

***Democracy and Tradition: Finding Common Ground  
Between Hauerwas' Traditionalism and Rorty's Liberalism***

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[1] At the 2003 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, a star-studded panel convened to discuss Jeffrey Stout's new work, *Democracy and Tradition*. Among the panellists were Stanley Hauerwas and Richard Rorty. This was fitting, since the theologian and the philosopher have been critical conversation partners for Stout for decades. The book, in fact, can be seen as the product of Stout's engagement with, among others, Hauerwas and Rorty.

[2] The book is divided into three parts. Part One makes the case for the relationship of democracy to virtues and character. Instead of seeing democracy as simply a political option that allows individuals to pursue their aims, Stout highlights the kinds of moral virtues and character needed for democracy to work and how democracy even helps us to cultivate those same moral virtues and character. In Part Two, Stout grapples with the place of religious traditions in public discourse. Instead of opting for a separation of religion from public discourse as Hauerwas advocates to preserve the community of the Church, and Rorty advocates to preserve public discourse itself, Stout argues for a significant and appropriate role for religious voices in the public discourse. Finally, in Part Three, Stout defends his brand of public discourse and conception of our common morality that he believes allow us to live peacefully together and provide us with confidence in the truth of our political and moral endeavors.

[3] While Stout engages numerous theologians from, Barth to Milbank, and philosophers, from Kant and Hegel to MacIntyre and Rawls, throughout *Democracy and Tradition*, the heart of his project really can be discerned through the on-going conversation he has with Hauerwas and Rorty. The former represents "traditionalists" and the latter represents "liberals." Both camps have valid critiques of each other.

Liberals have no trouble showing that traditionalism threatens to deprive us of the actual and potential benefits of exchanging reasons across the boundaries of enclaves. Traditionalists have no trouble showing that liberalism has failed to resolve a conflict between its commitment to freedom and its desire to dictate the terms of social cooperation (2004: 183).

Stout believes he can work through this impasse (an impasse that defines our current socio-political situation) by bringing both camps to his brand of "pragmatic expressivism" that "takes enduring democratic social practices as a tradition with which we have good reasons to identify" (2004: 184).

[4] Hauerwas has been influenced greatly by the moral philosophy of Alasdair MacIntyre. The former's work has reflected the latter's concern with tradition and community as necessary conditions for the cultivation of virtues and moral character. For Hauerwas, defending tradition and community (in his case, Christianity and the Church) in the modern world is critical in the effort to preserve the very existence of Christians today and in the future. From this perspective,

we can see why he so vehemently opposes the language of individualism and freedom, especially freedom from tradition and community, that he identifies with liberal democracy. For Hauerwas, liberalism is formed on the basis of self-interest and thus produces citizens that are only self-interested (79). Liberalism poses individuals' self-interests against one another, turning us into strangers rather than friends (81). The distrust intrinsic to such a political order never can form community, let alone be the fertile ground from which virtues and character arise. Hauerwas' assessment of our current situation is that we have turned freedom or liberty into an absolute ideal, one that can lead us to believe that "the ultimate goal is to be freed from all social constraints" (Stout, 2004: 151). Liberal democracy has promoted this view or, at a minimum, this has been its unintended consequence. Democracy and democratic discourse is, for Hauerwas, "one of the acids of individualism eating away at tradition" (Stout, 2004: 152). That said, religious traditions should be wary of entering the public sphere for fear that its pernicious individualism and anti-traditionalism will destroy them.

[5] Stout agrees with Hauerwas and MacIntyre that tradition and community are central to the cultivation of virtue and the formation of moral character. He disagrees, however, with the claim that liberal democracy is the enemy of tradition and community. "Traditionalists are right . . . to argue that ethical and political reasoning are creatures of tradition and crucially depend on the acquisition of such virtues as practical wisdom and justice," Stout writes. "They are wrong, however, when they imagine modern democracy as the antithesis of tradition, as an inherently destructive, atomizing social force" (2004: 11). Stout argues that liberal democracy is a tradition itself, one that cultivates virtues, forms moral character, and helps to create the kind of community that is possible in our pluralistic society. He argues that "democratic questioning and reason-giving are a sort of practice, one that involves and inculcates virtues, including justice, and that becomes a tradition, like any social practice, when it manages to sustain itself across generations" (2004: 152). For example, Stout identifies charity, courage, and generosity as virtues that are cultivated in democratic discourse (2004: 34, 60) and sees democracy giving rise to ethical norms that help to initiate and sustain public conversation (2004: 195, 273). In democratic discourse, all voices (religious or not) are welcome. In addition, religious traditionalists should not view this discourse as destructive of their own efforts, but to the extent that liberal democracy *is* a tradition they should see liberal democracy as contributing to the kind of moral project in which they too are engaged.

[6] Like Hauerwas, Rorty also is wary of having religious traditions actively involved in public discourse. But this is not because he wants to preserve the religious traditions, but because he wants to preserve the public discourse.

[7] For Rorty, religious language or vocabularies may be fine for those who want to use them within the confines of their own communities, but many of them need to be rejected in the larger public conversation. Why? If the justification that you give for an action or public policy to which I am opposed is grounded in a religious language that I reject, then the only way that I can be made to accept that action or public policy is through coercion or force. For example, I believe that homosexuals should have all the rights and privileges of marriage that hetero-sexuals have, including the use of that legal term. But what if the government passes a law that prohibits gay marriage so that the "sanctity" of heterosexual marriage can be preserved? "Sanctity" is a deeply religious and often used word in regard to this topic. And what if legislators use the Bible as part of their justification for enacting such a law? In this case, I will be forced to accept a

public law that is very much grounded in a type of language, religious or biblical, that I do not use or even accept as morally relevant in this case.

[8] Rorty's point is that there is a public sphere in which the language of liberty, equality, and reason should reign supreme. Then there is the private sphere where languages idiosyncratic to my religion, ethnicity, or culture may be relevant and important, but such languages can pose problems when used in the public sphere. Rorty writes:

Accommodation and tolerance must stop short of a willingness to work within any vocabulary that one's interlocutor wishes to use, to take seriously any topic that he puts forward for discussion. To take this view is of a piece with dropping the idea that a single moral vocabulary and a single set of moral beliefs are appropriate for every human community everywhere, and to grant that historical developments may lead us to simply *drop* questions and the vocabulary in which those questions are posed (1993: 265).

In the case of gay marriage, it certainly is fine if religious communities want to debate whether or not God demands that only heterosexuals can marry or even if God condemns homosexuality at all. But these are not legitimate questions for public discourse, because a significant portion of people in the public sphere do not believe in God or the use of such religious language, thus, these questions and vocabularies should be "dropped" from the public discourse. The only question that can legitimately be raised and discussed is whether or not the *legal* institution of marriage and its rights and privileges can be reserved only for that portion of the population that is heterosexual. In other words, is such discrimination in the law and by our governmental institutions justified in light of our commitment to liberty and equality?

[9] This is why Rorty argues for "light-mindedness" in the public sphere (1993: 268). The idea here is that as *public* citizens we must come to take less seriously some of the problems or issues that might trouble us, such as, whether or not God cares if a man sodomizes another man. As *private* citizens we can mull over or even obsess over these problems or issues all we like, using whatever idiosyncratic or narrow vocabulary we like. But attempting to use such a vocabulary in public discourse ultimately will fail. Either it will end the discussion (How can we talk if we are using different vocabularies?) or it will set up a situation in which the person using the idiosyncratic vocabulary likely will have to use coercion or force – ranging from legal coercion (e.g., prohibition of homosexual marriages) to actual physical violence (e.g., the destruction of abortion clinics or even the killing of abortion doctors) – to be effective. Either way, the outcome runs counter to what a liberal, democratic society is all about – in which all the citizens are committed or should be committed to liberty, equality, and rational discourse.

A liberal society is one whose ideals can be fulfilled by persuasion rather than force, by reform rather than revolution, by the free and open encounters of present linguistic and other practices with suggestions for new practices. But this is to say that an ideal liberal society is one which has no purpose except freedom, no goal except a willingness to see how such encounters go and to abide by the outcome (Rorty, 1989: 60).

There are good reasons for wanting such a liberal society. And clearly we have good reasons for being wary of religious vocabularies. But must all religious talk be prohibited? Is that a reasonable response to the possible dangers of religious talk?

[10] Stout agrees with Rorty to a certain extent. Stout argues that relying on religious reasons generally is “imprudent” and that “in a setting as religiously divided as ours is, one is unlikely to win support for one’s political proposals on most issues simply by appealing to religious considerations” (2004: 86). Yet he also is critical of Rorty on this issue. Where Rorty sees the use of religious language or vocabularies as a conversation-stopper (because not everyone is committed to the beliefs represented by those religions), Stout sees Rorty’s own banishment of religious language or vocabularies as a conversation-stopper. Just because religious language or vocabularies might not be held in common by everyone in the public discussion does not mean that they should be excluded. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr. may have used rhetoric that expressed ideals that we all hold in common, such as freedom, equality, and justice, but his success in furthering the public conversation and in achieving his objectives undoubtedly was tied as well to his powerful use of religious concepts and ideas. Stout concludes, “Reasons actually held in common do not get us far enough toward answers to enough of our political questions. The proposed policy of restraint, if adopted, would cause too much silence at precisely the points where more discussion is most badly needed. The policy would itself be a conversation-stopper” (2004: 89-90). In short, Stout recognizes and even advocates for a secular public discourse, but whereas Rorty would interpret secular to mean the exclusion of all religious talk, Stout interprets secular to mean a particular attitude or approach to religious language or vocabularies. He writes:

What makes a form of discourse secularized, according to my account, is not the tendency of the people participating in it to relinquish their religious beliefs or to refrain from employing them as reasons. The mark of secularization, as I use the term, is rather the fact that participants in a given discursive practice are not in a position to take for granted that their interlocutors are making the same religious assumptions they are. This is the sense in which public discourse in modern democracies tends to be secularized (2004: 97).

[11] But if the public discourse is being constituted by a cacophony of voices that often do not share the same commitments that are bound to the distinct languages being used, then what will be the grounds upon which the public can determine the validity of its decisions? Can it reach decisions? More particularly, how can moral judgments be made if we do not share a common language and common ideals? Are the ideals of democracy really enough? In other words, while Stout and Rorty may help us to avoid the dogmatism and fundamentalism that religion can bring to our public discourse, are we not stuck here with the spectre of relativism?

[12] Stout certainly tries to address this problem. As he states, the “relativist conception of truth erases disagreement among groups rather than making it intelligible” (2004: 238). If everyone lives within their insulated moral enclaves, and the boundaries between these are impermeable, then there cannot be genuine disagreement. Any disagreement would be similar to arguing about whether an apple is a better fruit than an orange. Genuine disagreement must begin with some commonalities, some level of agreement about beliefs or principles that can be the means by which to arbitrate the disagreement. Stout uses the example of Nazi morality to explain his point.

Nazis and I differ in many respects. We belong to different groups, each with its own way of thinking and talking about moral topics. I also differ with Nazis in another respect, for I reject various moral commitments they accept, including their view of what constitutes just treatment of Jews. The fact that we have different moralities should not be allowed to obscure the equally important fact

that we disagree about the moral truth. If I am right about justice, then the Nazis are wrong. Using a relativist conception of truth to redescribe our differences would be to dissolve the conflict in which we take ourselves to be engaged (2004: 239).

The relativist perspective would dissolve the conflict because it simply affirms that what is moral in the Nazi context may not be moral in Stout's context. There is no basis for comparison. However, justice is a concept that is shared in both contexts, and Stout's disagreement with the Nazis about the nature of justice is the source of genuine disagreement. In the end, it is the source of disagreement about *what is true*.

[13] This is very different from the tack that Rorty takes. As he argues, "since truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths" (1989: 21). Truth, from this perspective, is the product that arises from the competition (dialogue?) of competing vocabularies. Liberal society, as Rorty understands and supports it, "*is content to call 'true' whatever the upshot of such encounters turns out to be*" (1989: 52). This leaves us in a precarious position. What if some neo-Nazi vocabulary was to win the day in the United States? It would be at this point that the enemies of the neo-Nazis would want to argue that the neo-Nazi vocabulary fails because it is *not true*, and that truth demands that the neo-Nazis be overthrown. The enemies of the neo-Nazis *should not* accept such a state of affairs (a neo-Nazi society) just because the neo-Nazi vocabulary has the upper hand in our public discourse. Even if neo-Nazis are given power through a democratic process, I still can claim (and quite legitimately) that their views are false, that they are in opposition to the truth.

[14] But this is exactly the crux of the issue for Rorty. Having relegated truth to the product of competing vocabularies, Rorty is left to only defend the value of that competition. That is fundamentally a political position, the defense of democracy. Indeed, this is why Rorty argues that the deliberative process within a democracy must be given priority over philosophy, that is, reflection about what is true. Truth is, in the end, irrelevant. Or, as he says, the "*only* cash value of this regulative idea is to commend fallibilism, to remind us that lots of people have been as certain of, and as justified in believing, things that turned out to be false as we are certain of, and justified in holding, our present views" (1993: 280). In short, the idea of truth, at best, can only remind us of the long historical record of people(s) who have believed in all sorts of concepts and systems, many of them contradictory. Their trust in such concepts and systems often has resulted in great harm to people who do not believe or who reject such concepts and systems. Thus, we are better off just setting the idea of truth aside – something that is done more easily once we jettison any religious or metaphysical grounding for truth. What Rorty asks of us then is to become ironists. An ironist, in his sense, is someone who recognizes the ultimate contingency of her vocabulary and "does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself" (1989: 73). The ironist then is one who lives by his or her vocabulary while being aware of its ultimate contingency.

[15] I certainly can grant that there can be dangers to believing that our vocabulary is "in touch" with a "power," especially a greater or ultimate power, that transcends us. Examples abound among fundamentalist movements, and we know the harm that sometimes is inflicted in their names. But why should I think that my vocabulary is no closer to reality than *any* others? I can be humble about this and even open to correction, but that does not mean I have to relinquish my claim or my hope that my vocabulary can reveal some truth (though never fully) about the nature

of reality. This is one of the most important ways in which we use the idea of truth, because truth often is understood to be embodied in propositions that convey or reveal the truth of the reality around us. This is the case with truth in morality as well. When we are engaged in moral discourse, we want to be engaged, and most of us believe we are engaged, in a conversation about what is morally *true*, about creating the best vocabulary or vocabularies that can capture what is meaningful and admirable about human relationships. This is why, I think, Stout takes up the defense of truth in a way very unlike Rorty.

[16] It is clear from his earlier book, *Ethics after Babel: The Language of Morals and Their Discontents*, that Stout agrees with Rorty in rejecting the idea that truth corresponds to a “culture-transcendent thing-in-itself, like the Moral Law or a Realm of Values” or, I would add, God (1988: 24). Yet he finds it important to talk about truth and to affirm it. In *Democracy and Tradition*, he argues for a “modest pragmatism” that rejects any effort “to reduce truth to some form of coherence, acceptance, or utility” (2004: 251). So how then should we think about moral truth? For Stout, answering this question requires us to think clearly about the difference between truth and justification. While affirming a nonrelativist account of moral truth, he wants to insist as well on a contextualist account of justification (2004: 240). For any given principle or action, we may be justified in believing it or doing it (respectively) given the specific context in which we live – the available information at the time, the specific circumstances that pertain, etc. We might discover later, or others might discover long after we are dead, that we were wrong to think or act in certain ways. In this regard, Stout argues for the triangulation of person, proposition, and epistemic context. These three elements can be in such a relationship that a person is justified in thinking or acting in certain ways. But because context always changes, not everyone may be justified in believing or acting in the same ways in all contexts (2004: 231). Thus, a person may be justified in thinking or acting according to a proposition in one context, but not another. Stout concludes that “affirming that many of us are justified in holding some of the (nontrivial) moral beliefs we hold is not the same thing as affirming that somebody has established a set of (nontrivial) moral beliefs that any human being or rational agent, regardless of context, would be justified in accepting” (2004: 231).

[17] But if propositions and actions are justified only in specific contexts that themselves are subject to change, does this not just lead us back to the problem of relativism? Not for Stout. He argues that to “say that some of the moral propositions we are justified in believing might not be true is to remind ourselves that no matter how well we now think and talk about moral topics, it remains possible, so far as we can tell, to do better. To strive for moral truth as finite beings conscious of our finitude is to keep that possibility in view, to keep alive the struggle for this-worldly betterment of our commitments” (2004: 245). We may not ever be able to attain some final or complete truth, but the concept serves as a regulative ideal that both reminds us of our own fallibility as well as giving us hope that we can achieve ever greater understanding of our world and relationships. Stout concludes:

Contextualist epistemology is compatible with the idea that there is a moral law in this sense: an infinitely large set consisting of all the true moral claims but not a single falsehood or contradiction. Being infinitely large and including truths cast in myriad possible vocabularies we will never master, this set boggles the mind. We will never believe, let alone be justified in believing, more than a tiny fraction of the truths it encompasses. Most of them are inaccessible to us – and therefore not truths it would be wise for us to pursue. If the God of the philosophers exists,

he believes them all, and is justified in believing them all, but nobody else could come close (2004: 240).

[18] Truth is not a property of the natural world nor is it grounded in some transcendental being. For Stout, the “concept of truth is normative. It belongs to practices in which we assess claims and beliefs as possessing or failing to possess a sort of status” (2004: 254). It appears then that Stout ends with some kind of consensus theory of truth, but certainly he does not support such a reading. He writes, “If truth were a function of what the powerful dictate or what one’s peers accept – or even what we, in our humble epistemic condition, are justified in believing – then we would have less reason to give dissidents a hearing or to entertain the possibility of becoming critics ourselves. But truth, I have claimed, cannot be reduced to any of these things” (2004: 244-5). Truth then is not a property of the natural world, not grounded in some transcendent being, and not simply a matter of consensus. Stout insists that it is normative, or, to use my term, a regulative ideal, to our practices, but why should it be? Why should I be guided by a normative conception of truth if I have other interests, such as, financial well-being, attainment of power, etc., that could guide me instead?

[19] While I applaud Stout’s efforts to move beyond the epistemological and moral abyss that Rorty leads us to, he nevertheless does not successfully retrieve truth in a substantial enough fashion. Take, for example, the following:

Some realists think a definition of truth is needed to keep the democratic culture of moral seriousness and its spirit of self-criticism intact. I see no evidence that this is so. I fear that persuading people to consider a metaphysical theory essential to democratic culture invites them to give up on that culture when the theory comes to seem unpersuasive. Citizens are better advised to keep their commitment to democracy free from the unresolved disputes of the metaphysicians (2004: 254).

But on what basis should they have a commitment to democracy? There is a strong pragmatic argument for democracy, but not always. Many who think George W. Bush is limited in his critical ability and thereby constitutes danger to the nation and the world might not feel very committed to democracy at the moment. While democracy might be the social and political theory that allows us to keep our many public conversations going, to be really committed to democracy requires the belief that it is not only pragmatically true but true in some deeper, fuller sense – that it is not just true now for our country, but true ultimately for all countries and all times. This does not mean we have to go force it on others as a politically fundamentalist ideology might lead us to do, but for our own good we have to believe that democracy is true and not just relative to us and our time. Being an ironist (to refer back to Rorty) in a democracy may not be enough to preserve democracy.

[20] So, can we think of truth in a way that avoids the Charybdis of dogmatism and fundamentalism *and* the Scylla of relativism? Is this the irresolvable problem traditionalism and liberalism pose for us? In the end, I do not think that Stout steers us comfortably between Charybdis and Scylla when it comes to the issue of truth. But I do think that he makes significant headway in mediating the conflict between traditionalism and liberalism. And for that contribution, Stout’s work – especially *Democracy and Tradition* – will serve philosophers and theologians well for years to come.

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