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Truth and Justification: a Difference that *Makes* a Difference

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Abstract

Apparently, aiming to comply with the norm ‘Believe that P if and only if the proposition that P is true’ can hardly differ from aiming to comply with the norm ‘Believe that P if and only if the proposition that P is epistemically justified.’ So one may be tempted to agree with Richard Rorty that the distinction between truth and justification is pragmatically useless because it cannot make any difference ‘when the question is about what I should believe now.’ I resist this conclusion by arguing that the distinction between truth and justification is pragmatically useful even if the two properties are indeed normatively coincident. The argument I offer turns on the claim that truth plays an explanatory role that justification is inherently incapable of playing. However, my contention is not just that the distinction between truth and justification is pragmatically useful because truth is a bona fide explanatory notion. It is that the distinction between truth and justification is pragmatically useful because the realization that the former plays an explanatory role that the latter is inherently incapable of playing gives access to reasons which would otherwise escape our attention. If truth is a bona fide explanatory notion, the distinction between truth and justification is pragmatically useful because it is precisely when the question is about what I should believe now that attending to such a distinction will often make a difference – and it will make a difference even if the two properties are in fact normatively coincident.

Introduction

Pragmatist thinkers regard the property of corresponding to an unknowable thing-in-itself as a property the possession of which could not make any difference to the course of our experience. This thought, together with the belief that ‘there can *be* no difference anywhere that doesn’t *make* a difference elsewhere’ (James 2000: 27, emphasis in the original), leads them to conclude that truth-qua-correspondence cannot be meaningfully regarded as the aim of our inquiries. Peirce and other pragmatists go on to describe this aim in epistemic terms, employ-

ing notions like belief, agreement, warranted assertibility, rational acceptability and so on – and helping themselves to large doses of idealization. Apparently, however, no account of truth, epistemic or not, will relieve us from the necessity of acknowledging that truth and epistemic justification are *normatively coincident*. For how could aiming to comply with a norm like, ‘Believe that *P* if and only if the proposition that *P* is *true*’ possibly differ from aiming to comply with a norm like, ‘Believe that *P* if and only if the proposition that *P* is *epistemically justified*’? So one may feel compelled to concur with Richard Rorty that the distinction between truth and epistemic justification is in any case pragmatically useless, because it cannot make any difference ‘when the question is about what I should believe now’ (Rorty 1998b: 19).

In this paper I propose to show that this conclusion should be resisted. Truth and justification (for ease of exposition, in what follows I will often omit the qualification ‘epistemic’) may well be normatively coincident, but even if they are, it does not follow that the distinction between them is pragmatically useless. The argument I shall offer turns on the claim that truth plays an explanatory role that justification is inherently incapable of playing. So part of my task will be to dispel the suspicion with which many pragmatist thinkers typically look at it. However, the main thesis that I shall be concerned to defend is not that the distinction between truth and justification is pragmatically useful because truth is a *bona fide* explanatory notion. It is that the distinction between truth and justification is pragmatically useful because the realization that the former plays an explanatory role that the latter is inherently incapable of playing gives access to *reasons* which would otherwise escape our attention. If truth is a *bona fide* explanatory notion, the distinction between truth and justification is pragmatically useful because it is precisely *when the question is about what I should believe now* that attending to such a distinction will often make a difference – and it will make a difference even if the two properties are in fact normatively coincident.

To prevent misunderstandings, I should make clear from the start that my argumentative strategy will be extremely concessive. In what follows I will grant for the sake of argument a number of contentious claims about truth and justification which will no doubt strike many readers as utterly implausible. I shall endeavour to show that such claims can justifiably be attributed to Rorty and other pragmatist writers, but I wish to emphasise that I myself do not subscribe to most of them. The point I want to make is just that even if all such claims were correct (which I don’t think they are), there would still be good reason to believe that the distinction between truth and justification is anything but pragmatically useless.

Here is the plan of the paper. In Section 1 I present the pragmatic maxim and introduce the way it is applied to the problem of truth by Rorty and like-minded scholars. In Section 2 I spell out the *Pragmatic Uselessness Thesis*, distinguish it from the claim that truth and justification are normatively coincident and sketch two arguments in favour of the latter claim. In Section 3 I introduce the idea that truth plays a crucial role in the explanation of successful behaviour and offer a vivid representation of what that means by telling the story of the fortunate case of Gladstone Gander, the Lucky Wayfarer. In Sections 4 and 5 I present and defend against objections the *Best Explanation Argument* that can be constructed on the basis of that idea, and in Section 6 I conclude by summing up the challenge that it poses to friends of the Pragmatic Uselessness Thesis.

The Pragmatic Maxim Applied to Truth

I mentioned the claim that ‘there can *be* no difference anywhere that doesn’t *make* a difference elsewhere’. This is James’ version of the ‘pragmatic maxim’, a rule or method for clarifying the content of our concepts and hypotheses which lies at the core of the pragmatist tradition. Peirce’s formulation reads:

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. (Peirce 1992: 132; CP 5.402)

The ‘practical bearings’ mentioned in the formulation are direct or indirect effects ‘upon our senses’, and Peirce’s claim is in fact that ‘[o]ur idea of anything *is* our idea of its sensible effects; and if we fancy that we have any other we deceive ourselves’ (ibid.). However, the pragmatic maxim is not to be understood as quantifying merely over the actual effects of the objects of our conceptions; to clarify our concepts and hypotheses, we need to consider not only the sensible effects something *does* produce, but also those that it *would* produce if suitable conditions were to obtain.

As I said, the pragmatic maxim has led philosophers like Peirce and, more recently, Nicholas Jardine and Cheryl Misak, to replace the correspondence theory of truth with a pragmatist ‘elucidation’ of the aim of our inquiries – an aim described in terms of such epistemic notions as belief, agreement, rational acceptability and so on. However, other thinkers in the pragmatist tradition have been more radical: they have argued that a consistent application of the

maxim inevitably leads to the view that the very distinction between truth and justification is pragmatically useless. It is with this view – I shall call it the *Pragmatic Uselessness Thesis* (PUT) – that I will take issue in this paper.¹

The reflections articulated in the following passage by Richard Rorty are representative of the considerations that are commonly advanced in support of PUT:

Pragmatists think that if something makes no difference to practice, it should make no difference to philosophy. This conviction makes them suspicious of the distinction 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, the same activity. (Rorty 1998b: 19)

This text provides an eloquent statement of the train of thought that leads many scholars influenced by the pragmatist tradition to regard the distinction between true and justified beliefs (or propositions) as pragmatically useless, but of course it does not exhaust everything Rorty has to say about truth. In what follows I will refer to other passages from his writings, but since the focus of this paper is just on the train of thought outlined in this text, I will not embark on the detailed exegetical work that would be required to provide a more nuanced picture of Rorty's many-sided (and perhaps not wholly consistent; see Dummett 2004: 97-116) views on truth and justification. However, it may be interesting to widen the focus for a moment to get a glimpse of how he tries to reconcile the claim that the distinction between truth and justification is pragmatically useless with the fact that words like 'true' and 'false' turn up so frequently in everyday discourse. Rorty argues that such terms serve a variety of unconnected, non-explanatory purposes (Rorty 1991: 127 f.; cf. Rorty 1998b: 21 f.; 2000: 4).² He points to

¹ I have discussed the alleged epistemological virtues of accounts of truth couched in epistemic terms in Volpe (2003).

² The claim that the notion of truth is explanatorily idle is a leitmotif of Rorty's reflection on the subject. Particularly prominent in Rorty (1991), it is reluctantly qualified in Rorty (1998b), but its essential thrust remains unaltered. The acknowledgment that the distinction between truth and justification can prove useful in the explanation of our failures is immediately withdrawn by observing that 'useful' does not mean 'essential' (ibid.: 19 n. 1). And while Rorty feels compelled to make room for Davidson's use of the notion of truth in

an ‘endorsing’ as well as to a ‘disquotational’ use of the word ‘true’, but he maintains that the only use which cannot be eliminated from our linguistic practices with relative ease is the ‘cautionary’ one. As it happens, the cautionary use of ‘true’ turns out to be precisely ‘the use we make of the word when we contrast justification and truth, and say that a belief may be justified but not true’ (Rorty 2000: 4). However, in Rorty’s view this contrast does not oppose the reasons we may have for holding a certain belief (or the epistemic status of a belief we have reason to hold) to the relationship the belief entertains with reality; it is not, in other terms, a reminder that truth is ‘representational’ (Wrenn 2005: 100). For Rorty, to say that a belief may be justified but not true is merely to say that a belief that is justified for a certain audience may turn out to be unjustified for a different audience. Epistemic justification is always *relative to an audience*, and contrasting truth with justification merely serves ‘to remind ourselves that people in different circumstances – people facing future audiences – may not be able to justify the belief which we have triumphantly justified to all the audiences we have encountered’ (Rorty 2000: 4; cf. Rorty 1998b: 22).

I am sure many readers will find these claims utterly unsatisfactory, but I will not pause to criticize them. I have mentioned Rorty’s account of the function of ‘true’ and ‘false’ just to provide some context to the considerations he puts forth in support of PUT, as well as to introduce a claim – the claim that truth talk is inherently non-explanatory – that will be the subject of consideration in due course. Let us then go back to Rorty’s text.

Normative Coincidence and Pragmatic Uselessness

Here are three slightly different claims that can be gleaned from the passage of Rorty quoted in the previous section:

- (A) The distinction (difference) between truth and justification makes no difference to practice, i.e., *to the course of our experience*.
- (B) The distinction (difference) between truth and justification makes no difference *to what I should believe now*.³

the development of a theory of verbal interpretation, he plays down the significance of this concession by reiterating the point that “‘It’s true!’” is not a helpful explanation of why science works or of why you should share one of my beliefs’ (ibid.: 25 n. 23).

³ It has been suggested to me that Rorty might regard the relation between something’s not making a difference to my decisions about what to do and something’s not making a difference to what I should believe now as somewhat more indirect: the distinction between truth

(C) Truth and justification are *normatively coincident*, i.e., there is no difference between aiming to comply with the norm ‘Believe that *P* if and only if the proposition that *P* is true’ and aiming to comply with the norm ‘Believe that *P* if and only if the proposition that *P* is justified’ – for one has reason to think that the proposition that *P* is true just in case one has reason to think that the proposition that *P* is justified.

(A) is a very straightforward version of PUT – ‘the course of our experience’ may be taken as shorthand for ‘anybody’s actual or possible experience’. Taken literally, (B) expresses a logically weaker claim, because of course the distinction between truth and justification might conceivably make a difference to the (actual or possible) course of somebody’s experience without making a difference to what *I* should believe *now*. On a more relaxed reading, however, what (B) says is in effect that the distinction between truth and justification makes no difference *to what anyone might ever be under an (epistemic) obligation to believe*. On this reading, then, (B) is essentially equivalent to (A) – at least if it is assumed, as pragmatists are likely to assume, that something will make a difference to what someone might ever be under an obligation to believe if and only if it makes a difference to the course of someone’s actual or possible experience. (C) is the weakest of the three claims. By casting it in terms of ‘normative coincidence’, I have followed the lead of Wright (1992: 18 f.) – as Rorty himself does a few pages later (Rorty 1998b: 27). On the other hand, the formulations in (C) depart from pragmatist jargon by ascribing truth and justification to propositions rather than beliefs. This terminological choice is suggested by the reflection that phrasing the truth norm as ‘Believe that *P* if and only if the *belief* that *P* is true’ and the justification norm as ‘Believe that *P* if and only if the *belief* that *P* is justified’ would lead to unwelcome results in those cases in which nobody actually holds the belief that *P* – unless, that is, what is meant by ‘the belief that *P*’ is really the *proposition* that *P*.⁴ Ascribing truth and justification primarily to proposi-

and justification might make no difference to my decisions about what to do in the sense that it does not make a difference to my ways of belief acquisition, i.e., to my ways of acquiring habits of action. It is of course absolutely right to insist that Rorty, like all pragmatists, thinks of beliefs as habits of action rather than as representations. However, it is clear from the context that the ‘decisions’ mentioned in the passage quoted in the previous section concern belief, not action selection – in a footnote Rorty expressly talks of ‘deciding what to believe now’ (Rorty 1998b: 19 n. 1).

⁴ This point was brought to my attention by an anonymous referee for this journal, who noted that one might conceivably violate the truth (or justification) norm by failing to believe that *P* when the proposition that *P* is true (or justified) *and nobody holds the belief that P* – and it

tions rather than beliefs might of course be suspected of begging the question against the distinctively pragmatist contention that belief-tokens should be understood as habits of behaviour rather than as representational states, but I trust that, as the argument unfolds, it will become clear that nothing important depends on this usage.

Now, it seems clear that Rorty endorses all three claims.⁵ What is not so clear – from this as well as from other passages in his writings – is whether he distinguishes (B) from (C). Perhaps he doesn't notice the possibility, or doesn't see the point, of doing so. The reason why he tends to conflate (B) and (C) is likely connected with his assumption that truth talk is explanatorily idle, an assumption that leads him to maintain that the only way in which the difference between truth and justification might conceivably make a difference to the course of our experience is by providing different norms for our beliefs. He sees truth and justification as essentially *normative* notions, whose 'practical bearings' on the course of our experience can concern exclusively what we should (or should not) believe. Hence, if they cannot possibly come apart as norms of belief, the difference between them cannot possibly make a difference to the course of our experience.

In any case, distinguishing (B) from (C) is crucial for assessing the argument usually offered on behalf of PUT. For although (C) may well express a genuine insight about the normative force of truth and justification, it cannot itself be regarded as a version of PUT. In what follows, then, I will raise no objection to (C) – indeed, I will present two arguments that seem to support it. However, I will take exception with both (A) and (B). I will argue that having true, as opposed to merely justified, beliefs can (and often does) make a difference to the course of our experience (not-A) and that the distinction between truth and justification can (and often

would be awkward to describe such a situation as one in which an agent fails to believe that *P* and yet the belief that *P*, that nobody holds, is true (or justified).

⁵ Interestingly enough, none of these claims entails that it is impossible to draw any distinction whatsoever between truth and justification. Elsewhere Rorty says that he is ready to admit 'that one cannot identify the concept of truth with the concept of justification' (Rorty 2007: 45), and he even acknowledges that one cannot take warranted assertibility (which he takes to be substantially equivalent to epistemic justification) to be 'the property preserved in valid inference' (ibid.: 42). Yet, he insists that the distinction between truth and justification is just a piece of idle metaphysics, because the difference between these two things 'makes no difference to my decisions about what to do'. It is precisely because PUT is consistent with the claim that it is possible – though pragmatically useless – to draw a distinction between truth and justification that the arguments offered on behalf of this distinction by Dummett (1973: 450), Brandom (1976) and Wright (1992: 19-21) among others have no real bite against it. These arguments, if successful, show that our concepts of truth and justification are not coextensive; but that does not engage the charge that the distinction between truth and justification is ultimately worthless.

does) make a difference ‘to what I should believe now’ (not-B) – and I will show that this is so even if truth and justification are indeed normatively coincident (C).

An argument for a close relation of (C) is given by Wright (1992: 18; cf. Wright 2001: 755). The argument starts from a plausible claim concerning the practice of assertion: for this practice to be possible, its participants must be able to tell which assertions they are warranted in making in a given state of information and which they are not. In other terms:

- (1) There is warrant for thinking that [it is warrantably assertible that P] iff there is warrant for thinking that [P]

It is then sufficient to invoke the equivalence schema ‘It is true that P iff P ’ to conclude that

- (2) There is warrant for thinking that [it is warrantably assertible that P] iff there is warrant for thinking that [it is true that P],

which in turn yields the conclusion that there is no difference between aiming to comply with the norm ‘Assert that P if and only if it is *true* that P ’ and aiming to comply with the norm ‘Assert that P if and only if it is *warrantably assertible* that P ’.

Wright’s argument concerns the practice of linguistic assertion rather than that of belief formation; moreover, it is couched in terms of warranted assertibility rather than justified belief. This is why I said that its conclusion is a (close) relation of (C). However, pragmatist writers like Rorty have a habit of talking interchangeably of warranted assertibility and epistemic justification, and indeed it would be easy to reformulate the argument in terms of the practice of belief formation and the norm of epistemic justification. In any case, the conclusion that there is no difference between aiming to comply with the norm ‘Believe that P if and only if the proposition that P is true’ and aiming to comply with the norm ‘Believe that P if and only if the proposition that P is justified’ can be reached also by a different route, one that does not invoke the practice of assertion – nor, for that matter, the equivalence schema. This is how the argument goes. Although believing that P if the proposition that P is not true (or failing to believe that P if the proposition that P is true) involves a violation of the norm ‘Believe that P if and only if the proposition that P is true’, there is a clear sense in which one cannot be *blamed* for believing that P simply because the proposition that P is not true (or for failing to believe that P simply because the proposition that P is true). What one *can* be blamed for is believing

that P if one has no reason to think that the proposition that P is true (or has reason to think that it is not true), and failing to believe that P if one has reason to think that the proposition that P is true.⁶ So it seems the best one can do by way of aiming to comply with the norm is believe that P if and only if *one has reason to think that* the proposition that P is true. But of course, S has reason to think that the proposition that P is true if and only if the proposition that P is justified (for S).⁷ And since the relevant notions of reason and justification are plainly internalist, if the proposition that P is justified for S , S has reason to think that it is. So one has reason to think that the proposition that P is true if and only if one has reason to think that the proposition that P is justified. And this, of course, entails that there cannot be any difference between aiming to comply with the norm ‘Believe that P if and only if the proposition that P is true’ and aiming to comply with the norm ‘Believe that P if and only if the proposition that P is justified’.

I don’t want to put much weight either on this or on Wright’s argument. Although I find (C) plausible, my concern here is not to make a case that truth and justification are indeed normatively coincident (nor do I want to endorse the claim that it is either truth or justification, rather than, say, knowledge, that should be regarded as the norm of belief). As I said, my concern is merely to show that the assumption that truth and justification are normatively coincident does not mandate the conclusion that the distinction between truth and justification is pragmatically useless. So let us turn to the role of truth in the explanation of success.

Truth and Success

The claim that true beliefs tend to lead to successful behaviour often occurs in the writings of realistically-minded philosophers who exploit the so-called ‘success argument’ to mount a challenge to deflationary accounts of truth (see, e.g., Field 1986: 92-102; Kitcher 2002).

However, it is not necessary to endorse the correspondence theory to feel the pressure to ad-

⁶ As an anonymous referee for this journal pointed out to me, this is apparently just an instance of a general normative principle that could be formulated as follows: One can be blamed for failing to comply with a norm of the form ‘Do A if and only if condition C obtains’ only if one does A even though one *has no reason* for thinking that C obtains or if one doesn’t do A even though one *has reason* for thinking that C obtains. This seems to me a plausible principle, but I take it that the existence of the sort of *epistemic* blameworthiness (and blamelessness) that is invoked in the argument does not depend, ultimately, on the principle’s being unrestrictedly true.

⁷ I assume, as customary, that *epistemic* justification bears an internal relation to truth – which of course doesn’t mean that epistemically justified beliefs are invariably true.

mit that some instances of practical success cry out for an explanation in terms of the truth of (some of) the agent's beliefs. The claim that truths aren't true because they work, but work because they are true, was part of Frank Ramsey's reaction against James' attempt to identify truth with long run expediency (Ramsey 1990: 44). More recently, Paul Horwich has argued that the (non-paradoxical) instances of the equivalence schema provide everything that is needed to offer such an explanation (Horwich 1998: 22 f.). In what follows I shall not take side in the debate between friends of the theory of correspondence and upholders of deflationary accounts of truth, but I shall exploit the claim that having true beliefs can (and often does) make a difference to the outcome of our actions to formulate an argument against PUT.⁸ I shall present a little story that highlights the fact that, in order to explain the pragmatic success of an agent, it is sometimes necessary to invoke the truth, rather than the justification, of some of the agent's beliefs. Then I shall argue that, whenever truth plays such an explanatory role, the difference between truth and justification makes a (normative) difference 'to what I should believe now' *because* it makes a (non-normative) difference to the course of our experience.

Here then is *the fortunate case of Gladstone Gander, the Lucky Wayfarer*. Having got through a piece of business in an unknown city, Gladstone wants to get to the railway station to take the 9:31 p.m. train to Duckburg, when he comes to a crossroads. It is 9:20 p.m. and he just knows that, although both streets ahead of him – let's call them 'Right Street' and 'Left Street' – lead to the station, he will be able to get there in less than ten minutes only by taking the shorter one. Unfortunately, there are no signposts around and no people walking by. As

⁸ Philosophers who endorse PUT typically ascribe to their opponents the claim that we should adopt as a norm of belief some sort of correspondence of our representations to the deep structure of reality or to an unknowable thing-in-itself (Rorty 1998a: 4; 1998b: 19 f.). But there is no need to construe the opposition between truth and justification in terms of such heavily metaphysical versions of the correspondence theory. For present purposes, truth will be satisfactorily characterized by the (non-paradoxical) substitution-instances of

(M) Necessarily, truth is a property that is possessed by the proposition that *P* if and only if *P*.

The constraint expressed by the (non-paradoxical) substitution-instances of this schema may be called *Moore's Condition* (Moore 1953: 274 ff.; cf. Aristotle, *De Int.* 9: 18a39-b2). Moore's contention was of course merely that no plausible conception of truth may conflict with the propositions expressed by such instances. On the other hand, philosophers with deflationist leanings tend to believe that such propositions encapsulate everything there is to say – very little indeed, in their view – about truth itself. Be that as it may, the propositions expressed by the (non-paradoxical) substitution-instances of (M) give a reasonably clear idea of

it's getting late and the train is leaving in ten minutes, Gladstone makes up his mind to toss a coin and choose the way to take on the basis of the outcome – head Right Street, tails Left Street. The coin lands head up and he takes Right Street. Gladstone is well aware that he has no *evidence* that Right Street is the shortest way to the station. And while he knows that he is usually blessed by extraordinary luck, his luck often produces its effects in unexpected ways, so he is also aware that the outcome of the toss will not necessarily benefit him by correctly instructing him about the shortest way to the station (maybe he will not get to the station in time to catch the train but instead find a treasure along the way). So Gladstone doesn't actually *believe* that Right Street is the shortest way to the station, but merely acts as if it were: he acts on the *assumption* that Right Street is the shortest way to the station. As it happens, however, he gets to the station in time to catch the train (had he taken Left Street, he would have missed it).

Now a bit of terminology. I have just contrasted Gladstone's *acting on the assumption* that Right Street is the shortest way to the station with his *believing* (or rather, his failing to believe) that it is; but of course, acting on the assumption that *P* involves being in a psychological state whose content is the very *proposition* that is the content of the psychological state one is in when one *believes* that *P*.⁹ Following Wright, I shall refer to the psychological state an agent is in when he (or she) acts on the assumption that *P* as a state of *accepting* that *P*, where acceptance of a proposition is conceived of as 'a more general attitude than belief, including belief as a sub-case, which comes apart from belief in cases where one is warranted in acting on the assumption that *P* or taking it for granted that *P* or trusting that *P* for reasons that do not bear on the likely truth of *P*' (Wright 2004: 177). Moreover, I shall abbreviate 'the proposition that Right Street is the shortest way to the station' as 'RIGHT STREET'. So I shall say that Gladstone doesn't *believe* RIGHT STREET (he has no evidence that Right Street is the shortest way to the station), yet he *accepts* it for pragmatic reasons. For our purposes, his acceptance of RIGHT STREET prompts him to act in all relevant respects as if he had a full-blown belief in RIGHT STREET – which he hasn't.

the sort of thing the philosophers who don't accept PUT maintain should be kept accurately distinct from justification.

⁹ Again, talk of propositions might be looked at with suspicion by those who are convinced that belief-tokens are habits of behaviour rather than representational states. However, I take it that nobody will deny that there is something in common between acting on the assumption that *P* and acting on the belief that *P*, and here reference to propositions is just a handy way to talk about this common feature.

Now, what explains the practical success of Gladstone, the Lucky Wayfarer? Of course his taking Right Street, which is the shortest way to the station. But he takes Right Street because, having the coin landed head up, he acts on the assumption – i.e., on the basis of an acceptance whose content is the proposition – that Right Street is the shortest way to the station. Clearly, however, if RIGHT STREET hadn't been true, he wouldn't have arrived at the station in time to catch the train. So there is a clear sense in which the success of Gladstone's action is *explained* by the truth of RIGHT STREET. It is because that proposition is true that he manages to get to the station just in time to catch the train. However, it is clear that the appeal to the truth of RIGHT STREET cannot be replaced, in the explanation, by an appeal to its *justification*. For it is not because Gladstone is justified to accept (or believe) RIGHT STREET that he gets where he wants – he has no reason to accept (or believe) RIGHT STREET in the first place.

The case of the Lucky Wayfarer is designed to draw attention to a kind of situation in which the relationship between the truth and the justification of (the content of) an acceptance is so loose, that it is evident that the property that must be invoked to explain the success of an action cannot be the latter, but only the former. One counterexample is sufficient to refute a generalization. If the explanatory powers of truth and justification diverge in the case at hand, the two properties cannot be explanatorily coincident. But the moral I want to draw from the case is of course more general: it is that the distinction between truth and justification makes a real difference to the course of our experience *whenever it is possible to explain the success of an action by appealing to the fact that acting on the basis of a certain belief or acceptance is an effective strategy to reach the desired outcome*.

It must be admitted, of course, that people often reach their goals by acting on the basis of beliefs in false propositions. This, however, has no tendency to disconfirm the claim that *beliefs in true propositions tend to lead to successful behaviour*. The reason why acting on the basis of certain beliefs or acceptances is an *effective strategy* to reach some goals is that such states specify, more or less directly, those courses of action the taking of which is causally related to the obtaining of the desired goals (in Gladstone's case, taking Right Street leads one to the station in less than 10 minutes). *Whenever such a correlation obtains*, it is only the truth, not the justification, of the content of the relevant state that is aptly invoked to explain the success of the action performed by the agent. And this leads us to the argument that can be formulated on the basis of Gladstone's story.

The Best Explanation Argument

There are two main ingredients to the argument. The first is the by now familiar claim that truth explains pragmatic success in a way that justification doesn't. The second is a weak and, I believe, uncontroversial claim about the epistemic relevance of inferences to the best explanation:

(IBE) The recognition that the hypothesis that *P* offers a better explanation of a relevant set of data than any competing hypothesis provides a (defeasible) reason for believing that *P*.

Because of these ingredients, I call the train of reasoning that I am about to present the *Best Explanation Argument*. Its first premise articulates a central feature of the case presented in the previous section:

(P1) The hypothesis that RIGHT STREET is (not merely justified, but) true offers a better explanation of Gladstone's practical success than any competing hypothesis.

Given (IBE), from (P1) it immediately follows that:

(C1) If, having got to the station in time to catch the train, Gladstone recognizes that the hypothesis that RIGHT STREET is (not merely justified, but) true offers a better explanation of his practical success than any competing hypothesis, he thereby acquires a (defeasible) reason for believing that RIGHT STREET is true.¹⁰

However,

(P2) If one has a (defeasible) reason for believing that the proposition that *P* is true *and* that reason is not undermined by further evidence one possesses, then one should believe (the proposition) that *P*.¹¹

¹⁰ Having got to the station in time to catch his train, Gladstone is of course justified to believe that his navigational efforts have been successful.

¹¹ One might object to (P2) that an agent could have a (defeasible) reason for believing that a proposition is justified – a reason that is not undermined by further evidence – and yet fail to be under an obligation to believe it *if the reason is too weak to licence (let alone mandate) the relevant belief*. Quite. But in the case at hand it seems obvious that the reason acquired by the agent is strong enough, and the argument does not purport to establish that the distinction be-

Hence (from (C1), (P2)):

(C2) If Gladstone recognizes that the hypothesis that RIGHT STREET is (not merely justified, but) true offers a better explanation of his practical success than any competing hypothesis *and* the reason for believing that RIGHT STREET is true that he thereby acquires is not undermined by further evidence he possesses, then he should believe that RIGHT STREET is true.

It seems clear that the conditions specified by the antecedent of (C2) can be fulfilled. And of course, attending to the difference between truth and justification is necessary for Gladstone to be able to *recognize* that the hypothesis that RIGHT STREET is (not merely justified, but) true offers a better explanation of his practical success than any competing hypothesis. Hence (from (C2)):

(C3) Attending to the difference between truth and justification can make a difference to what Gladstone should believe ‘now’.

Obviously, however, the contrast that pragmatists like Rorty intend to bring out when they oppose the differences that can make a difference to ‘what I should believe now’ to the differences that cannot make any such difference is precisely the contrast between the differences *attending to which* can make a difference to ‘what I should believe now’ and the differences *attending to which* cannot make any such difference.¹² Hence (from (C3)):

tween truth and justification *always* makes a difference to what one should believe here and now, but only that there are cases where it does.

¹² It seems obvious to me that Gladstone can come under the epistemic obligation to believe that RIGHT STREET is true (as opposed to justified) only by attending to the difference between truth and justification. More generally, I am inclined to deny that a difference that one does not attend to can make a difference to what one should believe ‘now’ (I am sure that Rorty and the pragmatist writers that are the target of my argument would agree). On the other hand, if our epistemic obligations were conceived in a more idealized manner, the claim that a difference that one does not attend to *can* make a difference to what one should believe ‘now’ might perhaps appear more plausible. In that case, it would be easy to provide an alternative version of the Best Explanation Argument that does not turn on Gladstone’s *recognizing* that the hypothesis that RIGHT STREET is true offers a better explanation of his practical success than any competing hypothesis, but on the *fact* that the hypothesis that RIGHT STREET is true offers a better explanation of his practical success than any competing hypothesis.

(C4) The difference between truth and justification can make a difference to what Gladstone should believe ‘now’.

And in general:

(C5) The difference between truth and justification can make a difference to what one should believe ‘now’.

(Q.E.D.)

What does the Best Explanation Argument show about PUT? It shows that, although it is plausible to maintain that one has reason to believe that the proposition that *P* is true if and only if one has reason to believe that the proposition that *P* is justified, it is not always the case that one has a reason for believing that the proposition that *P* is true *because*, or *in virtue of the fact that*, one has a reason for believing that the proposition that *P* is justified. I am not claiming that there are propositions that we can recognize to be (probably) true without being able to justify them – nothing in what I have said commits me to deny that by recognizing that the hypothesis that RIGHT STREET is true offers a better explanation of his practical success than any competing hypothesis, Gladstone not only acquires a (defeasible) reason for believing that RIGHT STREET is true, but also one for believing that it is justified. However, there are cases in which one has reason to believe that the proposition that *P* is justified precisely *because*, or *in virtue of the fact that*, one has reason to believe that the proposition that *P* is true, and not vice versa. In such cases, focusing on the truth, rather than the justification, of the relevant proposition enables us to *see* reasons we would otherwise be unable to see. Reasons which would otherwise escape our attention are made *visible* by attending to the difference between truth and justification, so one might even argue that drawing this distinction makes a more pervasive and interesting difference to what one should believe than drawing (almost) any other distinction can make. The recognition that truth and justification are normatively coincident is thus insufficient to establish that the difference between these two properties makes no difference ‘to what I should believe now’.

Objections and Replies

To round off the discussion I will now examine and refute three likely objections to the Best Explanation Argument. The first is fuelled by the suspicion that drawing the sort of inference described in the Best Explanation Argument might prove unnecessary to acquire a (defeasible) reason for believing that Right Street is the shortest way to the station. For it might be the case that, whenever the recognition of the explanatory merits of the hypothesis that a certain proposition is true provides a reason for believing that proposition, an equally strong reason for believing it could be acquired by some other epistemic route – and if that were the case, the Best Explanation Argument would be in trouble. The answer to this objection is twofold. First, it should be noted that there is in fact no evidence that the universally quantified conditional that undergirds it is true. Second, even if it were, that wouldn't mean that recognizing the explanatory merits of the hypothesis that a certain proposition is true couldn't provide *a* reason for believing that proposition – which is all that is required for the Best Explanation Argument to go through.

The second objection concerns the epistemic credentials of Inference to the Best Explanation. This form of reasoning is looked at with suspicion by some philosophers, who question its capacity to lead in all cases, or at least more often than not, from true premises to true conclusions. If the doubts of such philosophers are justified, then perhaps it will have to be admitted that the Best Explanation Argument cannot be more compelling than Inference to the Best Explanation. To this objection it can be replied that the role played by (IBE) in the Best Explanation Argument is such that the argument goes through whether Inference to the Best Explanation is reliable or not. First of all, (IBE) merely states that the recognition that the hypothesis that *P* offers a better explanation of a relevant set of data than any competing hypothesis *provides a (defeasible) reason for believing that P* – not that it *establishes that P is (likely) true*. To this it might be retorted that the recognition that things are in a certain way can provide a (defeasible) reason for believing that *P* only if there is reason to believe that it guarantees (or makes it probable) that *P*. However, the objection is effectively put to rest by the consideration that a reason for doubting the reliability of a form of reasoning is a reason for not adopting it only if it is assumed that forms of reasoning can and must be assessed by considering how often they lead from true premises to true conclusions. This assumption, however, cannot be consistently combined with the claim that the distinction between truth and justification is pragmatically useless. For if our forms of reasoning were to be assessed by considering how often they lead from true premises to true conclusion, then of course the dif-

ference between truth and justification could not be a difference that makes no difference to the course of our experience. So it is inevitable to conclude that, if the usual misgivings about the reliability of Inference to the Best Explanation are to be raised at all, PUT must already have been rejected.

The third objection requires a longer discussion. It focuses on (P1) and questions the work done by appeals to truth when it comes to explaining pragmatic success. As I said, Rorty's assumption that the difference between truth and justification might conceivably make a difference to the course of our experience only by providing different norms for our beliefs is closely connected to the doctrine that the notion of truth is explanatorily idle. And it is of course a classical pragmatist claim (though not one all pragmatists would be willing to make) that any attempt to invoke the truth of our beliefs to explain successful behaviour simply gets things the wrong way around: it is not that certain beliefs of ours are true and *therefore* useful; rather, we endorse those beliefs that are useful by calling them 'true'.

Now, this objection does have some bite against the heavily metaphysical versions of the correspondence theory Peirce and James took as the target of their attacks one hundred or more years ago. If truth is an unverifiable correspondence of our beliefs to the deep structure of reality or to an unknowable thing-in-itself, how can it possibly explain anything at all? However, if the objection is to be aimed at more mundane conceptions of truth, it needs to be made more precise. For what ground can there be for denying that it is precisely because RIGHT STREET is *true* that Gladstone succeeds to get to the station in time to take the train? Here I think the objection can take two different forms.

First, the objector can argue that the whole explanatory burden should be placed on the states (beliefs or acceptances, desires, etc.) of the agent; since it is those states that do whatever causal work is required to produce the relevant action, any appeal to the truth of their contents will be utterly redundant for the purpose of explaining successful behaviour. Rorty seems to have in mind something along these lines when he suggests that an explanation like 'He found the correct house because his belief about its location was true' is just a promissory note which needs to be cashed out in terms of something like 'He found the correct house because he believed that it was located at...' (Rorty 1991: 140). Now, I am happy to grant that one needn't invoke the truth of an agent's beliefs (or acceptances) to tell the causal story that weaves together his (or her) beliefs (or acceptances) and desires with the actual outcome of his (or her) behaviour. So it may well be the case that John got to the house located at 43 River Street (partly) because he believed that the house he was looking for was located at 43 Riv-

er Street. However, explaining why John got to the house located at 43 River Street is not yet explaining why he found the *correct* house, that is, the house he was looking for. And the reason why John found the *correct* house cannot be simply that he believed that it was located at 43 River Street, for of course, had this belief been *false*, he wouldn't have found it. To express the information that is needed to explain why John found the *correct* house, it is necessary to say something like, 'John found the correct house because he believed that it was located at 43 River Street, *and his belief was true*'. If the explanatory question turns on the *success* of John's action, what needs to be explained is not simply the fact that he got to the house located at 43 River Street, but the fact that he found the house *he was looking for*, the house he was aiming to find by acting in the way he did. To explain *that* fact, invoking the truth of his belief is all-important.

Let's turn to the second form the objection can take. Its advocate can concede that it is because Gladstone and John act on the basis of true beliefs (or acceptances) that their navigational efforts are successful, and yet insist that the truth predicate enters in the explanation of pragmatic success only as a useful logical device, by which no causally explanatory property is ascribed to the beliefs (or acceptances) in question. In other terms, the objector can help himself (or herself) to the deflationary view that 'true' is merely a convenient disquotational device, or perhaps a predicate that expresses a logical property which never plays a causally explanatory role. As I hinted at before, it is not my purpose here to take sides in the debate that opposes friends of the correspondence theory to upholders of deflationary views on the subject of the causally explanatory role of truth. For the sake of argument, however, I can happily grant that the truth predicate enters in explanations of pragmatic success merely as a useful logical device that enables us to move from singular premises like 'If one acts on the assumption that Right Street is the shortest way to the station, and Right Street is the shortest way to the station, then one is more likely to get to the station in time to take the train' to general conclusions like 'If one acts on the basis of true assumptions one is more likely to get what one wants' – or from singular premises like 'If one believes that going to 43 River Street will get one what one wants and going to 43 River Street will get what one wants, then one is likely to get what one wants' to general conclusions like 'If one has true beliefs about how to get what one wants, one is more likely to get what one wants'. Saying that Gladstone's navigational efforts are successful because RIGHT STREET is true will then be tantamount to saying that they are successful because Gladstone acts on the assumption that Right Street is the shortest way to the station, and indeed Right Street *is* the shortest way to the station; and say-

ing that John found the house he was looking for because his belief that it was located at 43 River Street was true will be tantamount to saying that he found the correct house because he believed that it was located at 43 River Street and indeed it *was* located at 43 River Street. However, I think that flirting with deflationary ideas about truth will be of no help to our objector. Suppose we grant Horwich's claim that invoking the relevant instances of the equivalence schema is sufficient to provide a fully adequate account of the role played by the truth predicate in explanations of successful behaviour that mention the agent's means-end beliefs (Horwich 1998: 22-23, 44-46). The point is that this claim, even if correct, doesn't entail that truth plays no causally explanatory role in the sense that is relevant to the Best Explanation Argument. Here I take a leaf from Damnjanovic (2005), who applies to this issue a well-known account of causal explanations that exploits the distinction between being causally *efficacious* and being causally *relevant* (Jackson and Pettit 1990a; 1990b). According to this account, a property can be causally explanatory either by being causally efficacious or by being causally relevant – and it can be causally relevant in bringing about a certain effect without doing any actual causing, provided its realization ensures the presence of an underlying efficacious property that brings about the effect in question. One example is the property of being a sleeping pill, which ensures the presence of the property of having a certain chemical composition; another is the property of having a certain temperature, which ensures the presence of the property of having a certain momentum property. Now, what Horwich's deflationary account of the role played by the truth predicate in explanations of successful behaviour shows is indeed that appeals to truth can be eliminated without loss from such explanations. However, 'the fact that explanations which appeal to some property *P* can be replaced by explanations that make no appeal to *P* does not entail that *P* is not causally explanatory' (Damnjanovic 2005: 58). We can give a perfectly good explanation of why Ann has collapsed by saying that she has ingested a sleeping pill, even if a deeper explanation of the event would only mention the chemical composition of the substance she has ingested. By the same token, the fact that appeals to truth are eliminable from explanations of successful behaviour in the way suggested by Horwich shows at best 'that in all our explanations of success the real causal work is being performed by the agent's beliefs and mundane facts about the world. But for all the deflationist has shown, truth may nevertheless be a causally relevant property' (ibid.). So I think we must concur with Damnjanovic that deflationary accounts of the role played by the truth-predicate in explanations of successful behaviour, far from showing that truth never plays a genuinely causal explanatory role in such explanations, are best seen as

making clear ‘the way in which truth can be a causally relevant property merely by playing a rather simple logical role’ (ibid.: 67). But if such accounts lend no support to the claim that truth is never causally relevant, it seems clear that they cannot threaten the Best Explanation Argument, which exploits a form of reasoning (Inference to the Best Explanation) that doesn’t discriminate between explanations that mention properties which are causally efficacious and explanations that mention properties which are merely causally relevant. At the end of the day, then, it is a strength rather than a weakness of the argument that its appeal to the explanatory role of truth can be cashed out in deflationary terms, without invoking controversial assumptions about the deep nature of truth.

Conclusion

The Best Explanation Argument shows, I think, that the plausible claim that truth and justification are normatively coincident doesn’t entail the pragmatist conclusion that the distinction between these two properties is pragmatically useless. This result should prompt thinkers in the pragmatist tradition to reconsider the way they look at the relation between these two claims. I believe the challenge posed by the Best Explanation Argument is all the more significant in that it doesn’t presuppose any controversial thesis about the deep nature of truth, but only the acknowledgement that this elusive property can be causally explanatory merely in virtue of the fact that the truth-predicate plays the trivial logical role deflationists usually ascribe to it.

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