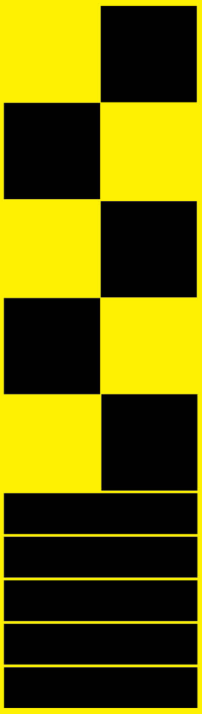
1934

Our Master's Voice: Advertising

James Rorty



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James Rorty

OUR MASTER'S VOICE

ADVERTISING

A MEDIASTUDIES.PRESS PUBLIC DOMAIN EDITION

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15 PSYCHOLOGY ASKS: How Am I Doing?

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Advertising, defined as the technique of producing customers, rather than the technique of selling goods and services, employs well-known psychological devices, and the advertising man is, in fact, a journeyman psychologist. Academic and business school psychologists are therefore naturally and properly interested in advertising as a field of study. But when the quality and effects of this interest are examined, there would appear to be a conflict between the layman's naive view of psychology as a disinterested "objective" scientific discipline, and certain current activities of academic psychologists in the field of applied psychology.

In 1920, the founder of the American school of "Behaviorism," Dr. John B. Watson, resigned his professorship at Johns Hopkins and entered the employ of the J. Walter Thompson Advertising Agency.[1] Psychologists have questioned the originality and value of Dr. Watson's contributions to the young science of psychology. But his contributions, as a business man, to the technique of advertising are outstanding.

[1] [See Kerry W. Buckley, "The Selling of a Psychologist: John Broadus Watson and the Application of Behavioral Techniques to Advertising," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 18, no. 3 (1982): 207–21; and Peggy J. Kreshel, "John B. Watson at J. Walter Thompson: The Legitimation of 'Science' in Advertising," *Journal of Advertising* 19, no. 2 (1990): 49–59.]

The J. Walter Thompson Company is one of the largest and most consistently successful advertising agencies in the world. Over the past fourteen years the advertising which it has turned out has betrayed increasingly the touch of the master's hand. It is good advertising, effective advertising. It is also more or less unscrupulous, judged by ethical standards, even the ethical standards of the advertising profession itself. It is natural that this should be so, since ethical considerations are irrelevant to the application of scientific method in the exploitation of the consumer.

Consider the advertising of such products as Fleischmann's Yeast, Woodbury's Facial Soap, Lifebuoy Soap, Pond's Vanishing Cream, etc.—all J. Walter Thompson accounts of long standing. In this and other advertising prepared by this agency, the fear-sex-emulation formula is used systematically to "condition the reflexes" of the reader into conformity with the profit-motivated interests of the advertiser. By putting the bought-and-paid-for testimonial technique on

a mass production basis, this agency has doubtless achieved important economies for the advertiser in the production of customers. Dr. Watson's agency was also one of the leaders in the adaptation to advertising of the story-in-pictures-balloon technique borrowed from Hogarth via the tabloids. Objections on the score of ethics and taste are met by the realistic argument that the market for these products consists chiefly of fourteen-year-old intelligences, and that the unedifying means used to convert these morons into customers are justified by the ends achieved: the profits accruing to the advertiser, the internal and external cleanliness of the moron, and the fixation of systematized illusions in the minds of the public, necessary to the use and wont of an acquisitive society.

Nothing succeeds like success. Probably Dr. Watson was never obliged to ask his employers, "How am I doing?" His achievements were manifest, and his present salary as vice president of his agency is reputed to be four times the maximum stipend of a university professor.

Nothing succeeds like success. It may well be alleged that the prestige of business dominates the American psychology, not excepting the psychology of American psychologists. Veblen, whose approach to economics was through social psychology and the analysis of institutional arrangements, had an Olympian respect for himself, and no respect whatever for business. But in terms of pecuniary aggrandizement and academic kudos, Veblen got nowhere during his lifetime. Hence it was natural that in the field of applied psychology, contemporary psychologists would have chosen to follow Watson rather than Veblen.

In 1921, the year following the elevation of Dr. Watson's talents to the realms of pecuniary accumulation, an organization called the Psychological Corporation was incorporated under the laws of the State of New York.[2]

The stock of the corporation is held by some 300 American psychologists, all of them members of the American Psychological Association, and most of them having the status of professor or assistant professor in American universities and colleges.

The second article of the corporation's charter reads as follows:

> The objects and powers of this corporation shall be the advancement of psychology and the promotion of the useful applications of psychology. It shall have power to enter into contracts for the execution of psychological work, to render expert services involving the application of psychology to educational, business, administrative and other problems, and to do all other things not inconsistent with the law under which this corporation is organized, to advance psychology and to promote its useful applications.

[2] [See Michael M. Sokal, "The Origins of the Psychological Corporation," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 17, no. 1 (1981): 54–67.]

This article is quoted in one of the sales pamphlets issued by the corporation and is supplemented by the following paragraph:

> In the hands of those properly qualified, psychology can be applied usefully to many problems of business and industry, and of educational, vocational and personal adjustment. The purpose of the Psychological Corporation is to promote such applications of the science and to prevent, where possible, its exploitation by pseudo-scientists. A portion of all fees for services rendered by the corporation is devoted to research and the advancement of scientific knowledge of human behavior.

At a special meeting of the stockholders and representatives of the corporation, held in conjunction with the 1933 convention of the American Psychological Association at Chicago, Dr. Henry C. Link, Secretary and Treasurer of the corporation, presented his report. In effect Dr. Link was appealing to the value judgments of his colleagues. He was saying: the corporation has been doing such and such things. Business, especially the advertising business, thinks we have been doing pretty well. How do you think we have been doing?

There was a row, a fairly loud row, judged by academic standards, and it got into the papers. Some of the assembled psychologists, themselves stockholders in the corporation, seemed to feel that Dr. Link had sold the integrity, the purity of American psychology down the river to the advertising business. Among the more forthright objectors was Dr. A. W. Kornhauser, associate professor of Business Psychology at the University of Chicago. It is interesting to note that the most strenuous objection came, not from one of the science-for-science's-sake psychologists, but from a business school professor. Perhaps it was because Dr. Kornhauser is more aware of the nature and methods of business than some of his less sophisticated associates. But before we discuss this row, it will be necessary to describe briefly the sort of thing that the Psychological Corporation had been doing.

Perhaps the most distinguished achievement to which Dr. Link pointed with pride was co-operative study, carried on by sixty psychologists, of the effectiveness of advertising, particularly among housewives. Dr. Link's report of this study was published in the January, 1933, issue of the *Harvard Business Review*.[3]

Between March 16 and April 4, 1933, 1,578 housewives in 15 widely scattered cities and towns were interviewed by instructors and graduate students of psychology working under the supervision of some fifteen assorted Ph.D.'s and M.A.'s. They used a test questionnaire which asked such questions as the following:

> What canned fruit company advertises "Just the Center Slices"? What toothpaste advertises "Heavens! Buddy must have a girl!"? What

[3] [Henry C. Link, "A New Method of Testing Advertising Effectiveness," *Harvard Business Review* 11 (1933): 165–77.]

> product used in automobiles uses pictures of *little black dogs* in its advertising? What product asks "What is the critical age of the skin"? What toothpaste advertises "Pink Toothbrush"? What product for use in automobiles has been using advertisements showing pictures of fish, tigers, flying geese and other animals? What do 85% of dentists recommend (according to an advertisement) for purifying the breath? What soap advertises "I learned from a beauty expert how to hold my husband"? What does, for a product used in automobiles, *what butter does for bread*? What company or product advertised "This is Mrs. F. C. Adgerton of Spokane, Washington"? What company advertises "Don't wait till the doctor tells you to *keep off your feet*"? What electric refrigerator is "Dual-automatic"? What company advertises a widely used toilet product as often containing "harmful acids"?

There is a total of twenty-seven questions of this sort on the questionnaire and the housewives had to answer all of them. The mind shrinks from contemplating either the amount of high-powered psychological persuasion required to hold them to their task, or the sufferings endured by these 1,578 female guinea pigs in the cause of "science." How many doorbells had to be rung before one willing housewife was captured? Did they suffer? And how much? Dr. Link should have answered those questions, too. I am sure the answers would prove something, although I am not sure just what.

What *was* proved, beyond question, when the questionnaires were all turned in, collated, tabulated, analyzed, etc., by the most rigorous scientific methods, was that, sure enough, housewives did read advertising. I quote from Dr. Link's article:

> The outstanding result of this test is the proof of the amazing influence which advertising can and often does exert. For example, 1,090 or 69% of the 1,578 housewives answered "Chase & Sanborn" to the question about the "Date on the can." The correct answer, "Ipana" was given by 943 or 59.7% of these women to the question regarding "Pink Toothbrush." On the other hand, the themes of certain very extensive campaigns registered correctly among only 15.65%, 11.3%, and even 7% of these housewives. In some cases, single advertisements, appearing only once, registered better than campaigns which had run in all the major magazines for six months, a year, or longer. That is to say, some advertising was 50, 100 or 150 times more effective, as measured by this test, than other advertising. The most conspicuous example of this was the result of the question, What soap advertises "Stop those runs in stockings"? This was the headline, explained in the copy, of a full-page advertisement for Lux soap which had appeared in just one of the leading women's magazines. Almost one half of the housewives, 47.7%, answered "Lux." This one insertion, costing about $8,000, was found six times as effective as a year's campaign advertising another article and costing about a million dollars, a ratio of 750 to 1. The average of correct answers to the thirteen most effective campaigns or advertisements was 36.3%. The average for the fourteen least effective was 8.8%.

The writer is not qualified to judge the scientific integrity of Dr. Link's methods. But the findings of this study are manifestly highly interesting and useful to advertisers, advertising agencies and advertising managers of publications, *who, incidentally got all this research for nothing*. It was done gratuitously by the co-operating psychologists, assistants and students, as a disinterested effort toward the "advancement of scientific knowledge of human behavior." ... Well, perhaps not wholly disinterested. The published study was in effect, a free sample and an advertisement of the sort of thing the Psychological Corporation is equipped to do. Doubtless it was a successful advertisement, since the corporation during 1933 conducted many scientific investigations, sponsored and paid for by individual advertisers, and conducted by its wideflung organization of psychology professors, instructors and students.

In other words, what Dr. Link was presenting proudly to his assembled colleagues was a successful advertising business, operating efficiently according to current standards, and using advertising to sell its services. Incidentally this business is in a position to cut the market price for advertising research because public and philanthropic funds help to support the co-operating professors, and they in turn are able to use their students as Tom Sawyer labor, sustained wholly or in part by the pure passion of science.

Whether "scientific" or not, that study of 1,578 housewives was indubitably a contribution. To whom and for what end? Not to science, but to the advertising business, to the end that it might conduct more efficiently its effort to "teach the use of the relatively great wealth, of new resources, new techniques and a reorganized production method." (L. S. Lyon's definition in the *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*).[4]

This effort makes systematic use of techniques which are most accurately characterized by Veblen's phrase: "creative psychiatry."[5] For example, one of the advertising campaigns tested was that of Ipana Toothpaste, which for the past ten years or more has been parroting "Pink Toothbrush," in the effort to make people worry about their gums and buy an expensive toothpaste, the use of which is alleged to prevent the gums from bleeding, the advertising being the customary melange of half-truth, inference and ambiguity.

When, therefore, Dr. Link appealed to the suffrages of his professional colleagues, it was upon the following grounds: that the Psychological Corporation has established efficient machinery by which its members might sell their scientific abilities and the leg work of their students to advertisers engaged, to quote Veblen once more, in "the creative guidance of habit and bias, by recourse to shock effects, tropismatic reactions, animal orientation, forced movements,

[4] [Leverett S. Lyon, "Advertising," *The Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, edited by Edwin R. A. Seligman, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1930).]

[5] [Thorstein Veblen, *Absentee Ownership and Business Enterprise in Recent Times: The Case of America* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1923), 307n12.]

fixation of ideas, verbal intoxication.... A trading on that range of human infirmities which blossom in devout observances and fruit in the psychopathic wards."

What happened? The next annual meeting of the Board of Directors of the Psychological Corporation was held in New York on Dec. 1, 1933. The managing director, Dr. Paul S. Achilles, explained that the objections of Dr. Kornhauser and others may have arisen from insufficient knowledge on the part of many psychologists of the charter and purposes of the corporation and the nature and extent of its current activities. He said that inasmuch as the corporation had never been subsidized nor conceived as an organization to be supported by subsidies, his efforts for the past three years had necessarily been concentrated chiefly on putting the corporation on a self-sustaining basis.

It was Dr. Achilles' opinion that the two basic assumptions on which the corporation was founded are: (1) That psychologists render services of economic value; and (2) that a business organization of co-operative psychologists rendering such services could not only be self-supporting and useful to the science but could earn funds for research and improvement of services. He felt that only as the corporation succeeded first in demonstrating its capacity for self-support through rendering creditable and marketable services such as it was now offering could it hope to achieve its larger aims. In brief his feeling was that it was equally if not more respectable for psychologists to earn their own way and their funds for research than to depend on subsidies.

Dr. W. S. Woodworth, of Columbia, expressed the opinion that one of the original aims of the corporation was to have frankly a commercial standing so that it could do business with business men with more freedom and directness than a university professor usually feels that he can. Further, in regard to the corporation's market survey work, that this seemed a legitimate field and that the mere fact that a market study involved personal interviewing did not make it unworthy or undignified.

The matter was clinched by the treasurer's report showing an 125% increase of gross receipts by the corporation over the preceding year, and payments of $7,000 to psychologists representing the corporation and their students. The corporation, which had been in the red for some time, was climbing out. Dr. Achilles (who incidentally has been serving without salary) and Dr. Link were re-elected as managing director and secretary-treasurer respectively. Other names on the present list of officers and directors are J. McKeen Cattell, E. L. Thorndike, L. M. Terman, Walter Dill Scott, W. V. B. Bingham, A. T. Poffenberger, R. S. Woodworth and Rensis Likert.

So that is that, as we used to say when the client laid down the law at an advertising conference. It looks bad for my old friends in the research departments of the advertising agencies. If the Psychological Corporation, under its present efficient management, continues to progress, this sweated academic scab labor is going to take the bread out of the mouths of a lot of families I know in Bronxville, Great Neck and elsewhere. Doubtless, too, the standards of advertising research will be greatly improved, when the job is taken over by psychologists instead of the more or less irresponsible apprentices in the agencies to whom such work is ordinarily assigned.

In the old days before the war I remember that advertising research was considered to be something of a joke. You knew the answer before you started out. Your job was to get the documents. We, too, went out with questionnaires, were chased down the street by irate Italian green grocers, and got our toes caught in doors closed energetically by unco-operative housewives. It really wasn't so very dignified, Dr. Woodworth, but it had its humorous compensations and it kept one in the open air. I recall a two-hundred-pound football player who on graduation drifted into an advertising agency where I worked and was assigned to research. It was the middle of July, and he had to interview some fifty housewives residing somewhere in the Oranges. I forget what he had to ask them. Did they use Gypso, maybe, and if not why not?

His name was—call him Mr. Retriever. Two days later, Retriever stumbled back into the office in a state of moral and physical exhaustion. Somebody was callous enough to ask him how he had been doing and how he felt.

"I've lost twenty pounds," said Mr. Retriever. "I feel like the hobo who started cross the continent by freight. He got aboard the car next the engine and the brakeman kicked him off. He grabbed the next car and got aboard. The brakeman kicked him off, but he scrambled back into the third car. This ritual continued until the train stopped at a way station, when the hobo walked to the front of the train and got aboard the first car. The brakeman spotted him and in exasperation demanded: "Brother, where in hell are you going?" "I'm going to Kansas City," replied the hobo, "if my tail holds out."

The sacrifices of dignity demanded of an advertising researcher are in fact extreme. I recall a baby-faced collegian who rang a doorbell somewhere in the wilds of Bergen County. There appeared in the doorway a comely middle-aged German woman who listened silently to his patter, meanwhile scrutinizing him shrewdly. When he finished, she gave him a ravishing smile and said: "I know what you want. You want a piece of apfelkuchen." The collegian blushed, searched his conscience and said: "Yes." This particular anecdote has

a Rabelaisian sequel which the writer feels obliged to withhold, in deference to the feelings of the Better Business Bureau. In a contribution to the Nov. 9, 1933, issue of *Printers' Ink*, Dr. Link states that "during the last two years we have interviewed almost 12,000 women in their homes, in more than sixty cities and towns." One is sure that the anecdotal literature of advertising research has been greatly enriched by these investigations.

It is possible, of course, that the Psychological Corporation, representing as it does the idealism and public spirit of American psychologists, is secretly engaged in boring from within the advertising business; one notes the repeated references ta the scientific research which these pot-boiling activities are designed to finance. Possibly the corporation intends to take as a point of departure Veblen's description of advertising as an enterprise in "creative psychiatry," and, using the data obtained by its commercially sponsored investigations, institute studies designed to show just what the advertising business has done to improve or debauch the mental, ethical and moral level of the average American. An attitude of suspended judgment is therefore indicated. The difficulty is that a study such as that above suggested would require some framework of value judgment, which would be most unscientific. And if, in spite of this objection, the corporation elected to make such a study, to whom would it report its results, asking again, "How am I doing?"