

***Disintegrating Galileo: A Commentary on Pablé***  
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I found Adrian Pablé’s integrated discussion of Richard Rorty and Roy Harris illuminating in several respects. It’s useful to have a sympathetic treatment of both of them in one place, and I largely agree with Pablé regarding the ways in which the two of them differ. That said, I also think that placing the two side by side in this way flatters neither, to the extent that their respective justifications for constructivism and integrationism are not independently supporting. If anything, they share revealing errors and blind-spots.

**On Rorty and Harris**

Rorty’s defence of his post-epistemological, ironist pragmatism depends to a significant extent on a false dichotomy between understanding ‘truth’ as what is defensible in conversation, or some similar highly deflationary conception of truth, and truth as mirroring transcendental things in themselves (hence the title *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*).<sup>1</sup> The dichotomy is false because between these extremes, as Susan Haack points out, are various important options Rorty simply ignores, including accounts of truth by Peirce, Ramsay, Tarski, Wittgenstein and Russell (Haack 2009, Chapter 9). The more viable variants of these positions, the ones where valuable philosophical work actually takes place, reject *both* transcendentalism and Rorty’s conversationalism. We don’t need inflated commitments to views about precise mirroring of the transcendental nature of ultimate reality in order to think that some claims correctly say how things are and others don’t. Furthermore, the pragmatists Rorty claimed as allies were quite clear about this. James, for example, said that to give up the goal of indubitable knowledge did not mean to “give up on the quest or hope of truth itself” (James 1956, 17). Peirce, on the other hand, referred to “high faith in the reality of knowledge” as, along with “concrete fallibilism,” sources of his philosophical approach (Peirce 1931, 14). It’s difficult to resist observing that Rorty’s promotion of ‘conversation’ seems to be relatively unencumbered by enthusiasm for listening.

Harris on the other hand seems to think in terms of one or more related, or similar, dichotomies. One striking one is the choice between integrationism and commitment to ‘fixed codes of forms and meanings supposedly known to all members of the linguistic community’ (Pablé 2013, 4). Perhaps there *are* genuine examples of serious scientists or philosophers who have been committed to fixed codes in the required sense. It is much more significant, though, that there are many examples of thinkers who hold no such commitment while also not being integrationist. The relevant burden of justification for the integrationist is not merely to show her view to be superior to the fixed-code, telementarist, surrogationist (etc., etc.), but to take on views that are *neither* integrationist nor in the grip of the ‘language myth’. An unavoidable first step here, which some integrationists might find a bridge too far, is conceding that the history of thought might not be clearly separable, without remainder, into integrationists and myth-mongers.

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter VI, Section 5 (‘Truth without Mirrors’) of Rorty (1981).

## On Galileo and Bellarmine

Let me attempt to illustrate this by reference to some of Galileo's interactions with the Inquisition, and the discussion of them offered by Pablé, which considers treatments of one of the episodes by Harris (2005) and another by Rorty (1981). Pablé suggests that Rorty and Harris both use the historical case of Galileo "to counter the *reocentric* explanation offered by modern science, according to which the statements made by the parties involved conflict in the sense that one was inherently true and the other inherently false" (Pablé 2013, 11). That's an odd way of putting things, because it's far from clear what it might involve for a statement to be 'inherently' true or false, or why anyone would want to say *that*, rather than simply that there was a conflict over what was true, or more nearly true, or defensibly assertable.<sup>2</sup> It is also odd because even the most Whiggish tellings of the story aren't about what statements are (inherently) true, but about what statements and theories are better supported by what evidence, and what attitudes to various kinds evidence (especially the new telescopic evidence) and justification are preferable.

Rorty's account focuses largely on a meeting in 1616 when Cardinal Bellarmine warned Galileo to teach the Copernican doctrine only as an hypothesis, and not a physical claim. According to Rorty, those who think that Galileo had better arguments — in the sense of better *epistemic* justifications — than Bellarmine fail to realise that the two used incommensurable approaches to justification. Rorty thinks, or at least says, that it is only *after* an essentially rhetorical and political victory by people identifying with Galileo that his type of argument has come to be regarded as exemplary. It is rhetoric and politics, not epistemology, that answers the question "What determines that Scripture is not an excellent source of evidence for the way the heavens are set up?" (Rorty, 1981, p329). As various commentators have pointed out, though, Rorty's position is insufficiently defended and independently implausible. That we cannot produce self-justifying and indubitable criteria for truth or evidential support does not force us to regard all putative evidence as rhetorical smoke (see Boghossian 2006, Haack 2009a, Spurrett 2009b).

Pablé thinks that Harris would not, at least entirely, endorse Rorty's account of the interactions between Galileo and the Church.<sup>3</sup> That is somewhat comforting, although it appears that Harris' remarks about the formation of various 'supercategories' suggest some common ground with Rorty. To the extent that supercategory formations are in some sense contingent and optional and not epistemic achievements or discoveries, they might turn out to be substantially rhetorical or political. Harris also shares with Rorty the

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<sup>2</sup> That is to say, it is not clear what additional work the 'inherently' is doing over and above simply saying that some statement is true, or false. (It is true that Pablé wrote an article called 'Integrating Rorty and (Social) Constructivism'. But would anyone say that it was *inherently* true that he did?) Perhaps the 'inherently' has something to do with perfectly mirroring ultimate reality. But then, as noted already, we need a justification for imposing this commitment on positions in epistemology and philosophy of language that actually reject it. Or we need a justification for pretending such positions don't exist.

<sup>3</sup> Harris' remarks about Galileo concern the 1633 proceeding, where Galileo (having been warned on this very point in the 1616 episode which Rorty discusses) was compelled to recant having asserted the Copernican claim as physical fact, not merely hypothesis.

thought that it is possible to be mistaken about the nature of the (supposed) conflict between Galileo and the Church. In Rorty's case the error is to suppose there was a clash between epistemic justifications. In Harris's it is to fail to appreciate the reason for a *genuine* conflict:

Galileo and the Church came into conflict not so much because they had different models of celestial mechanics but because they shared the same old geocentric model of semantics (Harris 2005, 131).

I've previously written that I found Harris' claim here "baffling" (Spurrett 2009b). I meant not so much that I could not tell what Harris was saying, as that I could not discern nearly sufficient justification for anyone saying what he says. Let me therefore attempt to explain my bafflement.

### **Celestial Mechanics and the Church**

It is a sufficiently banal observation not to seem worth making that some disagreements concern what things this or that term refers to (or 'picks out', or 'denotes' — I'm not touting any specific theory of reference here). Not only that, if the meaning of a term has any connection with the things it refers to, then at least some disagreements about what a term refers to could be, in part, disagreements over meaning. And so, indeed, returning to Galileo's 1616 legal proceeding, Galileo and Bellarmine differed over whether the Earth moved at all (or moved as much as, or in the same ways as, Mars or Venus), and — to say the same thing with different emphasis — they also differed over what things the verb 'to move' applied to. Not only that, they probably differed independently about what it meant to move, because part of Galileo's defence of heliocentrism, and his attack on Aristotle's views on topics beyond celestial mechanics, involved extended defence of a relativistic conception of motion (e.g. in day two of his 1967) which Bellarmine did not share.

What it involved in this case to have "different models of celestial mechanics" was, in part, to have different theoretical regimentations of notions such as 'motion', and different views about the observable aspects (if any) of various instances of motion, and, finally, to have different views about what moves, and with respect to what. All of these were active topics of debate and speculation at the time. Galileo and 'the Church' disagreed over some of these very things as the formal statement Galileo signed after his 1633 hearings make clear. But it's just false to say that Galileo, Bellarmine and 'the Church' shared "the same old geocentric model of semantics". Far from it. Both of Galileo's confrontations with the Inquisition took place in an atmosphere of subtle and very self-conscious debate over different types of demonstration, different kinds and modality of truth claim, different kinds of evidence, and different principles of scriptural exegesis. Everyone actively involved (Galileo, Bellarmine, and their various allies) was fully aware of this.

Bellarmino, for example, inclined to a literalist policy about scriptural interpretation, and held the Catholic view that determining the meaning was a task for the Church (that is, rejecting the idea associated with the Reformers who urged the competence of individual

believers to deal with interpretation themselves). Bellarmine’s version of literalism, which applied to all of Scripture, was actually stronger than that formulated by the Council of Trent in 1546, which insisted on literal (Church-guided) reading of Scripture on matters of ‘faith and morals’. Theologians outside and inside the Church — including its various sub-divisions and orders — were divided regarding what status to give references to astronomical and scientific facts, especially when they appeared to conflict with other sources of evidence. Within the Catholic Church itself, then, there was a variety of opinion about how to interpret the bible, about which parts to interpret literally, and about what literal interpretation amounted to.

Bellarmino also favoured a version of the view that the models in mathematical astronomy (including those of Ptolemy, Copernicus, Brahe, Kepler *and* Galileo) should be regarded as ‘hypotheses’ that might “save the phenomena” in the sense of imposing an elegant organisation upon the facts of observation, but should not be regarded as physically true. A major reason for this was because he was persuaded, on broadly Aristotelian grounds, that mathematical constructions could not demonstrate causal facts. For his part, Galileo went to some lengths to suggest interpretations of biblical passages suggesting a stationary Earth (or a moving Sun) that were consistent with the notion of a moving Earth and stationary Sun. He also actively engaged in theology, carefully defending the position that science could complement Scripture at least on some topics, including astronomy. In addition, and as part of his general assault on Aristotle’s ideas, he attempted to defend the view that a network of mathematical and empirical experiments, as well as thought experiments, might add up to a demonstration (McMullin 1998).

### **Differences of History and Interpretation**

This hasty sketch leaves out considerable detail, and there are disputes about the interpretation of some of that detail. My purposes here, though, do not require insisting on a specific interpretation of all of it. What I have said is sufficient, I hope, to make a few important points. Galileo’s conflict with ‘the Church’ was not a conflict with a homogenous entity. Within it, and around it, there were a variety of live options about the interpretation of Scripture, including specifically the question of whether or not to interpret passages with apparent significance to astronomy literally, and what it would mean to do so. There was variation in opinion about the status of mathematical models, and of evidence of other kinds, including observation (with or without telescopes). What this means for Harris’ remarks about Galileo is that it does intolerable violence to the history to suggest that Galileo and ‘the Church’ “shared the same old geocentric model of semantics”. I remain baffled that anyone could say such a thing because there is ample and easily available evidence that it is false.

An analogous point can be made against Rorty, who favours the view that Galileo and Bellarmine (while they might have shared the view that *some* description of the world was literally true) had fundamentally different views about the justification of belief, and so their ‘confrontation’ was in fact a stand-off accompanied by deep mutual incomprehension. That version of things is just impossible to square with the evidence of active involvement of all participants in deliberate and detailed debate over the

epistemological questions at issue, and their evident knowledge of various intermediate positions between those they defend.

Rorty and Harris both tell lively stories, and describe exciting-sounding and provocative views about the construction of knowledge, and about the language of science. But their stories both seem to rely on simplistic dichotomies, and neither holds up well to critical scrutiny, or to confrontation with accurate information about the history of science.

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