

## TRUTH AS A COMMUNICATIVE VIRTUE IN A POSTMODERN AGE: FROM DEWEY TO RORTY

**Clinton Collins**  
*University of Kentucky*

In an article reproduced in the *New York Times* last March, Vaclav Havel, the poet-playwright, and then president of Czechoslovakia, proclaimed the needs of the societies of the world at “the end of the modern era.”<sup>1</sup> His call is primarily for a change of attitudes, away from the arrogance of the typically modern beliefs in a humanism that dominates the natural universe, a scientific method that generates objective knowledge and assures unlimited progress, and advancing technology that can overcome the problems that are the by-product of earlier technologies. Havel would replace these with each individual’s unique experience of the world, his or her sense of justice and ability to see things from the perspectives of others, and “faith in the importance of particular measures,” as opposed to the large-scale plans characteristic of modernity.

Havel’s concern that the end of modernity calls for new attitudes echoes a theme taken up by educational theorists Nick Burbules and Suzanne Rice. Burbules and Rice tell us that the postmodern turn that is gradually overtaking Western intellectual traditions calls for education that reaffirms those “communicative virtues” that will facilitate dialogue across differences. Their list of communicative virtues includes:

tolerance, patience, respect for differences, a willingness to listen, the inclination to admit that one may be mistaken, the ability to reinterpret or translate one’s own concerns in a way that makes them comprehensible to others, the self-imposition of restraint in order that others may “have a turn” to speak, and the disposition to express one’s self honestly and sincerely.<sup>2</sup>

I don’t envy Burbules and Rice their task of prescribing virtues for the postmodern age, because postmodernity is not an “ism,”<sup>3</sup> it has no agenda. The term describes cultural changes happening to people throughout the post-industrial world, willy-nilly. Postmodernity takes no stand on such things as the communicative virtues described by Burbules and Rice. As those authors note, the things they describe were virtues in the modern age as well. These are virtues that the authors believe have not fallen under the cutting ax of postmodernity.<sup>4</sup> I think that Burbules and Rice have done well to reassert them in the midst of the current drift into postmodernity, which has produced a general effect of intellectual confusion.<sup>5</sup> Communicative virtues provide tiny anchors in that confusion: justification for continuing education in the form of conversations when people are losing their sense of certainty in the results of inquiry.

In this paper I want to focus primarily on only the last of the communicative virtues suggested by Burbules and Rice, what they describe as honesty and sincerity; what I wish to discuss as truth. Truth, itself, is not a communicative virtue. But the communicative virtues of honesty and sincerity would seem to assume (at least in their modern guise) that a speaker knows what is true and wishes to communicate that truth to others. The postmodern drift calls both of these possibilities into question.

Those expressing challenges to modern views of truth often turn to reexamination of the American pragmatic tradition. For example, in his encyclopedic work, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey writes that, under postmodernity,

coherent representation and action are either repressive or illusionary.... Pragmatism (of the Dewey sort) then becomes the only possible philosophy of action. We thus find Richard Rorty, one of the major U.S. philosophers in the postmodern movement, dismissing “the canonical sequence of philosophers from Descartes to Nietzsche as a distraction from the history of concrete social engineering which made the contemporary North American culture what it is now....”<sup>6</sup>

Few would challenge Harvey’s association of Rorty with a postmodern outlook that is both neo-pragmatic and neo-Deweyan. For some, however, this may imply that postmodernity leaves no alternative than some pragmatic theory of truth. Such a view obscures, I believe, the extent to which the Deweyan, pragmatic theory of truth expresses distinctly modern sentiments, sentiments that are both technicist (as the passage above that Harvey takes from Rorty suggests) and positivist.

While I think that Rorty has modified a pragmatic view of truth under the influence of postmodern sensibilities, I wish to raise doubts about the applicability of such a theory to postmodern conditions in education and conversation. I suggest further that honesty and sincerity, in being retained as communicative virtues for postmodern education, will gradually be redefined in a way that does not bind them to any of the modern theories of truth. Rather than honesty depending upon a speaker or author knowing the truth and presenting it to others, as a communicative virtue in a postmodern age it may come to mean the commitment of the speaker to the intrinsic value of the conversation with others.

Richard Rorty became a spokesperson for the postmodern turn with his book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*,<sup>7</sup> which sketches the historical rise and decline of the theory of truth as accurate representation of a reality external to human knowledge. Rorty was reacting against the tradition of linguistic analysis that had dominated British and American philosophy in the late phases of modernity. Rorty challenges the criteria used in the modern tradition to determine the adequacy of texts (here used to refer to any form of verbal communication). When a representational theory of knowledge is abandoned, the “truth” of texts becomes no more significant as a criterion of their adequacy than such contextual variables as their appropriateness to the social and historical contexts in which they occur, or their role in the psychology of the person creating the text. The postmodern turn casts doubt that texts can be politically, socially, psychologically or historically neutral. For example, a scientific theory’s adequacy depends as much on political variables among the appropriate scientific community as it does on its alleged correspondence to an external reality or its coherence with widely held beliefs, which are the two widely acknowledged criteria for truth, both classically and within the modern age.

Rorty’s challenge to the view of truth in the analytical tradition of late modernity is taken up directly by Bernard Williams, a leading British philosopher defending the legacy of the analytic movement. Williams concludes that Rorty’s views “raise important questions about the significance for culture in general of certain intellectual ideals — above all, a certain image of truthfulness.” Williams takes his stand clearly with these intellectual ideals of late modernity, and he spells out how analytic philosophy has observed them:

Analytic philosophy (holds) that it offers a very abstract example of certain virtues of civilized thought; because it gives reasons and sets out arguments in a way that can be explicitly followed and considered; and because it makes questions clearer and sorts out what is muddled.... It is an activity pursued under constraints...among others, those of rational consistency. Its experience of these constraints...is one where its spirit overlaps with the sciences. Both in this philosophy and in the sciences, the ideal is the old Socratic ideal that mere rhetoric and the power of words will not prevail....<sup>8</sup>

In this passage, Williams appeals to communicative virtues characteristic of modern Western societies. These virtues are as old as Plato (seen in Socrates’ challenge to the value of the rhetorical skills that the sophists taught to the rich young men of ancient Greece), and as current as the ideals of modern science. Indeed, Williams calls upon the leading late-modern philosopher of science, Karl Popper, in defense of his critique. “Karl Popper,” he writes, “believes, unlike Rorty, that there is something to be said about the objective progress of science in finding out what the world is really

like.” The implication is that Rorty’s counsel is a denial of scientific progress. “Progress,” however, is another idea undergoing a postmodern sea change. It is a kind of progress if the sciences (as well as other genres of human knowledge) “move with the times,” if they reflect an avoidance of stagnation and decay, and a continuous renewal that retains their relevance for the matters at hand in human social living. Yet Rorty challenges the modern notion that scientific progress can only mean “finding out what the world is really like.”<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to Williams, Rorty asks whether it is possible for people to “see ourselves as never encountering reality *except under a chosen description* — as, in Nelson Goodman’s phrase, making worlds rather than finding them...”<sup>10</sup> While Rorty’s challenge to modern notions of the “discovery” of truth expresses a postmodern temperament, his approving reference to “making worlds” may come too close to the blunt pragmatic view of all knowledge as instrumental to human actions. Rorty’s statement that “truth is simply a compliment to sentences that seem to be paying their way” recalls John Dewey’s redefinition of truth as “warranted assertability.”

Dewey believed that such a pragmatic test for truth was a way of going beyond the sterile philosophical controversies over whether truth means “corresponding to events in the natural universe,” or “in agreement with the body of widely accepted beliefs.” But the view of truth as warranted assertability makes sense only in a distinctly modern context, where the search is for the single meaning of truth that fits the human pattern of social progress, the paradigm of which, for Dewey, is technical problem-solving.

Both truth as correspondence and truth as coherence still have some relevance to human communications under the aspect of postmodernity. Under it, however, they lose their status as the most important criteria for evaluating communications: also to be considered are the historical circumstances to which texts and other verbal communications allude, the social and psychological conditions to which they give expression, and the political positions they serve.

When trying to describe reality, most people, and certainly those who call themselves scientists, make a conscious attempt to regulate description by paring away elements extraneous to brute experience. As Derrida suggests,<sup>11</sup> however, the reader or hearer of those descriptions plays a strong role in their interpretation, and need not rule out the possibility that elements of illusion and deception are mixed with even the seemingly most “disinterested” descriptions of reality. Descriptions of reality are thus on a continuum with illusions and deceptions, and each hearer, in order to make sense of the communications of others, makes a judgment as to where on that continuum a particular communication may be thought to lie.

### AN EXAMPLE

Take, for example, a recent great escapade of our collective political lives, the confrontation over charges of sexual harassment between Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas during the Senate hearings on the latter’s nomination to the Supreme Court. Many have claimed that the issue facing the Senate was “who is telling the truth; who is lying.” But from a postmodern perspective, I suggest that both are telling the truth, but that neither can speak the truth pure and unadulterated. Human communication is typically a mixture of appeals to community standards of credibility, mixed with attempts to conceal hidden motives of the self. I think it possible for an interpreter to read such a mixture into the testimony of both Hill and Thomas.

The evidence of the confirmation vote in the Senate, and opinion polls of the electorate suggests a nation narrowly divided over the weight to be assigned to charges of sexual harassment. The questioning of witnesses by the Senate Judiciary Committee suggests that sexual harassment has become one among many partisan political issues. Members of the party identified as more “conservative” generally hold to a narrower standard for so categorizing events. Those of the party identified as more “liberal” have sought generally to broaden the range of events considered sexual harassment. That is, despite the protestations from some Republican members of the committee that

if the events described by Anita Hill were true they would indeed constitute sexual harassment, their questioning implied, in my judgment, that even if something like these events had occurred, they would be mitigated by the time elapsed before they were made public, and by the circumstances under which they were made public, and by the subsequent career of the woman raising the complaint, and by the character of the man against whom the complaint was made. Indeed, Thomas' defense appealed to a coherence test for truth: "am I the kind of person who would lie? Listen to other women who knew me as well; consider the motives of my accusers."

In weighing these competing claims from a postmodern perspective, people attend more closely to these complicating social, political, psychological and historical factors. It is the unregeneratively modern amongst us who hold to the simplistic dichotomy that one of these people is lying, and the other is telling the truth. From a postmodern perspective, I think that truth is ubiquitous, but never unalloyed. It is even possible for people to speak truth when their intention is to deceive. The modern emphasis on the dichotomy between truth and error, on the other hand, privileges the communications of the "rational" and "knowledgeable" above the rest of us.

Emphasis on critical thinking as a mode of intellectual progress has become a principal educational legacy of modernity, one in which truth is seen as a product of continuous critique. In this regard, Karl Popper sums up the modern theory of knowledge brilliantly in his contention that science proceeds by systematic attempts to disconfirm its theories.<sup>12</sup>

Peter Elbow gives further indication of the postmodern turn in his contention that, in their approach to thinking critically, schools should balance their emphasis on methodological doubting with what he calls methodological belief.<sup>13</sup> Elbow quotes George Miller's "maxim": "In order to understand what another person is saying, you must assume it is true and try to imagine what it might be true of." Burbules and Rice cite Elbow's work in their search for communicative virtues for a postmodern age. They describe what Elbow calls "the believing game," in which people learn from others by granting their claims "a provisional plausibility simply based on the fact that those claims are sincerely held." Note, however, how far this virtue of sincerity is removed from modern criteria of truthfulness and rationality, which allow experts to denigrate the communications and experiences of the inexpert. Thomas F. Green makes a related point. In exploring the different dimensions of conscience, Green calls for balancing the voice of critique with the voice of membership, which one accomplishes by "taking the speech of another as a candidate for one's own speech."<sup>14</sup>

The pragmatic theory that truth is what works to solve the problem at hand does not seem to get at the ways in which postmodernity alters the basis of human communications. The communicative virtues that Burbules and Rice commend serve to place an intrinsic rather than an instrumental value on communications. From a postmodern perspective, the public conversation between the Senate Judiciary Committee and, alternatively, Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas was desirable, not because of the results produced for any of the participants, but because it involved a public keeping itself informed in matters that are in dispute.

Karl Hostetler deals with that dilemma between the instrumental and intrinsic value of conversation in his discussion of negotiations between his college of education and a nearby school system seeking a partnership in the reform of the public schools.<sup>15</sup> Hostetler reports that Rorty's recommendations for the conduct of collaborative inquiry seemed not to apply to this situation, because they call for an intrinsic valuing of conversation that neither of the negotiating parties was prepared to grant. The negotiations "fizzled." But if Rorty's recommendations are genuinely "pragmatic," would they not ask the parties to judge the conversation by its consequences for cooperative *action*?

Pragmatism is neither worse nor better than other vestiges of modernity, but the intriguing question as American culture enters a postmodern era is what can be done differently? I do not take the emergence of the postmodern era as necessarily salutary. I do think that it offers some new

possibilities: that people can learn to talk to each other without trying to get the upper hand through appeal to superior knowledge; and that teachers can speak to students on a basis of equality, not because we and they are the same, but because each of us is different, and therefore each is limited in the ability to prescribe for the other.

In this regard, Rorty seems to recoil from some implications of postmodernity when he contemplates elementary and secondary schooling. In an article in *Educational Theory*, “The Danger of Over-Philosophication,”<sup>16</sup> Rorty expresses the fear that elementary and secondary schools might be victimized by the shifting philosophical (epistemic) winds that may undermine this society’s commitment to the liberal political agenda (the fear that a postmodern America will throw out the liberal baby with the foundational bathwater). His response bends all the way back to applauding E.D. Hirsch, Jr.’s notorious lists of essentials for cultural literacy.<sup>17</sup> Rorty believes that the antidote to relativism that could result from the postmodern challenge to traditional views of truth is commitment to the traditions of one’s culture. While I agree that commitment of this kind can replace relativism, I believe that children can come to recognize very early that the beliefs of those traditions have no privileged epistemic status that renders them superior to those of other cultural traditions. There may be no need for Hirsch’s lists if young children come to understand that their commitment to cultural traditions is not coerced by some supra-cultural “truth,” but is part of their membership in a community that values their uncoerced embrace.

Rorty, whose attacks on essentialism helped earn him the designation “postmodern,” is willing to compromise with Hirsch’s educational essentialism when he deems that the pragmatic demands of the nation’s elementary and secondary schools require it. Like many of us, Rorty appears to have one foot in the modern and one in the postmodern era, and an indication of the trailing foot is his allegiance to a pragmatic theory of truth. If, in the postmodern era, we live in a world increasingly recognized as no longer packaged in the form of essentials for learning, a pragmatic need for commitment to social traditions cannot “make” essentials out of human imagination. People’s freedom to “make reality” is limited by the social, historical, psychological and political factors that are the textual addenda of postmodernity.

Rather than a denial of truth, the postmodern temperament allows for attention to a much wider range of truths, if educators can overcome their modern preoccupation with driving out falsehoods. The communicative virtues of honesty and sincerity will then no longer entail that students second-guess their own communications by combing them for evidence of possible falsehoods. And students can gain the support of teachers and fellow students in probing their communications for hidden truths that methodological believing can bring to awareness.

Havel’s faith in the importance of particular measures should remind us that the postmodern turn does not constitute an invitation to new grand-scale prescriptions for educational reform. Commitment to the intrinsic value of conversation means no longer subjecting our conversations to external tests of their “productivity.” It means placing conversation at the center of common life, in public as well as private. It means a recognition of equality among people that is not to be found in the all too modern attempts to exclude certain others from our lives: whether by racial and religious discrimination, by such seemingly innocuous ploys as “male bonding,” or by the intellectual ranking of people.

Mary Leach’s challenge to Burbles and Rice<sup>18</sup> reminds us that more than communication changes with the postmodern turn. Modern epistemology — realist, idealist, and pragmatist — undergoes a gradual erosion, so that conversation can no longer allow the marginalization of people on the basis of their ignorance of intellectual traditions or their inability to observe the canons of inquiry.

- <sup>1</sup> Vaclav Havel, "The End of the Modern Era," *New York Times*, March 1, 1992, op-ed. page.
- <sup>2</sup> Nicholas C. Burbules and Suzanne Rice, "Dialogue Across Differences: Continuing the Conversation," *Harvard Educational Review* 61, no. 4 (November 1991): 393-416.
- <sup>3</sup> I use "postmodernity" in preference to "postmodernism" following the prescription of Anthony Giddens in his book, *Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990). I'm indebted to Henry St. Maurice for calling the book to my attention.
- <sup>4</sup> Mary Leach disputes this in a feminist response to Burbules and Rice in which she claims that such virtues depend on an ontology and epistemology of liberal individualism, which keeps women and other marginalized people from being taken seriously in dialogue. See "Can We Talk? A Response to Burbules and Rice," *Harvard Educational Review* 62, no. 2 (Summer 1992), 257-63.
- <sup>5</sup> See, for example, David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 42.
- <sup>6</sup> Harvey, 52.
- <sup>7</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).
- <sup>8</sup> Bernard Williams, "Auto-da-Fe: Consequences of Pragmatism," in *Reading Rorty*, ed. Alan Malachowski (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 26-37. Originally in *The New York Review of Books*, 1983.
- <sup>9</sup> Thomas Kuhn, whose radical redescription of the history of science stands as a key expression of the shift to postmodernity, discusses scientific progress in the final chapter of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 160-73. Kuhn notes that "progress" is a built-in characteristic of normal science, since the results of previous inquiry are used to generate further research. While the breakdowns in this research agenda that result in a shift in the basic paradigm of a science (i.e., a revolution) are not progressive in the sense of carrying the science closer to the truth, they are selected by members of a scientific discipline to preserve as much of the knowledge generated under the earlier paradigm as possible, giving a semblance of progress to the paradigm shift as well.
- <sup>10</sup> Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (University of Minnesota Press), 1982, xxxix. Emphasis in original.
- <sup>11</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
- <sup>12</sup> Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1962).
- <sup>13</sup> Peter Elbow, "Methodological Doubting and Believing," in *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 254-300.
- <sup>14</sup> Thomas F. Green, "On Moral Learning," in *Philosophy of Education 1988*, ed. James M. Giarelli (Normal, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1989), 109-23.
- <sup>15</sup> Karl Hostetler, "Rorty and Collaborative Inquiry in Education: Consensus, Conflict and Conversation," *Educational Theory* 42, no. 3 (Summer 1992): 285-98.
- <sup>16</sup> Richard Rorty, "The Dangers of Over-Philosophication — A Reply to Ancilla and Nicholson," *Educational Theory* 40, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 41-44.
- <sup>17</sup> E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1987).
- <sup>18</sup> Leach (see note 4).