

ASSESSING RICHARD RORTY'S STRAIN OF TRUTH IN HUMAN COMPOSTING

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Abstract

The world is witnessing a cultural shift toward greener death care alternative aside from the normal traditional methods of burials. The traditional conventions of burial have been touted to releasing volatile organic compounds that are toxic to human bioaccumulate tissues as a result of decomposition, while cremation burns fossils and negatively contributes to climate change, at the same time, releasing toxic fumes into the ecosystem. Interestingly though, a group of people mostly in the United States of America known as Recompose Community have decided to explore a more eco-friendly alternative (EFA) or perhaps a more sustainable end of life alternative (SELA). So, human composting becomes a new innovation of disposing the human remains. It is the idea that what is left of us when our spirits depart will be promptly recycled back into the living ecosystem rather than slowly releasing harmful chemicals into the earth. But then, various religious groups express contradictory views on the best method of burying the dead bodies. This contradictions however, dovetail with Richard Rorty's claims that humans are constantly situated within contradictory truth claims and none of these claims can be established with conclusion. I argue therein that if every religion accepts different methods of laying to rest the human remains, it implies that truth is not universal in all circumstances but only finds relevance within one's cultural peers. Truth therefore becomes universal to the universe of human who found themselves within such a universe of universalities. And this, could be extended to imply that the world does not move in a straight line but in a curve and its direction constantly changes.

KEYWORDS: Human Composting, After Life Alternative, Rorty, Truth, Cultural Peers.

INTRODUCTION

Man is naturally inquisitive and this urge has enabled him to delve deep into the afterlife. The reality is that no man has survived death and so, when human life ceases, man harbours various degrees of beliefs as to what happens to him afterward. In this case, man devises various methods or processes that would ensure a peaceful, smooth and seamless transition to the afterlife. Indeed, different religions and people then exhibit their unique way of disposing of human remains. For example, the Christians and African traditional religions perform burial rites, deposit corpses in coffins/caskets before interment. The Muslims immediately wrap the corpse in linen and deposit in a grave while the Indians cremate the body. Whichever option one adopts therefore reinforces the agreed belief within such a community.

Interestingly though, while watching the Eronews on the 16th of December, 2022, there was a (news story) that terrorists had killed about 25 persons including pregnant women in Southern Kaduna, Nigeria and they were promptly given a mass burial. Few minutes thereafter, a reporter began to interview Katrina Spade, the founder of Urban Death Care Project and an advocate of human composting as well as some Catholic priests, Jewish leaders, and few other Doists adherents about their view on human composting- the idea that what is left of us when the spirits depart be recycled back into the living ecosystem. Human composting advocates a return to nature what it has used to sustain us, an ecofriendly death care system. Although each of those interviewed expressed conflicting opinions. The advocates of human composting argued that it is the closest way science will ever get to reincarnation because of its potential to create new life in form of plants that are grown in the human composted materials. They insisted that human composting protects funeral home workers from exposure from high levels of formaldehyde, which has been found to cause myeloid leukemia and other rare cancers. The Catholic priests on the other hand argued that the human body is sacred and the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral society, hence composting our bodies will defile the veil which once harboured our souls. They insisted that there are other environmentally friendly options, like forgoing embalment, cremation or composting and opting to be interred in a biodegradable casket or shroud.

While this was on going, series of questions that needs to be addressed began to crop up in my mind as to what constitutes the best approach to disposing human remains. Does truth depend on the cultural peers? Besides, is there any incommensurable paradigm in various truth claims and what role would Richard Rorty's notion of truth play when placed within the context of human composting?

Understanding the Notion of Truth

The concept of truth is one of the most argued topics in philosophy. It remains a controversial issue in many other sub-disciplines, like Metaphysics, Epistemology, Philosophy of language, logic, philosophy of science, philosophy of religion, philosophy of law and philosophy of mind. In this regard, Glanzberg notes that, “whereas, the central concern revolves around the question of what truth is supposed to be, to begin with, the question regarding the nature of the phenomenon can be divided into many sub-queries including, inter alia:

- i. What sort of things can be called true or false?
- ii. Are there different types of truth?
- iii. How about different degrees of truth?
- iv. Can we ever know truth?
- v. Can our knowledge of truth be verified?
- vi. Does truth change or only interpretations thereof?
- vii. What popular criteria for determining truth are justified?
- viii. Do different languages/cultures understand the concept in the same way?”¹ This foundational questions may however be responsible for the various ways of approaching truth claims.

The Major Theories of Truth

“The theories of truth can be grouped under two headings – ‘substantive’ theories comprising traditional views and ‘deflationary’ theories comprising views that are radically alternative to traditional views”.²

A. Substantive Theories

The three substantive theories discussed below are the realism/correspondence theory, the anti-realism/coherence theory and as well as the pragmatic theory.

- i. Realism/Correspondence Theory: “Realism involves a claim to reference or correspondence. It is a venerable notion that truth is the property of corresponding with reality”.³ As Malpas suggests, “the most common way of understanding truth, and the way that has often been assumed outside philosophy as well as within it, has been to treat it as simply a matter of correspondence between statements or sentences (which may be taken to express, for example, beliefs or particular theoretical claims) and the world or parts of the world”.⁴

According to the classical correspondence theory, “a statement is true just in case it corresponds to a fact, and false just in case it does not correspond to a fact”.⁵ The correspondence theory ‘is simply the proposition that when this or that happens, it really is so and that the statement concerning it is true’.⁶ For the realist, “the meaning of a sentence is given by the conditions that make it true”.⁷ They all use the correspondence theory of truth, that is, they maintain that the “truth of any statement is based on successful reference”.⁸ Realists affirm bivalence, that is, they contend that a “statement is either true or false depending on whether it does or does not correspond to the state of affairs it sets out to describe”.⁹ This theory of truth “claims that a statement is true if it corresponds to the state of affairs that it attempts to describe”.¹⁰

ii. Anti-realism/Coherence Theory: In contradistinction to realism, “anti-realism rejects correspondence and instead maintains that statements are true because they cohere with other true statements made within a particular form of life.”¹¹ In the words of Horwich “A system of beliefs is said to be coherent when its elements are consistent with one another and when it displays a certain overall simplicity. In that case ... the whole system and each of its elements are true. Thus, truth is the property of belonging to a harmonious system of beliefs”.¹²

The coherence theory is one “which measures truths by their “fit” within a given system”.¹³ Anti-realists do not dispute the realist’s contention that truth is a matter of conditions – where they part company is over the question of whether truth conditions may be ‘recognitionally transcendent’.¹⁴ “Anti-realists reject all attempts to make language mirror reality, and instead maintain that truth is essentially a human construct. They reject bivalence but rather assert that truth claims are internal to the community in which these truths are expressed, that is, truth depends on what is agreed within the community and that depends on the rules of the language game, not on dispassionate inquiry”.¹⁵

With many philosophers obviously renouncing the classical correspondence theory, epistemic accounts began in earnest to flourish, affirming that “the truth of a statement does not consist in an external relation to a feature of reality but in its possessing a positive epistemic status within our conceptual scheme or within our experience”.¹⁶

“This theory holds that the truth of a statement consists in its being a member of a comprehensive system of beliefs which is consistent and harmonious.”¹⁷ This consistency and harmonious relationship is nevertheless located within the human communities. Hence, “the basic core of the coherence theory of truth is the conception that beliefs, judgments or whatever truth-bearers are taken to be are ‘true or false according to whether or not they fit in – cohere, with the body of other beliefs or whatever that are true’”.¹⁸ A related term when discussing coherence is verificationism which, simply espouses the view that “the meaning of a word or combination of words is determined by a set of rules which regulate their use”.¹⁹

The coherence theory has uniquely been the theory of truth advanced by the idealists – those who are of the opinion that reality, at least in so far as we can be aware of it, is inherently mental in nature.

iii. **Pragmatic Theory**

The pragmatic theory is indeed a method of attempting to settle metaphysical disputes that otherwise might be wearisomely protracted. “Pragmatic theories of truth insist that there is a close connection between the concept of truth and our human experience and practice”.²⁰ According to the pragmatic maxim, “the meaning of a concept or an idea consists in the practical consequences of its use and truth consists, primarily, in agreement with the world”.²¹ So, the pragmatists’ approach to truth was to find out what difference it makes for a belief to be true. And it approaches every truth claim from an epistemic point of view, which nevertheless incorporates basic elements of coherence.

Pragmatic theories of truth are based on the pragmatist’s conception of meaning, according to which “all meaning is grounded in practice, with all difference in meaning involving some

difference in practice, that is, truth is a matter of fitting in with practice”.²² Pragmatism, as expressed by William James, takes the following view: “True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those we cannot. That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that, therefore, is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known-as”.²³

Deflationary Theories

Deflationary theories are in fact a radical alternative to traditional views as discussed above, and they comprise a family of arguments from those who hold deflationary or minimalist views of truth. According to these views “the concept of truth is a clear and uncontentious concept – one that is philosophically much less interesting than the proponents of robust theories think. The deflationists claim that truth has no substantive role to play in philosophy”.²⁴ Their view is that “a search for a ‘substantial’ theory of truth is due to a misunderstanding, and they dismiss the difficulties besetting such an enterprise as windmills of muddled thought”.²⁵

“Deflationary views of truth deflate the lofty pretensions of more “robust” theories of truth, such as the correspondence and epistemic theories”.²⁶ Deflationary theories of truth “hold that truth is a relatively trivial concept with no important connections with other concepts such as meaning and reality”.²⁷

Various brands of deflationism point to a radical alternative to traditional views. Also notable to the various deflationary views “is the conviction that substantive or robust theories of truth – such as correspondence or coherence or pragmatic theories – are all on the wrong track”.²⁸

According to deflationism, “substantive theories assume that truth has an inner nature, a nature that can be analyzed in epistemic or semantic or metaphysical terms”.²⁹ Deflationists categorically reject this assumption and hold the view that “there is no single substantive property that all true statements share and that truth has no underlying nature, no hidden essence”.³⁰ As Schantz explains “the concept of truth expresses neither a natural or real property nor a natural or real relation. For this reason, it cannot play a causal or explanatory role in good systematic theories. Since there are no interesting connections between the concept of truth and fundamental philosophical concepts, such as meaning, belief, statement, translation, and synonymy, the concept of truth should not be given a central place in our philosophical reflections. Rather, truth is a purely formal or logical concept whose correct explanation requires far less extravagant conceptual resources than advocates of substantive theories believe”.³¹ However, truth here has a possessiveness and if this is so as it is defined, then truth is that which inhabits its own nature and determines what reflects itself and no more.

It is clear from the foregoing discussions that the various positions represent different searches for the universal truth. But the conflicting opinions, despite the long philosophical inquiry on the nature of truth still persists and remains robust. However, we shall in brief present Richard Rorty’s concept of truth in an effort to establish his own opinion which the researcher seems convincing as far as it relates to human composting.

The Concept of Truth in Richard Rorty

For Rorty, we as individuals maintain contact with reality, but only causal contact. There is no direct rational awareness of reality; rather, our knowledge is mediated through beliefs which arise through causal interactions between our bodies and our environment. Seen as the most prominent philosophical defender of postmodernism, Rorty appears to prefer the description, “pragmatist” to “postmodernist”. He insists that “there is no “skyhook” which takes us out of our subjective conditions to reveal a reality existing independently of our own minds or of other human minds”.³⁹ He agrees with Hillary Putnam that “there is no “God’s eye standpoint” that reveals reality in itself”.³²

Each person interprets reality in accordance with his own subjective condition. But Rorty does not argue for an individualistic free-for-all notion of truth. He emphasizes the social influence upon the individual and his beliefs. Truth, or what Rorty substitutes for it, “is an intersubjective agreement among the members of a community”.³³ That intersubjective agreement permits the members of the community to speak a common language and establish a commonly accepted reality.

The end of inquiry, for Rorty, is not the discovery or even the approximation of absolute truth but the formulation of beliefs that further the solidarity of the community, or “to reduce objectivity to solidarity”.³⁴ He argues that once the notion of objective truth is abandoned, one must choose between a self-defeating relativism and ethnocentrism, neither of which can be justified in a manner that is not circular. He responds that one “should grasp the ethnocentric horn of the dilemma” and “privilege our own group”.³⁵ As far as any new beliefs that we are to consider, they must at least roughly cohere with those already held by the community, or as Rorty puts the point, “we want to be able. . . to justify ourselves to our earlier selves. This preference is not built into us by human nature. It is just the way we live now”.³⁶

Rorty argues that there is no objective truth, and that no one has rightly grasped reality. In *Truth and Progress*, he writes:

We have learned (from Nietzsche and James, among others) to be suspicious of the appearance-reality distinction. We think that there are many ways to talk about what is going on, and that none of them gets closer to the way things are in themselves than any other. We have no idea what ‘in itself’ is supposed to mean in the phrase ‘reality as it is in itself.’ So we suggest that the appearance-reality distinction be dropped in favor of a distinction between less useful and more useful ways of talking.³⁷

The citation above portrays Rorty as being pessimistic about truth. For him, objectivity is something unachievable and that we can only discover what is best for a particular community or culture any time in history. Rorty sustains his thesis that, “when we claim that a statement like “snow is white” is “true”, all we are simply saying is just that it is accepted by the particular culture in which the statement is made”.³⁸

Furthermore, “there is no wholesale, epistemological way to direct, or criticize, or underwrite, the course of inquiry”.³⁹ It implies that all our moral beliefs, moral ideas, values, and

theories are to be seen as local, cultural formations, rooted in and confined to a particular time and place. “He believes that no perspective or standpoint is final, and any position must be replaced if a better one comes along. And this is so because there is no independent ‘truth standard’ to decide which one is the final standpoint among many different positions”⁴⁰. However, Rorty does not tell us how to determine a “better position” without any reference to reason. So, if you place Rorty’s concept of truth side by side with the concept of human composting, the outcome will be normal discourse- which aim at continuing a conversation rather discovering truth. And the best one can do in a normal discourse is to keep the conversation going until perhaps there is agreement among one’s cultural peers and this will help us to avoid the self-deception which comes from believing that we know ourselves by knowing a set of objective truth. And should we grant the fact that truth is an absolute term, then its conditions of application will always be relative, hence, Rorty anticipated Herbamas by claiming that “there is nothing to the notion of objective truth save that of intersubjective- agreement reached by free and open discussion of all available hypotheses and policies”⁴¹

Towards Understanding Human Composting

Mathew McDonald believes that “human composting is to put the body in a cylindrical vessel with microbes that eat the flesh in about a month, followed by grinding up the skeleton into powder, resulting in, within a few more weeks about a cubic yard of soil amendment which can be added to the soil to make it richer and more fertile. It is the process of converting our bodies into manure and using it to fertilize the crops in the environment”.⁴²

Human Composting can also be said to be “the gentle transformation of a human body into the soil. It is the idea that what is left of us when our spirits depart will get promptly recycled back into a living ecosystem rather than slowly releasing toxic chemicals into the earth”⁴³. It is not only a new alternative way of burying corpses, but also an easy way to give back to the earth what it has formally produced.

In this regard, human remains can fully be decomposed into nutrient-rich soil which can be used to grow crops, flowers and trees in homes and public parks. On a deeper reflection however, human composting is a natural process which contributes ecological benefits to the environment by preserving the body’s nutrient and thereby, respects the physical body and spirit. Thus, human composting is seen as an accelerated method of human decomposition which is scientifically referred to as Natural Organic Reduction. It however, does not add harmful chemicals to the soil like many embalming fluids do. Human composting is like what is happening on the forest floor, where you have dead leaves and sticks decomposing naturally and creating highly nourished topsoil suitable for regenerating new life and this fitting nicely into natural life cycle. It is a re-composition process by which the remains of human beings would naturally be turned into compost. This strongly shares with a pantheistic worldview where everything is reduced to matter in constant transformation.

However, the most basic thing one can understand from this human composting is that a person's final resting place may be at the base of new crops and trees rather than laying waste in the grave. Implicit in this initiative is the secular notion of man as a being without purpose or eternal destiny in life and the body as a mere phase in the constant transformation of matter. But the fact that many do not believe in soul or afterlife does not change reality. The reasonable balance of truth in this case is that nature recycles, in the sense that, our waste is a nutrient to other organisms and their own waste in turn, nourishes our food.

ASSESSING THE DIVERGENT VIEWS AND RICHARD RORTY'S STRAIN OF TRUTH IN HUMAN COMPOSTING

The quest for a sustainable end of life option is agitating reflective minds across societies. In this regard, the traditional burial is increasingly getting expensive and expansive and as well, harmful to the environment, while cremation is not much better, hence, there is new innovation that is environmentally friendly – the green funeral or the human composting. The Catholic Church teaches that the human body is sacred and the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral society.

So, the Catholic Church believes that by burying the bodies of the faithful, the church confirms her faith in the resurrection of the body after death and it shows the dignity of the human body as an integral part of the human person. The church frowns at human composting because it simply fails to show respect to the body of the deceased as a vessel of the soul. The proponents of the concept tout it as environmentally friendly but the catholic insists that there are other environmentally friendly options that do not disrespect the human body. People can forgo embalming, cremation or composting and opt to be interred in a biodegradable casket or shroud. Again, the proponents of human composting maintain that natural organic reduction does not show disrespect for the descendant remains, rather it respects both the mother earth and the successor generations. They are of the opinion too that when a person dies, he or she goes to heaven while the polluting corpse is irrelevant. They extended it further that resurrection implies spiritual resurrection, a change of new life, a change of heart and a resurrection of individual soul.

Besides, Sudney, believes that "the biblical belief that the body comes from dust and therefore should be returned to dust at the end of life is consistent with human composting when considering compost to be dust itself"⁴⁴. But for the supporters of human composting, for each person who chooses human composting over burial or cremation, one metric ton of carbon dioxide is saved from entering the ecosystem. It is their view that the urban cities across the world are rapidly growing and there are limited spaces for gravesites, hence, human composting does not require coffin to bury or bodies to burn but the greenest available options of returning our remains to the mother earth in order to sustain her living children.

Some Jews believe that making profits from the sale of human remains as manure does not align with their tradition. There is a difference between returning a body to the earth which is the point and using the body for business. In general, the Jews believe that dead bodies should not be

used for tangible benefits. Besides, they perceive human composting as fitting nicely with their environmental values which admonish them to be good stewards of the earth. The Daoist tradition on the other hand believes that life should be altogether nourishing, prolonging and protecting. Their worldview aligns with human composting as a beneficial option for body disposal after death. For instance, they perceive life and death as a constant process of life renewal. They often raise the question: how do we properly dispose our remains so that we can continue to flourish within this cycle of transformation? Human compost or even trees planted with it could become the new form one would take up after his or her earthly sojourn which would contribute to the process of transformation. So, allowing one's body to be turned into compost after death creates an opportunity for Daoists to participate in a tangible nourishing of the earth. So, if we juxtapose these claims, one will discover that they fit nicely with Richard Rorty's thesis that humans consistently situate themselves with contradictory truth claims and none of these claims can be established with finality. This in extension implies that most human communities remain exclusivist. Hence, Rorty adopts a consensus theory of truth which holds that "truth emerges from discussion among the members of a community, that is, he conceives truth as always subjective. He believes that it is a socially and commonly accepted reality which enables the individuals within a given culture to form their values, worldviews and justify them as truth. Of course, truth then implies an inescapable social notion and justifiable rationality agreed within one's cultural peers. But Rorty ignores the fact that even the freest inquiry can as well produce falsehood that might seem to be right. The point then is that, it remains the case that despite Rorty's relativist conception on the nature of truth, his thesis fails to transcend the modernist tradition he rejected, as there is an ineliminable role of the self and reason in his postulations. But given the fact that those within the cultural peers use reason to justify their beliefs within that culture, the question, of course, is: what is truth? Justified from whose perspective and not true from which perspective? Rorty is guided by the assumption that conventions and traditions are far more powerful forces than reason in the social construction of life. But Julian Baggini cited Kant to argue that:

When we use reason we must never submit to an external authority but must think for ourselves. Only this is appropriate to the dignity of human individual. At the same time, however, Kant believed that if we think truly for ourselves, we will come to see what reason demands and freely submit to it. So whereas the person who accepts $1+1=2$ because a teacher says so is thinking heteronomously, someone who understands why the sum must be so is thinking autonomously. In doing so, one form of obedience is being substituted for another: we bow down to reason, not to those who tell us what to think.⁴⁵

But Kant fails to understand that the autonomy of reason goes further and it is indirectly seen as another form of heteronomy. And that was why Michael Lynch infers that "reason is marked with frailty, fed by our sentiments and passions, whose pale promethean flame must be cultivated lest it gutter and dim."⁴⁶ In sustaining Lynch's argument, I suggest that we should accept the fact that our reason is not completely pure, but it is subject to all manner of psychological and

sociological influences. In fact, the way we think is deeply not devoid of our personal dispositions and values that are not obviously free from our cultural affinity. But objective truth can still stand since its framework of operation is the systemization of the cognitive accumulation of experience which suggests that reality is; and truth corresponds to that reality. But craving for absolute truth leads to monism, and monism is a poor outlook in every facet of human life.

Conclusion

The grounding premise of this work is that, given the various processes of disposing human remains, it becomes imperative to acknowledge that there is no independent standard way of assessing truth claims, and that is why members of different communities often hold allegiance to paradigms which are incommensurable. This suggests that any prior position or view held must be replaced if a better one comes along. And again, if every religion accepts different methods or processes of laying to rest the human remains, it then means that truth is not universal but only finds relevance within one's cultural peers as advanced by Rorty. And if this is not so, why then is it that reason does not over time lead to agreement? Moreover, if Rorty's truth postulation is further dissected, one would also discover that it significantly aligns with Nancy Cartwright's *Metaphysical Nomological Pluralism*, "the belief that nature is governed in different domain by different system of laws or thoughts that are not necessarily related to each other in any systematic or uniform way"⁴⁷. Above all, the work submits that there is compelling evidence, without an exclusion of other possibilities that attachment to material things is worthless at the cessation of life.

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