority lies within the cultural conversation of the polis generally and emerges by some democratic process. Thus, the post-modern terminus for Rorty is that the only useful form of philosophy is when we can jettison all the “classical” categories envisaged by Plato and Aristotle, and supersede the obsolescent vocabulary of the natural sciences, replacing it with the language game of the social sciences that is far more suited to our post-modern milieu. For we neither lose nor gain anything if our beliefs are

true and to talk in terms of objectivity, truth or falsity is now utterly irrelevant, humankind can now “grow up” in this post-modern era:

This is the attempt to free mankind from Nietzsche’s “longest lie,” the notion that outside the haphazard and perilous experiments we perform there lies something (God, Science, Knowledge, Rationality, or Truth) which will...save us. (Rorty R. , 2011 (1982), pp. 204,208)

So, what of Blackburn’s response to Rorty? Blackburn bases his deconstruction of Rorty’s position on a practical ethical argument. Rorty was always keen to lay the fault or error of philosophy at Plato’s feet for indeed, Western philosophy is sometimes conceived as a “*a series of footnotes to Plato*” (Whitehead, 1979 (1928), p. 39). Yet, at the heart of Socrates’, and we would assume Plato’s own critiques of the metaphysics of his day, was the licentious and arbitrary way the gods behaved. Plato would want us to reach towards “truth” because that then endorses an “ethical truth” that reaches beyond the base carnality of the Gentile lasciviousness that both he and later, through his epistles, St Paul, the distiller of a distinctive Christian form of life, recognised as the defects of the Graeco-Roman culture. For both Plato, Paul and seen even more clearly in the later works of the apostle John, this required an absolute source of authority, the *Logos*<sup>10</sup> principle that establishes what there really is, how it is constituted and most importantly, *why* it is the way it is. Blackburn rejects the transcendental claims of Christian metaphysics so cannot join Paul and John in seeing unconditional authority in the logos. However, he does see within Western philosophy, truth, in the sense “of the way things really are” has been viewed as a positive goal of enquiry from Plato

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<sup>10</sup> “Logos” is an ancient Greek word which has a very wide field of meaning and is used in metaphysical, common language and specific technical contexts. However, its root meaning is always to give orchestrating structure and purpose to its referent.

onwards even if, as in Blackburn's case, we do not want to follow all the way to Plato's absolutism but we do feel justified in rejecting Rorty's blanket dismissal of the possibility of ethical truth:

It would help us [to] stop asking idle questions like "Are there objective facts about right and wrong in the same sense that there are objective facts about electrons and protons? (Rorty R. , 1999 (1998), pp. 4-6).

For these questions are for the philosopher of science and more importantly, for the community that Rorty wants to save, are anything but "idle". For unless we had, through the special language of mathematics, modelled the behaviour of electrons and protons, we would still be burning wood to heat our houses and using candles to light them. Blackburn can grant Rorty that this is not simply a naïve realism, we must often strip away false impressions, perceptions and conceptions to attain and discern knowledge about nature but we are confident enough that we can talk of their being a nature that is subject to investigation and comprehension:

We probably want to turn our backs on him [Nietzsche], and maintain our conviction that the senses and reason together enable us to detect the different kinds of things in our world accurately enough for us to determine their causal powers, to understand them and thence to make use of them in the struggle for survival. We will want to jettison the constant association between pragmatism and illusion, or perspective and error. So why should we not remain good, conservative, scientific realists – whatever that might mean? (Blackburn, 2006, p. 106)

That is, to progress in the knowledge or the *science* of a domain of human thought was considered essential as a means of humanity's mastering or stewarding of the natural world. Without the "truth" about the natural world we would be slaves to superstition and metaphysical mythologies about our existence would be as plausible an explanation as anything else. Contra Rorty, the idea that there are just a plurality of "truths" seems just to deny that some explanations are better than others and more faithful to the world as it really is to us. "The world as it really is" might be elusive but it is a logical fallacy to then collapse into scepticism and say we can know nothing about the

truth of the world at all. Thus, we see the strong connection between knowledge and truth as essential to the human understanding of the world; in the sense of it being that which enables culture to grow, develop and extend. There is “something” essential about the nature of truth as a component of human knowledge which led the classical philosophers to consider knowledge as *“justified, true belief”* (Nagel, 2014, p. 48) and regarding that “something” is enough for us to reject the sceptic’s path. We can grant that claims to “knowledge” as true, justified belief are more problematic than would at first appear. Bertrand Russell was one of the first to observe that an observer of a stopped clock in a railway station is believing something for which they have good justification (they can see the clock) and it may even be “true” twice a day but it would be difficult to claim that the observer now “knows” the time. Rorty would view this an insoluble problem and one we should no longer consider important to feel obliged to answer, of interest only in the technical ivory towers of the philosopher. Yet, despite his difficulty, Russell had not abandoned knowledge or truth for later in the same discussion he asserts, *“every case of knowledge is a case of true belief”* but he then astutely observes, *“but not vice versa”* (Russell, 2009 (1948), p. 139). Russell was also famous for his criticism of the sceptical mindset of which Rorty was perhaps the most sophisticated example; Russell noted that the sceptic will still eat when they get hungry even though they wanted to tell us we cannot trust the data of our senses.

We would also want to challenge Rorty’s central objection that the Truth concept is empty. Formally, the set called “Truth” is that which turns justifiable beliefs into knowledge, that is publicly accessible to all humanity, without prejudice. It is that which is objective, that exists outside of us, it is not subject to our subjectivity, is indifferent to how we feel or reason about it. Now Rorty is right to point out that there has been over 600 years of searching regarding that “something” and just what is that relation between “justification”, “truth” and “belief” that helps us to knowledge. Rorty wants us to believe there has been no progress and philosophy has descended into irrelevant technical discussions. Yet, truth is not “abstract” because of its objectivity in this conception and we

may ascend to it via induction or descend by deduction stopping at places of reasonable verisimilitude on the way:

Truth is the point of reference that we share with all human beings. No one can live without truth. Though we may disagree about which particular things are true or false, allegiance to truth—whatever the truth may be—permits us to stand alongside every person as honest fellow inquirers. (Willard, 2016, p. 114)

Here we see that a commitment to Truth is fundamentally an ethical choice based upon a shared humanity. Knowledge, belief and truth are taken to be components that “represent” nature and an accurate representation *is* a basic goal of philosophic and scientific enquiry. An accurate representation of reality, of things as they really are, we can call “Truth” and Blackburn agrees with Willard it implies a well-defined ethical position. Rorty’s frustration with “Truth” was that it was irrelevant to our shared humanity, which would be to say it provided no basis for informing our ethics. Rorty positioned our situation in time as contingent and counselled us to avoid “moral condemnation” of any action in itself for all is under a situational description. The resultant “*ironic condition*” is one that holds that we can never be capable of understanding reality the way it is, we must hold (after Sartre) to a “*meta-stable*” condition where tomorrow our tentative understandings of the world collapse as a new language game usurps our previous one, “*the terms in which [he] describes [himself]...are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies and thus of themselves*” (Rorty R. , 1989, pp. 73-74). He saw it rejected the entire conception of philosophy as somehow deciphering reality for us:

philosophical culture still had notions like Nature, Reason, Human Nature and so on, which were points of reference outside of history to which history was to be judged...Thinking of yourself as a contingency means thinking of what matters most to you for no deep reason... (Rorty R. , 2006, p. 30).

In contrast, Blackburn reminds us that it is our ethical commitments that shape our common humanity and to withhold from judgment is itself an ethical act, not a place of ethical neutrality:

The detached, ironic, aesthetic posture is attractive, relaxing, essentially *civilised*. It is the state that the Greeks called *epoche*...The highest form of living becomes merely spectating life, a kind of saintly fatalism, an indifference to the events around one [but] such withdrawal...is itself an ethical and political action. Withdrawing from insisting upon an obligation...is equivalent to allowing an action or issuing a permission. It is not a purely private stance...[T]he position is only possible for those who can afford to think of their lives as play. (Blackburn, 1998, p. 294)

A commitment does not mean we are stuck in closed loops of science with methodological straightjackets, but we do believe that the truth of the world is accessible to some degree by deductive and empirical methods. We may call a commitment to this trinity as identifying the minimum commitment of the philosophical view of reality known as representationalism and Rorty was known for his emphatic rejection of it as Platonic dogma. However, it is simply a commitment to a form of realism. Truth and especially how truth relates to knowledge, is considered as a subject worthy of study in its own right (Nagel, 2014, pp. 102-116). For Aristotle, "*To say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true*" (Aristotle, 1993, p. 7.27) and this, as Blackburn notes, "*is perhaps the first expression of the correspondence theory of truth*" (Blackburn & Simmons, 2010 (1999), p. 1). The correspondence theory of truth seeks to correlate with the "facts" of the world around us; truth is the best, empirically verifiable representation of reality. Put in terms of informal logic, a "true" proposition is one which corresponds to the facts of the world, "*the truth predicate is an intermediary between words and the world...its truth consists in the world's being as the sentence says*" (Quine W. V., 1992, p. 81). So, however problematic the concept of "correspondence" is, any commitment to scientific realism assumes its coherence to a greater or lesser degree. It is thus legitimate that though stopping short of absolute certainty nevertheless gives us a ground from which we can demonstrate ethical commitments that are not merely arbitrary. Thus, Blackburn was happy to concede there is plenty of ambiguity as to how we can correctly affirm the correspondence

in all kinds of cases or even whether “*correspondence with the facts*” is simply a tautology, an “*elaborate synonym for true*” (Blackburn & Simmons, 2010 (1999), p. 7). There are contradictory empirically equivalent accounts of the world, so just where does the truth consist in such cases? However, for Blackburn, if it is not possible to frame a philosophical or scientific conversation in terms of what is true, how can such a conversation be had at all? (Blackburn & Simmons, 2010 (1999), p. 6). For Blackburn, Rorty’s pragmatism is judged as incoherent and self-defeating for the post-Kantian foundations of it are not as secure as Rorty would believe. Moritz Schlick, the founder of the empiricist movement that came to be called logical positivism, provided a far more robust rebuttal of Kant’s synthetic a priori and a restatement of the correspondence theory in naturalistic terms (Schlick, 2002 (1925), p. 384). He explicated a precise relationship between facts and reality so that the weakness of the correspondence could be mitigated. For Schlick, because humanity continues to thrive, it must have come to know, in a more or less substantive sense, reality as it really is, “[T]he world must be knowable for man if he is to be able to live” (Schlick, 2002 (1925), p. 396). This position was maintained by Schlick whilst acknowledging there were “practical” limitations in our understanding in light of Hume’s critique of reason (Schlick, 2002 (1925), pp. 395-6). So though logical positivism failed because of its dogmatism, Schlick’s insight has powerful epistemic consequences and lends substantial credibility or warrant to the presupposition that humanity has a far closer relationship with its reason to reality that allows more than an arbitrary basis for its ethics.

Similarly, Rorty was emphatic there were just “truths” rather than Truth but Quine was keen to emphasise the *coherent* nature of even disquotations, “*Simplicity and naturalness are making the difference between truth and meaninglessness*” (Quine W. V., 1992, p. 98), objectifying the coherency criteria for truth. “Truth” was seen as the entire corpus of science and by recognising



that incoherence (as found in the pragmatists) resulted from confusing truth and warranted belief<sup>11</sup> (Quine W. V., 1992, p. 94). Put simply, he is asserting that people become confused over truth when there is a confusion between the logical structure of a proposition and the subjective content of a belief. As pragmatists evaluated “truth” on a subjective basis, their view of the world can never cohere logically and their philosophy can never inform us about reality. However, minimalism about truth might seem to rescue Rorty’s “truths” thesis at this point. Blackburn traces minimalism back to Frege who was the first to note the *transparency property* of truth, “*it makes no difference whether you say that it is raining, or it is true that it is raining, or true that it is true that it is raining*” (Blackburn, 2006, p. 60). However, most basically, Blackburn identifies deflationary views have a similar weakness to the pragmatic views; if we accept them, they seem to prove too much. If “is true” is a redundant predicate, just how do we frame philosophical discussions at all?<sup>12</sup> In another place he describes the deflationist penchant for flattening Ramsey’s ladder into the horizontal plane but then wanting to use the ladder in the vertical direction in presenting deflationism as a superior view of truth. Thus, Rorty wants to write with the conviction that his “no truth” indeed is a superior view of “Truth” which shows the dialectical tension of his position. The critical weakness of Rorty’s position is seen here. He wants an ethic but has no foundation on which to build it that is not entirely arbitrary and the obvious question is why we should accept his analysis and follow him in preference to the Nazi concentration camp guard that he refuses to condemn. He has no authority with which to commend his position to us.

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<sup>11</sup> This is a subject of great philosophical significance and importance for anyone that accepts epistemology as a legitimate branch of philosophy. The logician Alvin Plantinga penned three volumes on the concept of warranted belief. See Plantinga (1993, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> The philosopher of science Bas C Van Fraassen provoked a great debate during the 1980s with his assertion that science should not be concerned with truth arguments about reality (realism) but advocated a form of empiricism known as *constructive empiricism*, see Van Fraassen (1985). It remains an influential view but realism in a variety of forms is still the preferred view amongst philosophers of science.

Blackburn thus proceeds to demonstrate his position seems to be loaded with self-defeating propositions. Knowledge is only unworthy of study *if* we have accepted Rorty's proposition, absolutely but Rorty has assured us there is nothing we can be absolutely sure of. In what respect is he ascribing "truth" to mathematical propositions? Are those truths describing the world as it really is? The idea that we are "knowers" is surely the basis of civilisation, is it not an empirical reality we do what other animals do not do because we *know* more about the world? Even Quine would eventually admit epistemology as a psychological state (Quine W. , 1995, p. 19) and the role of intuition maintains an active place in scientific psychology with conceptions of knowledge and truth regarding beliefs about the world (Nagel, 2014, pp. 114-116). Blackburn thus suggests to us that Rorty's position is not as robust as it first seems and he then, with increasing precision, proceeds to disarm Rorty by critiquing his postmodernism generally. First, for the postmodern, he asserts that there is no durable moral content or knowledge. In asserting there is no "general answer", all that can be concluded is there is a variety of possible answers of seemingly equal validity, it is merely a preference of the reader; the truth of the matter becomes a personal (perhaps pragmatic) preference, what works best for me.

Blackburn then critiques this postmodern view generally and by implication undermines the tenability of Rorty's positions by explicating Rorty's view of the Holocaust. Rorty, consistent with his own historicist position that there is no neutral ground to stand from which to judge history , was unable to state that the Holocaust was categorically wrong or wrong in any absolute sense, rather than just "wrong" subject to our viewpoint as observers. When pressed by a sympathetic interviewer regarding a notional Nazi prison guard in a concentration camp, he answered "Moral criticism is too easy here" (Rorty R. , 2006, p. 25). For Blackburn, this is a morally bankrupt statement:

[We] *should* react on learning that there is some audience that presents the Holocaust to itself in a way that seems harmless or admirable...You do not want to be a prig or bigot, but neither do you want to be a weightless aesthete, to whom all real commitment is a subject of a joke or parody. (Blackburn, 1998, pp. 289-290).

He directs us to the work of historian Professor Deborah Lipstadt<sup>13</sup> to demonstrate just how insidious the postmodern denial of truth can become and places Rorty firmly within this category. For the postmodern relativist, there are no objective facts of history, just interpretations; historicism and revisionism take the place of an objective historical record:

[T]he relativists contribute to the fostering of what I call the “yes but” syndrome. Yes, there was a Holocaust, but the Nazis were only trying to defend themselves against their enemies...Yes, there was a Holocaust, but it was essentially no different than an array of other conflagrations in which innocents were massacred...Relativism, however convoluted, sounds far more legitimate than outright denial. (Lipstadt, 1993, pp. 215-216)

Rorty’s view of Orwell’s 1984 is equally as contentious:

Rorty finds it hard to understand what Orwell was on about, since the whole nightmare in that book concerns the loss of truth and the loss of right reason and, for Rorty, these count as no loss at all. Because he could control everybody’s thoughts, Big Brother was very good at social solidarity, so what was Winston afraid of? (Blackburn, 2003).

The dialectical contradiction is evident when Rorty admits the postmodern pragmatic relativist can give you no certain hope for the future or account of the past but wants you to hope anyway, “[We allow] room for *unjustifiable* hope, and an *ungroundable but vital* sense of human solidarity” (Rorty R. , 2011 (1982), p. 208) (emphasis added). For Blackburn, such a position offers no solace

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<sup>13</sup> Lipstadt famously exposed the academically respectable historian David Irving as a Holocaust denier (Lipstadt, 1993).

whatsoever, if we are to hope or to feel solidarity, it is permissible to speak of an ethical truth rather than to be caught in quasi-Wittgensteinian categories or to be trapped beneath Kuhnian descriptions that Rorty had been so persuaded by:

You need to know when talk of 'other vocabularies' and different ways of looking at things is idle, and the moment for standing fast has arrived...Knowing where it lies may take the Aristotelian qualities of maturity and judgment. (Blackburn, 1998, p. 290).

To deny ourselves this epistemological warrant is to surrender to Rorty's extreme relativism that grants no immanent distinction between the moral choices but only situational ones. For Blackburn, it is a moral *judgment* that there is sufficient virtue in an opposing opinion "*held by people who see situations clearly*" but the encounter may "*[reaffirm] our own commitments*" (Blackburn, 1998, p. 290). He is asserting that not all views have equal merit and it is possible to judge between them and indeed it is an ethical obligation on us to do so. Not all opinions are of equal validity and we are within our epistemic rights to judge the truth of them. He thus curtails the excesses of postmodernism by allowing us some ethical knowledge to ground our conceptions of right and wrong.

However, Blackburn wants to fortify his position against Rorty by questioning the very presumption of the postmodern accusation that all remains under a situational description, that truth is lost to be replaced by a "*diversity of subjectivities*". He asserts this claims too much for itself even if we acknowledge its cogency. He does this by considering Davidson's seminal attack on relativism (Davidson, 2001, p. 183 ff) and Hume's moral philosophy. The conceptual convergence between these two very different approaches is that there must be sufficient possibility of understanding between generations and nations of humanity that it is possible to establish and judge the past despite "*the local expression of the common material in the common life of the community is superficially entirely different*" (Blackburn, 2006, p. 209). That is, the underlying moral value or content of ethical significance remains the same regardless of the human cultural

contingencies. In considering that there is the possibility of sufficient translation between the minds of humanity establishes the possibility that there can be a history that is accepted as “true” in some strong sense and you *can* be lying about historical events, *even* when you are personally committed to the narrative. It was exactly on this philosophical point that the eventual libel trial between Lipstadt and Irving pivoted<sup>14</sup>. So, Blackburn does not deny the force of the postmodern critique but erects a philosophical fence around it using the materials of practical ethics to contain its excesses and the Rortian instinct to wash away the entire foundations of the Western philosophical tradition. In contrast to Rorty and Feyerabend we can judge between right or wrong, truth and falsity, happy we have sufficient objectivity available to us to warrant it:

We never found logos or a ‘first philosophy’, an underlying foundational story telling us, from somewhere outside our own world view, just why that world view is the right one. But perhaps we have learned to do without that, just as we learn to retain our hard-won confidences, without closing our minds to any further illuminations that the future may bring... We can take the postmodernist inverted commas off things that ought to matter to us: truth, reason, objectivity and confidence. (Blackburn, 2006, p. 220)

Thus our closing thesis is that the lofty Platonic idea of truth remains elusive but a conception of virtue gives a far more concrete conception of truth as the *better* way to live<sup>15</sup> that has the tangible

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<sup>14</sup> This was brought out very effectively in the film based on the trial, *Denial* (2016), when the final question by the Judge directed to Lipstadt’s legal team seems to raise exactly this distinction: Irving might really believe his account was accurate and so could not be guilty of lying. That is, if you accepted a subjective view of truth, this would be a valid deduction; however, if truth is objective, your personal view has no significance, you are still contra to the facts and technically misrepresenting reality with intent, commonly called “lying”.

<sup>15</sup> This is sometimes presented in Wittgensteinian terms – some forms of life and their language game allow us to live *better* (i.e. more ethical) lives. Wittgenstein, though sometimes perceived as supporting cultural relativism, has undeniable ethical and moral positions in his work, positions which are clearly in his personal correspondence as well as shared in the various memoirs of his friends and colleagues. There is also an under-

payoff of better relationships with our fellow humans and the evidence of substantive benefit to humanity through the modern processes of science, of assessment and explanation, of positing and structure. These, though unable to provide absolute certainty, nevertheless gives us epistemic right to have confidence that we are able to condemn a Nazi prison guard for their cruelty without being guilty of moral authoritarianism; that we can anchor our souls with sufficient practical certainty that we need not be embarrassed about being known as truth seekers.

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examined appreciation of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures (the only book he carried with him during the First World War whilst writing the *Tractatus* was Tolstoy's *Gospel In Brief*) as recounted in his correspondence in the memoirs of Engelmann, Bouwsma and Malcolm to the degree that both Engelmann and Malcolm considered the real purpose of the *Tractatus* was to ring-fence spiritual beliefs as inexpressible in language, thus to protect them from the new "scientific critiques" and his own verification principle which was to become a cornerstone of the anti-metaphysical logical positivist movement. See (Macneil, 2016).

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