TRUTH AND THE CRITIQUE OF REPRESENTATION*

Gerard Leonid STAN

ABSTRACT: The correspondence theory of truth was regarded for many centuries as the correct position in the problem of truth. The main purpose of this paper is to establish the extent to which antirepresentationalist arguments devised by the pragmatists can destabilise the correspondence theory of truth. Thus, I identified three types of antirepresentationalist arguments: ontological, epistemological and semantic. Then I tried to outline the most significant varieties for each type of argument. Finally, I evaluated these counterarguments from a metaphilosophical perspective. The point I endeavoured to make is that these arguments are decisive neither in supporting the pragmatist theory of truth, nor in proving the failure of the correspondence theory of truth. Actually, we are dealing with two distinct modes of looking at the same problem, two theoretical approaches based on different sets of presuppositions. By examining the presuppositions of the classical theory of truth, the pragmatists engage in a theoretical undertaking with therapeutical qualities: they contributed significantly to the critical evaluation of a series of dogmas. The belief in the power of the human mind to mirror reality exactly as it is was one of these dogmas.

KEYWORDS: antirepresentationalism, pragmatism, corespondence theory of truth, presupposition

I. Introduction

The approach provided by the correspondence theory of truth was regarded for many centuries as the correct and 'obvious' position in the problem of truth. For a long time no thinker doubted the validity of this theory. The postulate "a proposition is true if and only if it corresponds to a fact" seemed to have the indisputability of a divine commandment. Forced by the epistemic consequences of the distinction between things in themselves and phenomena, Kant is the first

---

philosopher to have questioned the validity and justifiability of the correspondence theory of truth. The German philosopher notes that an epistemic subject can compare an empirical judgment with its corresponding thing only insofar as it is able to *know* the said thing. Thus, the empirical judgment (a second-order representation) is brought into relation not with the object as such, but with a sensible reconstruction of the object (a first-order representation). One can go so far as to say that the judgment of a thing is in concordance with a mental fact (a sensible intuition), and not with the exterior thing. But since the epistemic access to the thing in itself is not possible, we can never know whether the phenomenon corresponds to the thing in itself; consequently, we can never know whether the judgment of an epistemic subject, formulated on the grounds of the 'synthesis of phenomenal data' represents the reality accurately or corresponds to it. As Putnam noted,

> you must not think that because there are chairs and horses and sensations in our representations, that there are correspondingly noumenal chairs and noumenal horses and noumenal sensations. There is not even a one-to-one correspondence between things-for-us and things in themselves. Kant not only gives up any notion of similitude between our ideas and the things in themselves; he even gives up any notion of an abstract isomorphism.[1]

Therefore, the judgments of sensible and rational beings cannot *on principle* be exact representations of things. But if the kantian argument is accepted, the very grounding of the correspondence theory of truth is brought into question.[2]

The chief purpose of this research paper is to establish, in principle, the extent to which a series of first-order antirepresentationalist arguments[3] can destabilise the correspondence theory of truth. Thus, I will first identify and expose the main objections formulated by pragmatist philosophers to the power of representation of the mind. At the same time, I will try to find possible

---

[1] Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge, London, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 63-64.

[2] The connection between the epistemology of representation and the correspondence theory of truth is also emphasised by Habermas: "The concept of knowledge as representation is inseparable from the concept of truth-correspondence. When we discard one of them, we cannot retain the other." (Jürgen Habermas, *Etica discursului și problema adevărului* [*Discourse Ethics and the Problem of Truth*] (București: Editura Art, 2008), 60 – my translation.)

[3] Antirepresentationalist, antifoundationalist and fallibilist arguments make up the core of the pragmatist position in relation to classical epistemology.

perspectives from which to counter these objections. Finally, I will critically evaluate these counterarguments from a second-order, metaphilosophical perspective, and I will try to establish the extent to which this type of counterarguments can be regarded as decisive in the rejection of the correspondence theory of truth. Finally, the point I will try to make is that these arguments are decisive neither in supporting the superiority of the pragmatist theory of truth, nor in proving the failure of the correspondence theory of truth. Actually, we are dealing with two distinct modes of looking at the same problem, two theoretical approaches based on different sets of presuppositions. Yet, from this perspective, we can never argue that a set of presuppositions is better than another. They simply exist, are adopted as being natural or obvious and eventually come to organise the solutions to problems in almost necessary formulae.

II. Types of antirepresentationalist arguments

The pragmatist approach to truth was meant to be, since its beginnings, an alternative to the correspondence theory of truth. Pragmatists devised counterarguments to this theory based on the idea of the impossibility of the epistemic subject to build exact representations of the states of the external world. Rejecting the possibility of representing facts through propositions was equivalent to rejecting the correspondence theory of truth. In the pragmatist philosophy, this idea generated three types of counterarguments to the traditional theory of truth: ontological, epistemic and semantic counterarguments.

The *ontological counterarguments* essentially state that the idea of the existence of an external reality, which can be known as it is, is a metaphysical dogma. Terms and sentences cannot be directly connected to facts, and their reference is left uncertain. Reality remains most of the times inscrutable and therefore sentences cannot correspond to facts. In another, kantian inspired, version, external states of being exist only as conceptual or internal representations of the human mind; consequently, there is no correspondence to facts, but a concordance or coherence between products of the human mind. The mind sooner represents its own internal operations rather than external states of being. Thus, the distinction facts-sentences is itself no longer tenable (being declared a metaphysical residue), and the problem of the possibility of representation becomes a pseudo-problem. Such counterarguments were put forth by W.V. Quine, Hilary Putnam and Donald Davidson.

Secondly, the *epistemic counterarguments* to the representationalist thesis state that the human mind, by means of its cognitive structures, cannot accurately mirror or represent the external world; the sensory input does not have an

epistemic nature and thus cannot serve as a basis for knowledge; the products of human cognition – ideas, judgments or other kinds of 'representations' – cannot correspond to facts. Thus, the problem of knowledge should no longer be regarded as a fundamental problem of philosophy. This type of counterarguments can be found mainly in the work of Wilfrid Sellars, W.V. Quine and R. Rorty.

Semantic counterarguments, the third type of pragmatist counterarguments to representationalism, state that there is no vocabulary or set of sentences which would give us the correct representation or description of a state of being. Each vocabulary is merely an instrument which can give us a simple description of a reality; the decision of 'describing' a fact in a specific vocabulary is made exclusively on pragmatic grounds. The physical world does not speak a certain language and cannot help us decide which vocabulary would be more suitable for describing it. Versions of this counterargument are found mainly with William James and Richard Rorty.

The three types of counterarguments are not strictly delimited, as they are in fact instances of the same antirepresentationalist principle in different theoretical domains. We can even regard each type of counterargument as a consequence of the other two. The critique of the power of representation of the mind or of sentences and the critique of external realism are implicitly or explicitly converted by pragmatists into critiques of the idea of correspondence-truth. In the following paragraphs I will try to identify these arguments throughout the pragmatist philosophy and to emphasise the main objections they engendered. At the same time, I will try to understand the presuppositions these arguments are based on. The relevance of these presuppositions will be discussed in the conclusion of this short research paper.

III. Ontological arguments against representationalism

This type of antirepresentationalist argument states that we are connected in knowledge and speech to our minds to such an extent that the contours of external reality appear to us blurry or inscrutable. The fact that the contours of the world become clearer occurs not due to an adequate representation, but to an effort to clarify one's theories and concepts. Clarity belongs to theories and concepts, not to the world as such. The external world seems irretrievably lost and states of being, inscrutable. The tradition of Western philosophy made 'reality' into one of the obsequious names of God, out of a religious need to worship a non-human power. The antirepresentationalist ontological arguments of pragmatists were devised precisely to free the human mind from the toils of Reality, from the

trap of another divinity. I will trace the way Quine and Putnam developed this type of argument.

In *Word and Object*, W.V. Quine argues that the connection between language and the world is ensured by 'occasion' sentences, meaning that they possess stimulus meanings that are the same for all members of a linguistic community. Occasion sentences, for Quine, "are sentences such as 'Gavagai,' 'Red,' 'It hurts,' 'His face is dirty' which command assent or dissent only if queried after an appropriate stimulation."[4] The main characteristic these sentences have is that their truth varies with momentary sensory stimulations. Yet more individuals can experience the same stimulation because for Quine, stimulations are universals. When is a sentence of this kind understood? Quine's answer comes naturally: a sentence can be understood when the fact that makes it true is identified.[5] However, the problem of identifying the said fact is not that simple. On the one hand, it seems possible to identify the fact corresponding to an occasion sentence by means of identical sensory stimulations. On the other hand, the problem of identifying the facts corresponding to standing sentences (sentences that do not change their truth value with different sensory stimulations) is almost insolvable. As we shall see, understanding such an utterance and, ultimately, the fact it represents is impossible without understanding the theoretical framework that makes it possible.

The theoretical consequence of the famous experiment of radical translation in *Word and Object* is the thesis of the inscrutability of reference, fundamental in rejecting representationalism from an ontological perspective. The linguist's translation of the expression 'Gavagai,' uttered by the speaker of a completely unknown language while pointing towards a rabbit, is problematic. 'Gavagai' could mean: 'Rabbit,' "This is a rabbit's foot," but also 'Animal,' 'Rodent' or 'White.' What is the origin of this referential ambiguity? It is the fact that the linguist does not know the 'referential mechanism' or the 'individuation mechanism' (demonstratives, articles, pronouns, the distinction singular-plural etc.) of the language he/she has just got in contact with. The linguist can acquire only a possible stimulus meaning of 'Gavagai' from sensory stimulations. In this case, its translation would have to involve a correlation with non-verbal stimulations (behaviour, context etc.). The stimulus meaning of an utterance or

---

[4] W.V.O. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), 35-36.

[5] W.V.O. Quine, "Mind and Verbal Dispositions," in W.V. Quine, *Quintessence. Basic Readings from the Philosophy of W.V. Quine*, ed. R.F. Gibson, Jr. (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 317.

the meaning acquired from sensory stimulation sums up an individual's disposition to accept or reject the utterance as a response to the stimulation.[6] 'Gavagai' has a correct empirical meaning for the native, but not for the linguist.[7] In other words, 'Gavagai' is an observation sentence referring to a reality that is well determined for the native; on the contrary, it is not clear for the linguist whether the sentence is a perceptual one, and the reference is left opaque. The simple ostensive experiment, uncorroborated with a mastery of the individuation mechanism of the natives' language ('this one', 'the same as…', 'different from…') does not allow the linguist to identify the reference correctly.[8] In a later work, Quine states that the linguist should base his/her attempt at translation not only on stimulus meaning, but also on empathy with the native's experience.[9]

Without going too deeply into the theoretical nuances of the radical translation experiment, we can perceive the reasons leading to the assertion of the *inscrutability of reference*. Rorty believes that Quine's greatest ontological contribution was the dissolution of the fundamental distinction between language and fact.[10]

If the reference is hard to identify, if language is so opaque that the reference becomes inscrutable, if language and reality are 'entities' that cannot be distinguished in order to understand how they relate, then the possibility of representation seems definitively compromised.

In *Reason, Truth, and History*, Hilary Putnam devised an antirepresentationalist argument based on ontological observations. What he tries to demystify is the world as it was thought by the external realist. For the external

---

[6] Quine, *Word and Object*, 34.

[7] The native knows the correct meaning not in the sense that there is an entity in his mind we could call 'the meaning of Gavagai,' whereas in the mind of the linguist that entity is inexistent. In *Ontological Relativity*, Quine says: "To discover the meanings of native of the native's word we may have to observe his behavior, but still the meanings of the words are supposed to be determinate in the native's mind, his mental museum, even in cases where behavioral criteria are powerless to discover them for us. When on the other hand we recognize with Dewey that 'meaning … is primarily a property of behavior,' we recognize that there are no meanings, nor likenesses nor distinction of meaning, beyond what are implicit in people's dispositions to overt behavior." (W.V.O. Quine, "Ontological Relativity," in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 28-29.)

[8] Ilie Pârvu, *Arhitectura existenţei* [*The Architecture of Existence*], vol. II (Bucureşti: Editura Paideia, 2001), 144.

[9] W. V. O. Quine, *Pursuit of Truth* (Cambridge, London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 43.

[10] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of the Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 202.

realist, the world is ready-made, made up of self-identifying things. Things and states are what they are even without the taxonomies of natural scientists. The signs in the mind which stand for a thing have a causal relation to that thing. On the other hand, the internal realist is convinced that signs do not correspond intrinsically to objects. For example, in a mind there can be signs, such as an opinion on electrons, which originates in physics textbooks, not in causal relations to electrons. Thus, it would be absurd to regard the connection signs-objects as intrinsical, unconnected with the one who uses them and with the purpose of using those signs.

> But a sign that is actually employed in a particular way by a particular community of users can correspond to particular objects within the conceptual the conceptual scheme of those users. 'Objects' do not exist independently of conceptual schemes. We cut up the world into objects when we introduce one or another scheme of description. Since the object *and* the signs are alike *internal* to the scheme of description, it is possible to say what matches what.[11]

Therefore, according to Putnam, the objects of the world are rather produced than discovered.[12] We cannot speak of knowing the world 'as it is,' but of a perpetual shaping of its states according to the conceptual schemes we use:

> What I am saying, then, is that elements of what we call 'language' or 'mind' penetrate so deeply into what we call «reality» that the very project of representing ourselves as being 'mappers' of something 'language-independent' is fatally compromised from the very start.[13]

In spite of the fact that the independence of facts from mind and language is compromised, there are experiential inputs to knowledge which science uses. If it were not so, natural science would have been a gratuitous exercise of imagination. But *all* of these experiential inputs to knowledge, according to Putnam, are shaped by our concepts.[14] In this context, to speak about the correspondence of judgments to reality is to adopt the perspective of the divine eye, to believe in the fact that

---

[11] Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, 52.

[12] In *The Many Faces of Realism*, Putnam mitigates his verdict and writes that it would be an exaggeration to say that the mind constitutes the world; the correct thing to say would be that the mind and the world constitute together both the mind and the world. Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (La Salle: Open Court, 1987), 3.

[13] Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1990), 28.

[14] Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, 54.

the states of the world possess an essence which can be known at first hand, without a conceptual mediation.

Davidson pushes the ontological criticism of representationalism even further by abandoning the scheme-content dualism. This dualism, present with Quine and even Putnam, is essential to the idea of representation and to the correspondence theory of truth. The scheme-content dualism, common to the whole Western metaphysical tradition, is built around the principle that conceptual schemes organise reality or the sensible data. The result would be that the world is a sort of chest of drawers (made up by the category scheme) in which clothes are stored (the sensible objects or data). Maintaining the scheme-content dualism leads to Quine's conceptual and ontological relativism. On the other hand, discarding this dualism would result in the dissolution of both ontological and conceptual relativity. Furthermore, discarding this dualism would render irrelevant the problem of representation and undermine the legitimacy of the correspondence theory of truth. According to Davidson, the truth value of sentences does not depend any longer on reference to facts, but on reference to other sentences, this being the maximal objectivity epistemic communities can reach.[15]

Even if the arguments of Quine and Putnam do not coincide in all details, both tell us the same thing: the world of the classical realist, made up of states of things independent of the human mind does not exist for us, as humans; 'the world as it is' can be an object of faith only in classical metaphysics, a mere dogma. And since it is absurd for humans to accept the existence of a world in itself, likewise absurd must be the pretension to represent 'the world as it is,' as well as the pretension to correspond to 'the world as it is.'

Obviously, in their turn, these ontological antirepresentationalist arguments gave rise to criticism and counterarguments. They were accused of promoting a form of solipsism, of replacing one dogma with another (for instance, it purportedly replaced the dogma of 'external reality' with the dogma of 'internal reality'), of perpetuating an unclear relation between experience and theory, between the empirical and language, between sensory stimulation and social convention,[16] of promoting a scepticism of meaning, of being self-contradictory

---

[15] Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in his *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 198.

[16] Noam Chomsky, "Quine's Empirical Assumptions," in *Words and Objections. Essays on the Work of W.V.O. Quine*, ed. Donald Davidson and Jaakko Hintikka (Dordrecht: Reidel Publishing Company, 1975), 66.

etc.[17] As Habermas suggests, ontological relativity may appear because we relate to the world as to a totality of language-determined facts. His suggestion is that the world should be suggested as a totality of things. Things are always the same, only the vocabularies or descriptions we create are different.[18] An objection to Habermas could be that by this he tries to smuggle back in the perspective of the divine eye.

IV. Epistemic arguments against representationalism

For pragmatists, the human mind is an instrument more of building and sustaining arguments than mirroring states of being. The epistemic antirepresentationalism adopted by pragmatists is based on the fact that humans cannot leave their own finite and perspectival minds when they know. Any item of knowledge benefits from a sensory input which is shaped and processed by the structures, categories or theories inherent to the human mind. From a pragmatist perspective, this sensory input cannot be regarded as a foundation for knowledge because a sentence can be based only on other sentences. An empirical sentence (a sentence on a fact) can be coherent only with other sentences, not with the fact as such; as Wilfrid Sellars argues, judgments, as epistemic entities, cannot be reduced to data on facts given by the senses, to non-epistemic entities. Therefore, we can never tell to what extent a sentence represents or corresponds to a real fact.

In Wilfrid Sellars's version, this argument takes the shape of criticism of the myth of the 'given.' Traditional epistemology – be it Cartesian or logic emipiricist – regarded as uncritical the distinction between what is inferred about a thing and what is given in the direct experience of that thing.[19] The given, in all its various

---

[17] In this respect, it would be useful to remember one of Graham Priest's comments on Quine. Undoubtedly, the most dramatic consequence of Quine's argument is that "the idea that one refers determinately to objects in talking must be given up." Yet asserting this position leads to a contradiction: "Objects in the world transcend anything we can determinately refer to in speaking. Yet, patently, Quine does refer to rabbits, rabbit parts, and other objects in his ruminations on reference. Even a skeptic about sense would be hard-pressed to deny this. Indeed, even to claim that one cannot refer determinately to objects presupposes that we can refer to those objects (and not to undetached object parts) to say what it is that we cannot refer to. Thus we have a contradiction at the limits of expression..." (Graham Priest, *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 220-221.)

[18] Habermas, *Etica discursului și problema adevărului*, 59.

[19] Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 13.

forms, refers to 'that which is unmediated,' 'that which is present,' the content of sensory data, sentences, relations, particulars, universals or primary principles (regarded as objects of unmediated knowledge).[20] For classical philosophers, *the given* is the way the human mind is able to anchor itself in the real world. For instance, our empirical knowledge is valid only because our sensory data represent the perceived facts with maximal accuracy. In other words, sensory data give us 'the world as it is.' All true empirical sentences could be regarded as reductible to a set of sensory data. Consequently, the true opinions on the external world would be its exact representations, mediated by the unmediated data of the senses.

Yet Sellars argues that there can be no cognitive capture of the sensory data without processing, modifying, altering them; the simple presence of perceptual experience has no epistemic value, it does not enable us to know anything. Any 'given' comes to possess an epistemic value only through the intervention of the human cognitive structures, of the concepts. The perception of a state of things has an epistemic value only when accompanied by a judgment on that state, only when its content is categorised through concepts.

> For we now recognize that instead of coming to have a concept of something because we have noticed that sort of thing, to have the ability to notice a sort of thing is already to have the concept of that sort of thing, end cannot account for it.[21]

The contribution of the sensory input to knowledge is not denied by Sellars,[22] but it is altered from that present in the classical picture. *On the one hand*, the sensory input can no longer be the fundamental basis for inferential or logic-conceptual knowledge. Therefore, knowledge can make no claim any longer to the status of objective, precise representation it had in the classical empiricist picture due to the certainty of the given. *On the other hand*, the sensory input is altered or 'coloured' in any act of knowledge by our conceptual structures, thus making its purity and its nature of 'given' become doubtful. After all, the 'given' is a sort of philosophical 'legend,' a legend that embodies the ambition of traditional

---

[20] Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, 14.

[21] Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, 87.

[22] In this regard, Sellars is explicit: "If I reject the framework of traditional empiricism, it is not because I want to say that empirical knowledge has no foundation." (Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, 78.)

epistemology to evince ultimate sources and grounds for knowledge.[23] In brief, the epistemic connection to facts is impossible because the sensory data or facts are not epistemic entities and thus can be neither represented, nor taken as grounds for knowledge or truth conditions of sentences.[24]

Quine's theoretical position is close to Sellars'. This position, generated by his holistic theory of meaning, points towards two interrelated problems: *the translation of a theoretical sentence* and the *subdetermination of theories*. In his famous radical translation imaginary experiment, Quine raises the question of translating not only occasion sentences, but also theoretical (standing) sentences. While occasion sentences can be translated on the grounds of connecting stimulus meanings to behaviours, theoretical sentences can be understood only if one understands the background theories guiding the judgments and behaviour of the natives. In other words, these sentences are not directly rendered true by sensory stimulations, but only by connections with other sentences (which are not directly in contact with sensory stimulations). If the linguist interested in speaking that language could learn enough from the vocabulary and grammar of the natives' tongue, but would also understand the set of theories tacitly adopted by the natives, he/she could translate in his/her own language almost every utterance produced by the natives. If one day somebody told him "Come quickly, a demon has got into Oio-Oio," the linguist could translate this utterance by "Oio-Oio has an epileptic seizure. I must try to help him." The translation was not literal, but it was

> paraphrasing the native's utterance about the demonic possession with one's own, about the epileptic seizure; even so, the function of communication of the language was perfectly accomplished, and both actors of the speech act behaved as the others expected.[25]

---

[23] William S. Robinson, "The Legend of the Given," in *Action, Knowledge and Reality. Critical Studies in Honor of Wilfried Sellars*, ed. H.-N. Castaneda (Indianapolis: Bobs-Merrill Company, 1975), 83.

[24] In the matter of the truth problem, Sellars comes close to the solution envisioned by Peirce: the truth is that which is eventually accepted by everyone examining a certain problem which generates doubt. See Wilfrid Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, New York: Humanities Press, 1968) 116-150.

[25] Ion C. Popescu, *Corabia lui Tezeu sau empirismul fără dogme* [*The Ship of Theseus or Empiricism Without Dogmas*] (Bucureşti: Paideia, 1997), 41-42.

In other words, the success of translating a theoretical sentence depends on the extent to which the linguist succeeds in understanding the theory of the native which explains the 'fact' to which it refers.

One and the same fact can be explained by many theories. In Quine's terms, theories are *subdetermined* by the fact. The linguist succeeds in translating a theoretical sentence not through a mechanical synonymity, by automatically replacing some words, but by trying to discover which of his/her analytical theories could correspond to the theory behind the utterance of the native. The reasons which prevent the two different theories from generating discrepancies in actions, since the linguist and the natives succeed in understanding one another and in acting convergently, should be sought in the fact that both theories are coherent with the same set of perceptual sentences, with the same fact.

We can notice a Kantian, transcendental logic in Quine's reasoning; according to Graham Bird, in *Word and Object* Quine paints a Kantian picture of the conditions of possibility of experience.[26] While in Kant's logic, the a priori forms of the subject, of the sensibility and of the intellect made experience and hence, knowledge, possible, in the philosophical picture presented by Quine, a priori forms are replaced by the set of theories or analytical hypotheses adopted by somebody at a certain time. Only by correlating the sensory given with certain analytical hypotheses, with certain background theories can a sentence be understood and analysed from the perspective of truth.

The pragmatist thinker who succeeded in pushing the epistemic criticism of representationalism to its last consequences was Richard Rorty. As he himself states, his epistemological position is based to a large extent on the ideas of Sellars and Quine. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty tries to demystify the way modern philosophers, as well as logical empiricists, theorised the 'neutral' frame of any epistemic experience. This frame was ensured (and it still is, for philosophers who haven't acknowledged the consequences of pragmatist criticism) by the mind seen as a 'mirror of nature,' as a medium capable to obtain 'privileged representations' of facts. We will be looking at the critical evaluation Rorty performs on the representationalist epistemologies of Locke and Kant.

Rorty blames Locke for confusing justification (the relation between sentences and judgments) and causality (the relation between facts and the sensory data). John Locke forgets the fact that every item of knowledge is ultimately a justified assertion and that there are extremely few situations where

---

[26] Graham Bird, "Editorial Review: Kant and Contemporary Epistemology," *Kantian Review* I (1998): 11.

we take the proper functioning of our body to be *justification* or *grounding* enough.[27] In formulating this objection, Rorty relies on T. H. Green's distinction between an 'element of knowledge' and a 'condition of the body' which allows the acquisition of knowledge. The senses and their proper functioning are purely physiological aspects of the inner workings of a body and not elements of knowledge.[28] And the proper functioning of our senses cannot be regarded as a guarantee for knowledge and sensory data are not epistemically relevant entities.

> Granted that we sometimes justify a belief by saying, for example, 'I have good eyes,' why should we think that chronological or compositional 'relations between ideas' conceived of as events in inner space, could tell us about the logical relations between propositions? [29]

Thus, the logical relations between propositions are not dependent on the relations between sensible ideas or data, which derive from certain physiological or psychic characteristics of the knowing subject. Understanding something about the succession or structure of sensory data does not implicitly mean understanding something about logical, grounding or justificatory relations present between judgments. The analysis of epistemic entities should be made by appealing to other epistemic entities and not by invoking non-epistemic entities.

Rorty tries to explain how 17th century empiricists came to make such an error by saying that they simply did not think of knowledge as justified true belief.

> This was because they did not think of knowledge as a relation between a person and a proposition. We find it natural to think 'what S knows' as the collection of propositions completing true statements by S which begin 'I know that...' (...) But Locke did not think of 'knowledge that' as the primary form of knowledge. He thought, as had Aristotle, of 'knowledge of' as prior to 'knowledge that,' and thus of knowledge as a relation between persons and propositions.[30]

Locke's error is believing that propositions can be justified by facts. But facts get to the mind due to the proper functioning of the senses, yet they have no epistemic relevance. On the other hand, propositions can be justified only by logical relations. And if propositions cannot be justified by facts, then they cannot represent facts and the mind cannot function as a mirror of nature.

---

[27] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 141.
[28] T. H. Green, *Hume and Locke* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1968), 19.
[29] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 141.
[30] Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 141-142.

Kant seems to take an important step away from 'knowledge of' towards 'knowledge that,' replacing Locke's 'ideas' with 'propositions.' Yet, in Rorty's view, Kant is still under the influence of representationalism, the reason being that, instead of bringing to the forefront of his epistemological analyses the judgment or the proposition as a fundamental entity of knowledge, he becomes interested in the psychological mechanism by means of which the components of the proposition make the proposition possible. In order to explain this mechanism, Kant appealed to the synthesis of non-linguistical entities, to a series of internal representations – intuitions and concepts. In other words, building a proposition (a linguistical action) is based on the psychological mechanism of synthesis. But grounding a proposition on a psychological representation is an epistemological absurdity. According to Rorty, logical empiricists make a similar error.

These antirepresentationalist arguments were challenged in their turn because they alledgedly lead to epistemic relativism and scepticism, denied the contribution of sensory experience to the forging of scientific knowledge, dismissed inductive logic as a part of the scientific logic, denied that observation sentences are connected to facts, or took epistemology on a road leading to a confusion of truth with justification or assertability etc.

V. Semantic arguments against representationalism

This type of argument is based on the idea, defended by Dewey and Wittgenstein, that language is not an image of reality, but a sort of collection of tools with multiple uses. Consequently, by its very nature, language is not meant to describe facts; language overflies reality, passes over facts, pointing to them rather vaguely in a conversational context. Language does not have a vocabulary capable of 'engaging a dialogue' with real states of things; the reason is simple: reality does not 'speak' a language with a vocabulary. In other words, the descriptive power of language is more a myth than a real property. And if facts cannot be captured in sentences, they cannot be represented, either.

An early version of this argument is found with William James. In his sixth and last 1906 conference, held at the Lowell Institute, Boston, William James accepted that truth is a property of ideas in agreement with reality. Up to this point, his view on truth seemed close to that of the correspondence theory of truth. James believes that the differences between his point of view and that of the supporters of the correspondence theory of truth emerge when the meaning of the terms 'agreement' and 'reality' is specified. The supporters of this theory, according to James, do not succeed in being analytical enough in specifying what this 'correspondence' or 'agreement with reality' is. From his point of view,

sentences referring to facts never become veritable copies. James gives an example: let us think of the idea we have about a clock on a wall. This idea is about the clock's dial, not so much about its mechanism:

> But your idea of its 'works' (unless you are a clock-maker) is much less of a copy, yet it passes muster, for it in no way clashes with the reality.[31]

If the idea we have about a clock could copy reality accurately, it should reflect all the parts that make up the clock mechanism, as well as the way they work together. But this does not happen, and our ideas fail sistematically in copying or representing the object to which they refer. Thus, our idea about a fact does not accurately reflect the structure of that fact, it does not correspond to it precisely, but rather functions as a pointer, and most of the times a vague one at that. The idea about a fact points to that fact, acts as a guide towards the fact, but rarely does it say anything specific about the fact. This idea has a pragmatical value, it is a kind of convention accepted in the communicational and actional interactions between the members of a community. The more an idea enables the orientation of the members of a community in their actions, the better it guides towards a fact, the bigger the chances are for it to be designated as true. But merely designating a name as true does not equal its being considered a faithful representation of the fact to which it guides.

On the trail of James, Wittgenstein II and Davidson, Richard Rorty adopts an iconoclastic position in the understanding of language and truth: language does not have a privileged relation with the states of the physical world; moreover, an epistemic subject does not take a decision regarding the truth of a judgment based on the signs of the physical world. Truth is a property of linguistic entities, like sentences. And as sentences are made, created, so are truths. Heedful of Davidson's ideas, Rorty argues that language is neither a medium of representation of the external world, nor a medium of self-expression.[32] The physical world (or our own self) does not possess an essence that would allow its disclosure or representation only with the help of a special vocabulary. Furthermore,

---

[31] William James, "Pragmatism," in *William James. Writings 1902-1910* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 1987), 573.

[32] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 11.

the world does not provide us with any criterion of choice between alternative metaphors, that we can only compare languages or metaphors with one another, not with something beyond language called 'fact'.[33]

The vocabularies of physics or biology, according to Rorty, are not closer to the 'things in themselves,' and even less 'dependent on the mind' than those used by, for instance, contemporary cultural criticism.[34] In fact, language is a collection of vocabularies, none of them having any privileged status. Alternative vocabularies are rather a type of alternative tools than steps or parts of a special, super unified vocabulary, capable of supplying an accurate representation of reality.[35] Each vocabulary can be a good tool for formulating and solving a specific type of problem.

Language does not have a specific function, of describing states of being and it does not have rigid rules, a purpose, or an essence. Davidson's theoretical principle on which Rorty establishes his position is this:

> There is no such thing as language, not if a language is anything like what many philosophers and linguists have supposed. There is therefore no such thing to be learned, mastered, or born with. We must give up the idea of a clearly defined shared structure which language-users acquire and then apply to cases. And we should try again to say how convention in any important sense is involved in language; or, as I think, we should give up the attempt to illuminate how we communicate by appeal to conventions.[36]

If language does not possess a structure allowing it to represent facts, there can be no sentences corresponding to facts. There are true sentences, only that their truth is not established in reference to facts, but in reference to other sentences other people believe. And since truths depend on sentences, since sentences depend on vocabularies and since vocabularies are created by people, then truths are also created by people. It is not the world that decides on the truth of sentences, but the skill of people joining sentences together to build arguments in their support.

This type of argument could be blamed for semantic relativism, for denying the descriptive capacity of the language of natural science or for trying to reduce

---

[33] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 20.

[34] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 16-17.

[35] Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 11.

[36] Donald Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs," in *The Philosophy of Language*, ed. A.P. Martinich (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 475.

something fundamental (the logical operations of reason) to something less fundamental (the linguistic practices of a community – using a vocabulary or a language).[37]

VI. Philosophical presuppositions and the answers to the problem of truth

After surveying and analysing the main types of pragmatist arguments against the representationalist position, it is only natural that we should ask ourselves whether these arguments can decisively undermine the correspondence theory of truth. In fact, this is how one should judge: since the human mind cannot represent accurately states of things, then the possibility that sentences may correspond to facts is compromised. If we accepted this conclusion, we should also accept that the correspondence theory of truth is compromised. Yet a judgment like this would be totally inadequate. The reason does not pertain so much to the solidity of antirepresentationalist arguments, as to the fact that most of these arguments are based on different presuppositions than the ones on which the correspondence theory of truth is based. The presuppositions in themselves are neither true, nor false, but they confer meaning and a certain configuration to a philosophical (or scientific, artistic etc.) position. The tenets of the correspondence theory of truth make sense only if we accept the fundamental presuppositions of this theory, just as the tenets of the pragmatist theory make sense if we accept the fundamental presuppositions of this theory. By laying side by side the presuppositions on which the two approaches to truth are based, the differences will become more clearly apparent. I hope that the differences on the level of the presuppositions will clarify the differences on the theoretical level. Moreover, I will hopefully render transparent the causes which generated criticism on both sides, as well as the reason for which these criticisms are not decisive in abandoning the classical position.

The traditional approach to truth, the correspondence theory of truth, is based on the following presuppositions: (A) Truth has a nature or an essence which a theory of truth should evince and explain; (B) There is an ontological fissure between sentences or utterances, on the one hand, and things, states of being or facts, on the other; (C) States of things are independent of the human

---

[37] Thus, according to Thomas Nagel, "Looking for the ultimate explanation of logical necessity in the practices, however deeply rooted and automatic, of a linguistic community is an important example of the attempt to explain the more fundamental in terms of the less fundamental." (Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 39.)

mind and its inner workings, but it has a structure that can be understood by the human mind; (D) The human mind works as a mirror of reality; the main functtion of language is to represent states of things; (E) Truth is the name of a relation between sentences and states of things; (F) In a way, facts and states of things compel us to consider some sentences true and others false; (G) There is a single true description of a state of things, the one that captures its structure; the human mind can reach a situation which would allow it to make the correct (ultimate, true) description of a state of things; (H) On principle, a correct and complete description of the whole reality is possible.

On the other hand, the presuppositions of the pragmatist theory of truth – most of which were valid in the previously analysed argumentative sequences – are the following: (a) Truth has no essence or specific nature or, at best, they are not problems worthy of attention; (b) The philosophical investigation of truth should not seek to answer the question "What is the nature or the essence of truth?"[38]; (c) The essence is rather a philosophical construct, a product of the thirst for homogeneity of classical metaphysicians; (d) The world exists for individuals only as an epistemic given, as an internal reconstruction, as reality in the mind of the epistemic subject; (e) No clear lines can be drawn between concepts and facts; (f) Language does not have a specific function (of describing reality or self-expression); (g) Processing the sensory data is by default equivalent to *distorting* it through concepts and theories; (h) The world cannot compel us in any way to accept a sentence as true; (i) Truth is a kind of coherence between opinions. Most of these presuppositions were valid in the antirepresentationalist arguments examined in the previous sections. They are not properly justified anywhere in the pursuits of pragmatist philosophers, but they are the sometimes unseen pillars of their theoretical attitude towards the impossibility of representation and overcoming truth as correspondence to facts.

The pragmatist theory of truth is an alternative to the correspondence theory of truth not in the sense that it brings fair counterarguments, but in that it build its position (and, implicitly, its counterarguments to the correspondence theory of truth) based on other presuppositions, other evidences. The merit of those who defend this theory is that perhaps they are less inclined to accept

---

[38] Rorty's opinion is that "'The nature of truth' is an unprofitable topic, resembling in this respect 'the nature of man' and 'the nature of God,' and differing from 'the nature of the positron,' and 'the nature of oedipal fixation.' But this claim about relative profitability, in turn, is just the recommendation that we in fact say little about these topics, and see how we get on." (Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 8.)

certain presuppositions as dogmas. In criticising the presuppositions or dogmas of the classical theory, they became more aware of the risk of uncritically accepting a theoretical position. Antirepresentationalist arguments had the undeniable merit of making us understand that the idea of a mind which, by its nature, mirrors or represents states of being is not self-evident. Likewise, the idea of founding knowledge on facts, on non-epistemical entities is not self-evident.

After all, pragmatism proposes a shift in the 'philosophical attention' towards another *Gestalt*, towards another theoretical configuration. Realism and pragmatism are different theoretical attitudes configured by the adoption of different presuppositions. The question "Which approach to truth is legitimate and correct?" presupposes a sort of hierarchical monocentrism of philosophical approaches that is not at all legitimate. Theoretical solutions to the problem of truth are alternate, but not in the sense that they are better than others or that all theories are equally good. They are alternate because they are generated by different sets of presuppositions. From this perspective, as they belong to different philosophical traditions,[39] they are incommensurable and reciprocally opaque. If this is indeed the case, then we can neither tell which approach is better, nor say that they are equally good. But, since reason is neither realist, nor pragmatist, arguments and counterarguments can be devised and assessed. Yet we cannot find objective standards which would allow us to decide which configuration of presuppositions will lead to a more workable theory of truth. We cannot build a theoretical position without presuppositions or one which would neutralise the presuppositions of different approaches under discussion. Examining a problem from another perspective than the traditional one – in this case, the idea of representation, fundamental to the correspondence theory of truth, from a pragmatist perspective – is eventually a *therapeutical* undertaking. Finally, such an

---

[39] I am using the expression 'philosophical tradition' in a sense close to that of 'research tradition', used by Larry Laudan to explain the system of representations more or less tacitly accepted by scientists who have been or are working in the field of the same science: "A research tradition is a set of general assumptions about the entities and processes in a domain of study, and about the appropriate methods to be used for investigating the problems and constructing the theories in that domain." (Larry Laudan, *Progress and its problems. Toward a Theory of Scientific Growth* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1977), 81.) While research traditions, depending on the theories developed in their midst, can be confirmed or disproved, philosophical traditions can only prove to be more or less fertile. In any case, the emergence of another philosophical tradition is not equatable with the *disproof* of the present philosophical traditions, but a 'shift of vision' towards another significant *Gestalt* of presuppositions.

undertaking guards us from dogmas by showing that a certain perspective in thinking a problem is neither natural, nor self-evident. By looking through the pragmatist lens at the presuppositions of the classical theory of truth, we understand how little obvious its tenets are. And this is precisely the main philosophical benefit: bringing into critical discussion theses that were traditionally accepted without any critical evaluation.