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Olsson, Erik J

*Published in:*  
Synthese

2015

*Document Version:*  
Peer reviewed version (aka post-print)

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Olsson, E. J. (2015). Engel vs. Rorty on Truth. *Synthese*.

*Total number of authors:*  
1

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00



## Engel vs. Rorty on Truth

Erik J. Olsson

**Abstract:** My concern in this paper is a debate between Pascal Engel and Richard Rorty documented in the book *What's the Use of Truth?* Both Engel and Rorty problematize the natural suggestion that attaining truth is a goal of our inquiries. Where Rorty thinks this means that truth is not something we should aim for at all over and beyond justification, Engel maintains that truth still plays a distinct (conceptual) role in our intellectual and daily lives. Thus, the debate between Engel and Rorty ends in a standoff. In the present paper, I question the claim that truth is not a goal of inquiry. I do so from the point of view of a systematic and general theory of rational goal-setting which has its roots in management science. I argue, in this connection, that Rorty's central claim rests on a principle of goal-setting rationality that is generally invalid. The bottom line is that the goal of truth, like other visionary goals, is likely to have the positive effect of increasing motivation and effort, and this may offset the drawbacks which Rorty, rightly, calls attention to. In largely following Rorty in this regard, Engel is making one concession too much to his opponent.

### 1. Introduction

I would like to start by paying tribute to Pascal Engel's great contribution to analytic philosophy in France, where he has been for a long time a leading analytical philosopher, as well as in Europe at large. Trained in the continental school, he at some point converted to analytic philosophy and has remained an enthusiastic devotee ever since. No doubt his change in view was in part caused by an insider's realization that intellectual anarchy looms if central distinctions such as that between true and false, rational and irrational, objective and subjective are neglected – a failure for which some French thinkers like Derrida and Foucault have demonstrated a particularly tragic disposition.

On a personal note, my first encounter with Pascal must have at one of the many workshops he arranged in the 1990s at the Sorbonne, at the time a center for the continental school thought, as part of his persistent efforts to introduce analytical philosophy in his home country. I am greatly indebted to him for repeatedly inviting me to give talks in this stimulating setting although at the time I was a doctoral student and not an established

researcher. Since then I have had the privilege to meet and discuss with Pascal on many occasions as well as to enjoy his friendship and kindness.

I turn now to the actual topic of this article. In a stimulating little book entitled *What's the Use of Truth?*, edited by Patrick Savidan, Pascal Engel and Richard Rorty engage in a debate which, according to an observer quoted on the back cover, “starts off in university tweed and ends up in a street fight”. It is not difficult to foresee that there should be a certain philosophical tension between the two because their intellectual trajectories could hardly have been more divergent. Where Engel converted from continental to analytic philosophy, Rorty made the opposite intellectual journey. From Engel’s perspective Rorty must be something of an intellectual conundrum: how could he, having had the great fortune of being schooled in the analytical tradition in the company of some of its most distinguished American practitioners, even contemplate taking seriously thinkers such as Derrida and Foucault? Similarly, Engel’s decision to distance himself from the continental tradition must appear, from where Rorty stands, as equally incomprehensible and erratic.

After reviewing the Engel-Rorty debate in section 2, I will make, in section 3, the move to invoke, as a vehicle of conceptual clarification and reconstruction, the theory of goal-setting as it has been developed and applied in management science and technology. The benefit of this framework, which may strike the reader as an unlikely source of philosophical enlightenment, is that it in fact provides a standard vocabulary for discussing goal rationality that is richer and more precise than the apparatus typically used by philosophical authors writing on the subject. As I argue, this richness and precision can inform the evaluation of the slippery claim that truth is the goal of inquiry, upon which so much of the Engel-Rorty controversy depends. A concrete illustration is given in section 4 where I consider Peirce’s view on the aim of inquiry as a preliminary to identifying, in section 5, what I take to be Rorty’s central thesis on the subject.<sup>1</sup>

## **2. The Engel-Rorty debate on truth**

The dialogue takes off with a main statement by Engel, the author *The Norm of Truth and Truth*, reflecting on the curious conflict between our general longing for truth, on the one hand, and the deep skepticism regarding that very concept expressed by some intellectuals, on

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<sup>1</sup> Sections 3-5 draw on Olsson (2015).

the other. Engel recalls having observed firsthand the personification of this tension in Foucault (Rorty and Engel 2007, p. 2):<sup>2</sup>

“It always used to astonish me, when I was attending Michel Foucault’s courses at the Collège de France in the 1970s, to hear him explaining to us that the notion of truth was no more than an instrument of power, and that, since all power was bad, truth could only be the expression of some malign intent, and then see him marching in demonstrations under banners bearing the slogan Truth and Justice.”

Engel proposes, tentatively, that intellectual skepticism regarding truth does not concern its role in our daily affairs but rather Truth as a metaphysical concept: “We dislike preachers who speak in the name of Truth, but we pay attention to everyday truths, like the ones in the periodic statement of our bank balance” (p. 3). But, he asks, what is the concept we are meant to reject and what is the concept that can supposedly still cling to? And is it really coherent to reject the one while retaining the other?

One could ask the further question: why engage with Rorty on these matters? As Engel notices, Rorty has defended ideas similar to those expressed by Derrida, Foucault and others but without succumbing to their abstruse prose and literary ambitions, writing in the more accessible and systematic style of the analytical philosopher he used to be. Where Derrida and Foucault simply state their views, one finds in Rorty’s work explicit arguments much to the same effect, drawing on American pragmatists like William James and John Dewey but also on broader thinkers like Quine, Davidson and Sellars. As Engel observes, “Rorty claims a place in the American pragmatist tradition”, adding that “his pragmatism is very different from that of the founder of this current, C. S. Peirce”. In a later section, I will problematize the last statement. Although it is indeed true that Rorty’s pragmatism is in many ways different from Peirce’s, both denounce the idea that truth figures essentially in the goal of inquiry, and they do so for very similar reasons, or so I will argue. Finally, because of his background “Rorty knows exactly what he is talking about when he discusses the thesis of analytic philosophy” (p. 5) increasing the prospects of a fruitful and informed debate.

Engel proceeds (pp. 6-8) to describe what he takes to be Rorty’s view on truth, as summarized in the following catalogue:

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<sup>2</sup> Page references are to *What’s the Use of Truth?* unless otherwise indicated.

- 1) The notion of truth has no explanatory use and does not cover any essence or substance or designate any profound substantial or metaphysical property or any object (the True).
- 2) The traditional correspondence or realist theory of truth is “devoid of meaning”.
- 3) The debates between realism and antirealism are “hollow”.
- 4) There is no distinction to be made between truth and justification, and the latter “is nothing other than agreement among the members of a group or a community, and there is no ultimate, final agreement or ideal convergence of statements”.
- 5) The concept of truth being empty, truth cannot be a norm of scientific or philosophical inquiry or an ultimate goal of our search. A fortiori, neither can it be a value.
- 6) We cannot hope for a naturalist, reductionist theory of representation and reality.
- 7) Rather than objectivity and truth, the values that are to be pursued are those of solidarity, tolerance, liberty, and a sense of community.

As Engel notices, Rorty relies in his argumentation on a deflationist or minimalist theory of truth, according to which the legitimate uses of the word true are exhausted by the following list:

- a. an endorsing or performative use as in “your belief is true”
- b. a cautionary use as when one says “your belief is justified but it is not true”
- c. a disquotational use in the sense of the Tarski equivalences (“p is true” is true if and only if p”)

Engel gives a detailed account of where he thinks he and Rorty advocate different views. This is not the place to give a complete coverage of Engel’s intricate argumentation. Rather, I will be mainly concerned with claims 4) and 5) above, i.e. on Engel’s reasons for rejecting Rorty’s theses that truth and justification are in a sense indistinguishable and that truth cannot be the goal of inquiry.

The rejection of what he calls the “argument from indistinguishability” plays a central role in Engel’s critical reflections on Rorty. As an “initial response”, Engel suggests the following indirect approach. Suppose it were true that the words true and justified (or warrantably assertible) mean the same thing.

“If that were the case, the negation of a statement would be the same thing as the affirmation that it is not warrantably assertible. But to say that the Loch Ness monster does not exist is not the same thing as saying that it is not warrantably assertible that the Loch Ness monster does not exist.” (p. 19)<sup>3</sup>

Engel proceeds, in his second line of criticism, to concede that there is a close link between justification and truth, but this link, he claims, is not one of identity (ibid.).

“When one has reasons, guarantees, or justifications for believing that P, these are justifications for believing that P *is true*. But this does not entail that saying ‘I am justified in believing that P’ and saying ‘P is true’ signify the same thing. On the contrary, this shows that, when one has reasons to assert or believe a proposition, one has reasons to believe that it *is true*. One cannot therefore maintain that *true* and *justified* convey the same thing, since justified *presupposes* the very notion of truth.”

Yet, Engel may have misinterpreted Rorty on this particular point. As I understand him, Rorty is not claiming that justification and truth can be strictly speaking identified. The point is rather that once we are in possession of the one, we cannot tell the difference between that situation and one in which we are in possession of the other. At the end of his response to Engel’s first statement, Rorty clarifies his position thusly: “I am perfectly ready to admit that one cannot identify the concept of truth with the concept of justification or with any other”, adding that “this is not a sufficient reason to conclude that the nature of truth is an important or interesting question” (p. 45). In Engel’s favor, it should be noted that Rorty was not always this explicit about the content of his actual thesis.

Finally, Engel considers the possibility of a collective brainwashing, asking “would we say in that case that our beliefs were justified in relation to one audience but not in relation to another?” (p. 20) His answer is negative: instead “we would say that our beliefs are justified but false” (ibid.). In response, Rorty could probably agree that, in the case of collective brainwashing, we would say that our beliefs are justified but false. It is only that he would reinterpret these words in a way that does not refer to truth or falsity. This is also what I take to be the gist of actual Rorty’s response to this particular point, in which he does little more than restate his position.

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<sup>3</sup> A more detailed version of this argument is given by Crispin Wright (1994), pp. 19-21.

I am inclined to think of the subsequent discussion of Rorty's rejection of truth as being a goal of inquiry as a central part of Engel's critique (pp. 22-30). In this connection, Engel ascribes to Rorty the following argumentative chain:

A. If there is a truth as norm or goal of inquiry, then there must be a real property in it such as "the truth of our assertions".

B. There is no real property of this kind.

C. Thus there is no truth as norm or goal of inquiry.

But premise A is false, Engel thinks, "because the fact that there does not exist a property such as the correspondence between our utterance and reality does not entail, from the point of view of inquiry, that we are not seeking to attain a certain objective" (p. 22). In other words, "[t]he notion of a norm does not presuppose the existence of the property in question or its reality" (p. 23). This seems to me to be on the right track. However, it should be borne in mind that Engel concurs with Rorty, perhaps merely for the sake of the argument, that truth is not a goal of inquiry in a "profound" sense of being a Supreme Value (p. 23). Rather, what Engel has in mind is "the relatively innocent sense in which we say that our beliefs aim at truth because it forms part of the concept of belief that if we discover that one of our beliefs is false we try to change it" (ibid.).

This is a point where I believe that Engel may be conceding too much to Rorty. While I acknowledge that our practice of belief is governed by the norm mentioned by Engel, I will argue below that Rorty's, and before him Peirce's, argument to the effect that there is no profound sense in which truth is the goal of inquiry is unconvincing, or even in a certain sense refutable. However, because the matter is delicate and philosophical pitfalls abound we need to approach it more systematically than is typically done.

### **3. A general theory of goal-setting rationality**

Goal rationality has been studied extensively in management theory, where it is central in so-called MBO, an acronym standing for Management By Objectives (e.g. Mali, 1972). This has led to the development of a common approach, codified in the acronym SMART, according to which goals should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound. This theory has been refined and systematized by Sven Ove Hansson and his research group at the Royal Institute of Technology (KTH) in Stockholm (e.g. Edvardsson and Hansson, 2005). In



the following, I will refer to the framework developed by Hansson et al as SMART+, signaling that it represents an updated, philosophically more sophisticated, version of the original SMART conditions. (This is my terminology, not theirs.) The KTH group has used the theory in its study of environmental (Edvardsson, 2004) and transport objectives (Rosencrantz et al, 2007).<sup>4</sup>

The thesis that a theory originating in management science could have any bearing whatsoever on a philosophical issue as sublime and profound as that of truth may seem shocking to some. I intend to prove this argument from guilt by association wrong. It is only from an implausible “first philosophy” standpoint that one could object to philosophy being informed by other parts of science. For an epistemological naturalist like myself, there is no problem in principle with borrowing ideas and concepts from other fields if there is some concrete hope that greater clarity can thereby be achieved. From this perspective, management science seems to be as good a field as any other.

A goal is typically set for the purpose of achieving it. We will say that a goal is *achievement-inducing* if setting it furthers the desired end-state to which the goal refers. Thus the goal of becoming rich is achievement-inducing (for me) if my setting that goal makes it more likely that I will in fact become rich, e.g. by inspiring me to focus on accumulating wealth, which may eventually lead to my actually becoming wealthy. As a first approximation, a goal G is achievement-inducing for a subject S just in case the probability that S attains the goal G is increased by S setting herself the goal G, i.e., in semi-formal terms, just in case  $P(S \text{ attains the goal } G \mid S \text{ sets herself the goal } G) > P(S \text{ attains the goal } G)$ .

Edvardsson and Hansson proceed to use the notion of achievement-inducement to define the concept of goal *rationality*: in their view, a goal is rational if it performs its achievement-inducing function (sufficiently) well. This is a satisficing rather than an optimizing notion of rationality (Simon, 1956). Evidently, in order to be achievement-inducing and therefore, on this proposal, rational a goal should guide as well as motivate action. One could also argue that rational goals serve to coordinate actions among several agents, but that aspect will not play any major role in the following.

There is certainly more to be said about this proposed concept of goal rationality. First, as it stands it begs the question against visionary goals such as “world peace” or, in general, goals

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<sup>4</sup> The account of SMART+ in this section draws mainly on Edvardsson and Hansson (2005). The reader is advised to consult that paper for additional references.

that cannot be fully attained. An example from Swedish transport policy is the so-called “vision zero” goal stating that, in the longer run, no one should be killed or seriously injured as the effect of a traffic accident (Rosencrantz, Edvardsson and Hansson, 2007). A goal that cannot be attained is not achievement-inducing and is therefore irrational according to the proposed definition. However, there is an obvious way to avoid this untoward result by a suitable redefinition of the concept of achievement inducement. A goal  $G$  is achievement-inducing for a subject  $S$ , on the revised proposal, just in case the probability that  $S$  attains the goal at least partially or, alternatively, at least approaches the attainment of  $G$ , is increased by  $S$  setting herself the goal  $G$ .

Second, achievement-inducement, even in the less demanding sense, cannot be all there is to goal rationality. If it were, the rational thing to do would be to set oneself trivial goals that can be easily attained: poking one’s nose, lifting one’s hand, and so on. The likelihood that I manage to raise my hand if I set myself the goal to do so is very close to one. Goals which are more difficult to achieve, such as getting oneself a solid education, would be dismissed as irrational. However, the proposal does make good sense as a tie-breaking condition in a setting where there are already a number of candidate goals that have been singled out on the basis of other considerations. Faced with a set of goals that are equally attractive in other respects, it is reasonable to select one that is achievement-inducing.

With these clarificatory remarks in mind, what does it mean, more specifically, to say that a goal can guide and motivate action? It is useful at this point to distinguish between three types of criteria of goal-rationality: those related to what the agents *know*, what they *can do* and what they *want to do*. From the first, epistemic perspective, goals should be *precise* and *evaluable*. A goal such as “achieving a better society” fails on the first account, that of precision. That goal is not very useful for guiding action unless supplemented with more precise instructions. There are at least two different aspects of precision: directional and temporal. A goal is *directionally complete* if it specifies in what direction one should go in order to reach the goal. Take for example the goal to substantially decrease the number of unemployed in Sweden. That goal is directionally complete because it suggests in what direction progress towards the goal is to be made. If employment has decreased, then the goal has been approached or achieved, otherwise not. A goal is *temporally complete* if it specifies the timeframe within which it should be attained.

A goal is *end-state evaluable*, moreover, if it is possible to know whether it has been achieved. The goal to reduce a pollutant in the atmosphere to a certain level that is far below what can be measured would fail to satisfy the criterion of end-state evaluability. A goal is *progressively evaluable* if it can be determined how far we are from satisfying it. This property of goals is crucial in determining whether a certain course of action should be maintained, changed or given up. It has also been argued that such feedback enhances the agent's motivation so that she will make an intensified effort to act in ways that further the goal.

For an illustration, suppose my goal is to reach Geneva by the end of the day. In order for that goal to be rational, I must be able to determine whether or not this is the city I am actually in by the end of the day. However, in many situations it is not enough to be able to determine whether or not the goal state has been fully achieved. In the example, I must also be able to tell whether I am travelling in the right direction, and how far I have left to go. In particular, if a goal is distant, or difficult fully to achieve we need to be able to judge the degree of success in approaching the goal. In other words, degrees of *partial attainment* must be distinguishable.

The second aspect of goal rationality concerns what the agent *can do*. It is reflected by the requirement that a goal should be *attainable*, or at least *approachable* (i.e. attainable at least to some degree). The goal to become a wizard (in the sense of a person with true magical powers) would not be classified as attainable or even approachable. There are at least three dimensions of approachability: *closeness*, *certainty* and *cost*. The dimension of closeness is the most obvious one. It concerns how close to the goal it is possible to come. The goal to achieve a perfectly just society is probably not fully achievable, and would therefore qualify as utopian, but it can be approached by acting in ways that increase social justice.

The third aspect of goal rationality is the volitional one. It concerns what we *want to do*. Goals, in order to be rational, should be motivating. Setting ourselves the goal should motivate us to act in a way which furthers the realization of the goal state. The motivation that a goal may give rise to in the agent can be characterized according to degree of intensity or durability. Studies indicate that goals are more action-generating when they are explicit and specific, and that such goals are more likely than do-your-best goals to intensify effort. There is also evidence suggesting that specific and challenging goals lead people to work longer at a task. We have already mentioned a connection between evaluation and motivation: when

people can check how they stand in relation to a goal, their motivation to carry out the task often increases.

An insight into the nature of goal-setting emerging from SMART+ is that the criteria of rational goal-setting may conflict in the sense that the satisfaction of one criterion to a high degree may lead to a failure to satisfy substantially some other criterion. The probably most common type of such conflicts are occasioned by the fact that some of the properties that make a goal action-guiding may at the same time make it less capable to motivate action. Consider, for example, the following two goals (Edvardsson and Hansson, 2005):

- (1) The team shall win 12 out of 20 games with a least a two goal advantage, 3 out of 20 games with at least a one goal advantage, and never lose a game with more than one goal.
- (2) The team shall beat all opponents hands down.

Here, the second goal, though less action-guiding than the first, is plausibly more achievement inducing, and therefore more rational, because of its greater action-motivating capacity.

In general, visionary and utopian goals are more likely to motivate action than less visionary goals, which on the other hand may be more action-guiding. This point is elaborated in Edvardsson and Hansson (2005). The task of goal-setting therefore may very well involve a combination of goals that are action-motivating and goals that are action-guiding. This may lead to the formulation of one single goal reflecting this compromise. However, it is often a better idea to adopt not a single goal but a whole system of goals at different levels. As Edvardsson and Hansson point out: “One way of balancing the criteria so as to optimize goal realization is to adopt goal systems in which goals are set on different levels in order to supplement each other. In this way visionary and highly motivating goals can be operationalized through more precise and evaluable subgoals, or interim targets.” (ibid., p. 359)

On first sight, goal rationality in inquiry seems attractively simple: the goal of inquiry is simply to find the truth. If this were correct, there wouldn't be any need for a theory of goal-setting in this domain. On closer scrutiny, however, considerable complexity emerges. For one, the goal to find the truth does not by itself suggest any very definite course of action; it does not specify in what direction one should go in order to reach the goal, except possibly that one should use a method that is reliable – one that is likely to lead to true beliefs. Still, the goal itself does not indicate what those methods are. In fact, not only directional completeness

but also the other aspects of goal rationality identified in the SMART+ model make good sense as principles governing goal rationality in inquiry, and it is not clear that they are maximized by the goal of truth.

For another example, it would clearly be desirable in science to have a goal that is end-state evaluable in the sense that it is possible to know whether it has been achieved. Once more, the goal of truth is not an obvious candidate. Similarly, we would like scientific goals to be temporally complete, progressively evaluable, attainable, and we would be happy to have goals that exert the proper motivational force on the inquirer. Finally, there seems to be no reason to think that science is devoid of goal conflicts. For instance, the goal of truth could be satisfied by simply adopting a trivial theory, one which is logically true. To avoid this, we need the further goal of informativity. But as many epistemologists have observed (e.g. Levi, 1967), if we decide to adopt both goals as ultimate ends this is likely to lead to a goal conflict since a more informative theory is often less likely to be true. A theory that is very specific regarding the causes of a particular kind of cancer may thereby be less likely to be true than a less committed theory.<sup>5</sup> These remarks will, I hope, suffice as a background and dialectical bridge to the following reconstruction of Peirce's argument to the effect that truth cannot be a goal of inquiry.<sup>6</sup>

#### **4. Peirce on belief as the goal of inquiry**

In a famous essay, Peirce argues that, contrary to the received view, the goal of inquiry is not truth, or true belief, but merely belief or "opinion" (Peirce, 1955, pp. 10-11):

[T]he sole object of inquiry is the settlement of opinion. We may fancy that this is not enough for us, and that we seek, not merely an opinion, but a true opinion. But put this fancy to the test and it proves groundless; for as soon as a firm belief is reached we are entirely satisfied, whether the belief be true or false. And it is clear that nothing out of the sphere of our knowledge can be our object, for nothing which does not affect the mind can be the motive for mental effort. The most that can be maintained is, that we seek for a belief that we shall *think* to be true. But we think each one of our beliefs to be true, and, indeed, it is mere tautology to say so.

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<sup>5</sup> For a related issue and some complications, see Bovens and Olsson (2002).

<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of simplicity and definiteness, I will in the following take "truth" in its objectivist or realist sense as referring to correspondence with an external reality, although I conjecture that much of the reasoning that follows would survive a weakening to "empirical adequacy", or the like.

We recall that, for Peirce, belief or opinion is, by definition, that upon which an inquirer is prepared to act. Hence, Peirce is proposing to reduce the goal of scientific inquiry to the goal of attaining that upon which we are prepared to act.

In the latter part of the quote, Peirce seems to be maintaining that the true state of things does not affect the mind and therefore cannot be the motive of mental effort. But the claim that the facts of the matter do not affect the mind is a counterintuitive one. When I look out the window, I come to believe that there is a tree just 10 meters away. Normally, this belief is caused by the tree, or the fact that there is a tree, which is thus affecting my mind.<sup>7 8</sup>

On another interpretation, Peirce is thinking of objective truth as essentially “mind-independent”. If so, one could be led to think that it follows trivially that objective truth cannot affect the mind, for nothing that is mind-independent can if that is what “mind-independent” means. But this is an irrelevant sense of mind-independence. In a less trivial sense, something is mind-independent and objective if it does not depend entirely on our will. Truth is mind-independent in the latter sense but not in the former. What is true – for example that there is a tree outside the window – does not depend entirely on our will but it is still something that can affect us in various ways, and typically does so through our observations.

Peirce is right, though, in stating that once we believe something, e.g. that there is a tree out there, we cannot, pending further inquiry, distinguish the state we are in from a state of *true* belief. If S believes that p, or believes truly that p, she cannot tell whether she has attained the first goal or the second. She will, from the position of the goal end state, judge that she believes that p just in case she will judge that she believes truly that p. Peirce can be understood as maintaining that this fact alone makes it more rational, or appropriate, to view the goal of inquiry in terms of fixing belief rather than in terms of fixing *true* belief. Is that correct?

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<sup>7</sup> It could be objected that Peirce is here using “truth” in a technical sense, signifying what is collectively accepted by all researchers once scientific inquiry has come to an end. Truth in that sense presumably does not exert any direct influence on a particular mind now. Still, this is an implausible interpretation of Peirce in the present context, as there is no concrete sign that truth should be given any special technical meaning.

<sup>8</sup> As an anonymous referee pointed out, Peirce later in *Fixation* (p. 18) seems to contradict his initial thesis: “There are Real things, whose characters are entirely independent of our opinions about them; those Reals affect our senses according to regular laws, and, though our sensations are as different as are our relations to the objects, yet, by taking advantage of the laws of perception, we can ascertain by reasoning how things really and truly are; and any man, if he have sufficient experience and he reason enough about it, will be led to the one True conclusion.”

Let us look at the matter from a more abstract perspective. We will say that two goals  $G_1$  and  $G_2$  are *end-state evaluation equivalent* for a subject  $S$  if, upon attaining one of  $G_1$  or  $G_2$ ,  $S$  cannot tell whether she attained  $G_1$  or  $G_2$ . Peirce, in the argument under scrutiny, is relying on the following principle:

(Peirce's Principle) If (i)  $G_1$  and  $G_2$  are end-state evaluation equivalent for a subject  $S$ , and (ii)  $G_1$  is logically stronger than  $G_2$ , then  $G_2$  is more rational than  $G_1$  for  $S$ .

Is this principle valid as a general principle of goal rationality? I will argue that it is not. Here is a counterexample:

Suppose that  $P$  is a pollutant that is dangerous to humans and that  $M$  is a device which indicates whether or not the amount of  $P$  in the air exceeds the limits that have been set by an international body. Moreover, there is no other device that can be used for this purpose. However,  $M$  is not fully reliable and it sometimes misfires. Let  $G_1$  be the goal of using the device  $M$  *and* successfully determining whether the air is free of  $P$ -pollution; and let  $G_2$  be merely the goal of using the device  $M$ .  $G_1$  and  $G_2$  are end-state evaluation equivalent for the measuring person  $S$ : upon attaining  $G_1$  or  $G_2$  she cannot distinguish one from the other. Moreover,  $G_2$  is logically entailed by  $G_1$ . It would follow from Peirce's Principle that  $G_2$  is more rational than  $G_1$ . But this conclusion can be questioned. It is true that  $G_2$  is more easily attained than  $G_1$ . But  $G_1$  is surely more inspiring than  $G_2$ ; it is, to use Peirce's own expression, a stronger "motive for mental effort". It cannot, therefore, be concluded that  $G_2$  is more rational, or achievement-inducing, than  $G_1$ . Hence, the principle presupposed by Peirce is plausibly not generally valid. This observation is sufficient to undermine Peirce's argument that the goal of belief is more rational, or appropriate, than the goal of true belief.<sup>9 10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> As an anonymous referee pointed out, true belief can be logically stronger than mere belief only if it can meaningfully be distinguished from it, and Peirce's view might be that we delude ourselves if we assume that there is such a distinction to be drawn. On this interpretation, Peirce is applying here his well-known pragmatic maxim ("Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object"). However, the direct textual evidence does not favor this interpretation. What Peirce writes is, again: "But put this fancy to the test and it proves groundless; for as soon as a firm belief is reached we are entirely satisfied, whether the belief be true or false." Peirce is here clearly distinguishing true belief from mere belief, implying that such a distinction can be drawn, adding that we are satisfied once we have reached the latter whether or not we have also reached the former.

<sup>10</sup> As I holistically reconstruct the argument in *Fixation*, Peirce is asking: how should we determine, in a way that is not question-begging, the best way of settling opinions? Assuming that one should aim at beliefs that are true is obviously question-begging because this is denied by proponents of, say, the method of tenacity, who think

Indeed, the goal of true belief, or the goal of truth for short, does sound more inspirational than the goal of settling belief. Many people, not least those equipped with a scientific mind, will go to almost any length to find the truth of the matter, sometimes even in practically insignificant affairs. Disregarding the special case of religious faith, comparatively few would be willing to incur similar personal and other costs for the sole gain of settling a corresponding opinion.

Apart from the general invalidity of Peirce's Principle, there may be other differences between the goal of belief and that of true belief that are worth attending to. One such factor is a difference in precision. We recall that a goal is said to be directionally complete if it specifies in what direction one should go in order to reach the goal. We have noted that the goal of true belief does not do terribly well on this score. But it might still do better than the goal of belief. For the goal of true belief suggests, albeit imperfectly, that the belief be fixed, not by any old method, but by one that is likely to establish the truth of the matter. This would suggest to the inquisitive mind such things as evidence-gathering, hypothesis-testing, the use of scientific instruments, and so on. The goal of belief does not suggest as vividly any particular course of action. It is compatible with using a wider range of methods, including methods that are not truth-oriented but focus, say, on the systematic disregard of contravening evidence.

Finally, there is a difference between the two goals on the ability dimension, concerning what we can do to approach the respective goals. This is related to the presumed difference in directional completeness. The goal of belief can be approach and evaluated along one dimension only: degree of belief. The stronger our belief is, the closer we are to achieving the goal of (full) belief. The goal of truth, by contrast, can in addition be approach, at least in principle, along the dimension of truth-likeness: the closer we are to the truth, the closer we are to achieving the goal of true belief *ceteris paribus*.

## **5. Rorty on justification as the goal of inquiry**

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that we should hold on to any old belief that comes first to mind. What everyone can agree upon, regardless of method advocated, is only that we want to have beliefs that are stable and do not easily go away, so the main question in Fixation is how this outcome is best achieved. Peirce then concludes, famously, that if one concedes that much, one must hold the scientific method to be superior, as all other methods lead to unstable beliefs. On this holistic interpretation, it is strictly speaking unnecessary to claim, as Peirce initially does, that the settlement of opinion is the sole aim of inquiry. Rather, what he should have stated is that if, in the beginning of the investigation, we agree on nothing else, we must at least agree that everyone values having stable opinions.



After this warm-up on Peirce, I turn now to Rorty himself and an argument presented in a paper from 1995, drawing partly on earlier work (e.g. Rorty, 1986), to the conclusion that truth is not legitimately viewed as the goal of inquiry. This is a conclusion also drawn by Peirce, as we saw, but where Peirce thought that the goal of truth should be replaced by the goal of belief, Rorty proposes that the proper replacement is rather *justified* belief. Apart from this notable difference, their respective arguments are strikingly similar.

The starting point of Rorty's 1995 paper is the following declaration (p. 281):

Pragmatists think that if something makes no difference to practice, it should make no difference to philosophy. This conviction makes them suspicious of the philosopher's emphasis on the difference between justification and truth. For that difference makes no difference to my decisions about what to do. If I have concrete, specific doubts about whether one of my beliefs is true, I can resolve those doubts only by asking whether it is adequately justified – by finding and assessing additional reasons pro and con. I cannot bypass justification and confine my attention to truth: assessment of truth and assessment of justification are, when the question is about what I should believe now (rather than about why I, or someone else, acted as we did) the same activity.

He adds, a few pages later on (p. 286):

The need to justify our beliefs and desires to ourselves and our fellow agents subjects us to norms, and obedience to these norms produces a behavioral pattern that we must detect in others before confidently attributing beliefs to them. But there seems no occasion to look for obedience to an additional norm – the commandment to seek the truth. For ... obedience to that norm will produce no behavior not produced by the need to offer justification.

Thus, in Rorty's view the goal of scientific inquiry is not truth but being in a position to justify one's belief. Rorty, moreover, views justification as essentially unrelated to truth, which in the end is a notion he favors dropping altogether (p. 299). One of the conclusions of his essay is that, on the Dewey-inspired theory which he advocates, "the difference between the carpenter and the scientist is simply the difference between a workman who justifies his action mainly by reference to the movements of matter and one who justifies his mainly by reference to the behavior of his colleagues" (ibid.).

Let us properly dissect this central line of reasoning, drawing on the theory of goal-setting previously introduced. Rorty, as quoted above, is contrasting two goals: the goal of attaining a true belief and the goal of attaining a justified belief. On the reading I would like to highlight, he is offering an argument that is similar to Peirce's argument for the propriety of the goal of belief, but – again – for a slightly different conclusion. Rorty is pointing out that the goal of attaining a true belief and the goal of attaining a (sufficiently) justified belief are end-state evaluation equivalent from the point of view of the inquirer: once the inquirer has attained either of these goals, she cannot tell which one she attained. This much seems true. Yet Peirce's Principle is not directly applicable as it demands that, among the goals under consideration, one goal be logically stronger than the other. The two goals of true belief and justified belief are not at all logically related, at least not as justification is standardly conceived.<sup>11</sup>

Still, the goal of justified belief is plausibly more directionally complete than the goal of true belief, it specifies more clearly in what direction to proceed in order to satisfy the goal, and in the quote above this is a feature that Rorty highlights. On a plausible reconstruction, the general principle underlying Rorty's reasoning, then, is this:

(Rorty's Principle) If (i)  $G_1$  and  $G_2$  are end-state evaluation equivalent for a subject  $S$ , and (ii)  $G_2$  is more directionally complete than  $G_1$ , then  $G_2$  is more rational than  $G_1$  for  $S$ .

But this principle shares the fate of Peirce's Principle of being plausibly generally invalid. Since the problem is similar in both cases, I shall not this time give an explicit counterexample. Suffice it to note that beside directional completeness, there are – as we have seen – several other aspects of a goal that play a part in determining its relative rationality. One such aspect is, to repeat, the motivational one. This aspect is interesting in this context because, as we noted, it often offsets the directional aspect. Goals that are strongly motivational are in practice rarely directionally complete, and vice versa. Thus many are motivated by goals such as achieving “world peace” or “a completely just society” and yet these goals do not *per se* suggest any particular cause of action. Conversely, goals that give detailed advice for how to act tend, as a matter of psychological fact, to be less inspirational.

As we have already noted, the goal of truth, though directionally less complete than the goal of justification, may still be more rational in virtue of its inspirational qualities. Hence, *pace*

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<sup>11</sup> I am here assuming a standard fallibilist account of justification according to which a belief can be justified without being true.

Rorty, we cannot conclude, from the presumed fact that the goal of true belief and the goal of justified belief are end-state evaluation equivalent and the latter more directionally compete than the former, that the latter is also the more suitable aim.

Leaving Rorty's discussion aside, a natural view to adopt concerning the relation between the two goals of true belief and justified belief, from a SMART+ perspective, is that they could very well live side by side, supplementing each other: the goal of truth providing the visionary, motivating factor and the goal of justification playing the more action-guiding part. Drawing on the upshots of section 3, there are *prima facie* two ways of implementing this recommendation. One would be to adopt a system of goals wherein both goals figure, the goal of truth as a high-level goal and the goal of justification as lower-level goal, the latter operationalizing the former. The other way would be to compress the two goals into one goal, that, namely, of attaining a justified true belief. The latter goal amounts, incidentally, to the goal of attaining *knowledge*, as that concept is traditionally conceived.

## **6. Discussion and conclusion**

Reconnecting to the Engel-Rorty dispute, the first point I wish to make, based on the above considerations, is the marginal one that while Engel is right to point out that Peirce and Rorty advocate very different versions of pragmatism in general, they reject the proposal that truth is a goal of inquiry for reasons that are, in fact, strikingly similar. They both rely on an "indistinguishability" principle according to which a subject is unable to distinguish the goal of truth from some other, more mundane goal, an observation which is then taken to speak in favor of the latter as the more legitimate aim to pursue.

More important, I have tried to make likely that Rorty's argument against truth as a goal of inquiry, the force of which Engel seems to concede, possibly only for the sake of argument, is unconvincing from the perspective of the general theory of goal-setting. The main problem is that the argument relies on an empirical thesis which, in its general form, is false or at least controversial: the thesis, namely, that visionary and utopian goals – to which we must count the goal of truth as a special case – do not have additional positive achievement-inducing qualities. The general theory of goal-setting, and the empirical work upon which it partly relies, suggests that the opposite holds: such goals do have such qualities through the increased "mental effort", to borrow Peirce's phrase, which they induce in the subjects entertaining them. They do so to the extent that their disadvantages from a goal-setting perspective are in many cases offset.

To make the point more vivid, consider the following closing statement by Rorty in the debate with Engel (pp. 44-45):

Trying to do the right thing will lead us to do just the same things we would do when we try to justify our actions to ourselves and others. We do not have any way to establish the truth of a belief or the rightness of an action except by reference to the justifications we offer for thinking what we think or doing what we do. The philosophical distinction between justification and truth seems not to have practical consequences. This is why pragmatists think it is not worth pondering.

For a parallel, consider a university which has decided to adopt the strategic goal of producing research of high quality. Since attainment of the goal is difficult to assess in isolation and opinions are likely to diverge, the university leadership has adopted a set of indicators or instrumental goals that are more easily verified: well-cited articles, many articles in peer-reviewed journals, books published by established publishing houses etc. Someone could now argue, along Rortyan lines, that once the indicators have been selected, there is no need to retain the higher level goal on top. For, to paraphrase Rorty, we do not have any other way to establish the quality of our research except by reference to the indicators we offer for thinking that something is of high quality. The distinction between high quality research and what the indicators indicate seems not to have practical consequences, and so pragmatism advises that we should not ponder this distinction. Yet, as I hope we can agree, for the academic staff including the higher level goal may make all the difference in the world from a motivational perspective. Surely, any account that wishes to be reasonably well in line with the broader literature on goal-setting must acknowledge this point. It seems to me that Rorty fails precisely in this regard.

Some of my critics have pointed out that Rorty's work is complex and multi-faceted and that there are relevant aspects of his account that I have not covered.<sup>12</sup> In response, the purpose of this paper has been to isolate one reasonably distinct Peirce-style argument that can be found in some of his work. This argument focuses on the goal of inquiry *per se* without considering its relationship to other goals and possible goal conflicts that might arise in such a wider context. What I have not acknowledged is Rorty's broader criticism of the philosophical

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<sup>12</sup> I am grateful to anonymous referee for stressing this point.

appearance-reality distinction and his claims about goals of truth and objectivity and their relation to various other attractive goals that society might strive for (e.g. Rorty 1998).

Rorty can be viewed, from this perspective, to give a different argument for why we should not set ourselves the goal of attaining truth, the reason being that it allegedly has social or, to use Rorty's characteristic term, "rhetorical" effects that are detrimental to attaining aims such as tolerance and solidarity. Seeking justification rather than truth will humble and humanize us and thereby promote the societal values that Rorty considers to be particularly desirable. Thus, the claim here is that *in the context of certain other goals* we should prefer the goal of justification to that of truth as the overall aim of inquiry because the former is, we are proposed to assume, less likely than the latter to lead to conflicts in our total system of goals.

The two arguments are not unconnected. The latter invites the objection that giving up our commitment to attaining truth may be too high a price to pay for promoting tolerance and solidarity and that we might be better off if we were instead to reconsider or qualify the latter (in addition to questioning the bold empirical premises upon which Rorty's second argument relies). One, perhaps the, role of the Peirce-style argument – which I found to be flawed on goal-theoretic grounds – is to underpin the second argument by suggesting that we would not lose anything in the process because the goal of justification is, in our terminology, as achievement-inducing as the goal of truth without having the latter's alleged rhetorical effects.

Another, related, type of criticism that I have encountered can be found in Kroes (2015), pp. 204-205, in response to Olsson (2015). Kroes initially concedes that the goal of truth has distinctive consequences and, moreover, that they are sometimes positive.

However, in my opinion there is also another, negative side to the coin of aiming for objective truth in case objective truth cannot be distinguished from mere belief, which seriously undermines the claim that it is more rational to go for objective truth than just settling belief as the aim of inquiry. From the perspective of rational goal setting, the worry that I have is a general one, namely, that it may be questioned whether any goal that combines the properties of being highly motivating and being not (fully) end-state evaluable may be a rational goal in the sense of achievement-inducing. Objective truth as a visionary, strongly motivating goal may seduce inquirers to think that they have (partly) attained that goal. Once that is the case, they ... will go to almost any length to defend 'their truth' of the matter and they can do so precisely because the goal of

objective truth is not end-state evaluable or not evaluatively different from less motivating goals.

Kroes (ibid, p. 205) seeks support for his thesis – that the overall effects of setting oneself the goal of objective truth may be negative – not in Rorty but in Thomas S. Kuhn:

According to Kuhn's analysis of science we see this behaviour also in science (Kuhn 1962); some scientists stick to an old paradigm 'no matter what', whereas others 'convert' to a new paradigm. That is the negative side of the coin of aiming for a highly motivating goals that are not (fully) end-state evaluable. Here, Kuhn's analogy with religious conversion is telling; scientists may become dogmatic about their own truth. ... The detrimental effects of the strongly motivating goal of objective truth when it comes to matters of religion are too well known to be spelled out in more detail and suffice to show that, after all, it may not be rational to opt for a strongly motivating goal when that goal is not end-state evaluable or not evaluatively different from less motivating goals.

The thought is that setting oneself the goal of truth may make one more disposed to stick to an old paradigm rather than to convert to a new one, and that this is "the negative side of the coin". According to this interpretation, Kuhn provided a normative account of science whereby staying in one paradigm is negative and partaking in a scientific revolution – a change from one paradigm to another – positive. Kroes is here presupposing what Alexander Bird calls the "standard picture" in his entry on Kuhn in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

If, as in the standard picture, scientific revolutions are like normal science but better, then revolutionary science will at all times be regarded as something positive, to be sought, promoted, and welcomed. Revolutions are to be sought on Popper's view also, but not because they add to positive knowledge of the truth of theories but because they add to the negative knowledge that the relevant theories are false.

As Bird observes, however, Kuhn himself did not subscribe to the "standard picture":

Kuhn rejected both the traditional and Popperian views in this regard. He claims that normal science can succeed in making progress only if there is a strong commitment by the relevant scientific community to their shared theoretical beliefs, values, instruments and techniques, and even metaphysics. This constellation of shared commitments Kuhn

at one point calls a ‘disciplinary matrix’ [Kuhn 1962, 182] although elsewhere he often uses the term ‘paradigm’. Because commitment to the disciplinary matrix is a pre-requisite for successful normal science, an inculcation of that commitment is a key element in scientific training and in the formation of the mind-set of a successful scientist. This tension between the desire for innovation and the necessary conservativeness of most scientists was the subject of one of Kuhn’s first essays in the theory of science, “The Essential Tension” (1959). The unusual emphasis on a conservative attitude distinguishes Kuhn not only from the heroic element of the standard picture but also from Popper and his depiction of the scientist forever attempting to refute her most important theories.

In other words, Kuhn did not take a negative stance toward staying in a paradigm *per se*. On the contrary, paradigms are necessary for successful normal science. Granting for the sake of the argument that the goal of truth makes one more disposed to stay in a paradigm rather than to opt for change, it does not follow from Kuhn’s work that this would be a negative practical consequence of setting oneself that goal. Rather, the goal of truth may, on that hypothesis, have the effect of promoting successful normal science through increased commitment to the underlying paradigm.

Summing up my responses to these critical commentaries, on the account I favor, goal-setting in inquiry is but a special case of a general theory of goal-setting which has been coming out of management science. There is, on this picture, nothing special about goal-setting rationality in inquiry; it follows the same pattern as other kinds of goal-setting. In particular, the emotional impact of a goal, its capacity to increase mental effort, needs to be taken into account in the formulation of appropriate goals of inquiry, just as such impact needs to be recognized in the formulation of appropriate goals for a company, a government, the United Nations, and so on. This account, moreover, “saves the phenomena” in the sense that truth comes out as a plausible goal of inquiry due to the increased motivation and effort induced by that goal. What most of us believed before we read Rorty and other truth-skeptics is something we can, in good conscience, continue to affirm.

### **Acknowledgement**

I would like to express my gratitude to three anonymous referees for their careful reading of earlier versions and for many helpful suggestions.

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