Rorty on Conversation as an Achievement of Hope

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Richard Rorty’s ideal of “keeping the conversation going” requires a further distinction between genuine conversation and simply “going through the motions” if we are to make the most of this recommendation. I argue for a requirement for the conditions of conversation, which draws on Rorty’s emphasis on the importance of hope for defining our social vocabularies. On this view, hope is a belief about what is possible for the future. In conversation, hope for the conversation actually conditions the questions one asks in the present. And, in genuine conversation, the participants share a common hope in answering a question.

One of Richard Rorty’s most famous and controversial philosophical positions has been his replacement of knowledge with conversation, whereby the old goals of progress, truth, and consensus under ideal conditions are replaced with Rorty’s ideal of “keeping the conversation going.” Part of Rorty’s point in giving historical accounts of philosophy is to urge listeners to realize that traditional epistemological projects have failed. In light of this, we must stop asking questions motivated by such projects, and get back to vital questions. We must embrace a more pragmatist view (along the lines of John Dewey) to philosophy and accept the social dimensions of inquiry, thought, and action. In doing this, Rorty believes it is helpful to speak in terms of conversations and vocabularies rather than truth, representation, and foundations of knowledge. And this is part of his overall rejection of grounding as transcendental or universal. Rather our normative claims are always situated within particular social contexts and always bear the stamp of our chosen values and practices. So, when Rorty makes his own normative claims to keep the conversation going, he does not mean for conversation to yield truth, or consensus, final answers, or final norms. On the other hand, Rorty still makes normative claims meant to persuade and influence. And exactly what is meant by and what is required for Rorty’s norm, i.e., to keep the conversation going is not entirely clear. Indeed the very idea of conversational maintenance requires some
philosophical unpacking. In particular, a distinction needs to be made between genuine conversation, and simply talking or “going through the motions” of conversation if we are to make the most of this recommendation.

With this in mind, my purpose is to argue for a requirement for the conditions of conversation — and this idea, in fact, actually draws on Rorty’s own notion of language and thought. In particular, Rorty emphasizes the importance of hope for vocabularies, societies, and inquiry. Yet he does not offer a philosophical account of hope or just how it functions. Nevertheless, I find this area fruitful and will expand this notion of hope to see its role in conversations. Rorty describes our social vocabularies as defined by our hopes. He thinks that one’s hopes are vital to understanding one’s own vocabulary. And as a consequence of this view, he also holds that to understand one another, we must try to keep on going in the conversation. This view looks more relativistic than it sounds. And in fact Rorty is typically thought of as a relativist and a nihilist, but really, he has not strayed so far from his early work in epistemology — and this approach has been acknowledged by Robert Brandom.1 One simply needs to see the subtleties in his view. To do this we will go beyond Rorty’s own comments on hope and argue that hope is a belief about what is possible for the future. In conversation, hope for the conversation conditions the questions one asks (and the questions one believes are answerable) in the present.

As such, understanding a person in conversation requires knowing what she hopes for the conversation. With this understanding of the role of hope in conversation, we can then distinguish between genuine conversation and insincere conversation. Such a distinction can be made according to whether the participants share a common hope for the conversation, in particular a common hope in answering a question.

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In various places, Rorty recommends that we keep the conversation going rather than pretend to rigorously move toward knowledge of the real world, truth, or consensus under ideal conditions. In Consequences of Pragmatism Rorty argues in favor of the pragmatic approach to knowledge. He sums up one of its characteristics, saying that pragmatism “...is the doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones — no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow inquirers.”2 Of course, Rorty’s constraints are nothing like what Peirce, Putnam, and Habermas have in mind when they talk about conversational constraints. Rorty explains, further down the paragraph, that he is less optimistic about articulating a general theory of conversational constraints.