

## READING RORTY: A SKETCH OF A PLAN

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**Abstract.** *The following pages are focused on a better understanding of Richard Rorty's reflections on the problem of truth, emphasizing the idea that one of the keys to a better understanding of Rorty is to consider the fact that there are three very different kinds of discourse present in his philosophical endeavors. In order to support this unprecedented claim I bring forward the case of one of Plato's dialogues concerned with the definition of knowledge, Theaetetus. The similarities between Plato's dialogue and Rorty are the core of my argumentation.*

**Keywords:** Richard Rorty, Plato, Theaetetus, objectivity, solidarity

Reading Rorty can be hard, not because his ideas are especially *difficult* but because they are, or at least seem on the face of it to be, quite straightforward and yet somehow wrong. But this is very unlikely: Rorty is not a thinker to get straightforward things wrong. We need, then, a plan for reading Rorty. Rorty himself offers a suggestion. He tells us that we will not understand him until and unless we distinguish between his ordinary, unreflective talk and his reflective, philosophical talk, between his lay and his philosophical uses of words such as 'true'.<sup>1</sup> This is helpful; but it does not, I think, go far enough in providing us the tools we need in reading Rorty insofar as there seem to be not two but *three* different sorts of discourse that Rorty engages in. Indeed, I will suggest that in this regard Rorty's reflections on truth bear a remarkable (and remarkably suggestive) similarity to Plato's reflections on knowledge in his dialogue *Theaetetus*. This is a large and unprecedented claim, one that I can only begin to explicate here. But even this mere sketch of a plan for reading Rorty will be enough, I think, to show that reading Rorty as engaged at various points in three very different sorts of discourse will enable us to make good sense of claims that have seemed to many readers, even otherwise sympathetic ones, to be quite wrongheaded.

The overall framework is straightforward. The basic case is our first-level discourse, that is, our ordinary talk about things, including the talk involved in first-order inquiry into things such as cats, corporations, and courage. But we can also engage in a different sort of discourse, as when we conduct a reflective, philosophical inquiry into first-order inquiry. Obviously, such second-order, reflective inquiry is possible only in light of first-order inquiry; second-order inquiry can be pursued only where there is already a good deal of first-order inquiry to be made the object of one's reflective gaze. Second-order inquiry seems also to be qualitatively different from first-order inquiry insofar as whereas first-order inquiry seems, at

<sup>1</sup> See, for instances, his responses in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert B. Brandom (Malden, Mass. and Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 89, 263-4, and 266.

least on the face of it, it be inquiry into how things are, second-order inquiry seems better described as concerned to understand, or to make manifest, the nature of our first-order inquiries. The third sort of discourse we will be concerned with here is different again. It is not merely more of the same, a kind of philosophical reflection on the practice of philosophers—though this too is possible. The third sort of reflection and discourse as it will concern us here does not take the form of *inquiry* at all but is instead a reflection on something more fundamental, something that might be described as our existential condition, our being as humans. Because in Plato's *Theaetetus* as I read it not only are all three sorts of discourse in play, they are also relatively well marked in the text itself, it will help to begin with a brief discussion of this remarkable dialogue.

Although the *Theaetetus* was written after such middle dialogues as *Republic*, it manifests many characteristic features not of the middle dialogues but of Plato's earliest, aporetic dialogues. It focuses on a 'What is . . . ?' question, in this case, the question 'What is knowledge?', and over the course of the dialogue a series of answers are proposed, discussed, and ultimately rejected. Also as in the early dialogues and by contrast with middle dialogues such as *Republic*, Socrates claims to have no knowledge himself, save for the knowledge that he does not know.

But there are also important differences between this dialogue and Plato's early dialogues. In the *Theaetetus* Socrates's main interlocutor is not (as he is in all the early dialogues) a self-professed expert in the topic under discussion. Socrates's interlocutor in this dialogue is instead a mere boy, the sixteen-year-old student Theaetetus who, although already manifesting remarkable intellectual gifts, does not profess to know what knowledge is. Indeed, he is presented at the opening of the dialogue as having just the sort of wisdom Socrates claims for himself: Theaetetus knows that he does not know. The dialogue also combines the standard dialogue form with a more reflective description of Socrates's method that is reminiscent of Socrates's description of his activities in Plato's *Apology*. But whereas in *Apology* Socrates likens himself to a gadfly, in the *Theaetetus* he again and again describes himself as a midwife to the ideas of others. The *Theaetetus* is written in dramatic rather than narrative form, and as is emphasized in the prefatory dialogue within which the main dialogue is embedded (as it were, half-way), the main dialogue is in the form of a written document, which, according to the prefatory dialogue, is being read aloud by a slave. What we have in the *Theaetetus*, then, is a written dialogue, a piece of text, within a written dialogue, a piece of text.<sup>2</sup> There is, finally, a very curious section midway through the main dialogue, a section that Socrates himself describes as a digression, within which Socrates sketches the life of the philosopher as it contrasts with the lives of others. The digression clearly recalls themes from *Republic*, but it is not at all easy to understand why it is there, how exactly we are to read it, or what relationship it has to the rest of the text.

The *Theaetetus* is, then, a text with a very complex structure, one that has been carefully crafted to be read on at least three levels. First, and most obviously, there is the examination itself, which, after some preliminaries, comprises three proposed definitions—that knowledge is perception, that knowledge is true judgment, and that knowledge is true judgment with an account—all of which are examined and ultimately rejected. At this level of reading, the fact that the examination is cast in the form of a dialogue, the fact that it is embedded in another dialogue, the fact that Socrates digresses halfway through, all are merely

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<sup>2</sup> Again, the framing is incomplete: the dialogue as a whole ends with the end of the embedded dialogue.

stylistic, merely decorative; what matters are the ideas, what knowledge is said to be, and the arguments to show that it cannot be that. This, then, is first-order inquiry, inquiry into what something is, in this case, not what a cat, corporation, or courageous act is, but what knowledge is. And as already remarked, that inquiry fails; none of Theaetetus's answers to the question 'what is knowledge?' survive Socrates's examination of them. Furthermore, unlike what we find in, say, *Euthyphro*, there is, as far as I can see, no indication that an answer might be forthcoming, nor even for thinking that progress has been made towards answering the question.<sup>3</sup> At the dialogue's end, Socrates is clearly done with Theaetetus, and so also, apparently, with the question 'what is knowledge?'

To read the dialogue at the second level, as a philosophical reflection *on* first-order inquiry, is to take into account that the *Theaetetus* is written as a dialogue between Socrates, in his self-described role as midwife, and the student Theaetetus—with the occasional intervention of Theodorus, a famous geometer and Theaetetus's teacher. Reading at this level, we find Plato engaged in an extended reflection on the nature of first-order inquiry, and in particular on the role of critically reflective examination in inquiry. We are also taught to distinguish, for instance, mob-oratory from serious discourse, and the philosopher from the champion conversationalist. But, as the digression pointedly reminds us, even this second-order inquiry into the nature of first-order inquiry does not exhaust the meaning of the dialogue as a whole. Relative to the second-order inquiry into the nature of (first-order) inquiry the digression clearly *is* a digression, just as Socrates says it is; but as its placement midway through the dialogue indicates, it is also central to the message of the dialogue as a whole. Together with other, subtler clues, it marks, I think, yet a third, quite distinctive sort of reflection, this time on philosophers, Plato himself included, and philosophizing.

Now as Plato asks in the *Theaetetus* what knowledge is, so Rorty asks what truth is, that is, what is the mark, the necessary and sufficient condition, of something's being true. And in keeping with the aporetic conclusion of Plato's *Theaetetus*, Rorty answers, I would say correctly, that there is no such mark, no test for truth and hence no way to guarantee that one has gotten things *right*. *Anything* we think we know may turn out to have been mistaken. There is, as Sellars would say, no Given. The first-order inquiry into truth, according to which it is just one more thing in the world to be investigated, inevitably comes up empty-handed.

But Rorty occasionally seems to want to go further in this mode. In particular, he sometimes suggests that there is no truth whatsoever at the level of first-order inquiry, no way things in the world are that we might discover. He seems almost to think that we discovered, at a certain point in history and contrary to what we had at first naively thought, that reality can play only a causal role in our cognitive lives, not a justificatory one, and hence that reality as it is is unknowable in principle because there simply *is* no way the world is, no joints in reality at which one might carve, whether correctly or incorrectly. This, to my ear, sounds like just the sort of philosophy-as-super-science that Rorty otherwise so strenuously objects to. Better, I think, to hold that whatever philosophical reflection on first-order inquiry may achieve, it is *not* more first-order knowledge about how things are, or are not. First-order inquiry into truth, as into knowledge, is *inherently* aporetic: there is no mark of truth, or of

<sup>3</sup> Others claim to see farther. Some readers think that a modified version of the last answer, knowledge is true judgment with an account, could survive Socratic examination. Others argue that because knowledge, according to Socrates and Plato following him, can only come from oneself, Plato cannot *tell* us what knowledge is but only point the way for the reflective reader. There does not, on these accounts, seem to be clear textual evidence for either view.

knowledge, waiting to be discovered, as there is of cats, corporations, and perhaps even courage.

Because there are no marks of truth, truth cannot itself be made the goal of inquiry, as Rorty often reminds us. It does not follow that there is nothing to be said at the second level about the nature of first-order inquiry. In the *Theaetetus*, we have seen, Plato's Socrates emphasizes, at this level, that inquiry constitutively involves critically reflective examination aimed at discovering whether one has knowledge or only the appearance of knowledge. His practice of midwifery, as it is portrayed over the course of the dialogue, shows just what this means, and it is not hard to hear echoes of Plato's reflections on the nature of inquiry in those of Rorty, in particular, in Rorty's proposal that "we should be retrospective rather than prospective: [that] inquiry should be driven by concrete fears of regression rather than by abstract hopes of universality".<sup>4</sup> Socrates the midwife is much more concerned that one has *not* gotten things right, that one does *not* know that which one professes to know, than he is hopeful that one does know.

Nor is it merely a piece of good advice to admonish people to spend more time worrying about the possibility that they are wrong than they do hoping that they are right. That advice reflects a fundamental insight into the rationality of inquiry itself, one that is the positive corollary, in reflective, philosophical discourse, of the realization (of first-order inquiry) that there is no mark of truth. It is the insight that, in Sellars's words, "empirical knowledge . . . is rational, not because it has a *foundation* but because it is a self-correcting enterprise which can put *any* claim in jeopardy, though not *all* at once".<sup>5</sup> Even recognizing that we are inherently and unavoidably fallible, we can nonetheless strive to do better than we have done, seek to correct such errors as we are in a position to recognize—whether errors in our beliefs, errors in our conceptions of things, or even errors in what we take to be rational at all. Sellars's point is that it is precisely this capacity for self-correction, of *anything* that we think we know, that explains the rationality of inquiry, that is, the fact that it constitutes *inquiry* at all, the striving for truth.

And this applies equally to second-order reflective, philosophical inquiry. Second-order inquiry into the nature of first-order inquiry, like first-order inquiry itself, inevitably involves various presuppositions any of which may turn out to have been mistaken. For instance, Rorty seems to think that giving up the idea that language serves to *represent* reality entails giving up the idea that language is in any way revelatory of reality. He seems to think that the fact that our descriptions of things are invariably in some human vocabulary or other entails that those descriptions cannot be conceived as cutting reality at its joints. But perhaps neither entailment holds. It is true that, as Rorty says, "the story of *biological* evolution is helpless to explicate the coping-representing distinction, helpless to say when organisms stopped coping and began copying".<sup>6</sup> But we are not restricted either to a representational conception of language or to the notion of biological evolution. We can think instead of language as *enabling* cognitive access to reality, and we can do so in large part because we can retrospectively trace a course of Hegelian *intellectual* evolution—as indeed Rorty himself recognizes in other contexts.

<sup>4</sup> *Rorty and His Critics*, p. 61.

<sup>5</sup> Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, with an introduction by Richard Rorty and study guide by Robert Brandom (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), §38.

<sup>6</sup> *Rorty and His Critics*, p. 185; emphasis added.

Much more might be said about second-order philosophical reflection on first-order inquiry as, for instance, Rorty does in his discussions of intellectual virtues such as seriousness, honesty, and curiosity. I want, however, to turn to yet another familiar theme in Rorty's writings, one that I will suggest should *not* be seen as a piece of second-level philosophical discourse but instead as a reflection of the third more existential sort, namely, Rorty's idea that instead of grounding solidarity in objectivity we should reduce objectivity to solidarity.<sup>7</sup>

As McDowell reads it in "Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity", Rorty's claim that the discourse of solidarity ought to replace the discourse of objectivity is addressed to philosophers concerned to understand first-order inquiry. McDowell reads it, in other words, as a second-level claim, one that, according to McDowell, is mistaken and liable to lead to more of just the sort of philosophy that Rorty urges us to give up on. With Rorty, McDowell deplores a "wishful conception of attunement with how things really are, as a means of avoiding an uncomfortable acknowledgement of the limitations of reason and the contingency of our capacities to think as we believe we should"; but he at the same time opposes Rorty's call for us to "[abandon] the very idea of aspiring to get things right", "the very idea of making ourselves answerable to how things are".<sup>8</sup> But perhaps Rorty's call for solidarity should not be read as a piece of philosophical reflection on first-order inquiry to the effect that because truth is beyond our ken, we have only ourselves to answer to. Perhaps this is a different sort of point again, one that belongs to a *yet another* mode of discourse, one that is about us in particular. Rorty seems to want to suggest that *when it comes to us*, there is no point trying to ground solidarity in objectivity, in some "ahistorical human nature", because there simply is no such thing as ahistorical human nature.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps his point, then, is that when it comes to us, solidarity is all we have, where this is meant not as the upshot of a first-order inquiry into how things are, nor even as a philosopher's second-order reflection on first-order inquiry, but as something different again, something more fundamental, more existential. The task is to understand what exactly that might mean.

Hegel was perhaps the first explicitly to recognize that the history of our intellectual development over the past few thousand years shows that standards of rationality change over time, sometimes very radically. As Rorty provocatively puts it, "what counts as rational argumentation is as historically determined, and as context-dependent, as what counts as good French."<sup>10</sup> But one does not need a lesson from history to question the rationality of what one is up to. Any sufficiently intelligent and reflective thinker can have moments of profound self-doubt, moments "when," as Rorty puts it, "we want to reassure ourselves of our own rationality—to convince ourselves that we are not being caught up by something merely voguish or merely self-interested".<sup>11</sup> In such moments the reflective thinker is an ironist, in Rorty's sense, "[facing] up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and

<sup>7</sup> In "Solidarity or Objectivity?", in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, vol. I* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Rorty suggests that we call those wanting to ground solidarity in objectivity "realists", and those wanting to reduce objectivity to solidarity "pragmatists" (p. 22).

<sup>8</sup> John McDowell, "Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity", in *Rorty and His Critics*, p. 112.

<sup>9</sup> "Solidarity or Objectivity?", p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> *Rorty and His Critics*, p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> *Rorty and His Critics*, p. 89.

desires”.<sup>12</sup> The ironist, as Rorty understands him, just is “the person who has doubts about his own final vocabulary, his own moral identity, and perhaps his own sanity”.<sup>13</sup>

Now because what is at issue in such moments is precisely one’s rationality, one’s sanity, and one’s moral identity, it is clear that the discourse has shifted again, from inquiry itself, whether first- or second-order, to questions about one’s *capacity* for inquiry, for a form of practice that is by its very nature neither merely vogueish nor self-interested. Such reassurance as one might seek in such moments obviously cannot, without vicious circularity, turn to inquiry for satisfaction. Instead one turns, Rorty tells us, to “those who helped make us what we are”, in particular to “imaginary conversations with people (our parents, our teachers, our friends) who might be imagined to have doubts about what we are up to”, to “people intelligent enough to understand what one is talking about—people who are capable of seeing how one might have those doubts because they know what such doubts are like, people who are themselves given to irony”.<sup>14</sup> As I want now to indicate, I think that the central section of the *Theaetetus*, the section that Plato has Socrates describe as a digression, is just such a moment of irony on Plato’s part.

In the digression Plato has Socrates compare the life of “the man of the law-courts” to the life of “the man brought up in philosophy, the life of the student” (173d-e). The former is likened to a slave and is, Plato says, always in a hurry; although he is skilled at worldly affairs, his soul is “small and warped” (173a). The philosopher, by contrast, is like a free man, one with plenty of time; he knows nothing of worldly things, and, Plato says, quite surprisingly given what we know of Socrates, “he knows not even that he knows not” (173e). Indeed, the philosopher, as he is described in the digression, is so far removed from worldly affairs that “he scarcely knows whether [his next-door neighbor] is a man or some other kind of creature” (174b). As I read it, what Plato is offering us here is a parodic version of the distinction he so skillfully draws in *Republic* between the tyrant enslaved by his desires and the truly just man.

But why would Plato have done that? Why would he write such a parody into the heart of the *Theaetetus*? Here are two possible reasons. First, he may have done it as an expression of just the sort of self-doubt that Rorty takes to be characteristic of the ironist. Perhaps the philosopher is merely flattering himself in thinking that he is in some way better than others, in some way more in tune with reality. Perhaps even he is caught up in something merely vogueish or self-interested, not rational at all. Alternatively, Plato may be responding to flat-footed readings of *Republic*, readings that find in that work two wholly separate realms, that of being, knowledge, and reality, on the one hand, and that of becoming, opinion, and appearance, on the other. Undoubtedly there would have been such readers in Plato’s day, as there are today; perhaps Plato is responding to such readers by carefully laying out that reading in a way that clearly shows just how silly it really is.

Suppose that we take the digression the first way, as an expression of profound self-doubt. In that case, we will read the dialogue as a whole as a sort of imagined conversation that Plato is holding with his beloved teacher Socrates. This is not an unreasonable reading given that Socrates, the actual historical person, might well have been expected to have doubts of just the sort Rorty describes, that is, doubts about what Plato has been up to, particularly in

<sup>12</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. xv.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Rorty, “The Last Intellectual in Europe: Orwell on Cruelty”, in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 186.

<sup>14</sup> *Rorty and His Critics*, p. 89, and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 187.

dialogues such as *Republic* in which Plato quite freely presents his own positive views. If we take the digression in the second way, as a response to uncomprehending readers of *Republic*, then we will read the *Theaetetus* as an especially well-crafted, multi-layered attempt to find the sorts of readers that Rorty's ironist seeks, readers who are "intelligent enough to understand what one is talking about". Largely as a result of my own reading of Rorty on irony, my own best guess, which I will not pursue further here, is that the two are in fact deeply related and both at work in the dialogue. What I do want to pursue further is the question of the nature of such conversations given that they do *not* take the form of inquiries, whether first- or second-order, together with the idea that in this case we need to focus on solidarity *rather* than objectivity.

Inquiry takes place in the space of giving and asking for reasons and is, as Rorty says, improved by curiosity, by one's eagerness "to expand one's horizons of inquiry . . . so as to encompass new data, new hypotheses, new terminologies, and the like".<sup>15</sup> In inquiry, one examines as much evidence as can be gathered, both the reasons for and the reasons against any particular view; one gives reasons to others and asks reasons of them; and one is rational throughout the process of inquiry just insofar as one feels the force of the better reason. Because all this is put in doubt by the ironist's reflections, Rorty's imagined conversations do not in the same way take place in the space of reasons. They are and must be instead tentative and exploratory. They are also, Rorty suggests, quite like the sorts of conversations that are involved in decision-making by consensus as it contrasts with decision-making by vote or majority-rule.

The process of decision-making by consensus is essentially egalitarian, cooperative, inclusivist, and participatory. Even more important for our purposes, it is also a powerful means by which to create a substantive sense of community and a shared voice, that is, solidarity. The process aims, as the etymology of the word "con/sensus" indicates, at a thinking and feeling together. In decision-making by consensus one does not so much talk *to* others, communicating thereby one's thoughts on a matter, as *with* them in order to achieve a common understanding and shared sense of purpose. It is, I suggest, just this sort of discourse—tentative and exploratory, addressed to one's hopes and fears as much as to one's beliefs, and aimed at the *creation* of a community of inquirers—that best characterizes the sort of real or imagined conversations that Rorty has in mind as responding to the ironist's self-doubts. Such conversations assuage one's doubts about one's own rationality precisely because and insofar as they realize solidarity.

Inquiry, whether first- or second-order, takes time; it takes time to amass data, to form hypotheses, to test them, and so on. But inquiry is not constitutively temporal; it takes time but it is not constituted in and by its unfolding in time—as, for instance, a living organism is. Inquiry does not have its *being* in time; that it takes time is accidental, external to it. Conversation of the third sort, the ironist's conversation as modeled on decision-making by consensus, does have its being in time; such a conversation is essentially historical, and organic. It needs time to grow and develop, and it does so because the unity that is sought can be achieved only through such a process of growth and development. Quite simply, communities of the relevant sort can *only* be grown; they cannot be built. And they cannot be built precisely because there is no objective commonality, no essence to humanity that can be appealed to in unifying the community. The community *is* unified as a community of inquirers only insofar as we, its members, *have* unified it through our conversation, only insofar as we have made it the site of free, honest, and open inquiry into matters of common concern.

<sup>15</sup> Rorty *and His Critics*, p. 17.

Perhaps a totalitarian state could be engineered, but a community in which one is free to speak one's mind, and heart, openly and honestly, and is able to trust others to do the same, cannot be engineered; it can only be cultivated.

This process of cultivation by means of which community, solidarity, is secured is furthermore intrinsically open-ended and on going. We cannot, in this case, retreat to something objective, even to what Cavell calls the Ordinary; as Rorty knows, there is, and at this level can be, no "peaceful, non-obsessed, vision of how things deeply, truly, unproblematically are" because with each move in the conversation the whole subtly, or perhaps not so subtly, shifts in ways that call for further conversation.<sup>16</sup> The conversation through which we realize our rationality, our capacity for any inquiry at all, has no end. It is the life-blood of rationality itself.

It should be clear, then, that in the context of the discourse of the ironist in doubt about his motives, his morals, and his rationality, we really are faced with Rorty's either/or: on the one hand, objectivity, that is, an appeal to something non-human that would silence once and for all those doubts, or on the other, solidarity, the self-conscious attempt to create and sustain a conversational community in which one is both free to express oneself and able to trust others to do the same. But if so, then Rorty is absolutely right to claim that full human maturity can be achieved only with the realization that *in this case*, the case in which the discourse aims at the *creation* of a community of inquirers, we really do have only ourselves to turn to. Any attempt, *in this context*, to achieve objectivity directly rather than on the basis of an achieved solidarity will succeed only by fiat, by one's willed abasement to something. Where our concern is with the peculiar sort of discourse that the ironist engages in, we both can and should heed Rorty's call to take care of freedom on the grounds that if we do then truth will take care of itself.

Taking my cue from Plato's dialogue *Theaetetus*, I have distinguished three sorts of discourse, first-order inquiry into things, second-order reflective, philosophical inquiry into first-order inquiry, and finally a third kind of discourse, a kind of existential reflection on ourselves as rational inquirers. Rorty's negative point that there is nothing interesting to be said about truth, no mark of truth, belongs at the level of first-order inquiry. But we have also seen that something more positive can be said about the rationality of inquiry at the second level, namely, that inquiry is rational precisely because it is self-correcting. My principal aim, however, has been to suggest that Rorty's either/or, either solidarity or objectivity, can be read, as Plato's digression in the *Theaetetus* can, as an instance of a third sort of discourse, one that concerns, in effect, the conditions of possibility of any inquiry at all. What we discover if we read Rorty this way is, as I have put it, that in the end one can only talk *to* those with whom one can also talk *with*. There can be objectivity, inquiry, the striving for truth, but *only* on the basis of solidarity, consensus, and shared meaning—only, that is, within an intentional community of ironists. Only if *we* take care of freedom *can* truth take care of itself.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> *Rorty and His Critics*, p. 349.

<sup>17</sup> My thanks to Aryeh Kosman for very helpful comments on the penultimate draft.