

IS TRUTH MIND-DEPENDENT?*

Diego Marconi
Università di Torino

Abstract

It has been claimed that in a world without minds there would be no truths. Richard Rorty saw this claim as an antirealist objection. However, 'true in a world' has two readings. On one reading the claim, even if true, is no objection against realism; on the other it does count as such an objection, but it is plainly false. I also show that Heidegger's slightly different claim that there were no truths before there were any minds runs into problems that are similar to, though not identical with Rorty's.

Keywords

Truth; realism; Rorty; Heidegger.

I
‘What is ‘be true’ supposed to mean in a world in which there are no statements to be true nor minds to have true beliefs?’, asked Richard Rorty a few years ago (1991a: 3). The question was meant to be rhetorical, the intended answer being ‘nothing whatsoever’. Rorty’s contention has been taken to be that if there were no people it would not be true that there are e.g. mountains or stars (though there might be mountains, or stars) (Glock 1997: 100). However, this cannot have been Rorty’s point, for even in a world devoid of people (i.e. of human beings) other creatures might have minds, and, consequently, beliefs, some of them true. In this paper I will try to formulate a *prima facie* more plausible version of Rorty’s point. I will then try to show that, even under the most favourable interpretation, Rorty’s thesis has very limited import: attempts to give it wider scope –to make truth, as such, mind-dependent - are bound to fail, for they are predicated on a confusion. Once the confusion is dissolved, it stands out that the mind-dependence of truth cannot be upheld. Finally, I will examine a variant of Rorty’s thesis (endorsed by Martin Heidegger) which, though essentially no less objectionable than Rorty’s, fares slightly better in certain respects.

* An expanded version of this paper will appear in a philosophical journal. Thanks to Philip Percival and Peter Simons for helpful comments on the version delivered at the Porto conference.

As Rorty is literally talking about the meaning of the phrase ‘be true’, his point could seem to be that in a world without language users the phrase would have no meaning, hence no application: nothing, in such a world, would be called true.¹ Whether or not this is conceded, this interpretation would make the point unconvincingly weak: from the fact that, in a world without language users, nothing would be called ‘true’ it certainly doesn’t follow that nothing would be true in such a world, no more than it would follow that nothing is a dinosaur from the fact that nothing is called a dinosaur.² Moreover, Rorty’s imagined world is not just one in which ‘there are no statements to be true’, it is, in addition, one in which ‘there are no minds to have true beliefs’. His point is not that the phrase ‘be true’ would not be around in such a world: rather, it is that such a world would contain no truth bearers, be they statements or beliefs. In such a world, it would also be the case that the expression ‘be true’ (or, for that matter, any other expression) is not in use, hence has no meaning; however, the point is not that (consequently) nothing would be called true. The point is that nothing would be true, for want of truth bearers.

What kind of world is Rorty talking about? We already saw that he cannot be talking of a possible world devoid of humans, for in such a world other beings might have minds. Nor can he be talking about our world, i.e. about the Earth in its remote past, before any minded creatures inhabited it: for then, other beings in the Universe might have had minds. Hence he must be talking either about a non-minded possible world, or about our own Universe at some globally pre-minded stage. At some point we shall want to distinguish the two cases; for the moment, we shall assume that Rorty is putting forth the contention that in a non-minded possible world, i.e. in a world where no beings have minds, the phrase ‘be true’ would have no meaning.

We saw that by this Rorty cannot simply mean that in a non-minded world there would be no language, thus no meaning for ‘be true’ or any other linguistic expression. What he wants to say is that, relative to such a world, the concept of truth has no intelligible application; or in other words, that in such a world there are no truths. I’ll take this to be Rorty’s thesis:

In a non-minded world there are no truths.

The *prima facie* grounds for (R) are explicitly mentioned by Rorty: truth bearers are mind-dependent entities, as they are statements or beliefs; so no minds, no truth bearers; a fortiori, no truths, for truths are truth bearers that are true.

Of course, truth bearers might not be mind-dependent entities: for example, they might be Fregean propositions or other abstract entities.³ But suppose for the moment they are mind-dependent entities such as beliefs or statements. If so, then, obviously, in a world where there are no beliefs or statements there are, a fortiori, no true beliefs or statements. Is this platitude the full content of (R), and all that Rorty wants to push on us?

It might be argued that even such a platitude is damaging enough. For, supposedly, even in a world without minds there might be mountains or stars.⁴ Thus, take a world *w* such that there are stars in it but no minds. Given that truth bearers are mind-dependent entities, *w* would not contain any truths: in particular, while it would be correct to say –it is, indeed, our hypothesis– that there are stars in *w*, it would not be correct to say that it is true (in *w*) that there are stars. Or in other words, there are stars in *w* but it is not the case that it is true in *w* that there are stars. Now, consider the (schematic) principle

(Den)⁵ *p* if and only if it is true that *p*.

¹ ‘There is a strong case for holding that the phrase ‘is true’ would not mean anything in a world in which there are no people to use it’ (Glock 1997: ib.).

² On the assumption that linguistic idealism is false. Rorty explicitly rejects linguistic idealism in 1998a: 90.

³ Indeed, that there are truths that are not, and never will be believed by anyone is often used as an objection against identifying the truth bearers with beliefs: see e.g. Künne 2004: 380.

⁴ Rorty has no trouble conceding so much, as we shall see (p.XX).

⁵ I follow Künne (2003: 35) in labelling this principle ‘the biconditional Denominalization Schema’.

Suppose (Den) is a necessary truth, i.e. it holds in every possible world. By logic, this entails that for every w , p holds in w iff it is true in w that p . Thus, the Rortian conclusion that, if w is a non-minded world, there are stars in w but it is not the case that it is true in w that there are stars is inconsistent with (Den) being a necessary truth. But (Den) is generally regarded as relatively uncontroversial; and those who regard (Den) as having quasi-definitional import would say that, given our notion of truth, (Den) couldn't possibly have counterexamples. So, perhaps the platitude is no such thing: if one accepts it and wants to retain the full force of (Den), one would have to insist that truth bearers are not to be identified with mind-dependent entities such as statements or beliefs.

||

Or rather: even the platitude could be regarded as controversial if the argument just given were sound. However, it is not sound. In the argument, we derive

(1) It is not the case that it is true in w that there are stars

from

(2) w does not contain any truths

This step appears to presuppose that 'A is true in w ' entails 'A is a truth and w contains A' (or, as I will say, 'A is true and A exists in w '). But it is by no means obvious that such an entailment holds. Let us define 'A is true of a world w ' as 'A's truth condition is satisfied by the way things are in w '⁶ (or, equivalently, by ' w is such that A'⁷). By saying that A is true in a world w we can mean either

A exists in w and is true of w

or

A is true of w .⁸

⁶ I am borrowing the first formulation from Andrea Iacona (2003: 338). According to Iacona, 'the truth of a truth bearer in alternative states of affairs [= possible worlds] depends on the satisfaction of its truth condition in those states of affairs, no matter what its ontological status is' (ib.); thus for him 'A is true in w ' has only one reading, namely the b-reading. I am leaving this issue open, to favour Rorty's point.

⁷ With the obvious adjustments depending on what kind of truth bearer A is. E.g. if A is a sentence, 'that A' = 'that' followed by the disquotation of A; if A is the proposition that B, 'that A' = 'that B'; etc.

⁸ A somewhat parallel distinction is introduced by Hoffmann (2003: 645) for truth bearers that are propositions. He distinguishes between a proposition's being true with respect to a possible world w (our b-reading) and a proposition's being true in w (the a-reading). A proposition's truth with respect to w is compatible with its non-existence in w . However, Hoffmann wants further to distinguish between 'say[ing] of a proposition p that it is true with respect to a possible world w ' and 'predicat[ing] truth of p , with respect to w ', the latter coinciding with saying of p that it is true in w . I think this is one distinction too many. - Glock (1997) also uses a distinction between being true of a world and being true in a world, which he attributes to the Rortian: 'Even if there were no people [the Rortian concedes], it would still be true that there are mountains [...] But all that means is that there are truths of a world without people, but not that there are truths in a world without people' (101). While Hoffmann seems to think that the only legitimate reading of 'true in a world' is the a-reading, Glock thinks it is the b-reading: 'We can say what holds true in a world without people no less than we can say what holds true of such a world. The crucial point is that what holds true in or of both the actual and the fictional world, e.g. that there are mountains, is not a kind of object' (101-102). Indeed, if it is ruled out that truth bearers might be 'objects' such as beliefs or statements, i.e. mind-dependent entities, Rorty's claim loses most of its initial plausibility, as we shall see. - Mates (1986: 94-95) opposed a sentence or a proposition "being true of a world" (the b-reading) to its being true in a world (the a-reading): like Glock, he thought the interesting notion to be the former, as "we are not interested in what would have happened to the sentence itself if the given world had existed. We wish...that "There are no sentences" is true of any possible world in which there are no people and hence no languages, even though in such a world the sentence... would not even exist, let alone be true". According to Mates, use of "true of a world" rather than "true in a world" goes back to Russell (1900: 32). I am indebted to Peter Simons for the reference to Mates.

Use in the context of possible world semantics clearly favours the b-reading (see e.g. Kripke 1963a, 1963b; Hughes and Cresswell 1968: 177-178); however, it is conceivable that someone might use 'true in a world' in 'sense' (a). I don't see that such a use would violate any semantic rules of English. Notice, however, that (1) follows from (2) only if the a-reading of 'true in w' is assumed. For the fact that there are no truth bearers, hence no truths in w is irrelevant to its being true in w (in the b-reading) that there are stars. If 'true in w' means 'true of w', then even if w does not contain any truths, it may still be true in w that there are stars. Thus the platitude is just what it seems, a platitude, unless we find reason to regard the a-reading as privileged.

Notice that there is no special connection between the choice of mind-dependent entities as truth bearers and the choice of the a-reading of 'true in a world' over the b-reading. One who adopts, say, beliefs as truth bearers is not therefore obliged to give 'true in a world' the a-reading (as if beliefs could be said to be true in a world w only by regarding them as existing in w). My belief that there are mountains in Spain can be said to be true, in the b-reading, in any world that is such that there are mountains in Spain, whether or not such a world is minded. That a world w is non-minded is irrelevant for a truth bearer A's being true in w in the b-reading (unless, of course, A is about minds or mind-dependent entities), whether or not A is a mind-dependent entity.

Is there any reason for being partial to one reading rather than the other? Not as far as I can see. But there is every reason to keep the two readings distinct. Otherwise, one risks overstating the truism that no true beliefs are entertained, or true statements issued in a non-minded world as the far-reaching thesis that in a non-minded world, it would not be true (e.g.) that there are stars. Which, in turn, could be phrased as the bombastic thesis that 'truth is mind-dependent'.

Let us go back to Rorty to see how this works. In the text from which I quoted at the start, a review of works by and about John Dewey, Rorty contrasts Dewey's and his own pragmatism with idealism, on the one hand, and Russellian realism on the other:

Idealists sometimes said: 'If there were no minds, there would be no stars'. Pragmatists say only: "If there were no minds, there would be no one to use the term 'star'". Opponents like Russell ask: but would it not be true that there are stars? Pragmatists answer that question with another: what is 'be true' supposed to mean in a world in which there are no statements to be true nor minds to have true beliefs?

Thus, our initial quotation ('What is 'be true' supposed to mean, etc.')

is set as a reply to the Russellian realist's claim that even if there were no minds, it would still be true that there are stars. We identified Rorty's reply as thesis (R):

In a non-minded world there are no truths.

But (R) can be construed as a plausible objection to the realist's claim only thanks to the ambiguity of 'true in a world'. For suppose (R) is disambiguated. Take the reading under which it means that in a non-minded world w, nothing is such that it both exists in w and is true of w (i.e. the a-reading). As we saw, if truth bearers are mind dependent entities then on this reading (R) is plausible (though platitudinous). But then, (R) counts as an antirealist objection only if the realist holds that

Even in a non-minded world, there would exist mind-dependent truth bearers to the effect that there are stars, and they would be true of such a world.

But there is no reason to saddle the realist with such an explicitly inconsistent claim. Suppose, on the other hand, that (R) is given the b-reading, so that it means that, for w a non-minded world, nothing is true of w. Then it does count as an objection to the realist's claim (in any reading), but there is no reason to regard it as true.

In summary: against the realist, Rorty insists on the mind-dependence of truth. Now, there is

a sense in which truth is mind-dependent (given that truth bearers are mind-dependent entities); but in that sense, the mind-dependence of truth does not count as an objection against the realist. For mind-dependence to count against the realist, it must be taken in a stronger sense; but in order to show that truth is mind-dependent in such a stronger sense, an argument is needed.

For a moment, one might think that there is indeed such an argument, though it is not one that Rorty would be happy to endorse. Take the idealist of Rorty's quotation, the one who would say: 'If there were no minds, there would be no stars', or mountains, or dinosaurs. The idealist's rationale could be, for example, the following: to be a star is to fall under the concept of star. But in a non-minded world, there would be no categorizing of anything by anybody. Hence, in a non-minded world there would be no stars (ditto for mountains, dinosaurs, bacteria, or whatever). This argument is clearly based on the conflation of what are often regarded as two different uses of the concept 'concept':⁹ the second premise assumes that a concept is a mental entity, whereas the first does not necessarily take concepts to be mental. So, even granting both premises the argument is dubious to say the least, for it might be guilty of equivocation.¹⁰ However, if, for whatever reason, one held with the idealist that in a non-minded world there are no stars (or mountains, or dinosaurs), it might seem that he would have a reason to consider (R) true in the b-reading, his reason being that nothing is true of a non-minded world; consequently, nothing is true in a non-minded world, even in the b-reading.

But this is an obvious mistake, at least if we stick to the definition of 'true of a world' we gave above. For according to the definition, a truth bearer A is true of w iff w is such that A, or equivalently iff A's truth condition is satisfied by the way things are in w. Now, if w, a non-minded world, contains no stars, w is such that there are no stars: hence, a truth bearer to the effect that there are no stars is true of w, and therefore true in w in the b-reading. Thus, even the idealist cannot rescue the b-reading of (R).¹¹

Notice that, anyway, Rorty would not endorse the idealist's claim:

As astrophysical theory has changed since the days of Gilgamesh, the heavens have been re-described, but they have not changed.

It is part of our story about the stars and planets that they would indeed exist whether or not anybody ever described them.¹²

There may be an idealistic tinge to the second quotation (after all, the stars' and planets' independent existence is itself part of a "story"); however, the first quotation clearly asserts that the heavens' existence and properties are independent of our descriptions and re-descriptions of them, thus presumably of our conceptualization of them as well. Rorty wants to keep the distinction firm between a world without minds, hence without truths, and one without stars.

So did one of his sources of inspiration, Martin Heidegger. Wrote Heidegger:

⁹ Georges Rey's 'metaphysically taxonomic function' and 'epistemologically taxonomic function' respectively (Rey 1983: 241; cf. Rey 1994: 190, Margolis & Laurence 1999: 5-6).

¹⁰ From the argument's conclusion it follows that a non-minded world is an empty world: in such a world, nothing would have any property (not even the property of being an individual or of being self-identical). An idealist might be happy with this consequence, for she could read it as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the idea of a non-minded world, an idea that many idealists would regard as preposterous anyway.

¹¹ Unless (R) is restricted to atomic and quantified truths, excluding truth functional compounds. I.e., (R') = 'In a non-minded world there are no (non-truth-functional) truths', in the b-reading, is entailed by the idealistic assumption (I owe this qualification to Achille Varzi).

¹² Both quotations from Rorty 1991a: 3. Rorty also holds that 'all true beliefs are true because things are as they are' (1998a: 94). It is hard to see how this can be reconciled with Rorty's approving statement that 'pragmatists like Dewey...do not think there is a Way the World is' (ib.). Rorty, however, thinks it can: see his discussion of Bernard Williams' criticism to the same effect, Rorty 1998b: 56-57.

Before Newton's laws were discovered, they were not "true". From this it does not follow that they were false [...] The fact that before Newton his laws were neither true nor false cannot mean that the beings which they point out in a discovering way did not previously exist. The laws became true through Newton, through them beings in themselves became accessible for Da-sein. With the discoveredness of beings, they show themselves precisely as the beings they previously were. (Heidegger 1927: 208).

Thus, not only did Newton's laws not create the planets or their orbits: before Newton, the objects of his discoveries already had just the properties that Newton came to attribute to them ('They show themselves precisely as the beings they previously were'). On the other hand, Newton's descriptions of such properties –Newton's laws- were not true (or false) before he devised them. Why? Because, in Heidegger's¹³ super-antirealist view, truth is essentially connected with discovery: 'To discover...is the kind of being of "truth"' (ib.). There is truth only if there is discovery; but the possibility of discovery requires (potential) discoverers, i.e. the minded beings to whom Heidegger refers by the word 'Da-sein':

Before there was any Da-sein, there was no truth; nor will there be any after Da-sein is no more. For in such a case truth as disclosedness, discovering, and discoveredness cannot be. (ib.)¹⁴

So, although planets moved in elliptical orbits even before Newton, it was not true that they did. Heidegger would have agreed that there were stars before minds came around, but it was not true that there were.

We will later explore the differences between talking about a non-minded world, like Rorty, and talking about a pre-minded (or pre-Newtonian) world like Heidegger. Whatever they may be, there are important similarities as well: both Rorty and Heidegger reject the idealistic claim that nothing would be the case in a non-minded/pre-minded world; both insist that, nonetheless, nothing would be true in such a world; consequently, they both have *prima facie* trouble with the equivalence

(Den) p if and only if it is true that p.

We said (p.X) that Rorty's claim (R) does not necessarily involve such trouble, for it need not entail that (e.g.) it is not true that there are stars in w, a non-minded world: indeed, the latter claim can be understood as in the b-reading, so that the claim that w does not contain any true truth bearers is irrelevant to its being true of w that there are stars. Let us now resume the argument in a more systematic fashion. Suppose first that (R) itself is given the a-reading: i.e. (R) amounts to

(R_a) If w is non-minded, nothing is such that it exists in w and it is true of w.

(R_a) need not entail that it is not true in w that (e.g.) there are stars, for this may be understood as in the b-reading. It may be objected, however, that if one a-reads (R) there is no reason why one should not a-read 'It is true in w that there are stars' as well: in which case even (R_a) would engender trouble with (Den). For (R_a) entails that it is not the case that that there are stars both exists in w and is true of w, i.e. it entails that it is not true in w that there are stars (where 'true in w' is given the a-reading).

Be that as it may, we saw that Rorty needs to give (R) the b-reading to mount an attack against realism. So suppose that (R) is given the b-reading, in which case it amounts to

(R_b) If w is non-minded, nothing is true of w.

(R_b) straightforwardly entails that it is not true in w that there are stars (under either reading).

¹³ Or, more accurately, early Heidegger's. See Harrison 1991: 124.

¹⁴ Consistently, Heidegger goes on to say that 'The fact that there are "eternal truths" will not be adequately proven until it is successfully demonstrated that Da-sein has been and will be for all eternity. As long as this proof is lacking, the statement remains a fantastical assertion which does not gain in legitimacy by being generally "believed" by the philosophers'.

Thus, if there are non-minded worlds and some of them are such that there are stars, we have for any such world that both p and $\sim Tp$ (where p = 'There are stars', and 'T' is the sentential operator 'it is true that'). So it turns out that there are possible worlds that are such that (Den) does not hold: (Den) is not a necessary equivalence, which, as we noticed, may not be acceptable to those who regard it as definitional of truth.

So, if he wants to avoid trouble with (Den) Rorty must surely renounce his antirealist polemic; but even so –i.e., even if he gives (R) the a-reading- he is not entirely safe, for it can be retorted that in that case (Den) itself should be given the a-reading. We shall presently see that, as far as (Den) is concerned, Heidegger finds himself in a position that strongly resembles Rorty's, though he gets there by a different road.



Let us take stock. We saw that 'A is true in world w ' does not necessarily mean 'A exists in w and is true of w '. It can mean ' w is such that A', and it is often used in this way. If 'A is true in world w ' is given the first reading and truth bearers are taken to be mind-dependent entities, then, obviously, nothing is true in a non-minded (or pre-minded) world. In this sense, there are no truths in such a world. However, this would not unqualifiedly count as an objection to the realist claim that if there were no minds, it would still be true that there are stars. For in the other reading of 'A is true in w ' it may be true, even in a non-minded world, that there are stars. In the other reading, what this amounts to is that a non-minded world may be such that there are stars in it. That this could be the case –that there could be stars in a non-minded world- is denied by the idealist. However, even the idealist cannot keep negative truth bearers (such as 'There are no stars') from being true in a non-minded world in the second reading (the one we called 'the b-reading'). So, even for the idealist truth is not unqualifiedly mind-dependent.¹⁵ In any case, Rorty is not an idealist, and neither is Heidegger: they both want to say that there are stars in a non-minded (in Heidegger's case, pre-minded) world. But they also want to say that it is not true that there are stars in such a world, which, at least in one reading, leads to a conflict with the equivalence (Den).

Now, so far we have been assuming, quite explicitly most of the time, that truth bearers are mind-dependent entities such as statements or beliefs. For if they are not mind-dependent entities, we noticed, Rorty's claim seems to lose whatever initial plausibility it may have. For example, suppose that truth bearers are propositions. Frege thought that propositions were neither physical nor mental entities: they inhabited a Third World (though they could be grasped, somehow, by human minds). Could inhabitants of a Third World also be actual or possible denizens of our world? I would find it odd. For to regard something as inhabiting a Third World (or any other Platonic realm) is to ascribe it existence of a peculiar sort; how could it be endowed with such a peculiar form of existence while at the same time existing in the plain, everyday sense of existence? If Platonic entities were, or could be denizens of our world, while postulating a Third World to begin with? Thus I take that Fregean propositions are not the sort of entities that might exist in a (regular) world, minded or not; consequently, they cannot be true in a world in the a-reading.¹⁶ More accurately, if truth bearers are Fregean propositions, 'true in a world' does not have the a-reading. In the b-reading, there is no reason why Fregean propositions could not be true in a non-minded world (once again, provided they are not about minds or mind-dependent entities).

¹⁵ Anyway, in the idealist's view the mind-dependence of truth is parasitic upon the mind-dependence of properties and facts: there are no (positive) truths about stars in a non-minded world because there are no stars in it.

¹⁶ Mates (1986: 95) remarked that "it is hard to know what could be meant by saying that so abstract an entity as a proposition is in a possible world, that is, could have existed".

On the other hand, many philosophers believe that propositions exist in every possible world (call such propositions ‘ubiquitous’);¹⁷ thus –a fortiori– in every non-minded possible world. Such propositions are therefore mind-independent. As nothing keeps them from being true of a world (minded or not), they can be true in a non-minded world in both readings of ‘true in a world’. Propositions so conceived are among the most un-Rortian of entities.

Finally, other philosophers, such as some of the proponents of Russellian propositions, believe that propositions may or may not exist in a world (call these ‘contingent propositions’); not, however, depending on whether the relevant world is minded or not, but depending on whether (all) their constituents exist in that world. Russellian propositions are not regarded as mind-dependent entities (unless, once more, they are about minds). So, suppose the proposition that *p* exists in world *w*. As it may be true of *w*, it can be true in *w* under both readings, whether *w* is minded or not. Suppose on the other hand that the proposition that *p* does not exist in *w* (for example, take the proposition that Socrates does not exist and consider a world *w* in which Socrates does not exist). Then the proposition would not be true in *w* in the a-reading (for it does not exist in *w*), though it might nevertheless be (and, intuitively, would be)¹⁸ true in *w* in the b-reading. Again, that *w* is or is not minded is irrelevant.

Thus, with non-mind-dependent truth bearers the Rortian claim that there are no truths in a non-minded world cannot be upheld.¹⁹ Some such entities may be true in non-minded worlds even in the a-reading, i.e. they may exist in, and be true of a non-minded world: such is the case with ‘ubiquitous’ and ‘contingent’ propositions. Fregean propositions, on the other hand, cannot be true in non-minded worlds in the a-reading: not, however, because they do not exist in non-minded worlds, but rather because they are not the kind of entities that exist in worlds. For such entities the b-reading of ‘true in a world’ is obligatory, and on that reading they may be true in any world, minded or not.

IV

From something’s being true, it obviously does not follow that it is believed. This is clear enough from everything that was true before there were any people, and so any believers or beliefs, at all. (Stroud 2000: 22).

Stroud is not literally asserting, but he is certainly presupposing that lots of things were true before there were any people (= minds), hence any beliefs. Heidegger, we know, disagrees: ‘Before there was any Da-sein, there was no truth; nor will there be any after Da-sein is no more’. So far, we have been discussing the view (that we attributed to Rorty) that there are no truths in a non-minded possible world; we saw that there are reasons to accept such a view only in a rather platitudinous, harmless sense. Does talking about our own world in its pre-minded stage make any difference? We saw that, according to Heidegger, although there were dinosaurs 70M years ago it was not true at the time that there were dinosaurs (for Stroud, it was). Does Heidegger have better arguments than Rorty because of being talking about the past rather than about possibilities?

¹⁷ Bealer 1993, Schiffer 1996. In (2003), Schiffer reiterates the contention that properties exist in every possible world (66), though he is not equally explicit about propositions.

¹⁸ If a proposition that doesn’t exist in *w* were said to be true in *w* (unqualified), we would be dealing with a non-existent entity which has properties (if truth is a property). Some (like Hoffmann 2003: 643) would be happy to accept the consequence, others (Williamson 2002) would not be. In my opinion, the distinction between the two readings of ‘true in a world’ is of help here: a proposition that does not exist in *w* cannot be true in *w* in the a-reading, but it may well be true in *w* in the b-reading. Notice that being true in *w* in the b-reading does not amount to having a property in *w*: thus we would not be dealing with an entity that has properties in *w* though it does not exist in *w*. (I thank Philip Percival for drawing my attention to Hoffmann’s paper).

¹⁹ For parallel discussions involving other kinds of truth bearers see the expanded version of this paper.

Whether or not talk of truth at some time can be represented as exactly paralleling talk of truth in a possible world,²⁰ ‘true at t’ appears to exhibit the same ambiguity as ‘true in w’. Define ‘A is true of the world at t’ as ‘A’s truth condition is satisfied by the state of the world at t’, or simply ‘The world at t is such that A’. Then, ‘A is true at t’ can be taken to mean either

(at) A exists at t and is true of the world at t

or

(bt) A is true of the world at t.

Heidegger’s claim that it was not true (in the year 70M b.C.) that there were dinosaurs would then turn out to be based on giving ‘true at t’ the at-reading while taking truth bearers to be mind-dependent entities, exactly as Rorty’s claim depended on giving ‘true in w’ the a-reading while taking truth bearers to be mind-dependent. However, it is easy to see that Heidegger can establish the mind-dependence of truth in much a more direct way, by simply relying upon his notion of truth. For if ‘A is true’ means ‘It is, or it has been discovered that A’ (or something along these lines), then clearly nothing can be true unless some mind is there to discover it. It follows that nothing was true before there were minds: e.g. it was not true, in the year 70M b.C., that there were dinosaurs. No doubt, those who share Stroud’s intuitions will regard this as a reductio of Heidegger’s definition of truth; however, it must be granted that his conception is coherent. In Heidegger’s view, the mind-dependence of truth does not follow from a dubious reading of ‘true in a world’ plus the assumption that truth bearers are mind-dependent entities: instead, it is built into the very definition of truth.

We saw that Rorty had trouble with (Den), the equivalence ‘p if and only if it is true that p’. Is Heidegger in the same boat? Perhaps not. He would be if his view were that, while

(6) There were dinosaurs at t [t = the year 70M b.C.]

it is not the case that

(7) It is true that there were dinosaurs at t.

(Den) would then be false at t. However, on the face of it this is not what Heidegger holds. He holds that, while (6), it is not the case that (8):

(8) It was true that there [were] dinosaurs at t.

Let the sentential operator ‘P’ stand for ‘it was the case that’, as usual; let ‘T’ stand for ‘it is true that’; and let p be the sentence ‘There are dinosaurs’. Then, Heidegger’s view is that

(9) $Pp \ \& \ \sim PTp$

not that

(10) $Pp \ \& \ \sim Tpp$

Now, this wouldn’t make much of a difference if (9) and (10) were logically equivalent; and they would be logically equivalent if ‘PTp’ were equivalent to ‘Tpp’. Assuming (Den), one might think that the latter equivalence can be proved as follows:

PTp Hyp

Pp (Den), subst. of equivalents

Tpp (Den)

²⁰ Gareth Evans (1985) thought it could not. I am not convinced by his argument, but anyway, it doesn’t seem to affect the ambiguity I am pointing out.

and similarly in the other direction. However, the proof assumes that equivalents may be substituted for each other in the context 'P[...]'], i.e. that 'P' is extensional. But 'P' was shown to be non-extensional long ago.²¹ On the other hand, 'P' was also shown to be intensional, which means that necessary equivalents can be substituted for each other in a P-context. If so, then (9) and (10) are logically equivalent if and only if p and 'Tp' are regarded as necessarily (and not just materially) equivalent. If (Den) is regarded as a necessary truth, then Heidegger's view concerning truth in the past is inconsistent with (Den) even as a material equivalence. So Heidegger's predicament is ultimately very similar to Rorty's: he has trouble with (Den) being a necessary truth. In Heidegger's case, if (Den) is a necessary truth then his view is inconsistent with (Den). In Rorty's case, if (Den) is a necessary truth then his view does not carry the antirealist implications that Rorty himself appears to derive from it: it is reduced to a harmless platitude.

In Heidegger's case, that his view is inconsistent with (Den) being a necessary truth is no serious problem from Heidegger's own viewpoint: after all, as far as I know Heidegger never committed himself to (Den), let alone to its necessitation. With Rorty, things are different. Rorty repeatedly professed his allegiance to Davidson's programme in the theory of meaning.²² In a Davidsonian theory of meaning, 'theorems' of the form

p is true (in L) iff s

(for example: 'La neige est blanche' is true (in French) iff snow is white) are not simply true but necessarily true, as Davidson himself came to realize.²³ Of course, this applies to homophonic biconditionals as well. For suppose there is a world such that snow is not white, yet 'Snow is white', as an English sentence, is true. That would be a world where 'Snow is white' does not mean that snow is white (for if it meant that snow is white, it would be false in a world in which snow is not white). In such a world, English would be a partly different language. However, there is no world in which English is a different language: there are worlds in which the inhabitants of England do not speak English, but no world where English does not have the semantic properties that identify English in the actual world.²⁴ Consequently, there is no world such that it is not true that 'Snow is white' is true iff snow is white. Thus every instance of the schema

(Dis) 'p' is true iff p

is a necessary truth, at least within the context of a Davidsonian theory of meaning. Now, Rorty can accept (Dis) being a necessary truth only if its necessity is restricted to a proper subset of the set of possible worlds (presumably, it will be the subset of minded worlds). For if (Dis)'s necessity is not so restricted, then (Dis) being a necessary truth entails that (Den) is also a necessary truth, i.e. that there are no worlds, minded or not, such that it is not true that p although p.²⁵ Presumably, the relevant proper subset will be the set of minded worlds. In other words, if Rorty wants to stick to Davidson's programme while avoiding to recognize the necessity of (Den) he must assume that a sentence only expresses a proposition in minded worlds. Whether Davidson himself would be happy with such a restriction is a different story.

There is another difference between Heidegger's stance and Rorty's, one that we already noticed. Heidegger's claim, counterintuitive as it may be judged, is coherent with his conception

²¹ See Thomason 1974: 36-37.

²² Rorty 1979: 259-262; 1982: xxvi; 1991b: 137-138; 1995: 286.

²³ Davidson says that such theorems 'must be viewed as laws', and that they have to be taken 'as capable of supporting counterfactual claims' (Davidson 1984: xiv; cf. 1976: 174).

²⁴ Soames 1984: 410; Künne 2003: 220-221.

²⁵ For all contingent propositions, such as the proposition that there are stars. For an argument to this effect see the expanded version of this paper.

of truth; indeed, it is an immediate consequence of his conception of truth. Rorty, on the other hand, does not share such a conception, nor any other substantial conception of truth: as he himself said, he “swing[s] back and forth between trying to reduce truth to justification and propounding some form of minimalism about truth” (Rorty 1995: 282). In my opinion, the latter alternative is by far prevalent in Rorty’s writings: “The pragmatist can agree with Davidson that...to develop a truth-theory for the sentences of English, e.g....is...all that can be milked out of Philosophical reflection on Truth” (1982: xxvi). Thus, contrary to Heidegger, Rorty has no particular reason to reject the b-reading of ‘true in a world’ in favour of the a-reading; or anyway, no reason stemming from his conception of truth. But unless the b-reading is ruled out, Rorty’s claim –thesis (R)- is ungrounded.

Is truth mind-dependent? Mind-dependence may be built into the definition of truth, as with Heidegger. If so, to challenge the mind-dependence of truth we have to challenge the definition: anti-antirealist arguments will be relevant in this context. Otherwise, it appears that truth can be said to be mind-dependent only in a rather trivial sense: if truth bearers are mind-dependent entities and ‘true in a world’ means ‘existing in a world and true of that world’, then truth is indeed mind-dependent: nothing would be true in a world without minds. If either premise is dropped, the conclusion that truth is mind-dependent is unwarranted.

References

- Bealer, G. (1993), ‘Universals’, *Journal of Philosophy* 90, 5-32.
- Davidson, D. (1976), ‘Reply to Foster’, in G.Evans, J.McDowell (eds.), *Truth and Meaning*, Oxford : Oxford University Press; later in Davidson 1984, 171-179.
- Davidson, D. (1984), *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Evans, G. (1985), ‘Does Tense Logic Rest upon a Mistake?’, in *Collected Papers*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 343-363.
- Glock, H.J. (1997), ‘Truth Without People?’, *Philosophy* 72, 85-104.
- Harrison, B. (1991), ‘Heidegger and the Analytic Tradition on Truth’, *Topoi* 10, 121-136.
- Heidegger, M. (1927), *Sein und Zeit*, Halle 1927; English translation by J.Stanbaugh, Albany: SUNY Press, 1996.
- Hoffmann, A. (2003), ‘A Puzzle about Truth and Singular Propositions’, *Mind* 112, 635-651.
- Hughes, G.E., Cresswell, M.J. (1968), *An Introduction to Modal Logic*, London: Methuen.
- Iacona, A. (2003), ‘Are There Propositions?’, *Erkenntnis* 58, 325-351.
- Kripke, S. (1963a), ‘Semantical Analysis of Modal Logic I’, *Zeitschrift für mathematische Logik und die Grundlagen der Mathematik* 9, 67-96.
- Kripke, S. (1963b), ‘Semantical Considerations on Modal Logic’, *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 16, 83-94.

- Künne, W. (2003), *Conceptions of Truth*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Margolis, E., Laurence, S. (1999), 'Concepts and Cognitive Science', in *Concepts. Core Readings*, Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 3-81.
- Mates, B. (1986), *The Philosophy of Leibniz. Metaphysics and Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rey, G. (1983), 'Concepts and Stereotypes', *Cognition* 15, 237-262.
- Rey, G. (1994), 'Concepts', in S.Guttenplan (ed.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford: Blackwell, 185-193.
- Rorty, R. (1979), *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rorty, R. (1982), *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rorty, R. (1991a), 'Just One More Species Doing its Best', *London Review of Books* 13, n.14.
- Rorty, R. (1991b), *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, Philosophical Papers Vol.1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, R. (1995), 'Is Truth a Goal of Enquiry? Davidson vs. Wright', *The Philosophical Quarterly* 45, 281-300.
- Rorty, R. (1998a), 'Charles Taylor on Truth', in *Truth and Progress*, Philosophical Papers Vol.3, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 84-97.
- Rorty, R. (1998b), 'Hilary Putnam and the Relativist Menace', in *Truth and Progress*, 43-62.
- Russell, B. (1900), *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz*, London: Allen & Unwin; seventh impression, 1967.
- Schiffer, S. (1996), 'Language-Created, Language-Independent Entities', *Philosophical Topics* 24, 149-167.
- Schiffer, S. (2003), *The Things We Mean*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Soames, S. (1984), 'What is a Theory of Truth?', *Journal of Philosophy* 81, 411-429; later in M.P.Lynch (ed.), *The Nature of Truth*, Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 2001, 397-418.
- Stroud, B. (2000), *The Quest for Reality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thomason, R. H. (1974), 'Introduction' to R. Montague, *Formal Philosophy*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1-69.
- Williamson, T. (2002), 'Necessary Existents', in A. O'Hear (ed.), *Logic, Thought and Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 233-251.
-