

2) Rorty argues that truth is created by language. It does not mirror a preexisting order. Present that argument and assess it. Where do you stand and why?

In the first chapter of his work, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Richard Rorty questions a long standing philosophical idea by proposing what he calls the contingency of language. Rorty takes aim at the idea that truth and language are immanent and/or indicative of a pre-existing order of the world. In place of this idea, he argues that truth is actually created by language. This is a fairly large task, given that the notion of language mapping (or attempting to) onto a separate reality can be traced back to Plato's Forms and Descartes' mind/body distinction. While constructivist sentiments about truth have been around since the nineteenth century, Rorty takes a unique perspective by specifically identifying and critiquing the relationship between language and truth. This paper serves to explicate Rorty's argument that truth is resultant from language, assess the argument's strengths and weaknesses, and compare and contrast this argument with thoughts about truth and language that I myself hold.

In order to locate the setting in which Rorty's argument takes place, he draws from political, intellectual, and cultural movements in Europe, most notably the French Revolution, the move away from German Idealism, and the advent of Romanticism. Rorty's argument is also inspired by Donald Davidson's work on language, namely his challenge of the subject/object dichotomy mentioned above. Previous generations of thinkers believed in a deity whose language was creation and thought language was a medium a subject uses to discover truths about objects (be it the world or themselves). Furthermore, this line of thinking divided the self

from the world, thus making language a guessing game where one attempted to map their own language onto God's language of creation (which would be intrinsic, static, and divine).

As scientific discoveries were made by thinkers such as Newton and Galileo, language users adopted their vocabularies because they were thought to better capture the essence of God's creation. Rorty however, interprets situations like these differently. Rorty argues that language (in the form of vocabularies) is not stumbled upon or discovered, but developed out of a need to comprehend and work within the world in a different fashion through what appears to be a dialectical model. For example, when concepts such as divine right and monarchy did not meet the needs of French society, they were quickly usurped by vocabularies of action, liberty, and freedom. However, these vocabularies are not reciprocated by the world in any way, or as Rorty puts it, "...the fact that Newton's vocabulary lets us predict the world more easily than Aristotle's does not mean that the world speaks Newtonian" [Rorty, 6]. Here we approach one of the cruxes of Rorty's work. Language is no longer a medium such as a lens through which to understand a disparate world or disparate truths, but language adopts a performative aspect and can become a vector of change.

The discarding and subsequent replacing of vocabularies is best captured in Rorty's work when he argues, "The proper analogy is with the invention of new tools to take the place of old tools" [Rorty, 12]. Rorty further argues that, "Both [Wittgenstein and Davidson] treat alternative vocabularies as more like alternative tools than like bits of a jigsaw puzzle" [Rorty, 11]. Again, language isn't working to create an intelligible picture of the world. Instead, language acts upon the world and manipulates it. Language as a tool is a strong point in Rorty's argument. To take the tool analogy further, the concept of hammering something becomes increasingly intelligible

upon the advent of the hammer. However, one would be hard pressed to assert that the act of hammering did not exist at all prior to the tool. It is moreso the case that the shortcomings of another tool, say a screwdriver, for a particular task make it clear that a new tool needs to be developed to address said task (the task being hammering). In politics, science, theology, and art, language was used as a tool to accomplish particular goals, and as new problems developed, new vocabularies came into existence.

Now that Rorty's argument has been presented, it is possible to identify potential strengths and weaknesses. Rorty's notion of vocabulary as a tool (as inspired by Wittgenstein) captures the generative power of language; language not only *is*, but it *does*. In this manner, language is de-divinized and demystified, moving from the category of a strange transcendental experience to something known, interacted with, and manipulated by humans. In the cases of political change and scientific discovery, language helped satisfy very human aims. Rorty also gains momentum in his criticism of how philosophies of language often mimic and encounter the same problems as philosophies of mind. Once he makes clear the foibles of perceiving language and mind similarly (namely by identifying the subject/object split Davidson critiqued), he is able to circumvent many potential problems where strange metaphysics seem to bog down language as a concept.

Rorty's attack on the telos of language is also coupled well with his critique of a teleological existence. This is made clear when he argues that, "... [we see] language as we now see evolution, as new forms of life constantly killing off old forms- not to accomplish a higher purpose, but blindly" [Rorty, 19]. With the dethronement of a theological telos (or subscription to the will of God), language need not attempt to align with the divine through comprehension of

the world or the discovery of truths. Again, language is not used like a bow and arrow to hit a target (the target being “the world”), but rather like the tools of a carpenter to modify, create, and destroy whatever truths the user pleases. The argument is grounded in sociohistorical movements

However, one shortcoming of Rorty’s argument (as identified by himself) is the limitation of the tool analogy for language. In his words, “This Wittgensteinian analogy between vocabularies and tools has one obvious drawback. The craftsman typically knows what job he needs to do before picking or inventing tools with which to do it” [Rorty, 12]. Rorty does not explain entirely how these goals come into existence. While he makes it clear that the advent of new tools often co-occurs with new visions and goals that were previously unintelligible, there is little to be said about what sparks these ideas for change. Rorty’s attack of language as a medium also provides confusion. While the concept of medium was challenged because it implied alterity between subject and object, the notion of a tool also makes this implication. The wielder of the tool is using language on *something*, and if there is no distinction between the worker and the product, what exactly is being done. Furthermore, the tool itself seems to be a tertiary component in Rorty’s conception of truth upheaval.

One may also argue that Rorty’s argument is not the most original or interesting. Polemics against telos, rigidity, and transcendental values have already been well documented, especially by thinkers such as Nietzsche, Foucault, and Derrida. Nietzsche specifically proposed that truths are made rather than found nearly a century before Rorty, though Rorty does deserve credit for linking the production of truths to language specifically (as opposed to truth’s relation to power, an idea popularized by Nietzsche).

Now that some strengths and weaknesses of Rorty's argument have been identified, it is an appropriate time to compare Rorty's views with my own. To make progress in this discussion, it is necessary to delineate between facts and truths. Facts seem to be inherently descriptive, and facts are only made intelligible through the demarcations created by language. For example, the statement, "Trees contain chloroplasts," is contingent upon language, for the words *tree* and *chloroplasts* identify and categorize lumps of mass in ways one can understand. To this point, Rorty emphasizes that, "We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that the truth is out there" [Rorty, 5]. Rorty makes it clear that the world is out there, regardless of how it's framed using language or facts. An existent is not contingent upon language, but its intelligibility is.

I am not sure I agree, however, with the notion of language creating truths namely due to the nebulous use of the word *truth*. If Rorty uses the word *truth* in the same way Nietzsche does (as calcified values, armies of metaphors, etc.), then one may argue that language creates truths. However, it is unclear whether there is a difference between truth and belief in Rorty's work. Furthermore, language may not be moving toward transcendental truths, but this does not necessarily disprove their existence. Rorty himself says, "To say that we should drop the idea of truth as out there waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have discovered that, out there, there is not truth" [Rorty, 8]. Language may facilitate the accomplishing of a person's desired task, and this task could be premised with beliefs and values, but there is still a possibility that truth is alien to these things unless truth is encompassed by the concepts of belief and value.

Regardless of truth implications, Rorty liberates language from its restricted use of aiming at transcendental targets, and as a result it is able to adopt the values that are possessed by

its users. The contingency of facts, values, and intelligibility are made clear throughout Rorty's work, but to an extent the intrinsic nature (or lack thereof) of the world we interact in may be unverifiable. Regardless, "The world does not speak, only we do" [Rorty, 6].

#### References:

Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*. Cambridge University Press

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#### Strengths of Rorty's argument-

- Captures generative power of language
- Grounded in sociohistorical movements
- De-divinizes and demystifies language
- Identifies its relation and significance to mind problems
- Good critique of telos of language

#### Weaknesses of Rorty's argument-

- Disanalogy of tools
- Lack of clarity as to what a medium is
- There are still constants in vocabularies even if they are constructed- why? (we still individuate ourselves)

What is a truth?

“...the fact that Newton’s vocabulary lets us predict the world more easily than Aristotle’s does not mean that the world speaks Newtonian” [Rorty, 6].

- Highlights the fact that historically we have stumbled upon the idea that nothing has intrinsic nature
  - “What was needed, and what the idealists were unable to envisage, was a repudiation of the very idea of anything- mind or matter, self or world- having an intrinsic nature to be expressed or represented” [Rorty, 4].
- World is out there, truth is not
  - “We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that the truth is out there” [Rorty, 5].

“The suggestion that truth, as well as the world, is out there is a legacy of an age in which the world was seen as the creation of a being who had a language of his own” [Rorty, 5].

“This conflation [of truth and the world] is facilitated by confining attention to single sentences as opposed to vocabularies” [Rorty, 5].

“...the fact that Newton’s vocabulary lets us predict the world more easily than Aristotle’s does not mean that the world speaks Newtonian” [Rorty, 6].

“The world does not speak, only we do” [Rorty, 6].

Rorty implies little agency involved in adopting vocabularies- “That sort of shift was no more an act of will than it was a result of argument. Rather, Europe gradually lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others” [Rorty, 6].

“What is true about this claim is just that *languages* are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences” [Rorty, 7].

“To say that we should drop the idea of truth as out there waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have discovered that, out there, there is not truth” [Rorty, 8].

“For Davidson breaks with the notion that language is a *medium*- a medium either of representations or of expression” [Rorty, 10].

If we replace mind with language for explanatory purposes, “We are still using a subject-object picture, and we are still stuck with issues about skepticism, idealism, and realism” [Rorty, 11].

“Both [Wittgenstein and Davidson] treat alternative vocabularies as more like alternative tools than like bits of a jigsaw puzzle” [Rorty, 11].

“The proper analogy is with the invention of new tools to take the place of old tools” [Rorty, 12].

“This Wittgensteinian analogy between vocabularies and tools has one obvious drawback. The craftsman typically knows what job he needs to do before picking or inventing tools with which to do it” [Rorty, 12].

“His new vocabulary makes possible, for the first time, a formulation of its own purpose. It is a tool for doing something which could not have been envisaged prior to the development of a particular set of descriptions, those which it itself helps to provide” [Rorty, 13].

“To say that we come to speak the same language is to say, as Davidson puts it, that ‘we tend to converge on passing theories’” [Rorty, 14].

“We should realize that we have abandoned not only the ordinary notion of a language, but we have erased the boundary between knowing a language and knowing our way around the world generally” [Rorty, 15].

“Think of the term ‘mind’ or ‘language’ not as the name of a medium between self and reality but simply as a flag which signals the desirability of using a certain vocabulary when trying to cope with certain kinds of organisms” [Rorty, 15].

“The idea that language has a purpose goes once the idea of language as a medium goes” [Rorty, 16].

\*\*\*imagine a pair of glasses that is worn by an individual. The glasses are language and the individual is the community that uses said language. Different vocabularies bear different lenses, colors, shapes, etc. The kicker is that the glasses aren’t used to *look* at anything, but our reality is literally the lenses used, the language used. Meh.

“Whereas the positivist sees Galileo as making a discovery- finally coming up with the words which were needed to fit the world properly, word Aristotle missed- the Davidsonian sees him as having hit upon a tool which happened to work better for certain purposes than any previous tool. Once we found out what could be done with a Galilean vocabulary, nobody was much interested in doing the things which used to be done with an Aristotelian vocabulary” [Rorty, 19].

“...it is changing the way we talk, and thereby changing what we want to do and what we think we are” [Rorty, 20]

“The very idea that the world or the self has an intrinsic nature...is a remnant of the idea that the world is a divine creation, the work of someone who had something in mind” [Rorty, 21].



“...language as we now see evolution, as new forms of life constantly killing off old forms- not to accomplish a higher purpose, but blindly” [Rorty, 19].