

### **Richard Rorty and “The End of the Epistemology Thesis”**

“We need to make a distinction between the claim that the World is out there and the claim that truth is out there. To say that the World is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. 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 human mind – because sentences cannot exist, or be out there. 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 human beings – cannot” (Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*).

On Rorty's account, modern epistemology is not only an attempt to legitimate our claim to knowledge of what is real, but also an attempt to legitimate philosophical reflection itself—a pressing task, on many accounts, once the advent of the so-called new science of the sixteenth and seventeenth century gradually gave content to a notion of knowledge obtained by the methodological interrogation of nature herself. Because the result of this kind of interrogation, theoretical empirical knowledge, is so obviously fruitful, and also carries with it seemingly uncontested norms of progress, its mere presence poses a legitimation challenge to a form of thought, and claim to knowledge, that is distinct from it. Cartesian epistemology, in Rorty's picture, is designed to meet this challenge. It is sceptical in a fundamental way; sceptical doubts of a Cartesian sort, that is, doubts that can be raised about any set of empirical claims whatever, and so cannot be alleviated by experience, are tailor-made to preserve at once a domain and a job for philosophical reflection. Rorty's aim in *PMN*<sup>1</sup> is to undermine the assumptions in light of which this double legitimation project makes sense.

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<sup>1</sup> *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*

## Epistemology II

### Topic 12

To be a naturalist in Rorty's sense, is to be the kind of antiessentialist who, like Dewey, sees no breaks in the hierarchy of increasingly complex adjustments to novel stimulation—the hierarchy which has amoeba adjusting themselves to changed water temperature at the bottom, bees dancing and chess players check-mating in the middle, and people fomenting scientific, artistic, and political revolutions at the top.

In Rorty's view, both Dewey's pragmatism and Darwinism encourage us to see vocabularies as tools, to be assessed in terms of the particular purposes they may serve. Our vocabularies, Rorty suggests, "have no more of a representational relation to an intrinsic nature of things than does the anteater's snout or the bowerbird's skill at weaving."

Pragmatic theories of truth are usually associated either with C.S. Peirce's proposal that true beliefs will be accepted "at the end of inquiry" or with William James' proposal that truth be defined in terms of utility. More broadly, however, pragmatic theories of truth focus on the connection between truth and epistemic practices, notably practices of inquiry and assertion. Depending on the particular pragmatic theory, true statements might be those that are useful to believe, that are the result of inquiry, that have withstood ongoing examination, that meet a standard of warranted assertibility, or that represent norms of assertoric discourse. Like other theories of truth (e.g., coherence and deflationary theories) pragmatic theories of truth are often put forward as an alternative to correspondence theories of truth. Unlike correspondence theories, which tend to see truth as a static relation between a truth-bearer and a truth-maker, pragmatic theories of truth tend to view truth as a function of the practices people engage in, and the commitments people make, when they solve problems, make assertions, or conduct scientific inquiry. More broadly, pragmatic theories tend to emphasize the significant role the concept of truth plays across a range of disciplines and discourses: not just scientific and fact-stating discourse but also ethical, legal, and political discourse as well.

Pragmatic theories of truth have the effect of shifting attention away from what makes a statement true and toward what people mean or do in describing a statement as true. While sharing many of the impulses behind deflationary theories of truth (in particular, the idea that truth is not a substantial property), pragmatic theories also tend to view truth as more than just a useful tool for making generalizations. Pragmatic theories of truth thus emphasize the broader practical and performative dimensions of truth-talk, stressing the role truth plays in shaping certain kinds of discourse. These practical dimensions, according to pragmatic theories, are essential to understanding the concept of truth.

## Epistemology II

### Topic 12

As these references to pragmatic theories (in the plural) would suggest, over the years a number of different approaches have been classified as “pragmatic”. This points to a degree of ambiguity that has been present since the earliest formulations of the pragmatic theory of truth: for example, the difference between Peirce’s (1878 [1986: 273]) claim that truth is “the opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate” and James’ (1907 [1975: 106]) claim that truth “is only the expedient in the way of our thinking”. Since then the situation has arguably gotten worse, not better. The often-significant differences between various pragmatic theories of truth can make it difficult to determine their shared commitments (if any), while also making it difficult to critique these theories overall. Issues with one version may not apply to other versions, which means that pragmatic theories of truth may well present more of a moving target than do other theories of truth. While few today would equate truth with expedience or utility (as James often seems to do) there remains the question of what the pragmatic theory of truth stands for and how it is related to other theories. Still, pragmatic theories of truth continue to be put forward and defended, often as serious alternatives to more widely accepted theories of truth

Source: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-pragmatic/>