Richard Rorty and the Postmodern Rejection of Absolute Truth
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I will not try to provide a complete definition of postmodernism. It appears to be so open a theory that not even its advocates can agree upon how to define it. Instead, I will concentrate on one aspect of it that is of special interest to philosophers and is central to the entire postmodernist movement. This aspect is stated most clearly by Stanley Grenz in *A Primer on Postmodernism*:

[Postmodernism] affirms that whatever we accept as truth and even the way we envision truth are dependent on the community in which we participate . . . There is no absolute truth: rather truth is relative to the community in which we participate.\(^1\)

We, as Christians, might now ask, "Why is this so bad?" Postmodernism allows us our own truth, so we Christians can acknowledge it against the atheistic and agnostic concepts of truth so prevalent in among scholars today. Does not postmodernism promise to preserve our intellectual freedom that was threatened by more antagonistic movements such as logical positivism, behaviorism, Marxism, and atheistic existentialism? But the answer to the question is negative. Postmodernism, in an evident inconsistency, rejects some beliefs. It absolutely denies the existence of a source of truth, morality, and intelligibility distinct from man. That is to say it denies a Christian, Judaic or Islamic God. There is also a more general reason for Christians to be wary of postmodernism. Historically, the Christian intellectual tradition has, despite some noteworthy exceptions, expressed confidence that the universe, under the guidance of a supreme being, is intelligible. However, since the Renaissance, that confidence in the world's intelligibility has gradually eroded in Western intellectual history. Postmodernism, in its denial of an absolute truth or of any ultimate intelligible structure to reality, continues that erosion.

Richard Rorty is often cited as the most prominent philosophical defender of postmodernism. Although he appears to prefer the description, "pragmatist" to "postmodernist," he defends the basic postmodernist position as I have described it. He insists that there is no "skyhook" which takes us out of our subjective conditions to reveal a reality existing independently of our own minds or of other human minds.\(^2\) He agrees with Hillary Putnam that there is no "God’s eye standpoint" that reveals reality in itself.\(^3\) Each person interprets reality in accordance with his own subjective condition. But Rorty does not argue for an individualistic free-for-all notion of truth. He emphasizes the social influence upon the individual and his beliefs. Truth, or what for Rorty substitutes for it, is an intersubjective agreement among the members of a community.\(^4\) That intersubjective agreement permits the members of the community to speak a common language and establish a commonly accepted reality. The end of inquiry, for Rorty, is not the discovery or even the approximation of absolute truth but the formulation of beliefs that further the solidarity of the community, or "to reduce objectivity to solidarity."\(^5\) He argues that once the notion of objective truth is abandoned, one must choose between a self-defeating relativism and ethnocentrism, neither of which can be justified in a manner that is not circular. He responds that one "should grasp the ethnocentric horn of the dilemma" and "privilege our own group."\(^6\) As far as any new beliefs that we are to consider, they must at least roughly cohere with those already held by the community, or, as Rorty puts the point, "We want to be able . . . to justify ourselves to our earlier selves. This preference is not built into us by human nature. It is just the way we live now."\(^7\)

Rorty is unclear concerning the nature of a community. It may include not only a group of existing people but also historical or fictional characters. He is somewhat more explicit concerning his own community
however. He speaks of “the community of the liberal intellectuals of the secular modern West,” [8]. The ideal of that community is the promotion of unforced general agreement among its members with tolerance of disagreement. The solidarity of such a community would lie in both the liberal beliefs that its members generally hold in common and in its tolerant attitude.

II.
Rorty gives few examples of how we should go about establishing this solidarity. One could imagine some though. For us westerners, belief in a caste system is out of the question and belief in equality is essential. Solidarity with our society demands a breaking down of all attitudes and beliefs that lead us to treat one person as more intrinsically valuable than another. Consequently, we can at least entertain the ethical systems of Kant and Rawls, and we must support laws ensuring that no one is prevented from voting or in any other way participating in our society as an equal.

But even when we argue for such admirable values, Rorty says that we cannot do so because those values are absolutely correct. Nor must we argue for them on logical grounds. To do so would be to admit objective value and truth. We must argue for them only because they increase solidarity in our community. [9] This means of arguing for a belief becomes especially troublesome when one considers the many different communities in one complex society such as ours. Liberals, conservatives, Christians, Muslims, capitalists, Marxists, etc. live together and, on many issues, have divergent “webs of beliefs.” [10] How are we to converse on such issues if our aim is solidarity of each community rather than agreement based upon reasons aiming at objective truth? Does our community include all of these different beliefs or is a community defined by its beliefs?

I must admit that, on some issues our society behaves in a Rortian manner. Consider, for example, the issue of global warming. One’s position on this issue appears to depend more upon whether one belongs to a liberal or conservative community rather than upon whether the earth’s temperature is rising because of pollution. So also with other issues, such as whether Anita Hill or Paula Jones was guilty of harassment or whether marijuana is medically useful. Rorty would, it appears, welcome the tendency in these cases to ignore the truth or falsity of what is under discussion in favor of deciding what best unifies one’s own. However, in these cases, the replacement of objectivity with solidarity is almost universally recognized as illegitimate and inconsistent with any reasonable or generally accepted notion of truth. Rorty’s aim at solidarity as the end of inquiry may as well function as an analysis of falsity, or of how we ought not to settle upon a belief.

This substitution of solidarity for truth can lead to strange results. Suppose, for example, that a patient is suffering from a potentially fatal disease that is fully curable by antibiotics. In his society, such illnesses are thought to be best treated by a witch doctor’s incantations and potions. A doctor, from without that society, encourages him to seek conventional medical treatment, but to do so would be inconsistent with the patient’s society. Would Rorty truly argue that there is no objective truth to this issue? Would he argue that we favor with the conventional treatment only because we have solidarity with a different community? The issue is not which society to form solidarity with but how to prevent the reality of the patient’s death.

Rorty does not claim that all societies are equal, so he might argue that since the physicians society is better, he ought to be listened to. But what makes one society better than another? Rorty has an answer to that question, but it does not help him in this case. For Rorty, a society is better only if it approaches his ideal more nearly. That ideal is the condition under which there is maximal voluntary agreement together with some tolerated disagreement. [11] There is nothing in the case to suggest that the physicians society meets this ideal any more than the patient’s.

When such cases are brought to the attention of postmodernists, they commonly respond by complaining that the case is bizarre. I respond that the case is not bizarre, but fairly common. People often resist traditional medicine because of religious or philosophical beliefs. The case is only rendered bizarre if one accepts Rorty’s replacement of objective truth with solidarity. If Rorty’s position is to be credible, it must apply to all cases, including the aforementioned one.
But if one has little stomach for such cases, one can find still other evidences that Rortian postmodernism is, ironically, inconsistent with the very western liberal community in which Rorty professes to belong. Let us take, for example, a very well established practice in most western legal systems: the protection of a jury from prejudicial influence of the society as a whole. Jurors, especially in well publicized cases, are purposely barred from communicating with their communities specifically to avoid Rortian justice. If the aim of inquiry in the legal system were solidarity with the community, jurors would be encouraged to allow the society at large to influence them. The aim of the generally accepted practice is to discover truth rather than to attain solidarity. Rorty may object that, while the application of the rules governing jury behavior may superficially conflict with community solidarity, the judicial practice of handling juries in this way has been agreed to by the community and thus expresses a solidarity in principle. However, the reason for this agreement is not to establish solidarity but to devise rules that best enable us to uncover the truth.

It may be objected that the law is a special case and should not be considered representative of truth in general. However, the same problem arises in broader areas as well. Consider, for example, the question that we as Christians are often asked: Why do you believe in God? This is precisely the kind of general issue that the postmodernist, Rortian concept of truth is supposed to enlighten. Suppose that we answer in an honest and Rortian manner: I believe in God because my community shares that belief as a source of solidarity. That answer will and should evoke the response, "That is not a good reason to believe. You should have a better one." The Rortian answer would not only bring a negative response from those outside of the Christian community but also from members of that community, themselves. Furthermore, the person giving the answer should hardly be satisfied with it. His recognition of it would more likely reconsider his belief than strengthen it.

Rorty is left in uncomfortable position. When one offers the best possible Rortian reasons for a belief, they discredit it rather than support it. Knowing this, the committed Rortian would disguise his reasons for believing in something or recommending it by giving more convincing but disingenuous reasons. Thus the Rortian is reduced to a fundamental dishonesty. He can only render his beliefs credible to the community if he hides his ultimate reasons.

But if the Rortian insists that my examples are too carefully chosen and are not representative of truth or reality as they are best understood, I must ask, "Where are they understood in a Rortian, postmodernist manner?" Daily, we are concerned with matters truth and reality. I, for example, am concerned about whether my airplane will leave on time for my return home from this conference, how my students are will do on their next exams, what the score in the baseball playoff game is, etc. I may also be curious about facts that have no significant bearing on my material condition or emotional state: How old are the Rocky Mountains? How did Pluto become part of the solar system? Were there Irish monks in North America before the Vikings? Rorty’s analysis applies not even remotely to any of these issues about which I have expressed an interest. All are concerned with what is true and real, but none have anything to do with community solidarity. Rorty’s analysis is so restricted in its application that, even if it is correct, it has no connection with truth in any ordinary sense but only in some very limited theoretical sense. This is ironic since Rorty insists that his analysis is pragmatic. It is doubly ironic when he claims to follow Wittgenstein, who warned against analyzing concepts divorced from their occurrence in ordinary language.

One might reply that my examples were ill chosen because they do not belong in the area of beliefs that Rorty intends to be decided by community solidarity. Konstantin Kolenda attempts to support Rorty on this issue in Rorty’s Humanistic Pragmatism. He argues that the simple truths to which I refer in my examples are of a different sort from the more controversial and perhaps more general ones that Rorty declares to be functions of solidarity. These "commonsense-factual beliefs" are "unquestioned by participants in a given linguistic community." That is to say, they are not controversial because everyone agrees with them. But I believe that those statements are philosophically important. They invite the question, "Why does everyone agree with them?" If the answer is that they are obviously true, it suggests that there is an objective truth, and it applies to an overwhelming number of statements. If they are true only because, for some unknown reason, people decide to call them true, then they are not of a separate order at all and are subject to the same process of inquiry that Rorty applies to the more philosophically grand statements: They are, as I supposed when initially discussing them, allegedly matters expressing and promoting solidarity.
It seems that when statements are clear counterexamples to his theory that solidarity determines whatever passes for truth, Rorty or his supporters merely try to dismiss the statements as irrelevant to his main point. He places them in a different "safe" category of noncontroversial truth, drawing a clear line between the philosophical and the controversial. So long as he does this, he has an escape hatch to avoid counterexamples. This enables Rorty also to evade the possibility of refutation. If an issue is controversial, its controversial nature ensures that no one is in possession of objective facts to decide it. Rorty can then say with confidence that it is not decided factually but by considerations of solidarity with one community or another. But if an issue is clearly decided, its noncontroversial nature makes it "nonphilosophical"; he can simply put it in the "safe" category, and the issue becomes off-limits.

But beyond the evident question-begging is another problem for Rorty. These allegedly noncontroversial statements are subject to the same arguments against objective truth as the philosophical ones. His arguments do not show that there are two kinds of truth but one. All truths for Rorty are equally lacking in objectivity.

The nearest to an explanation of why we should set apart our "noncontroversial" "nonphilosophical" beliefs is that they are unreflective behaviors as opposed to more contemplative broad perspectives. For example, upon learning how long the bus ride from Denver to Boulder is, prospective commuters between those cities act in a manner different in which they otherwise would have. But this account does not apply to all cases. When I learn how old the Rocky mountains are or how Pluto became part of the solar system, I doubt that my behavior will change at all, unless one considers my answering of questions by saying, "The Rocky mountains are X years old" to be behavior. But even if behavior is construed so broadly, we are left with the question of what causes the behavior. If Rorty answers with reference to a world existing independently of human beings, he contradicts his basic claim that we cannot speak or refer to such a world. If he reverts back to the influence of the community, then he is forced back to the prior, enigmatic opinion, that even these noncontroversial issues are decided by community solidarity.

How is Rorty led to these strange and esoteric conclusions about truth and reality? Among Rorty's writings, I find three prevalent and recurring forms of argument, the first of which is an he oft-quoted linguistic argument in Contingency, Law, and Solidarity:

To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations.

Truth cannot be out there—cannot exist independently of the mind—because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. [14]

And then, somewhat paradoxically,

The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own --unaided by the describing activities of a human being—cannot. [15]

Rorty’s argument, as so stated, is at least as old as the pre-Socratic Sophists and, confuses an allegedly necessary condition with a sufficient condition. The argument may be put this way: "True" is a modifier that describes only sentences, so where there is no sentence there is not truth. But even if we grant that only sentences can be true, it does not follow that a sentence alone is sufficient for truth. "Happy" can only describe a sentient being, but the mere existence of the sentient being does not entail that he is happy. The supposition that only sentences can be true does not remove the need for some other nonlinguistic condition to render the sentence true.

Nor is it even clear that the existence of a sentence is necessary for truth. I will borrow from Aristotle and Berkeley to develop this point. Consider the description "green," when applied to a scarf. "Green" is a word and therefore can only make sense in a linguistic context. We may then ask when the linguistic expression,
"My scarf is green" is true. In a technical sense, the scarf is not green when it is in the closet with the light turned off and with no one observing it. We may, however, say that it is potentially green, because if anyone were to observe it, it would appear green. In common discourse, we say that it is green, dropping the "potentially," for evident linguistic reasons. Now let us consider the more complex sentence, "The sentence, "My scarf is green is true." " In a technical sense, the sentence cannot be true if it is not written, or at least thought about, because it would not exist in order to be true. However, if all of the external conditions obtain, i.e., I have a green scarf, we may say that the sentence "The sentence, "My scarf is green is true" is true in a potential sense because if someone were to utter it, it would be true. But as before, we could easily drop the "potentially" as linguistically unnecessary.

The point may be broadened to cover the truth of events that existed before language or independently of language. If no language existed when dinosaurs did, we could still say that the statement "Dinosaurs exist" would still have been true, in the potential sense, at the time of dinosaurs because if a language like ours had existed, the statement, "Dinosaurs exist" would have been true. The same general argument would show that the statement would be true, in the same potential sense, even if beings capable of language never existed. The existence of actual utterances is necessary for truth only in the technical sense in which my scarf can be green only when someone is looking at it.

There is a second discernable argument that appears, explicitly or implicitly in several of Rorty’s writings. I summarize the argument, as best I can render it in the following form:

1. All human inquiry, thought and belief occurs in language. [In Konstantin Kolenda’s words, "all phenomena are relative to the language in which they are described."] [16]

2. All language is entirely culturally determined.

Conclusion: There is no objective human inquiry thought or belief.

Both of the premises are questionable, though the first has widespread support among Wittgensteinians and other linguistic philosophers. The second, though, upon close examination, renders the argument circular. To say that all language is entirely culturally determined is to assume that it is in no way determined by external reality. But that is precisely the issue in question.

Rorty has a third, perhaps more powerful argument. He challenges those who believe in an objective reality to establish knowledge of it. He points out that there is always a gap between our sense experience and the reality that is purported to exist. He argues that Descartes was unable to bridge that gap by means of reason any more than Hume could bridge it by experience. [17] Rorty also points out that we cannot escape our linguistic heritage when we examine our world. We see the world through a conceptual framework imposed by language, so even if other skeptical doubts are put to rest, our knowledge of an alleged external reality is obscured linguistically. Furthermore, using Wittgenstein’s observation that language cannot describe its own limits, Rorty argues that we cannot, in language, describe a reality beyond language. [18]

Like Descartes, he points out that there is always a gap between our impressions of reality and reality itself. For this reason, I call this Rorty’s anti-Cartesian argument. He implicitly asks in several ways, some involving perception and some involving language, how we can refute skepticism. Because we cannot, he argues, we must reject the traditional concept of reality. [19] David Hiley thus refers to Rorty as a Pyrrhonist, or thoroughgoing skeptic. [20]

I will not presume to refute skepticism. Philosophers have been trying to do so for centuries, and I doubt that I will succeed. However, I ask, "Why need we refute skepticism?" In my seemingly flippant response, I express the suggestion that Rorty is a Cartesian in spite of himself. To clarify this point, let me express my understanding of the central effect of Descartes upon philosophic history. [21]

In his Meditations, Descartes gives birth to modern philosophy by asking what he can know with certainty. [22] In doing so, he reordered the questions that the outstanding philosophers that preceded him had asked. Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and others of the philosophical tradition asked first, "What is real?" then "How do I know reality?" and finally, "How can I be certain of what I know?" By
asking "What is real?" before asking "How do I know reality?" one suggests that there may be a reality about which we can have beliefs, opinions and knowledge, but about which we may be, at least in part, ignorant. By asking "How do I know reality?" before "How can I be certain of what I know?" one suggests that we can know things even if we are not absolutely certain of them. Ordering the questions in that manner permits us to suppose that there is a knowable though not fully understood reality that we can discuss even without the benefit of certainty. But Descartes put the third question first and considered it identical to the second. Although he thought that he had answered both sufficiently, later philosophers, especially empiricists, thought that he had failed. But, if the questions are ordered as Descartes ordered them, the failure to attain certainty, and thus the failure to answer the first of his questions, nullifies all claims to knowledge. In turn, the inability to assert knowledge claims precludes discussion of the once primary but now tertiary issue of what constitutes the real. Descartes’ quest for certainty has thus given us a fixation with doubt and skepticism.

It is in this important sense that I consider Rorty modern rather than "post" modern and a Cartesian rather than an anti-Cartesian. He is led to his so-called postmodernism by adopting the context of Descartes, the father of modern philosophy. [23] David Hall, among others appears to agree with the characterization of Rorty as modern rather than postmodern, citing Rorty’s own more recent attempts to distinguish himself from the postmodern movement, though perhaps for reasons different from mine. [24]