Russell, James, and Rorty:
Three Visions of "Truth" and "Usefulness"

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Is a belief true only if it is useful? In the past 150 years of philosophical inquiry, at least three distinctive approaches have developed in response to this question. The first approach, whose champion in this essay is Bertrand Russell, responds negatively to the question, holding the realist view that true beliefs correspond propositionally to a stable mind-independent reality. Usefulness has no part in the equation. The second approach, advocated by William James, rejects the implied relationship of dependency of truth on use in the question but offers the alternative: "a belief is *bound* to be true if it is useful." Under his pluralistic understanding, truth is *made* when the dynamic overlapping planes of the universe—mind and reality—agree with one another. A belief happens to become true as we continue to pursue its usefulness. The third approach, led by neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty, responds in the affirmative to this essay's opening question (though merely in a manner of speaking) as it holds that beliefs themselves are all that we have. Truth and use are thus mere expressions created by language and, while to a considerable extent meaningless, for the purposes of this question, of the right spirit.

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Though each of these approaches have something to recommend them, they cannot all be true at once, although it's not immediately obvious why they should be inconsistent. This essay posits that because these three approaches to the question are interpreting truth with differing conceptions of universe, they are in effect responding to different questions. As we cannot comprehend the conditions that would determine which metaphysical approach is correct, all we can indeed say in response to the relationship between what is true and what is useful is that all three of these approaches are logically valid according to each's metaphysical understanding.

In the next section, this essay identifies a natural (but naïve) proclivity lurking in ordinary language (and in Russell's critique of James) toward assuming beliefs simply map on to a given reality "out there." It then nonetheless defends Russell's common sense account of truth under this conventional, realist universal conception. Section 2 summarizes and critiques the conventional classification of James's conception of truth as relativist. It then explicates and defends a stronger interpretation of his work on truth that fits with his pluralistic metaphysics. Section 3 separates the pragmatic-realist truth of James from the non-realist truth of Rorty before defending the latter view as interpreting a *description* of truth, not a *theory* of truth. The conclusion will demonstrate the multi-faceted and ultimately unanswerable nature of the question by recognizing an irreconcilable clash of these three metaphysical interpretations.

1. The Truth and common sense

To appreciate the complexity of this question, we must begin by scrutinising the ironic dogma of how we, in natural language, speak of truth. In 1911, William James identified that a significant amount of the ease that anti-pragmatists had in critiquing his concept of truth was because of the reader's readiness to view the concept through an absolutist lens (James 1987, 963). The ordinary assumption is that truth *is* rigid because we talk about it as such. It is likely, for example, that each of us has exclaimed, "That's true!" in the past few days. However, we should ask ourselves, in doing so, were we flipping through a book of mind-independent truths and picking one out, or were we expressing the strongest possible statement of agreement that we could come up with? Surely, at least some of the time, we say "That's true!" just to affirm that we have heard what the other conversant has said. Yet, in making the superficial statement, we appealed to truth, a concept outside of human experience, because it holds linguistic

power. In doing so, we have strengthened the (perhaps misguided) concept all the more.

With this in mind, we turn to the transatlantic debate on truth between analytic and pragmatic philosophy in the first decade of the twentieth century, and more specifically to the debate between Bertrand Russell and William James. We have on the one hand what many call a common sense theory, and what Richard Kirkham calls the "most venerable" of truth theories: truth as correspondence (119). A belief is true under the correspondence theory if it is in accord with a state of affairs outside the human mind (121). On the other hand, we have James's theory, a variant of a diverse field of pragmatist thoughts on truth, that believes it to be "something essentially bound up with the way in which one moment in our experience may lead us towards other moments which it will be worthwhile to have been led to" (James 1987, 575). Oddly, despite seemingly endorsing much of James's pluralistic metaphysics on matters of unity and fact, Russell's interpretation of James's truth is entirely confused (Russell 1999, 69). His main critique and main analogy are these: pragmatists mistake a *criterion* of truth for a *meaning* of truth. A book is listed in a catalogue in the library. Pragmatists, because it is useful, take the book's listing to *mean* that the book is in the library. But, in fact, according to Russell, the book's listing in the catalogue is just a *criterion* of truth, a probable and useful indication that there is a matching book among the shelves but not a necessary qualifier that there is (Russell 1999, 75). Yet, Russell's is a faulty analogy for understanding the pragmatic approach. In James's view, truth and use are inextricably linked. While Russell understands that some (or maybe all) true beliefs might be useful, he does not see that it follows that useful beliefs are true. James, by contrast, says, "True is the name for whatever idea starts the verification-process, useful is the name for its completed function in experience" (James 1987, 575). Only those ideas we might consider valuable enough to name have already satisfactorily undergone the verification-process and can be named either true or not true. For James, when we say in ordinary language that something is true, we are erroneously describing as a finished product what is in fact a process that will continue to change. The idea of a book (truth) out there for us to find reeks of the common conception James wishes we could leave in the past: "*The* Truth: what a perfect idol of the rationalistic mind!" (591).

The following decades, however, saw James's wish thoroughly disregarded. Inspired by Frege's and Russell's breakthroughs in formal logic, the implied hope of realising the Truth had a resurgence in the work of the immensely influential logical positivists of the mid-twentieth century who hoped to boil down philosophy to language analysis and

mathematics (Talisse and Aikin 2011, 12). Against this analytic trend which, in its early stages, found major success in the union of science and philosophy, it was difficult to admit any merit to James's pluralistic vision of co-existing scientific paradigms. For most, it seemed one system, formal logic, would expand to every corner of philosophy. James's 1909 critique that "the abstract world of mathematics and pure logic is so native to Mr. Russell that he thinks that we describers of the functions of concrete fact must also mean fixed mathematical terms and functions" was taken on by the logical positivists as a badge of honor (963). We should note here the link between a realist metaphysics and the realist conception of truth. If truth is defined as rigidly as mathematical concepts are, of course a belief is not true only if it is useful! The truth is the Truth!

2. A Pluralistic Universe: Another interpretation of James's conception of truth

This section will interpret William James's conception of truth another way. By now, we should understand that if pragmatists give truth a simple definition, they face an uphill battle. Just as we would be inclined to think of this essay question with the idea of truth as static, so too do we hold the disposition to quickly dismiss trite quotes of truth as what is useful as relativist and thus, misguided. But to be called a relativist, James perceives, implies of the critic an impression of the universe unified on one plane. The critic is a monist in the sense that there is one objective reality of which we and our minds are part of but cannot grasp entirely. In a lecture published in his 1909 work, *A Pluralistic Universe*, James writes "Whether materialistically or spiritually minded, philosophers have always aimed at cleaning up the litter with which the world apparently is filled... and aimed at ascribing to the world something clean and intellectual in the way of inner structure" (650). By contrast, James thinks that the litter cannot be cleaned up. There are overlapping layers that make up the universe's structure to which "the reality and the mind belong, intermediary verifying bits of experience with which the mind at one end, and the reality at the other, are joined" (923). "Reality" and "universe" are not synonymous. Rather, mind and reality are two overlapping planes in the universe. To borrow another of James's phrases, in the One, there are many. To add, "realities are not true, they are; and beliefs are true of them" (925). A belief is made satisfactorily true when mind and reality agree.

Finally, we have arrived at our second approach to the question. While James would likely not (as many claim) respond affirmatively to the question as it is phrased because of the monistic plane it implies where

reality is dependent on mind (a belief is true *only if* it is useful), he would say that a belief is *bound* to be true if it is useful. In so doing, he does not discredit the existence of external facts but alters the meaning of truth to mean something less static. While we cannot understand the abstract concept of truth of an idea agreeing between the planes of mind and reality, we can perceive usefulness because, again, "useful is the name for [an idea's] completed function in experience" (James 1987, 575). While truth is not dependent on usefulness, a true belief will always happen to be the same as a useful one. This, too, is a source of much confusion among James's critics, so I will clarify what it means. Stephen Stich gives this example: Harry believes his flight to leave at 7:45 am so he plans accordingly to get to the airport on time. The flight, however, crashes and Harry dies. It would have been more useful, Stich argues, for Harry to hold the false belief that his flight left at 8:45 am and thus, not to board the plane (123). James, however, offers criteria for what is useful. He says that useful beliefs "lead to consistency, stability and flowing human intercourse. They lead away from eccentricity and isolation, from foiled and barren thinking" (580). While these are, perhaps, vague guidelines, we can see here plainly that Stich's example still does not meet them. It might have been *convenient* for Harry's survival to miss his flight, but his false belief would not be *useful* as it would not make the universe any more consistent or stable. There is, by contrast, a consistency in the logic that if one makes it to the airport on time, they will likely make it to their destination on time.

I will explicate the crux of this section by offering a rethinking of another of Bertrand Russell's critiques of pragmatism. He believes it is "far easier to settle the plain question of fact: 'Have popes always been infallible?' than to settle the question whether the effects of thinking them infallible are on the whole good" (James 1987, 962). In other words, even if all beliefs were true (which Russell does not believe), would it not be easier to discern what is true than to discern what is useful? While he makes a compelling case that the criteria for discerning use for James remain elusive, this section has made clear that with a pluralistic metaphysics like James's, to search for the truth is a naïve pursuit as it is constantly changing. "Good consequences," by contrast, "assign the only intelligible practical meaning to that difference in our beliefs which our habit of calling them true or false comports" (James 1987, 962). We cannot comprehend the conditions that would determine which of Russell's or James's metaphysical approaches is correct. Both of their conclusions on truth based on their metaphysical approaches, however, are valid.

3. A Neo-Pragmatist Counter: a description of truth over a theory of truth?

By our account so far, we have agreed with those who argue that the decline of the pragmatic tradition in the mid-twentieth century was not because it was refuted but rather "eclipsed, covered over, put in the background" thanks to the widespread acceptance of an alternative and incompatible underlying metaphysical approach (Talisse and Aikin 2011, 12). Yet, in the past thirty years at least, pragmatism has had a definite resurgence, in large part due to the works of one neo-pragmatist, Richard Rorty. Against those who liken Rorty to "contemporary pragmatism's William James" (including Rorty himself on occasion), this essay pushes back (Misak 2013, 213). Born of this resurgence is an entirely different (though perfectly coherent) approach to the question: "Is a belief true only if it is useful?" While it has been demonstrated that the charge of relativism against James is weak, the same charge against Rorty may be rather convincing. For Rorty, the truth is no "more than what our peers will, *ceteris paribus*, let us get away with saying" (Rorty 1980, 176). It is a mere word steeped in cultural bias that is used for emphasis and that will continue to change as times goes on. Thus, while he agrees with James that there is no truth, he breaks with him by arguing that all truth consists of experiences and the "solidarity" that we share in them.[1] Simply put, on truth, where Russell is a standard realist and James is a pragmatic realist, Rorty is a non-realist.

Predictably, Rorty encounters feedback erroneously directed toward James. If a theory postulates that truth is indefinable, is it really a theory of truth? Is it not instead a description of truth? And if so, are his thoughts even of the pragmatic tradition (Haack 1998)? These observations are valid and, indeed, are the reasons why Rorty admits that he "swing[s] back and forth" between the relativism expounded above and an approach "propounding some form of minimalism about truth" (Rorty 1991, 21). Our third metaphysical approach (or perhaps first post-metaphysical approach) is also monistic, but of the opposite sort to Russell's monism. It asks us to forget the real and embrace that the universe of possible meaning is on one plane—namely, the plane of human conversation (Rasmussen 2014, 151). Only when we believe that all we have is experience (and experiences of still other experiences) can we describe truth as anything other than

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[1] See Rorty (1990).

something outside of our experience. To say that a belief is true only if it is useful with this metaphysical conception is perfectly reasonable.

4. Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated three approaches to understanding the universe and three corresponding solutions to the question, "Is a belief true only if it is useful?" Our first approach interprets a realist universe, a mind-independent entity we yearn to grasp. It follows from this approach that a true belief is that which corresponds to the mind-independent entity—whether the belief is also useful is a different matter. Our second approach understands the universe pluralistically as overlapping planes, one of which is mind and one of which is a mind-independent reality. Truth describes the changing relationship between them. To make sense of these two overlapping planes, it is useful to find consistency between them. It follows from this approach that a true belief is *bound* to be useful but not that a belief is true *only if* it is useful. Our third approach understands the universe relativistically as nothing but experiences building upon one another. The concept of truth here is a tool we use in language. It follows from this approach that a belief is true only if it is useful.

These three theories (or descriptions) of truth, then, are not competing on the same playing field. By elucidating each approach in terms of their respective metaphysical assumptions, we see that they are engaging in a vastly greater debate than it might at first have seemed, and one that is ultimately for us an insoluble riddle. Unless, therefore, some great consensus is reached on how we should understand the structure of the universe, the only possible response we can give to the question, "Is a belief true only if it is useful?" is that there are as many views as there are metaphysical visions.

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