adapt successfully are likely to be highly influential in the fields in the next generation.


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## X.4 Dismantling Truth: Solidarity Versus Objectivity

**RICHARD RORTY**

Richard Rorty is Kenan Professor of Humanities at the University of Virginia and the author of several works, including *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), from which the first part of this selection is taken.

In Part I of this selection, "Epistemological Pragmatism," Rorty argues that truth means, not what corresponds to the facts, as is the dominant definition of truth in Western philosophy, but what it is better for us to believe. He describes truth as "what you can defend against all comers . . . what our peers will [all things considered] let us get away with saying." He defends the thesis that we should give up metaphysical and epistemological notions of reality and truth in favor of those built on ethnocentric solidarity.

In Part II, "Solidarity Versus Objectivity," Rorty attacks the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity as well as the correspondence theory of truth. He side with Thomas Kuhn in arguing that we can have no theory-independent notion of reality and proposes to erase the essential difference between science, on the one hand, and the humanities and art, on the other. Embracing the title of "the new fuzzies," Rorty further develops his thesis that a notion of social solidarity replace the enlightenment notion of objective truth.

### Part I

**Epistemological Pragmatism**

Quine asks how an anthropologist is to discriminate the sentences to which natives invariably and wholeheartedly assent into contingent empirical plitudes on the one hand and necessary conceptual truths on the other. Sellars asks how the authority of first-person reports of, for example, how things appear to us, the pains from which we suffer, and the thoughts that drift before our minds differ from the authority of expert reports on, for example, metal stress, the mating behavior of birds, or the colors of physical objects. We can lump both questions together and simply ask, "How do our peers know which of our assertions to take our word for and which to look for further confirmation of?" It would seem enough for our peers to believe there to be no better way of finding out our inner states than from our reports, without their knowing what "lies behind" our
evaluate their success in terms of antecedently specified criteria. If we already knew what criteria we wanted to satisfy, we would not worry about whether we were pursuing the right ends. If we thought we knew the goals of culture and society in advance, we would have no use for the humanities—as totalitarian societies in fact do not. It is characteristic of democracies and pluralistic societies to redefine their goals continually. But if to be rational means to satisfy criteria, then this process of redefinition will be bound to be non-rational. So if the humanities are to be viewed as rational activities, rationality will have to be thought of as something other than the satisfaction of criteria which are statable in advance.

[The second] meaning of “rational” is, in fact, available. In this sense, the word means something like “sane” or “reasonable” rather than “methodical.” It names a set of moral virtues: tolerance, respect for the opinion of those around one, willingness to listen, reliance on persuasion rather than force. These are the virtues which members of a civilized society must possess if the society is to endure. In this sense of “rational,” the word means something more like “civilized” than like “methodical.” When so construed, the distinction between the rational and the irrational has nothing in particular to do with the difference between the arts and the sciences. On this construction, to be rational is simply to discuss any topic—religious, literary, or scientific—in a way which eschews dogmatism, defensiveness, and righteous indignation.

There is no problem about whether, in this latter, weaker sense the humanities are “rational disciplines.” Usually humanists display the moral virtues in question. Sometimes they do not, but then sometimes scientists don’t either. Yet these moral virtues are felt to be not enough. Both humanists and the public hanker after rationality in the first, stronger sense of the term: a sense which is associated with objective truth, correspondence to reality, method and criteria.

We should not try to satisfy this hankering, but rather try to eradicate it. No matter what one’s opinion of the secularization of culture, it was a mistake to try to make the natural scientist into a new sort of priest, a link between the human and the non-human. So was the idea that some sorts of truths are “objective” whereas others are merely “subjective” or “relative”—the attempt to divide up the set of true sentences into “genuine knowl-

edge” and “mere opinion,” or into the “rational” and the “judgmental.” So was the idea that the scientist has a special method which, if only the humanists would apply it to ultimate values, would give us the same kind of self-confidence about moral ends as we now have about technological means. I think that we should content ourselves with the second, “weaker” conception of rationality and avoid the first, “stronger” conception. We should avoid the idea that there is some special virtue in knowing in advance what criteria you are going to satisfy, in having standards by which to measure progress.

[Is Science Rational?]

One can make these issues somewhat more concrete by taking up the current controversy among philosophers about the “rationality of science.” For some twenty years, ever since the publication of Thomas Kuhn’s book The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, philosophers have been debating the question of “whether science is rational.” Attacks on Kuhn for being “irrational” are now as frequent and urgent as, in the 1930s and 1940s, were attacks on the logical positivists for saying that moral judgments were “meaningless.” We are constantly being warned of the danger of “relativism” which will beset us if we give up our attachment to objectivity and to the idea of rationality as obedience to criteria.

Whereas Kuhn’s enemies routinely accuse him of reducing science to “mob psychology,” and pride themselves on having (by a new theory of meaning or reference or verisimilitude) vindicated the “rationality of science,” his pragmatic friends (such as myself) routinely congratulate him on having softened the distinction between science and non-science. . . . [H]e has said that “there is no theory-independent way to reconstruct phrases like ‘really there.’” He has asked whether it really helps “to imagine that there is some one full, objective, true account of nature and that the proper measure of scientific achievement is the extent to which it brings us closer to the ultimate goal.” We pragmatists quote these passages incessantly in the course of our effort to enlist Kuhn in our campaign to drop the objective-subjective distinction altogether.

What I am calling “pragmatism” might also be called “left-wing Kuhnianism.” It has also been
making them. It would also seem enough for us to know that our peers have this acquiescent attitude. That alone seems sufficient for that inner certainty about our inner states which the tradition has explained by “immediate presence to consciousness,” “sense of evidence,” and other expressions of the assumption that reflections in the Mirror of Nature are intrinsically better known than nature itself. For Sellars, the certainty of “I have a pain” is a reflection of the fact that nobody cares to question it, not conversely. Just so, for Quine, the certainty of “All men are animals,” and of “There have been some black dogs.” Quine thinks that the “meanings” drop out as wheels that are not part of the mechanisms, and Sellars thinks the same of “self-authenticating non-verbal episodes.”

More broadly, if assertions are justified by society rather than by the character of the inner representations they express, then there is no point in attempting to isolate privileged representation.

Explaining rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what society lets us say, rather than the latter by the former, is the essence of what I call “epistemic behaviorism,” an attitude common to Dewey and Wittgenstein. This sort of behaviorism can best be seen as a species of holism—but one which requires no idealist metaphysical underpinnings. It claims that if we understand the rules of a language-game, we understand all that there is to understand about why moves in that language-game are made. If we are behaviorists in this sense, then it will not occur to us to invoke either of the traditional Kantian distinctions. But can we just go ahead and be behaviorists? Or, as Quine and Sellars’s critics suggest, doesn’t behaviorism simply beg the question? Is there any reason to think that fundamental epistemic notions should be explicated in behavioral terms?

The last question comes down to: Can we treat the study of “the nature of human knowledge” just as the study of certain ways in which human beings interact, or does it require an ontological foundation (involving some specific philosophical way of describing human beings)? Shall we take “S knows that p” (or “S knows noninferentially that p,” or “S believes incorrigibly that p,” or “S’s knowledge that p is certain”) as a remark about the status of S’s reports among his peers, or shall we take it as a remark about the relation between subject and object, between nature and its mirror? The first alternative leads to a pragmatic view of truth and a therapeutic approach to ontology (in which philosophy can straighten out pointless quarrels between common sense and science, but not contribute any arguments of its own for the existence or [non]existence of something). Thus for Quine, a necessary truth is just a statement such that nobody has given us any interesting alternatives which would lead us to question it. For Sellars, to say that a report of a passing thought is incorrigible is to say that nobody has yet suggested a good way of predicting and controlling human behavior which does not take sincere first-person contemporary reports of thoughts at face-value. The second alternative leads to “ontological” explanations of the relations between minds and meanings, minds and immediate data of awareness, universals and particulars, thought and language, consciousness and brains, and so on. For philosophers like Chisholm and Bergmann, such explanations must be attempted if the realism of common sense is to be preserved. The aim of all such explanations is to make truth something more than what Dewey called “warranted assertibility”: more than what our peers will, ceteris paribus, let us get away with saying. Such explanations, when ontological, usually take the form of a redescription of the object of knowledge so as to “bridge the gap” between it and the knowing subject. To choose between these approaches is to choose between truth as “what it is good for us to believe” and truth as “contact with reality.”

Part II

Solidarity Versus Objectivity

In our culture, the notions of “science,” “rationality,” “objectivity” and “truth” are bound up with one another. Science is thought of as offering “hard,” “objective” truth—truth as correspondence to reality, the only sort of truth worthy of the name. Humanists—philosophers, theologians, historians, literary critics—have to worry about whether they are being “scientific”—whether they are entitled to think of their conclusions, no matter how carefully argued, as worthy of the term “true.” We tend to identify seeking “objective truth” with “using reason,” and so we think of the natural sci-
ences as paradigms of rationality. We also think of rationality as a matter of following procedures laid down in advance, of being "methodical." So we tend to use "methodical," "rational," "scientific" and "objective" as synonyms.

Worries about "cognitive status" and "objectivity" are characteristic of a secularized culture in which the scientist replaces the priest. The scientist is now seen as the person who keeps humanity in touch with something beyond itself. As the universe was depersonalized, beauty (and, in time, even moral goodness) came to be thought of as "subjective." So truth is now thought of as the only point at which human beings are responsible to something non-human. A commitment to "rationality" and to "method" is thought to be a recognition of this responsibility. The scientist becomes a moral exemplar, one who selflessly exposes himself again and again to the hardness of facts.

One result of this way of thinking is that any academic discipline which wants a place at the trough, but is unable to offer the predictions and the technology provided by the natural sciences, must either pretend to imitate science or find some way of obtaining "cognitive status" without the necessity of discovering facts. Practitioners of these disciplines must either affiliate themselves with this quasi-priestly order by using terms like "behavioral sciences" or else find something other than "fact" to be concerned with. People in the humanities typically choose the latter strategy. They describe themselves either as concerned with "values" as opposed to facts, or as developing and inculcating habits of "critical reflection."

Neither sort of rhetoric is very satisfactory. No matter how much humanists talk about "objective values," the phrase always sounds vaguely confused. It gives with one hand what it takes back with the other. The distinction between the objective and the subjective was designed to parallel that between fact and value, so an objective value sounds vaguely mythological as a winged horse. Talk about the humanists' special skill at critical reflection fares no better. Nobody really believes that philosophers or literary critics are better at critical thinking, or at taking big broad views of things, than theoretical physicists or microbiologists. So society tends to ignore both these kinds of rhetoric. It treats humanities as on a par with the arts, and thinks of both as providing pleasure rather than truth. Both are, to be sure, thought of as providing "high" rather than "low" pleasure. But an elevated and spiritual sort of pleasure is still a long way from the grasp of a truth.

These distinctions between hard facts and soft values, truth and pleasure, and objectivity and subjectivity are awkward and clumsy instruments. They are not suited to divide up culture; they create more difficulties than they resolve. It would be best to find another vocabulary, to start afresh. But in order to do so we first have to find a new way of describing the natural sciences. It is not a question of debunking or downgrading the natural sciences, but simply of ceasing to see him on the model of the priest. We need to stop thinking of science as the place where the human mind confronts the world. We need a way of explaining why scientists are, and deserve to be, moral exemplars which does not depend on a distinction between objective fact and something softer, squishier and more dubious.

To get to such a way of thinking we can start by distinguishing two senses of the term "rationality." In one sense, the one I have already discussed, to be rational is to be methodical: that is, to have criteria for success laid down in advance. We think of poets and painters as using some other faculty than "reason" in their work because, by their own confession, they are not sure of what they want to do before they have done it. They make up new standards of achievement as they go along. By contrast, we think of judges as knowing in advance what criteria a brief will have to satisfy in order to invoke a favorable decision, and of businessmen as setting well-defined goals and being judged by their success in achieving them. Law and business are good examples of rationality, but the scientist, knowing in advance what would count as disconfirming his hypothesis and prepared to abandon that hypothesis as a result of the unfavorable outcome of a single experiment, seems a truly heroic example. Further, we seem to have a clear criterion of the success of a scientific theory—namely, its ability to predict, and thereby to enable us to control some portion of the world. If to be rational means to be able to lay down criteria in advance, then it is plausible to take natural science as the paradigm of rationality.

The trouble is that in this sense of "rational" the humanities are never going to qualify as rational activities. If the humanities are concerned with ends rather than means, then there is no way to
evaluate their success in terms of antecedently specified criteria. If we already knew what criteria we wanted to satisfy, we would not worry about whether we were pursuing the right ends. If we thought we knew the goals of culture and society in advance, we would have no use for the humanities—as totalitarian societies in fact do not. It is characteristic of democracies and pluralistic societies to redefine their goals continually. But if to be rational means to satisfy criteria, then this process of redefinition will be bound to be non-rational. So if the humanities are to be viewed as rational activities, rationality will have to be thought of as something other than the satisfaction of criteria which are statable in advance.

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We should not try to satisfy this hankering, but rather try to eradicate it. No matter what one’s opinion of the secularization of culture, it was a mistake to try to make the natural scientist into a new sort of priest, a link between the human and the non-human. So was the idea that some sorts of truths are “objective” whereas others are merely “subjective” or “relative”—the attempt to divide up the set of true sentences into “genuine knowl-

edge” and “mere opinion,” or into the “rational” and the “judgmental.” So was the idea that the scientist has a special method which, if only the humanists would apply it to ultimate values, would give us the same kind of self-confidence about moral ends as we now have about technological means. I think that we should content ourselves with the second, “weaker” conception of rationality and avoid the first, “stronger” conception. We should avoid the idea that there is some special virtue in knowing in advance what criteria you are going to satisfy, in having standards by which to measure progress.

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Whereas Kuhn’s enemies routinely accuse him of reducing science to “mob psychology,” and pride themselves on having (by a new theory of meaning or reference or verisimilitude) vindicated the “rationality of science,” his pragmatic friends (such as myself) routinely congratulate him on having softened the distinction between science and non-science. . . . [H]e has said that “there is no theory-independent way to reconstruct phrases like ‘really there.’” He has asked whether it really helps “to imagine that there is some one full, objective, true account of nature and that the proper measure of scientific achievement is the extent to which it brings us closer to the ultimate goal.” We pragmatists quote these passages incessantly in the course of our effort to enlist Kuhn in our campaign to drop the objective-subjective distinction altogether.

What I am calling “pragmatism” might also be called “left-wing Kuhnianism.” It has also been
rather endearingly called (by one of its critics, Clark Glymour) "the new fuzziness," because it is an attempt to blur just those distinctions between the objective and the subjective and between fact and value which the criterial conception of rationality has developed. We fuzzies would like to substitute the idea of "unforced agreement" for that of "objectivity." We should like to put all culture on an epistemological level (or get rid of the idea of "epistemological level"). . . . On our view, "truth" is a univocal term. It applies equally to the judgments of lawyers, anthropologists, physicists, philologists and literary critics. There is point in assigning degrees of "objectivity" or "hardness" to such disciplines. For the presence of unforced agreement in all of them gives us everything in the way of "objective truth" which one could possibly want; namely, intersubjective agreement.

As soon as one says that all there is to objectivity is intersubjectivity, one is likely to be accused of being a relativist. That is the epithet traditionally applied to pragmatists. But this epithet is ambiguous. It can name any of three different views:

1. the silly and self-refuting view that every belief is as good as every other.
2. the wrong-headed view that "true" is an equivocal term, having as many meanings as there are contexts of justification.
3. the ethnocentric view that there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society—ours—uses in one or another area of inquiry.

The pragmatist does hold this third, ethnocentric view. But he does not hold the first or the second view of relativism.

But "relativism" is not an appropriate term to describe this sort of ethnocentrism. For we pragmatists are not holding a positive theory which says that something is relative to something else. Instead, we are making the purely negative point that we would be better off without the traditional distinctions between knowledge and opinion, construed as the distinction between truth as correspondence to reality and truth as a commendatory term for well-justified beliefs. Our opponents call this negative claim "relativistic" because they cannot imagine that anybody would seriously deny that truth has an intrinsic nature. So when we say that there is nothing to be said about truth save that each of us will commend as true those beliefs which he or she finds good to believe, the realist is inclined to interpret this as one more positive theory about the nature of truth: a theory according to which truth is simply the contemporary opinion of a chosen individual or group. Such a theory would, of course, be self-refuting. But we pragmatists do not have a theory of truth, much less a relativistic one. As partisans of solidarity, our account of the value of cooperative human enquiry has only an ethical base, not a epistemological or metaphysical one.

To say that we must be ethnocentric may sound suspicious, but this will only happen if we identify ethnocentrism with pigheaded refusal to talk to representatives of other communities. In my sense of ethnocentrism, to be ethnocentric is simply to work by our own lights. The defense of ethnocentrism is simply that there are no other lights to work by. Beliefs suggested by another individual or another culture must be tested by trying to weave them together with beliefs which we already have. . . .

This way of thinking runs counter to the attempts, familiar since the eighteenth century, to "think of political liberalism as based on a conception of the nature of man. To most thinkers of the Enlightenment, it seemed clear that the access to Nature which physical science had provided should now be followed by the establishment of social, political and economic institutions which were "in accordance with Nature." Ever since, liberal social thought has centered around social reform as made possible by objective knowledge of what human beings are like—"not knowledge of what Greeks or Frenchmen or Chinese are like, but of humanity as such. This tradition dreams of a universal human community which will exhibit a non-parochial solidarity because it is the expression of an a historical human nature.

Philosophers who belong to this tradition, who wish to ground solidarity in objectivity, have to construe truth as correspondence to reality. So they must construct an epistemology which has room for a kind of justification which is not merely social but natural, springing from human nature itself, and made possible by a link between that part of nature and the rest of nature. By contrast we pragmatists, who wish to reduce objectivity to solidarity, do not require either a metaphysics or an epistemology. . . . We see the gap between
truth and justification not as something to be bridged by isolating a natural and trans-cultural sort of rationality which can be used to criticize certain cultures and praise others, but simply as the gap between the actual good and the possible better. From a pragmatist point of view, to say that what is rational for us now to believe may not be true, is simply to say that somebody may come up with a better idea. . . .

Another reason for describing us as “relativistic” is that we pragmatists drop the idea that inquiry is destined to converge to a single point—that Truth is “out there” waiting for human beings to arrive at it. This idea seems to us an unfortunate attempt to carry a religious conception over into a secular culture. All that is worth preserving of the claim that rational inquiry will converge to a single point is the claim that we must be able to explain why past false views were held in the past, and thus explain how we go about re-educating our benighted ancestors. To say that we think we’re heading in the right direction is just to say, with Kuhn, that we can, by hindsight, tell the story of the past as a story of progress.

But the fact that we can trace such a direction and tell such a story does not mean that we have come closer to a goal which is out there waiting for us. We cannot, I think, imagine a moment at which the human race could settle back and say, “Well, now that we’ve finally arrived at the Truth we can relax.” Paul Feyerabend is right in suggesting that we should discard the metaphor of inquiry, and human activity generally, as converging rather than proliferating, becoming more unified rather than more diverse. On the contrary, we should relish that thought that the sciences as well as the arts will always provide a spectacle of fierce competition between alternative theories, movements and schools. The end of human activity is not rest, but rather richer and better human activity. We should think of human progress as making it possible for human beings to do more interesting things and more interesting people, not as heading toward a place which has somehow been prepared for us in advance. To drop the criterial conception of rationality in favor of the pragmatist conception would be to give up the idea of Truth as something to which we were responsible. Instead we should think of “true” as a word which applies to those beliefs upon which we are able to agree, as roughly synonymous with “justified.” . . .

. . . Pragmatists would like to replace the desire for objectivity—the desire to be in touch with a reality which is more than some community with which we identify ourselves—with the desire for solidarity with that community. They think that the habits of relying on persuasion rather than force, of respect for opinions of colleagues, of curiosity and eagerness for new data and ideas, are the only virtues which scientists have. They do not think that there is an intellectual virtue called “rationality” over and above these moral virtues. . . .

Pragmatists interpret the goal of inquiry (in any sphere of culture) as the attainment of an appropriate mixture of enforced agreement with tolerant disagreement (where what counts as appropriate is determined, within that sphere, by trial and error). Such a reinterpretation of our sense of responsibility would, if carried through, gradually make unintelligible the subject-object model of enquiry, the child-parent model of moral obligation, and the correspondence theory of truth. A world in which those models, and that theory, no longer had any intuitive appeal would be a pragmatist’s paradise.

When Dewey urged that we try to create such a paradise he was said to be irresponsible. For, it was said, he left us bereft of weapons to use against our enemies; he gave us nothing with which to “answer the Nazis.” When we new fuzzies try to revise Dewey’s repudiation of criteriology we are said to be “relativistic.” We must, people say, believe that every coherent view is as good as every other, since we have no “outside” touchstone for choice among such views. We are said to leave the general public defenseless against the witch doctor, the defender of creationism, or anyone else who is clever and patient enough to deduce a consistent and wide-ranging set of theorems from his “alternative first principles.”

Nobody is convinced when we fuzzies say that we can be just as morally indignant as the next philosopher. We are suspected of being contritely fallibilist when righteous fury is called for. Even when we actually display appropriate emotions we get nowhere, for we are told that we have no right to these emotions. When we suggest that one of the few things we know (or need to know) about truth is that it is what wins in a free and open encounter, we are told that we have defined “true” as “satisfies the standards of our community.” But we pragmatists do not hold this relativist view. We
XI.5 A Defense of Objectivity

MARGARITA ROSA LEVIN

Margarita Rosa Levin received her Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota and teaches philosophy at Stern College. She is the author of several articles in philosophy of science and environmental ethics. In this essay, she defends the notion of objective knowledge against contemporary critics such as Richard Rorty, radical feminists, Marxists, Jacques Derrida, and others. After defining objectivity as “intersubjectively accessible knowledge... independent of anyone’s biases, traditions, wishes, or other influences,” she examines (1) the general philosophical arguments against the possibility of objectivity, (2) those grounded in the history and sociology of science, and (3) those specifically grounded in the social sciences. Levin argues that the anti-rationalist arguments not only fail but also presuppose objectivity even in their attempt to undermine it.

Upholding Truth: Objectivity Versus Skepticism and Nihilism

It is a paradox that the twentieth century, which has witnessed the greatest triumphs of science and technology, should also be the century in which the ideal of objectivity has been subjected to the most severe challenges. By objectivity I mean intersubjectively accessible knowledge, by definition truly independent of anyone’s biases, traditions, wishes, or other influences. The idea that objectivity is not only possible but also regularly realized continues to underpin modern natural science. This same objectivity was a goal that initially inspired the social sciences.¹