Rorty, neopragmatism and non-foundational international ethics

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

RORTY, NEOPRAGMATISM

AND

NON-FOUNDATIONAL INTERNATIONAL ETHICS

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

IN

INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

by

Harry Damon Gould

1997
To: Dean Arthur W. Herriott
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Harry Damon Gould, and entitled Rorty, Neopragmatism and Non-Foundational International Ethics, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Date of Defense: July 29, 1996

The thesis of Harry Damon Gould is approved.

Dean Arthur W. Herriott
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Florida International University, 1997
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS
RORTY, NEOPRAGMATISM AND NON-FOUNDATIONAL INTERNATIONAL ETHICS

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The purpose of this paper is to apply the work of Richard Rorty to questions of ethics in International Relations.

Beginning with discussion of Pragmatism in this chapter, and Rorty’s political beliefs in the second, the paper moves in Chapter Three to the means by which Rorty has come to hold his ethical beliefs. This takes the reader through discussions of the contingency of language, self and community to the notions of irony and liberal ironism. Chapter Four contrasts the (neo)Pragmatist conception of progressive, piecemeal social change to traditions which eschew such a notion in favor of immanent critique. Discussion in chapter five moves to the application of this neopragmatist line of thought to the discussion of solidarity
and human rights, bringing all of the various strands of this paper together. In the conclusion, two apparent inconsistencies in Rorty’s thought are clarified.
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Chapter I

Introduction
The purpose of this thesis is to apply the work of Richard Rorty to questions of ethics in International Relations. Beginning with discussion of Pragmatism in this chapter and Rorty’s political beliefs in the second, the thesis moves in Chapter Three to the means by which Rorty has come to hold his ethical beliefs, which in the tradition of American Pragmatism are inseparable from his political beliefs. This takes the reader through discussions of the contingency of language, self and community to the notions of irony and liberal ironism, closing the circle started with the introduction of Rorty’s political credo. Chapter Four contrasts the (neo)Pragmatist conception of progressive, piecemeal social change to traditions which eschew such a notion in favor of immanent critique. Discussion in the fifth chapter moves to the application of this neo-pragmatist line of thought to the discussion of human rights, bringing all of the various strands of this paper together. The final chapter addresses various challenges to the neopragmatist position as articulated here.

Pragmatism

Pragmatism is the truly American philosophy. Associated with such names as John Dewey, William James and C.S. Peirce, its heyday was the very end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. In the mid twentieth century, it fell into disfavor as logical positivism, empiricism and
their derivatives gained ascendance. Two quotations are most often associated with pragmatism, and better than any others summarize its ethos.

William James, expressing the role of interest in truth, stated, "The true is the name of Whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too for definite assignable reasons." Truth is thus a compliment we pay to a statement which furthers our interests.

Dewey elaborated this point, obliterating the is/ought distinction along the way.

We only acquire whatever knowledge we have now because we had certain purposes, and the point of that knowledge is, for us, inseparable from our future purposes. All reason is practical reason... To characterize something as good is to say that it will provide us with satisfaction in our purposes.

A useful metaphor, provided by Rorty himself, to illustrate the self image of pragmatist philosophy is that of clearing the (mostly philosophical) underbrush leaving it to others to plant the forest. The others for pragmatism are social workers, activists, journalists, politicians and educators.¹

As Rorty interprets Dewey, pragmatism is a way of making political liberalism attractive to those with philosophical

¹ Richard Rorty, "The Banality of Pragmatism and the Poetry of Justice" in Brint and Weaver, eds. Pragmatism in Law and Society. p. 92.
Richard Rorty, "Does Academic Freedom Have Philosophical Presuppositions?" Academe. 80/6 p. 58.
tastes. "It provides a rationale for nonideological, compromising, reformist, muddling through." Pragmatists value parliamentary democracy and the welfare state, but not because they are demonstrated through philosophical argumentation to be superior; it is on the basis of "invidious comparison" with other forms of social organization that it is held to be best.²

The upshot of these beliefs is that culture does not need abstract, philosophical principles to be legitimate. A society is "just" if its laws are in accord with the shared self understandings of its members. Foundationalists will reject this as relativism, arguing that morality must be based on something more than prevailing social conventions, but as will be shown later, this is a charge Rorty dismisses.³

Pragmatists do not (as will be discussed at length in Chapter three) believe that there is an intrinsic human nature, therefore it is not on the basis of the fidelity of the democratic form of governance to intrinsic human needs that it can be defended. A pragmatist utopia is one in which "everybody has had a chance to suggest ways in which we might cobble together a... society, and in which all suggestions have


³ Christopher Norris, "Philosophy as a Kind of Narrative." Enclitic 7, Fall 1989. p. 151.
been thrashed out in free and open encounters." \(^4\)

Stanley Fish, a contemporary figure in pragmatism (what will be called neopragmatism once the differences are illustrated) articulates the pragmatic ideal as the belief that if people would only stop trying to come up with a standard of absolute right which could then be used to denigrate the beliefs and efforts of other people (for example, ALL Western religions, Platonism, Kantianism, and Marxism), they might spend more time sympathetically engaging with the beliefs of others and learning to appreciate them. \(^5\)

> If we conceive of ourselves as creatures clinging together in a foundationless world, rather than as philosophers in search of foundations, we might cease to experience life as a fight. \(^6\)

The central message to be gleaned from the above is that the critique of absolutes is not really very threatening. We can, in fact, function without absolutes; we always have.

I shall take now the opportunity to explore the pragmatist notion of truth adumbrated above, because it is central to the Pragmatic project, and no less to Rorty's version of it. "Truth" for pragmatists is not something worthy of extensive philosophical investigation. It is just

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\(^4\) "Cosmopolitanism without Emancipation", p. 213.

\(^5\) Stanley Fish, "Almost Pragmatism" in Brint and Weaver. p. 64.

\(^6\) "Almost Pragmatism", p. 66.
the name of a “property which all true statements share.” Pragmatists believe that there is not much of interest to be said about this common property. Some acts under some circumstances are good, but there is nothing universal or useful to be said about what makes them good.7

Pragmatists want to get beyond discussing the nature of Truth or Goodness, because they feel such topics have outlived their usefulness. They are not articulating theories saying that there are no such things as Truth or the Good, merely that the search for such theories will get us nowhere.8

Neopragmatism conceives of itself as different from the original pragmatism in the following ways. Neopragmatism tends to focus upon language rather than experience, mind, or consciousness. This comes from the influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Donald Davidson on Rorty. Also having been influenced by Thomas Kuhn, the neopragmatist Rorty is suspicious of the scientific method. The original pragmatists believed that there were no social problems that could not be solved by the application of sound scientific technique; Rorty is not so sure.9


8 “Pragmatism and Philosophy”, p. xiv.

9 “Banality…”, p. 91.
Rorty’s relationship to Philosophy is rather complex. Despite being a philosopher by trade, he considers himself an anti-Philosopher. The root of his objection to philosophy is essentially that it regards itself as Philosophy.

Rorty’s first cannonade was found in his groundbreaking _Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature_. This work is held by many to be his most important and substantial; it is an assault on the very self-image of Philosophy as a *fach*. For the purposes of this work, _Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature_ is of secondary importance. The revolutionary claims made in it have now been internalized by Rorty, and are largely implicit in his writing -- there is no trace of the correspondence theory of truth, the “idea” idea, or an idealized language left in Rorty’s work.

Ever since Hobbes and Locke, philosophy has been guided by the belief that its role is to search for Truth, or the foundations of knowledge. This self-conception was reinforced by Descartes, Kant and Hegel, and can actually be traced back to Plato. The belief common to all of these thinkers was that through human rationality, and later science, the foundations of knowledge could be identified.10

Rorty focuses particularly on the period since

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Descartes. It was during this period that the dominant metaphor of the mind as a "mirror of nature" took hold. Philosophy took it as its job to polish the mirror and, more importantly, focus the images reflected in the mirror.\textsuperscript{11}

The metaphor was vague enough for some ostensibly crucial differences of view. For example, empiricists and idealists could still disagree over how to interpret the metaphor: is the mind a passive recipient of a given objective reality out there, or does it play a role in shaping that reality? For Rorty these differences are minor compared with the single overriding prejudice that unites them. There are three parts to this, which I take from Christopher Norris' discussion of Rorty's Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. Philosophy, according to this tradition, is best engaged in a quest for its own rational or logical foundations. These foundations will reveal themselves only to a mind specially trained in "the business of lucid self-knowledge. Philosophy will thus become a "science" primus inter pares, because it promised an ultimate grounding for all other modes of thought.\textsuperscript{12}

Rorty wants to get beyond the conception of Philosophy as the final arbiter to all claims to knowledge. He follows the three philosophers he takes to be the most important of

\textsuperscript{11} ibid.

\textsuperscript{12} "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing", p. 151.
the twentieth century, Dewey, Wittgenstein and Heidegger, in rejecting the possibility of systematic Philosophy which can provide a final explanation of the world. He considers them and himself edifying philosophers, philosophers whose aim is no more grandiose than helping people make their lives better.
Chapter II

Rorty’s Politics: A First Glance
Rorty’s Political Credo

Rorty most plainly stated his political beliefs in his response to Richard Bernstein’s attack on the implications of *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Rorty was in the curious position of having been damned both by conservatives for being postmodern, relativist and irrationalist, and by postmodernists and left for being neoconservative. Rorty acknowledged expecting the criticisms from conservatives, regarding such criticism as proof of being on the right track; the other criticisms were more surprising to him.

Several of the items enumerated in his credo are no longer relevant because of their focus on the cold war. I will quote Rorty at length here.

(1) Given the failures of central governmental planning, we can no longer make “nationalization of the means of production” a central element in our definition of “socialism”... we have to use some such definition of “socialism” as Habermas’s: ‘overcoming the rise to dominance of cognitive instrumental [interests]. (Alternatively, perhaps: “overcoming the greed and selfishness which are still built into the motivational patterns impressed on our children, and into the institutions within which they will have to live.”) We have to find a definition that commits us to both greater equality and a change in moral climate without committing us to any particular economic setup. Nobody so far has invented an economic setup that satisfactorily balances decency and efficiency... There is nothing sacred about either the free market or about central planning; the proper balance between the two is a matter of experimental tinkering.
(3) Within the First World, the social
democratic scenario of steady reform
along increasingly egalitarian lines... has
been stalled for decades, largely because
the political right... (made up of the
people who have no interest in increasing
equality) has diverted public attention,
money and energy...

(6) ...social democrats have to maneuver
on (at least) two fronts - against
enemies at home in the interest of, for
example, the people in the urban ghettos
and rural slums of the First and Third
Worlds...

(7) ...no single set of slogans is going
to help. There is no way to consolidate
our enemies in any interesting
"theoretical" way.

(8) We have freedom of the press, an
independent judiciary, and universities
in which teachers continually urge
students to combat... 'the forces and
tendencies at work (eg., class conflict,
social division, patriarchy, racism)
which are compatible with liberal
political practices but nevertheless
foster real inequality and limit
effective political freedom.' Such
fragile, flawed, institutions, the
creation of the last 300 years, are
humanity's most precious achievements.
It is quite possible that all such
institutions may vanish by the year 2100.
There will then... be nothing to prevent
the future being, as Orwell said, 'a boot
stamping down on a human face, forever.'
Nothing is more important than the
preservation of these liberal
institutions.\(^13\)

One may summarize Rorty's politics, as Joan Williams has

done, as being egalitarian, feminist, and social democratic.\textsuperscript{14} He admits to sharing the politics of Hubert Humphrey.\textsuperscript{15}

Having given this general sketch of Rorty's politics, we will proceed in the next chapter to look more closely at Rorty's vision of the liberal utopia. From there, we will work through the way in which he arrives at the conclusions which shape his vision, and some of the implications of a liberal-ironic utopia.

As will become even more evident in the next chapter, there is a \textit{prima facie} tension between the J.S. Mill/Isaiah Berlin style negative liberty Rorty advocates on the one hand, and his quasi-Marxist egalitarianism adumbrated in his credo. The first concern focuses on protecting equality of opportunity, and then leaving everyone alone; the second, by Rorty's own admission, must necessarily involve the active equalizing of extant economic circumstances; \textit{i.e.}, leveling. I do not believe, however, that Rorty perceives any conflict.

In order to begin to explain this tension, I shall explore an autobiographical piece by Rorty, in which he weaves these concerns together. It also will help clarify what will appear in the next chapter to be a logical inconsistency between irony and democracy.

\textsuperscript{14} Joan C. Williams, "Rorty, Radicalism, Romanticism: The Politics of the Gaze," in Brint and Weaver. p. 156.

Richard Rorty was raised a Trotskyite. He grew up "knowing that all decent people were, if not Trotskyites, at least socialists... [He] knew that poor people would always be oppressed until capitalism was overcome... at twelve, [he] knew that the point of being human was to spend one’s life fighting social injustice."\(^{16}\)

In addition to the social concerns with which he was raised, Rorty developed very private fascinations which he could not link to his Trotskyite social agenda, but which were, for inarticulable reasons, equally important to him; one such interest was in orchids.

Over time, Rorty sought to reconcile his public and private concerns, hoping to place them in a framework which would allow him to "’hold reality and justice in a single vision’" (a phrase he borrowed from W.B. Yeats). He defined justice as "the liberation of the weak from the strong." He wanted to be "...both an intellectual and spiritual snob and a friend of humanity -- a nerdy recluse and a fighter for justice."\(^{17}\)

While at the University of Chicago, he believed he found this in Platonism, the study of which encouraged, among other things, a dismissal of the thought of John Dewey. Rorty became convinced that Socrates was, by necessity correct,

\(^{16}\) "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids", p. 142.

\(^{17}\) "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids", p. 143.
virtue was knowledge, because by no other means could Rorty be able to hold reality and justice in a single vision. In Platonism, Rorty found all of the certainty of religion without the requisite humility of religion of which he felt incapable.\(^1\)

Rorty was never a successful Platonist because in Platonism he saw two incommensurable goals: irrefutable argument and private bliss. The first, importantly for Rorty, translated practically into "...becom[ing] able to convince the bullies that they should not beat one up, or to convince rich capitalists that they must cede their power to a cooperative, egalitarian commonwealth." The second goal involved attaining a state of perfect (private) bliss. Again, Rorty had found equally desirable, but incommensurable, goals.\(^2\)

Rorty became more and more disillusioned with Platonism and Philosophy generally, and progressively more concerned that its study would never help him achieve his social aims. His doubts were partially assuaged by his discovery of Hegel. On Rorty’s interpretation of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, even though philosophy may be no more than holding one’s time in thought, and redescribing the last generation’s redescribers, this might be enough to "...weave the conceptual fabric of a

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18 "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids", p. 144-145.

frer, better, more just society.” Importantlly, Hegel helped Rorty get beyond the Platonic concern with reaching a perspective beyond the contingencies of time and space which would allow the possibility of true understanding of all things.20

Hegel led Rorty back to Dewey (whom, as we shall see, was an important figure in his childhood), who had a generation earlier reached the same conclusions about the untenability of Platonism. Coincident with Rorty’s return to Dewey was his first encounter with the work of Jacques Derrida, whose work led him to read Heidegger. Rorty was “...struck by the resemblances between Dewey’s, Wittgenstein’s, and Heidegger’s criticisms of Cartesianism.” It is unclear at what point he encountered Wittgenstein’s writings. Rorty attempted to blend a criticism of that tradition with Hegelian historicism, and a “quasi-Heideggerian story about the tensions within Platonism”, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. He was, however, no closer to reconciling his private and public quests.21

Eventually, Rorty decided that he had been wrongheaded to even attempt to reconcile these two parts of his life. Only religion could successfully do this; not even Platonism could succeed. Rorty had concluded that Plato himself had

20 “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids”, p. 146.

21 “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids”, p. 146-147.
failed in this task.

The book around which this work is largely centered (particularly the next chapter), *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, is Rorty’s sustained argument that these disparate goals, the social and the private, neither can nor should be joined. "...One should abjure the temptation to tie in one’s moral responsibilities to other people with one’s relation to whatever idiosyncratic things or persons one loves... The two will, for some people coincide... but they need not coincide, and one should not try too hard to make them."22

Seeing no tension between *liberté* and *egalité*, Rorty has not tried to address the problem; I will attempt to resolve the tension in chapter six.

22 "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids", p. 147.
Chapter III
Rortyan Liberalism:
Contingent and Ironic
Introduction

The idea of Rorty’s liberal utopia hinges on his idea of the liberal ironist. Rorty’s definition of “liberal” is taken from the late Judith Shklar who defined liberals as “people who believe that cruelty is worst thing we do.”

Christopher Norris, a resolute adversary of Rorty’s, defines Rorty’s concept of “irony” thus:

...[irony] signifies the readiness to treat one’s own ideas, attitudes and values as a set of shifting and provisional beliefs, arrived at through an open-ended process of ‘self creation’ that gives no right to pronounce or criticize in matters of wider socio-political debate.

Contingency, again defined by Norris, represents:

...the clear eyed recognition that those beliefs take rise within some cultural context, or in response to a transient phase in the ‘conversation of mankind’, and can therefore claim nothing more in the way of ultimate validity or truth.

An ironist (to which we will come back) is the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own beliefs and desires. This requires being historicist and nominalist enough to abandon the idea that those beliefs and


desires refer to something timeless.²⁶

Liberal ironists are then people who include among their ungroundable desires the hope that suffering will be diminished and that humiliation -- the form of suffering unique to humans -- will come to an end. There is no answer to the question "Why not be cruel?" At least there is no non-circular justification that cruelty is horrible. There need not be one. Anyone who thinks that there are justifications "out there" or inside of us, is still a theologian or metaphysician at heart.²⁷

Such metaphysically oriented or "ontotheological" thinkers believe in an order beyond time and change which has determined the point of human existence and established a hierarchy of responsibilities. This is not necessarily bad, just misguided and potentially dangerous when such people try to impose their truths (e.g., Lenin, Mao, Hitler).²⁸

What Rorty seeks is a liberal utopia in which ironism is universal. People will hold beliefs very strongly and guide their actions accordingly, but they will be willing to acknowledge that they do not hold them for any deep, metaphysical reason.

²⁶ "Introduction", Contingency... p. XV.
²⁷ "Introduction", Contingency... p. XV.
²⁸ "Introduction", Contingency... p. XV.
In such a culture, a post-metaphysical culture, human solidarity would not be regarded as a fact waiting to be recognized or discovered, but as a goal. Solidarity would not be achieved by philosophical inquiry, but by imagination -- imagining others, strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is thus not discovered, but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar people.\(^{29}\)

This increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize others by thinking “They do not feel it as we would.” The process of coming to view others as “one of Us” rather than as “them” is a matter of detailed redescription of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescriptions of what we are like.

Redescription, as conceived by Rorty is not a task for theory and theorists, but for narrative. It is more suitably the province of ethnography, journalism, and especially, the novel. These media let us see the details about the kinds of suffering being endured by others, and in some cases, the sorts of cruelty we are capable of.\(^{30}\) It is for this reason that Rorty believes they are gradually replacing both the

\(^{29}\) “Introduction”, *Contingency*... p. XVI.

\(^{30}\) cf Chs. 5,7 and 8 of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity.*
sermon and the treatise as the main sources of moral change and progress.\textsuperscript{31}

In Rorty’s liberal utopia, this replacement would actually be recognized. This recognition would be part of a general turn away from theory toward narrative. It would amount to a recognition of the contingency of language -- recognition that there is no way to step outside of the vocabularies we use and find some sort of meta-vocabulary encompassing all vocabularies.\textsuperscript{32}

The historicist, nominalist culture Rorty envisions would replace the search for the perfect vocabulary with narratives connecting the present and past on one hand, and utopian futures on the other. It would regard the realization of utopias and the imagining of new ones as an ongoing, endless process. There would be no telos.

For purposes of clarity, I will now explore Rorty’s conception of contingency. Pursuant to Rorty’s own divisions I will speak of the Contingency of Language, the Contingency of Selfhood, and the Contingency of a Liberal Community. Each builds upon the preceding: the beliefs of a liberal community are based upon the contingent collective self-understandings of individual selves, which are in turn built

\textsuperscript{31} “Introduction”, Contingency..., p. XVI.

\textsuperscript{32} “Introduction”, Contingency..., p. XVI.
upon wholly contingent vocabularies. Given the centrality of the concepts discussed here to Rorty’s view, I will explore them and their implications in depth.

The Contingency of Language

"...since truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by humans, so are truths."33

We must start with Rorty’s claim, first intimated in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, that there is no sense in which any description is an accurate representation of the way the world is in itself. We need to get beyond the idea that anything (mind, matter, self, world) has an intrinsic nature to be expressed or represented. The Eighteenth Century German Idealists confused this belief with the belief that the world is not “out there”, thus giving us Kant’s belief in the noumenal world, a variant on Plato’s world of essences. Rorty believes the idealists to have gone in the wrong direction.

Rorty feels that we need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there, and that truth is out there. To say that the world is out there is only to say that it is not our creation, that most positivities are the

effects of causes which do not include human minds. To say that truth is not out there is to say that where there are no sentences, there is no truth. Given that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations, truth cannot be out there. Truth cannot exist independent of the human mind because sentences cannot so exist.\textsuperscript{34}

The world is thus out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own -- unaided by the describing activities of humans and their languages -- cannot be. Rorty sees the suggestion that the truth exists independent of humans as the residue of a period when the world was seen as the "creation of a being who had a language of his own."\textsuperscript{35}

The conflation of the platitude that the world may cause us to be justified in believing a sentence to be true with the claim that the world contains "facts" is facilitated by confining attention to single sentences, rather than whole vocabularies. We often let the world decide between alternate sentences, but this makes it easy to confuse the fact that the world contains the causes of our being justified in holding a belief with the claim that some

\textsuperscript{34} "The Contingency of Language", pp. 4-5.

\textsuperscript{35} "The Contingency of Language", p. 5.
nonlinguistic state is an example of truth. This is not as likely to occur when dealing with whole vocabularies rather than sentences; when we deal with alternative language games, it is difficult to think of the world as making one language game better than another.\textsuperscript{36}

When the notion of "description of the world" changes from the level of criteria-governed sentences within language games to language games as wholes, the idea that the world decides which descriptions are true is no longer sensible. It becomes difficult to believe that there is one true vocabulary out there waiting to be found.

For Rorty and other philosophers who have taken the linguistic turn, the world does not speak, only persons do. It can cause us to have beliefs once we have language, but it cannot provide us with language; only other humans (language users) do this. This does not imply that the choice of language game is arbitrary or, conversely, that it is an expression of something intrinsic; such notions are no longer relevant when dealing with choices between language games.\textsuperscript{37}

For Rorty, most of reality is indifferent to human descriptions of it; it is primarily the human self that is affected by description. The self is created by the use of a

\textsuperscript{36} "The Contingency of Language", p. 5.

\textsuperscript{37} "The Contingency of Language", p. 6.
vocabulary. It is not, however, well represented or poorly represented or expressed in a vocabulary. Anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed; a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is, for Rorty, the chief instrument of social change.

Any belief formerly thought absurd or repugnant can be made to look good, just as, conversely, what had always been regarded as a natural truth, or something to which one had become resigned, can be represented in terms which make it look repugnant. This is, as Rorty puts it, “altering the data of moral theory.” One way of doing this for Rorty is to provide a new language to facilitate new reactions.38

Political utopians, who number among Rorty’s cultural heroes beside novelists and poets, do not claim that human nature is repressed by “unnatural” institutions, but that changes in language and other social practices may produce new sorts of people (novelists awaken us to the suffering of those around us, poets help change language, and political utopians go to work on the ground prepared by novelists and poets, not in a revolutionary way, but in a piecemeal, reformist way). To say that there is no such thing as intrinsic nature is not to say that the intrinsic nature of reality turned out to be extrinsic, just that the term is not

very useful. Similarly, saying that we should drop the idea that the truth is out there is not the same as claiming that we have discovered that there is no truth, which would, of course, be a self-refuting truth claim. 39

Philosophers, Rorty claims, should not be asked to argue about such topics because, "[The] trouble with arguments against the use of familiar and time honored vocabularies is that they are expected to be phrased in that very vocabulary." They are expected to show that the central elements of that vocabulary are inconsistent in their own terms. 40

For Rorty, interesting philosophy is not usually argument over the merits of a thesis, but more often a contest between "an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things." 41

The method at work here is to redescribe lots of things in new ways, until a new pattern of linguistic behavior has been created, and hopefully, eventually adopted. This change in linguistic behavior will also hopefully yield changes in nonlinguistic behavior. Rorty sees this process not as


working in piecemeal fashion, but "holistically and pragmatically." It involves the suggestion that we stop doing the same (old) things and try new ones. This is not based on arguments based on criteria shared by both vocabularies, because, by definition, given the new language game, there will not be shared criteria.\textsuperscript{42}

To build upon these claims and investigate their implications for social change, Rorty explores the work of Donald Davidson. What is most important about Davidson's work is that he abandons the notion of language as a medium. In the traditional view of humanity, humans are not simply networks of beliefs and desires, but beings which have those beliefs and desires in addition to a core self which can evaluate and choose between them. This gives us a picture of the essential core of the self on one side of the network with the world on the other; i.e., the subject-object dichotomy. The idealists tried and failed to replace this conception. The Linguistic Turn centered around substituting language for self as a medium, but this proved to be ineffective, merely placing language between the network and the world. This led to the idealization and reification of language.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{42} "The Contingency of Language", p. 9.

\textsuperscript{43} "The Contingency of Language", p. 10.
Davidson does not view language as a medium of expression or representation; he is thus able to set aside the idea that either the self or the world has an intrinsic nature. His thinking thus resembles that of Wittgenstein in treating alternate vocabularies like alternate tools and not as parts of a whole. Following Wittgenstein, we are thus able to focus on the efficiency of the (linguistic) tools. Given this, we see that revolutionary achievements occur when someone realizes that two of our vocabularies are interfering with each other and invents a new one to replace them.

The creation of a new vocabulary is not a discovery about how the old ones fit together. The invention of a new vocabulary makes possible the formulation of its own purpose; it is the tool for doing something which could not have been thought of prior to the development of descriptions made possible by the new vocabulary.44

The idea that language has a purpose is no longer helpful once the idea of language as a medium goes. "Davidson lets us think of the history of language, and thus culture, as Darwin taught us to think of the history of a coral reef. Old metaphors are constantly dying off into literalness, then serving as platform and foil for new metaphors." This allows us to view our language as the

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44 "The Contingency of Language", pp. 11-12.
result of multiple contingencies.\textsuperscript{45}

Following this point, we need to view the difference between the literal and the metaphorical not as a distinction between two types of meaning or interpretation, but as the difference between familiar and unfamiliar uses of words. We can handle literal uses with our old theories, but metaphorical uses force us to develop new theories. We should not think of metaphoric expressions as having meanings distinct from literal ones, because to have a meaning is to have a place in a language game, which, by definition, metaphors do not.\textsuperscript{46}

To use a sentence which does not have a place in a language game is to utter something neither true nor false; it can only be liked or disliked. It may, in time, become a "truth value candidate." If it is liked, it may be repeated, and gradually require habitual use; at this point it will no longer be a metaphor.\textsuperscript{47}

Changing the way we talk will, for Rorty, yield changes in what we want to do and what we think we are, and thus, for our purposes, what we are. This means that there are no problems which bind the generations together. This sense of

\textsuperscript{45} "The Contingency of Language", p. 16.

\textsuperscript{46} "The Contingency of Language", pp. 17-18.

\textsuperscript{47} Rorty says that we may alternately call it a dead metaphor. "what most sentences of our language are." "The Contingency of Language", p. 18.
human history as the history of successive metaphors lets us see "the poet, in the generic sense of the maker of new words, the shaper of new languages, as the vanguard of the species."\textsuperscript{48}

The world does not provide us with any criterion of choice between alternate metaphors; we can only compare them with one another, or with something outside of language called "fact". To drop the idea of language as representation and to be thoroughly Wittgensteinian in approach to language would be to de-divinize the world. Only if we do this can we accept the claim with which I opened this section, "...since truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by humans, so are truths."\textsuperscript{49}

We thus have no prelinguistic consciousness to which language needs to be adequate; "what is described as such a consciousness is simply a disposition to use the language of our ancestors, to worship the corpses of their metaphors."\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{48} "The Contingency of Language", p. 20.

\textsuperscript{49} "The Contingency of Language", pp. 20-21.

\textsuperscript{50} "The Contingency of Language", p. 21.
The Contingency of Selfhood

Rorty's discussion of the contingent nature of the self centers around the tension between the effort to achieve self creation through recognition of contingency, and through the effort to achieve universality by transcending contingency. In the classical world, this was played out in the quarrel between philosophy and poetry; since Hegel, and particularly since Nietzsche, this has been going on within philosophy.51

The philosophers Rorty takes as important have broken with Plato, and see freedom as the recognition of contingency; they take Hegel's insistence on historicity and combine it with Nietzsche's identification of the "strong poet" (Harold Bloom's term to which we shall return) as humanity's hero. They insist on "the sheer contingency of human life." Ironically, post-Nietzschean philosophers like Wittgenstein and Heidegger write philosophy to exhibit the universality and necessity of the individual and contingent. They thus find themselves immersed in the ancient quarrel, and end by surrendering philosophy to poetry.52

It was Nietzsche, Rorty claims, who first suggested that we drop the whole idea of "knowing the truth", and "representing reality" with language; he was thereby


suggesting that we not try to find a single context for all human lives. Once we follow Nietzsche in believing that Plato’s "true world", the world of essences, was only a fable, we would at death find our comfort not in having been more than animal, but by being an animal who, "...by describing himself in his own terms had created himself." He would, in other words, have created his own mind, all that matters. To create one’s own mind is to create one’s own language rather than be dependent on the language others had left behind ("the corpses of our ancestors’ metaphors").

In this Nietzschean schema, self-knowledge, that which the tradition from Plato onward had sought, is, in fact, (or more apropos of pragmatism, more usefully thought of as) self-creation. It is not the discovery of the self’s nature, but the process of creating a self by inventing a new language, new metaphors.

If we follow Davidson’s position on the literal/metaphorical distinction, and drop the notion of language fitting the world, we can see the point of Nietzsche’s claim that the “maker, the person who uses words in new ways, is best able to appreciate her own contingency.” Thus, for Nietzsche, only the poet can truly appreciate contingency; most of us try to escape it. Rorty concedes that strong poets are the causal products of natural forces,

53 “Contingency of Selfhood”, p. 27.

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but what is different about them is that they are capable of telling the story "in words never used before."\textsuperscript{54}

For Nietzsche, the criterion for a worthwhile life is how well it escaped from the inherited descriptions of the contingencies of its existence and finds new ones.

Nietzsche’s appeal, given its generally sneering tone, is limited. In finding a way to bridge Nietzsche to everyman, Rorty finds Freud very useful. Freud "...helps us accept, and put to work, this Nietzschean... sense of what it is to be a full-fledged human being." Rorty sees Freud as the moralist who helped de-divinize the self beatified by Kant by "tracking conscience home to its origin in the contingencies of our upbringing."\textsuperscript{55}

Freud de-universalizes Kant’s moral sense, making it idiosyncratic and contingent; he thus allows us to see moral consciousness as historically contingent. Freud presents conscience as the renewal of guilt of repressed experiences which are the products of countless contingencies that never enter (conscious) experience. This is not a new position, but Freud gives it greater depth and detail than had ever before been suggested. For example, Freud’s concept of the “narcissistic origin of compassion” gives us a way to think

\textsuperscript{54} "Contingency of Selfhood", p. 28.

\textsuperscript{55} "Contingency of Selfhood", p. 30.
of pity not as the identification with a common core we all share, getting us beyond Plato and Kant without merely inverting them as had Nietzsche.56

Freud "leaves us with a self which is a tissue of contingencies rather than at least potentially well-ordered system of faculties." He thus gives each of us the equipment to construct a private vocabulary of moral deliberation. This enables us to sketch a narrative of our own development which can be far better suited to each individual than anything philosophy has ever offered. Moral deliberation can thus become as detailed as prudential calculation had been; this thus results in the break-down of the distinction between moral guilt and practical inadvisability, further yielding a dismantling of the prudence-morality distinction.57

In this scheme, rationality is nothing more than a mechanism to help adjust contingencies to other contingencies, allowing us to see morality and prudence not as products of distinct faculties as Kant would have it, but as alternate modes of adaptation to contingency.

For Freud, only if we catch hold of some crucial contingency in our past can we make something worthwhile of ourselves. We should thus "...praise ourselves by weaving


57 "Contingency of Selfhood", p. 32.
idiosyncratic narratives... of our success in self-creation, our ability to break from an idiosyncratic past” and “...condemn ourselves for failure to break free of that past rather than for failure to live up to universal standards.”

Freud -- and in the next section this will be central to Rorty -- distinguishes sharply between the private ethic of self-creation and the public ethic of mutual accommodation, finding no bridge provided by universally shared beliefs or desires. This is because our private goals are as idiosyncratic as the unconscious obsessions and phobias from which they originate. As such, Freudian moral psychology cannot be used to define social goals; Freud is not a moral philosopher who supplies universal criteria.

Freud thus turns us away from the universal to the concrete, providing us with a moral psychology which is broadly compatible with Nietzsche’s attempt to see the strong poet as our archetype. Freud’s approach does not entail Nietzsche because Freud rejects the idea of an archetypal human; humanity is not a natural kind with an intrinsic nature.

“By breaking with both Kant’s residual Platonism and Nietzsche’s

58 “Contingency of Selfhood”, p. 33.

59 “Contingency of Selfhood”, p. 34.

60 “Contingency of Selfhood”, p. 35.
inverted Platonism, he lets us see both Nietzsche's superman and Kant's common moral consciousness as exemplifying two forms of adaptation."61

Contrary to Nietzsche's claim, no one is truly dull, because there is no such thing as a dull unconscious. Thanks to Freud, we can see every life as a poem. No life is so racked by pain as to be unable to learn a language or create a self-description.62

**The Contingency of a Liberal Community**

My central claim about Rorty in this section is that a liberal society is better served by a vocabulary of moral and political reflection which is informed by the discussions in the previous two sections. Although the "vocabulary of Enlightenment rationalism... was essential to the beginnings of liberal democracy, [it] has become an impediment to the preservation and progress of democratic societies." A vocabulary centered on metaphors of self-creation would be better suited. Such a vocabulary would not provide foundations, because the notion of philosophical foundations loses its utility when rationalism is abandoned. This

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61 "Contingency of Selfhood", p. 35.

62 This does not, as we shall see, mean that we can generate a language of the oppressed, because some are too oppressed to create a new language, and are thus stuck with the language of their oppressors, and potentially, only their oppressors' descriptions.
vocabulary would thus not ground democracy, but permit its practices and goal to be redescribed.63

"...[I]n its ideal form, the culture of liberalism would be one which was enlightened, secular, through and through." In it would be no trace of divinity, nor room for the belief that there are non-human forces to which humans are responsible. Its citizens would be:

...no longer able to see any use for the notion that finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings might derive meanings of their lives from anything except other finite, mortal contingently existing human beings.64

The liberal societies of our century have produced more and more people able to recognize the contingency of the vocabulary in which they state their highest hopes (what we will call in the next section their "final vocabulary"), yet remain faithful to them.

Given this, most now accept that there is no framework within which one can meaningfully ask, "'If freedom has no morally privileged status, if it is just one value among many, then what can be said for liberalism?'" We no longer assume that we must explain things by reference to something


64 "Contingency of Community", p. 45.
outside the contingencies of our particular situation.\textsuperscript{65}

If we take Rorty’s position seriously, we can no longer claim to be able to decide between values to see which are morally privileged because we have no way to rise above our particular situation and its language game to compare it with all others based upon some neutral criteria.

For Rorty, what is a central tenet for liberal society is that “with regard to words as opposed to deeds, anything goes.” Openmindedness should be fostered for its own sake. With regard to the problem of truth discussed previously in this chapter, liberal societies accept that whatever position wins out in a free and open encounter is true. Rorty believes, furthermore that trying to philosophically ground liberal democracy is detrimental because that necessarily enshrines claims that are not the outcome of free and open encounters, but are prior to them.\textsuperscript{66}

The upshot is that what liberal societies need are improved self-descriptions, not new foundations. This need for foundations Rorty traces back to Enlightenment scientism, which was a secularized version of the much earlier religious need for otherworldly authority. As such, the Enlightenment turned the scientist into a secular priest; Rorty

\textsuperscript{65} “Contingency of Community”, pp. 46-50.

\textsuperscript{66} “Contingency of Community”, pp. 50-52.
acknowledges that this may have been useful in its time, but is no longer. We should replace the scientist with the artist and the utopian politician, but we must not venerate them. They are simply representatives of those sectors of our culture which excite change in the way in which the scientists used to.  

This means, for Rorty, that we should "poeticize" culture in the same way the Enlightenment tried to scientize it. We should "...substitute the hope that chances for fulfillment of idiosyncratic fantasies will be equalized for the hope that everyone will replace 'passion' or fantasy with reason."  

Rorty's ideal society would, as stated earlier, have the strong poet as its cultural hero; in keeping with the presuppositions of such a claim, Rorty further claims that we would no longer assume that a society is no stronger than its philosophical foundation. We would be able, in fact, to dispose of the idea of philosophical foundations entirely.  

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67 "Contingency of Community", p. 52.

68 "Contingency of Community", p. 53.

69 I find this claim problematic. On the one hand, Rorty says we should lionize the strong poet for her role in helping us create our communal self-description. On the other hand, the irony of the strong poet, presumably the impulse which guides her toward her redescriptive activity, is according to Rorty, at best, politically useless. It would seem more useful to say that the last generation's strong poet should be our hero, because this generation's is -- unless scrupulously following Rorty's admonition to privatize her quest for self-creation -- at work underminding our self-descriptions.
The only justification a liberal society we would need would be invidious comparison with other societies known in history or put forth as ideals. Allegiance to one’s society also ceases to be a matter of reference to external criteria.  

Three of Rorty’s heroes, Dewey, Oakeshott and Rawls have been central to undermining the idea that there can be a set of concepts that can ground liberalism across time and culture. Rorty feels that this “undermining” has actually helped to strengthen liberal institutions because it has freed them from any need to defend themselves philosophically. Rorty says of these thinkers: “Their pragmatism is antithetical to Enlightenment rationalism, although it was itself made possible… only by that rationalism. It can serve as the vocabulary of a mature (de-scientized, de-philosophized) Enlightenment liberalism.”

A further upshot of this move is the at the societal level, the morality-prudence distinction, as with the term “moral” itself, is no longer very useful. “’Moral

70 “Contingency of Community”, p. 53-54.


The inclusion of Oakeshott, a strongly conservative Aristotelian, is puzzling, but the quotations which Rorty provides (“Contingency of Community”, pp. 57-60) seem to support his reading.

72 “Contingency of Community”, p. 57.
principles' only have a point insofar as they incorporate tacit reference to a whole range of institutions, practices and vocabularies of moral and political deliberation." They are reminders of such practices, not their justifications. If the dichotomy has any use, it is in terms of the difference between appeal to the interest of the community, and to individual interests. There is no longer something that stands to the community as the community stands to the individual; there is no humanity with an intrinsic nature.73

At the level of the social the morality-prudence distinction is no longer useful because it presupposes an intrinsic nature of humanity beyond the contingent traits of any contingent society. However, the demands of morality are the demands of a language, and languages are the creations of (contingent) humans. To obey a moral requirement is to identify with such a contingency.

For Rorty, a liberal society is one in which society's needs can be met by persuasion rather than force; it has no desire except freedom.74

It is a society whose hero is the strong poet and the revolutionary because it recognizes that it is what it is, has the morality it has, speaks the language it


74 Rorty's claim at this point is in direct contradiction of his strongly egalitarian, quasi-Marxist, sentiments. I will address this tension below.
does, not because it approximates the will of God or the nature of man, but because certain poets and revolutionaries of the past spoke as they did.\textsuperscript{75}

This all gives us Rorty's conception of the liberal ironist, a person with a sense of the contingency of "their language of moral deliberation, and thus their consciences, and thus their community... combined commitment with a sense of the contingency of their own commitment."\textsuperscript{76}

\textbf{Irony and Liberalism: Public and Private}

...the fact that you have obligations to other people... does not entail that what you share with other people is more important than anything else. What you share with them, when you are aware of such moral obligations, is not... "rationality" or "human nature"... or anything other than ability to sympathize with the pain of others. There is no particular reason to expect that your sensitivity to that pain, and your idiosyncratic loves, are going to fit within one big overall account of how everything hangs together.\textsuperscript{77}

Rorty recognizes a \textit{prima facie} tension between the quest for self-creation, what Foucault calls autonomy, and commitment to a liberal community. His solution is to privatize efforts at self-creation and autonomy. Before

\textsuperscript{75} "Contingency of Community", p. 61.

\textsuperscript{76} "Contingency of Community", p. 61.

\textsuperscript{77} "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids", p. 148.
discussing his proposed solution, I shall first examine the problem in more detail.

“All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives... call these words a person’s ‘final vocabulary.’” Rorty considers it final in the sense that if the vocabulary is challenged, its user has no way to argue on its behalf that does not employ terms taken from the vocabulary itself; it is, Rorty says, as far as the user can go with language.

I shall define an “ironist as someone who fulfills three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others.”

Such persons are, Rorty claims, naturally inclined to liberalism, particularly the negative liberty afforded the intellectual by a liberal society. In keeping with the attitudes discussed in the sections on contingency, ironists are both nominalist and historicist, recognizing that nothing has an intrinsic nature. They also recognize that all of the searches for individuals’ correct language games are not

going to converge upon the one, true vocabulary. They worry that they may be playing the wrong language game given the particular contingencies of their upbringing, and may thus be the wrong sort of person. They cannot, however, give any sort of criteria as to what may qualify as a "right" or "wrong" type of person.79

They have abandoned the search for "truth", regarding "truth" as "simply a platitude used to inculcate the local and final vocabulary." Their ironism is in part defined by Rorty as not containing such notions as "truth".

When arguing, ironists tend to choose dialectic, because the primary unit of dialectic is the vocabulary, not a single proposition within a language game. As discussed in the previous sections, the method of choice for the ironist is redescription.

Rather than philosophy, the ironist finds Literary Criticism -- when conceived of as "placing books in the context of other books -- a helpful tool. It is this comparative method that ironists find attractive, given their Davidsonian attitude that there is nothing to compare a vocabulary against except another. At the level of the self, there is nothing that can assuage the ironist's doubts about herself except greater acquaintance with others. It is for that reason that they find literary critics helpful moral

79 "Private Irony and Liberal Hope", pp. 73-75.
advisers (but no more than advisers); Critics have a larger range of acquaintance than most people.80

By Rorty’s definition, however, “Literature” now encompasses almost any book with any conceivable moral value, which given Rorty’s nominalism means simply any book that might change what one considers important.

The liberal ironist has no desire for power because she is properly ironic about her vision and her influence. The ironist will not be bothered by the thought that her redescriptions and vocabularies will be viewed by her successors as “mere redescriptions.” The perfection the ironist seeks is a private perfection; she wants only to be left alone to pursue it. There is, however, an important public role for ironists. This role is linked to the fairly tight historical connections “...between the freedoms of intellectuals on the one hand and the decrease of cruelty on the other.”81

Rorty seeks to separate the public realm from the private for a number of reasons, the first of which is to defend ironism. Jürgen Habermas, a philosopher, social theorist and leading contemporary member of the Frankfurt School, finds the ironism which Rorty celebrates “destructive

80 “Private Irony and Liberal Hope”, pp. 76-80.

81 “Contingency of Community”, p. 61.
of social hope." Rorty sees it as largely irrelevant to public life and political questions; its use lies in the attempt to form an individual's self image. Habermas' resistance to irony lies in his Marxist roots: he believes that the value of any philosophy lies in its political implications; because ironists draw no (intrinsic) political implications, Habermas views them as inherently conservative.82

In Rorty's ideal society, the intellectuals would be ironists, but everyone else would not, although they would be "commonsensibly nominalist and historicist." They would view themselves as contingent, but would not have any doubts about the contingencies they embody. What separates intellectuals and non-intellectuals in Rorty's liberal utopia is doubt. Particularly attractive about this arrangement is that its citizens would not need to justify the sense of human solidarity they feel because they are no longer raised to play such a language game where philosophical justification is considered important. When doubts about social arrangements are voiced, they are responded to with requests for concrete alternatives, not philosophical

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argumentation.\textsuperscript{83}

Rorty recognizes very plainly that no society’s public rhetoric can be ironist, because irony is “an inherently private matter.” An ironist must have something to be ironic about, to have doubts about.

Another possible objection to ironism is its possibly humiliating potential. As discussed previously, ironism is, in part, a recognition of the power of redescription, but most people do not want to be redescribed. The ironist tells them that their language, their final vocabulary is “up for grabs.” This is, Rorty concedes, potentially very cruel, because the easiest way to humiliate a person is by making what they cherish most (what is enshrined in their final vocabulary) and make it seem unimportant\textsuperscript{84}.

When this is combined with the fact that ironists do not link redescription and emancipation, and that they state that freedom comes from historical contingencies mostly unaffected by redescription, we see that the problem is not that ironists are prone to humiliating others, but that they simply cannot empower others.\textsuperscript{85}

The only thing which Rorty believes needs redescription

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\textsuperscript{83} “Private Irony and Liberal Hope”, p. 87. \\
\textsuperscript{84} “Private Irony and Liberal Hope”, p. 89. \\
\textsuperscript{85} “Private Irony and Liberal Hope”, pp. 90-91. 
\end{flushright}
is that which will serve Liberal aims: answers to the question "What humiliates?" The aim of the liberal ironist is to decrease the likelihood of anyone being humiliated by increasing our ability to recognize humiliation through redescription of what is humiliating.

However, Rorty is aware that people simply do not want to be redescribed; for this reason Rorty distinguishes between redescription for private purposes and for public purposes. Private redescriptions may describe anyone in terms which have nothing to do with my attitude toward your actual or possible suffering. My private purposes and the part of my final vocabulary which is not relevant to my public actions, are none of your business. 86

The only part of a person’s final vocabulary which is relevant to the rest of her society is the part which requires her to be aware of the ways in which her actions may cause the humiliation of others. It is this susceptibility to humiliation which links the liberal ironist with the rest of her society.

People oppressed by cruelty are unable to engage in the language game of reflection, because pain makes them "mute". More true to Rorty’s language elsewhere, they can use only the language of their oppressors and can describe themselves

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86 "Private Irony and Liberal Hope", p. 91.
using only the descriptions used by their oppressors. There can therefore be no “voice of the oppressed” or “language of the victim”, because the language which used to be sufficient, the only one they know, is no longer working and they are suffering too much to put new words into action. It is the (ironist) intellectual who has the essential role of putting the situation of the victim into language. The liberal novelist, poet and journalist are skillful at imaginative identification of this sort; they are able to imagine a language for those who cannot speak for themselves.87

Ironism presents another, more serious problem: some ironists intellectuals do not wish to keep their irony to themselves. Three of Rorty’s favorite ironists, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Foucault, all see, to a greater or lesser extent, public, political relevance for their theories; it is for this reason also that Rorty seeks to maintain the public-private split.

Foucault at times tries to combine his attempts at self-creation, what Rorty, following Foucault, calls his “quest for autonomy”, with the institutions of a liberal society. Rorty believes strongly that such desires should be kept private, because the sort of autonomy Foucault and others

seek can definitionally not be embodied in institutions. Autonomy is not something we all have within us waiting to be released, and certainly not something that any institution could release. It is something made, not found, and it is not particularly relevant to the liberal desire to avoid humiliation.  

To have an autonomous, self-created self an ironist must cut the links which binds her vocabulary to those of the rest of her society. This does not, however, entail, cutting the social bonds which link her to her society, nor using that society’s political vocabulary.

By keeping this quest private, we keep ourselves from developing political attitudes (as Nietzsche and Heidegger did) which lead to the belief that there is some social goal more important than avoiding cruelty. It is when ironists want their private self to serve as a model that their politics tend to cease being liberal.

When he begins to think that other human beings have a moral duty to achieve the same inner autonomy as he himself has achieved, then he begins to think about political and social changes which will help them do so. Then he may begin to think that he has a moral duty to bring about these changes, whether his fellow

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88 “Contingency of Community”, p. 65.

citizens want them or not.

For this reason, ironist philosophers are socially and politically "useless" and potentially dangerous.\(^90\)

The Romantic intellectual's goal of self-overcoming and self-invention seems to me a good model... for an individual human being, but a very bad model for a society. We should not try to find a societal counterpart to the desire for autonomy. Trying to do so leads to Hitlerlike and Maolike fantasies about "creating a new kind of human being." Societies are not quasi-persons. The point of a liberal society is not to create anything, but simply to make it as easy as possible for people to achieve their wildly different private ends without hurting each other.\(^91\)

We should ask ironists to privatize their attempts at sublimity, and "to view them as irrelevant to politics and therefore compatible with the sense of human solidarity which the development of democratic institutions has facilitated."\(^92\)

There are many criticisms of Rorty's public-private split. Feminists, for example, are concerned that it is a revitalization of the oppressive sexual division of labor. Others believe that it is merely a rehashing of a discredited Hellenic ideal. Hopefully, it has been made clear that it is

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\(^91\) "Moral Identity and Private Autonomy: The Case of Foucault", p. 196.

neither of these things. Rorty has addressed the first allegation directly, stating:

> The kind of private/public distinction the feminists mostly talk about is the distinction between who stays home and does the dirty work with the cooking and kids, and who gets out of the house into the great world outside. That has nothing to do with the distinction I'm trying to draw between individual self-creation and public responsibility.⁹³

In the next chapter, we will explore some of the critiques and alternatives to Rorty's view of liberal society, and particularly his conception of social change.

Chapter IV
Pragmatism, Immanent Critique and Change
...philosophical thought... [has] relatively little to do with the reach of political imagination. It seems to me a sign of despair, and therefore of failing imaginations, when a left becomes as philosophized, as preoccupied with theory, as the academic left in the United States presently is. The fantasy that a new set of philosophical ideas... can do quickly and wholesale what union organizers, journalistic exposés, activist lawyers, charismatic leftist candidates, and the like can do, at best, very slowly and at retail, seems to me the result of a failure of nerve.94

In this chapter, we explore Rorty’s response to the various challengers to the piecemeal, pragmatist conception of social change. They can be thought of as a group under the rubric “immanent critique”; each of the traditions here identified is, to Rorty’s mind, more prone to criticism, particularly ideologiekritik, than to action. The ideology always criticized is the bourgeois ideology of late capitalism.95

Most are outgrowths of Marxism, but have abandoned Marx’s own valorization of praxis over critique.


95 “Thugs and Theorists”, p. 569.
Pragmatism, Neopragmatism and Change

In addition to the novel, about which we have spoken, and will address again below, and to metaphor, Rorty identifies two other means for social change, reformist activism, which is the concept central to Rorty’s Deweyan position, and Prophecy. Rorty addresses Prophecy only in one place.96

In this piece, he nicely synopsizes his position, but changes vocabulary; this is ostensibly done to remain continuous with the language of Lynn Baker’s piece, “Just Do It: Pragmatism and Social Change”, but the term “Prophet” nicely encapsulates Rorty’s idea.97

Rorty identifies two types of prophet, good and bad. Good prophets say that if we all got together and did $\chi$, we would probably like the results. They provide an idea of what a better future might look like and how it might be achieved. They make no claims to “legitimacy” or “truth” (certainly not “Truth”).98

Bad prophets consider themselves the voice of something bigger and more authoritative than the possible consequences


of their ideas; a messenger from some authority in the name of which they speak. They thereby defend their proposals by the authority with which they speak.99

This first type of prophet will not be inclined to engage in philosophical debate about her prophecy; when forced to do so, it is useful to have a philosopher around, particularly, Rorty claims, a pragmatist philosopher. The pragmatist philosopher would essentially run interference while the prophet engages in the important work.

Theoretical Marxism and Pragmatism

Rorty is still wed to much of, if not Marxism, at least (Romantic) Socialism. For him, Marx and the tradition went wrong when it tried to scientize itself, hence his claim that Dewey took what was useful from Marx and discarded the rest.100

It is for this reason that Rorty feels we need to “banalize our vocabulary of political deliberation.” For Rorty, we should start talking about greed and selfishness rather than constructs such as “bourgeois ideology”. Highlighting a point which will recur throughout this chapter, Rorty states that we should stop assuming that the

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100 Rorty, "Thugs and Theorists", p. 568.
role of the intellectual is radical critique of existing institutions -- criticism that attempts to penetrate down to the realities beneath the appearances. As we have seen, Rorty rejects this metaphysical urge in all of its manifestations, but he finds it particularly pernicious in the political realm.¹⁰¹

For Rorty, it is better to say that we may be able to construct a better society than we have now, than to try to see through "mystification" and social construction to reality. Even here the vocabulary must be kept banal. The better society which we should seek to create (the liberal utopia of chapters II and III, with perhaps greater emphasis placed on economic equality) should not be thought of as conforming better to the way things really are (or should be), but merely containing fewer inequities, because, for purely contingent reasons, that is what we -- the 'we' of Rorty's credo discussed in chapter two -- value. For such a task, what is needed is reformist criticism; such criticism implies in Rorty's usage that the critic sketch alternate institutions. These alternate institutions, paralleling his warnings about why ironists must keep their projects private, must not presuppose the existence or creation of a new kind of person. Rather than try to avoid complicity with present

institutions (cf. comments on Foucault, supra.), we should focus on transforming them into better institutions. This entails “View[ing] the present as the raw material of a better future.”

We should thus stop talking about “alienation” as if we understood the true nature of human life and could measure the difference between it and the corrupt and degraded existence of contemporary humanity.

Foreshadowing the more sustained discussion in the next section, Rorty claims that we should emphasize the difference between real and cultural politics. For him, this is the difference between alleviating suffering and equalizing opportunities on the one hand, and redirecting the uses of learning and leisure on the other. We should thus be concrete, banal and pragmatic when we discuss politics, while being as abstract or “transgressive” as we wish when discussing cultural politics. Most social hopes have very little to do with cultural politics, and can stand on their own without questions about, for example, the nature of modernity. What is more in order are concrete fantasies

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102 “Intellectuals at the End of Socialism”, p. 6.

103 “Intellectuals at the End of Socialism”, p. 6.

104 As we shall see in the following section, Rorty walks a fine line here: he rightly claims that critique heaped upon critique heaped upon deconstruction will not stop the strong oppressing the weak, but might these not yield the changes in metaphor Rorty holds to be essential to all change.
about a future where everyone can get work which gives satisfaction and a decent wage; a future in which everyone is safe from violence and humiliation.\textsuperscript{105}

Since Plato, intellectuals have tried to support these small fantasies with a larger, blurrier, more sophisticated set of fantasies. From Plato until Hegel, such fantasies were linked to a story about humanity’s relation to something larger and ahistorical; after Hegel turned discussion to a story about humanity’s relation to History, History conceived as something with form and movement, belief in such explanations has let intellectuals feel that they can serve non-intellectuals by telling them how they can get what they want. These explanations let the intellectuals feel that their special gifts have social utility, they permit the intellectuals to function as an \textit{avant-garde}. As we shall see in the next section, this continues in the Cultural Politics movement.\textsuperscript{106}

With Hegel, World History became the name of an inspiring blur produced by conflating the immaterial and the material, the atemporal and the temporal. The Marxist-Leninist version helped us both to overcome our fear of elitism and to gratify our blood lust. It let us see

\textsuperscript{105} "Intellectuals at the End of Socialism", p. 7.

\textsuperscript{106} "Intellectuals at the End of Socialism", p. 7.
ourselves as about to be swept up by the aroused masses and “borne along toward the slaughter bench of history.”  

However, with Hegel, intellectuals began to switch from fantasies of contacting eternity to fantasies of constructing a better future. Hegel helped substitute hope for knowledge. Marx took this a step further, blurring the distinction between understanding the world and knowing how to change it. Marx sought to replace capitalism with communism and replace bourgeois culture with new forms of cultural life arising from the emancipation of the working class.  

Rorty feels that these Marxist suggestions should now be dropped. We can no longer use capitalism to mean both a market economy and the “source of all contemporary injustice.” The same conceptual ambiguity plagues the terms “bourgeois ideology” and “working class”. Some Marxist phrases are still, to Rorty’s mind, quite resonant and can still motivate people to action, but they must be taken out of their grand theoretic context. They can exert the greatest amount of suasion when put in the context of concrete suggestions about how, for example, to reduce structural unemployment.  

107 “Intellectuals at the End of Socialism”, p. 8.  
109 “Intellectuals at the End of Socialism”, p. 9.
What Rorty sees as still vital in Marxism is the same as what he sees vital in Christianity:

...indignation over the fact that greed drives out sympathy... We are indignant... over the tendency of humanity to divide up into groups who want to hold on to what they have, rather than sharing the surplus... it is the same tendency Plato observed in his description of the plutocratic state and Jesus observed in the Jerusalem of his time.110

When Marxism was still an option, we dreamt of a time when change would come from the bottom up, making it unnecessary to rely on the sympathy of the strong. This is a theme which recurs in the human rights discourse, Rorty’s analysis of which is discussed in chapter five below.

Western intellectuals are (regrettably to Rorty’s mind) still looking for a successor to Marxism -- for a large theoretical framework to let us put society in a new context. The hope implicit in this search is that the new context will suggest something less banal to say than “people ought to be kinder, more generous, less selfish.” Rorty feels that there may be nothing less banal to say, especially at the levels of generality theorists enjoy.111

Cultural Politics, Deconstruction and Change


The Cultural Left, which Rorty defines following Henry Gates as a "'Rainbow Coalition of feminists, deconstructionists, Althusserians, Foucauldians, people working in ethnic or gay studies, etc.'"\textsuperscript{112}, seems for Rorty to share with Marxists and instinctive distrust of proposals for concrete, piecemeal reform and the conviction that it is very important to find the "correct theoretical analysis" of a social phenomenon, even if this analysis leads not to proposals for specific changes, but only to one more reiteration of the need for change.\textsuperscript{113}

Particularly singled out for Rorty's attention are those whose focus and "tools" are postmodern in orientation. The reasons for this are interesting. Rorty is damned by both left and right. By the right, Rorty is criticized for being irrationalist, relativist; they feel that he leaves American democracy without the philosophical foundations needed to support; we have already seen his response to these accusations (cf Chapter II). From the left, however, Rorty has been accused of being neo-conservative. His Deweyan optimism is a large part of this, but also part is faith (also Deweyan) in reform. This critique seems generational in nature. Partly for this latter reason does Rorty seem so

\textsuperscript{112} Richard Rorty, "Two Cheers for the Cultural Left." \textit{The South Atlantic Quarterly}. 89/1 1990. p. 288. No citation provided for Gates.

\textsuperscript{113} "Two Cheers...", p. 232.
touchy and defensive.

Most postmoderns (the English Department Left is another common descriptor) think that because bourgeois ideology (a term we have seen Rorty feels without which we would do better) permeates all of our language and culture, there is no point in trying to offer straightforward arguments or proposals. We can, they claim, no longer try to generate change by spelling out the details of what the strong and rich are trying to do to the weak and poor. We have to be "indirect, sneaky and complex." To subvert the language of our culture (which contains the roots of our culture's ills) we need to get behind, beneath the language of bourgeois ideology. Although Rorty does not state it in the context of this debate, this is the putting to use of Derrida, et. al. for metaphysical purposes, a supreme irony. It is no longer enough when talking about oppression to expose what is happening materially; intellectuals must change the language in which such topics are discussed; if they do not, anything they say will be complicit with the dominant bourgeois ideology.\footnote{Richard Rorty, "Intellectuals in Politics: Too Far In or Too Far Out?" \textit{Dissent}, Fall 1991. p. 487.}

This leads to the belief that the subject to study to change the world is Literature, and particularly Literary Criticism/Theory. It leads, further, to a generation of
young leftists who believe that “they are contributing to human freedom by campaigning against the prevalence of binary oppositions.”

What Rorty diagnoses as having happened without ever saying so, is that students of literature have gone down the path made by Plato and followed by so many others in their search for “metaphysical comfort.” Despite the distrust of metanarratives implicit to postmodern thought, this postmodernized ideologiekritik seeks to create just such an all encompassing theory.

One particular target of Rorty’s attention is Andrew Ross. Ross views the English Department Left as “deepening and intensifying the Marxist critique of society.” Consider the following:

A postmodern politics must complete the Gramscian move to extend the political into all spheres, domains and practices of our culture... Everything is contestable; nothing is off limits; and no outcomes are guaranteed. These are the conditions of a "philosophy of praxis", which demands of its disciples that they put aside, for the time being, the rank-and-file state of mind -- in other words, their willing suspension of disbelief in a fixed ethical horizon.

For Rorty, though, it is this rank-and-file state of mind

115 “Thugs and Theorists”, p. 569.

that feels outrage when it sees the strong depriving the weak of hope. It was, furthermore, this sense of outrage which once drove the best and brightest of young people, the ones most disturbed by inequalities of life chances to read Rousseau, Voltaire and Paine. Later generations would read Marx, Lenin and Fanon; today they read Barthes, de Man and Ross. Rorty regards this as a loss, for once they read Ross, they have been diverted off the traditional Marxist track.\textsuperscript{117}

Such theorists claim that what the left needs is a postmodern successor to Marxism -- a general theory of oppression that can bring race, class and gender together in a useful synthesis, burrow under the deepest infrastructures of our present language and unmask all ideological aberrations at once. They tend to believe that the whole tradition of liberal reform is so caught up on these ideological aberrations as to be useless. For them, the only way to escape is by deconstructing the entirety of liberal thought.\textsuperscript{118}

Rorty rightly observes that this transgressive line of inquiry loses contact with the leftist tradition that often brought Social Democrats and Marxists together in common political initiatives. It restricts itself to cultural

\textsuperscript{117} "Intellectual in Politics...", p. 488.

\textsuperscript{118} "Intellectual in Politics...", pp. 488-489.
politics, while losing any relevance to the attempt to use the institutions of a democratic society to help the weak resist the strong. They have given up on the idea of democratic politics, of mobilizing moral outrage in defense of the weak; they have no use for the vocabulary used by both bourgeois liberals (Dewey, Rorty) and Marxists to express their common hopes.119

The more they tell their students that the root cause of the suffering they see around them is "Western technological thinking" (Heidegger), "phallogocentrism" (Derrida), or "liberal individualism", rather than old fashioned greed and selfishness, the more likely they are to believe that detecting these things in texts strikes a blow for freedom. The more students are told that the most useful thing they can do is unmask ideological aberration, the more likely they are to dismiss proposal for reformist legislation as mere distraction. The very unwillingness to think in terms of drafting and passing legislation demonstrates for Rorty the inutility of this new left.120

The upshot of all of this for Rorty is that it has yielded

119 "Intellectual in Politics...", p. 489.

...the idiot jargon... Leftspeak -- a dreadful, pompous mishmash of Marx, Adorno, Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan. It has resulted in articles that offer unmaskings of the presuppositions of earlier unmaskings of the presuppositions of earlier unmaskings. It has created the contemporary equivalent of the self-involved Trotskyite discussion groups of the 1930s.121

Ross thinks that Rorty's observations are obvious; Rorty cites the example of Ross claiming that no one has any difficulty recognizing that the rich are "soaking" the poor. Rorty claims that many, in fact, do not recognize this; as evidence he cites the phenomenon of Reagan Democrats, the industrial and rural poor, traditionally Democrat "successfully duped" into voting Republican.

Rorty regards the dismissal by Ross of statistics and journalism as the lowest form of political consciousness as simply a way of claiming that what they (Literature and Philosophy) do is more important than what sociologists and journalists do.

They are right that we must go beyond the press to popular culture to find the issues important to people, but to this Rorty responds with a quintessential pragmatist query: What do you do with this information? How do you use it to change institutions and laws?

If they believe that raised consciousness will trickle

121 "Thugs and Theorists", p. 570.
down as it did with feminism, for example, sophisticated theoretical analyses and deconstructions will do nothing but put it further out of reach.

Students should not be taught that "phallogocentrism" or "humanism" must go before things can get better. For Rorty, this implies that topics only philosophically sophisticated individuals can grasp are more politically urgent than what the average voter can grasp. Rorty is correct to dismiss this as elitist and antithetical to the whole idea of universal adult franchise.\(^{122}\)

At the root of Rorty's objections is his denial that continental thinkers have given us new tools to analyze the system. As was discussed in Chapter III, their philosophies are inherently private. For Rorty, Foucault was a useful historian of particular institutions, but his neo-Nietzscheanism seems to have no particular relevance to ideologiekritik, social Reform or politics as the English Department Left would have it. Neither Derrida nor Foucault taught or practiced a method that does better what the old Marxists tried to do -- expose the "underlying meaning" of what our culture. They are important and useful philosophers for Rorty because they help envisage a social democratic utopia in which "Enlightenment Liberalism is carried through to its limit, eradicating in the process the last traces of

\(^{122}\) "Richard Rorty Replies", pp. 266-267.
Rorty supports my claim of the irony inherent in the Cultural Politics program (pp30-31, supra) in his claim that neither Derrida nor Foucault can be blended with Marx (although he finds them comfortably blendable with Dewey and Rawls). As Rorty explains it, “Marx is a perfect example of "the metaphysics of presence" that deconstructors want to deconstruct -- the set of ideas that centers on the distinctions between reality and appearance.”

123 “Thugs and Theorists”, p. 571.

Chapter V

Solidarity, Ethics and Human Rights
Traditionally, philosophers have tried to bolster human solidarity by attempting to determine what is essential to humans which separates them from the beasts. Philosophers of contingency who are also interested in the expansion of human solidarity such as Rorty, do not have such an option. For them what it means to be a good or just or inhuman is relative to contingent local spatiotemporal conditions. Rorty believes that we should cease to desire such universal criteria.

For Rorty, a belief, no matter how contingently held "can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for..." This is a highly counter-intuitive claim, which I am not sure I am ready to accept except in the cases of all but the most extraordinary persons; who could really say that they would surrender up their life for something which they understand they may not believe tomorrow?

Rorty borrows Wilfrid Sellars' concept of "we intentions" as the basis for moral judgment. For Rorty and Sellars, immorality is defined as something which "we" do not do. This defines the in-group in opposition to all others who do indeed commit such acts. Someone within "us" who commits such an act is, by virtue of this commission, no longer one of "us". The most important (philosophical)

125 "Solidarity", p. 189.
questions thus become “Who are ‘we’, how did we come to be what we are, and what might we become?”\textsuperscript{126}

Rorty rightly points out that this “we” is of greater emotional appeal when it is local and particular; we thought of as humanity is still too abstract to motivate most persons.

This may seem somewhat pessimistic, but Rorty does see both a history of progress and hope for future progress in terms of expansion of whom we consider part of “us”. This point will become central to the discussion in the following section, but for now let it suffice to say that solidarity should not be thought of in terms of recognition of a core nature which we all share; it is plain that Rorty has no use for such an idea. We should, in our efforts to promote solidarity, try to view traditions among people and peoples as less significant than the only thing which truly is shared by all, the capacity for humiliation. Solidarity -- as was the case with individual identity -- is made rather than found.\textsuperscript{127}

We can and should treat solidarity as a goal, and articulate it for public purposes as if it had the metaphysical basis which Rorty refutes, a “focus

\textsuperscript{126} “Contingency of Community”, pp. 59-60.

\textsuperscript{127} “Solidarity”, p. 192-195.
imaginarius”. We should realize that a focus imaginarius is none the worse for being a construct; it is a part of our final vocabulary.\textsuperscript{128}

**Rorty on Human Rights**

According to Rorty, throughout history, people have used the terms “man” or “human” to mean “people like us.” The line between humans and animals is not, for many, simply the line between “featherless bipeds” and all others; there are animals walking around in humanoid form. Such was the attitude taken by the Germans with regard to the Jews, the Serbs with regard to the Muslims. “We” (such a “we” as identified in the previous sentence) and those like us are paradigm cases of humanity, but those too different from us in behavior or custom are, at best, borderline cases.\textsuperscript{129}

The human-animal distinction is only one of three ways by which we paradigmatic humans tell ourselves from the borderline cases. The second is the distinction between adults and children. We tend to treat ignorant, superstitious people like children. They are held to be able to attain true humanity only if given a proper (our) education. If they cannot absorb the education, they are

\textsuperscript{128} “Solidarity”, p. 196.

obviously not human.130

This has been said in the past of women, but the simpler, more pervasive way to exclude women is to equate "man" with "humanity". This reinforces the average male's thankfulness for not having been born female, and reinforces his fear of the ultimate degradation, feminization. Feminization may take the form variously of emasculation or penetration.131

Because for most males, being a woman does not count as a way of being human; the third way of not being human is not being male.

Throughout history, philosophers have tried to expand the breadth of those we number among the human by explaining what only we as humans have -- what is essential to being human. For Plato it was a special added ingredient which all other animals lack. Respect for this is why people should be nice to each other. Nietzsche replied that efforts to get people to be nice are doomed to fail because the real truth about human nature is that we are a "uniquely nasty and dangerous kind of animal."132

When neo-Platonists claim that all featherless bipeds

130 "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality", pp. 113-114.


have the same inalienable rights, Nietzscheans dismiss the whole idea of an inalienable right as an attempt by the weak to resist the strong by means of metaphysical claims and guilt.

In getting beyond this Plato-Nietzsche debate, we have become less prone to ask the question "What is our Nature?" and more willing to ask "What can we make of ourselves?". This implies that we generally take theories and philosophies of human nature less seriously than in the past. We have come to think of ourselves as the "flexible, self-creating/self-shaping animal", rather than the rational animal (Plato/Kant) or the cruel animal (Nietzsche).\(^{133}\) This does not, however, preclude one from being cruel, particularly as Rorty would remind us, in one's Nietzschean quest for self-creation.

It is one of the shapes Rorty believes we have assumed which is the focus of his article, the Human Rights Culture, a term he takes from Eduardo Rabossi, an Argentine jurist and philosopher of law. For Rorty, this culture should just be welcomed as a fact; we should not attempt (philosophically) to get behind or beneath this fact. There is no need to identify and defend its philosophical presuppositions. It is Rorty's belief that the human rights culture renders human rights foundationalism (Plato, et.al.) outmoded and

\(^{133}\) "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality", p. 115.
irrelevant.\textsuperscript{134}

In this conception, the question of whether or not we really have the rights listed in the Helsinki Declaration is not even worth raising. There is nothing relevant to moral choice separating human beings from animals except historically contingent facts of the world, cultural facts. Some critics label this cultural relativism, because it seems incompatible with the fact that our human rights culture is morally superior to other cultures. It is Rorty’s contention, however, that this superiority is not in any way presupposed by the existence of universal human rights. For Rorty, the criticism is only valid if we believe that a moral claim is invalid if it is not backed up by knowledge of the element which makes humans distinct. For Rorty, however, “It is not clear why respect for human dignity must presuppose the existence of any such attribute”.\textsuperscript{135}

We have traditionally called the essential element Rationality. Critics associate cultural relativism with irrationality because it denies the existence of morally relevant facts which are applicable regardless of the cultural context.

The task as Rorty sees it is to make the human rights

\textsuperscript{134} “Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality”, p. 115-116

\textsuperscript{135} “Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality”, p. 116.
culture more self-conscious and more powerful, not to
demonstrate its superiority by an appeal to something
transcultural. All philosophy can do is summarize our
culturally influenced intuitions about the right thing to do
in various situations; these generalizations are not supposed
to ground our intuitions, just summarize. The formulation of
such summarizing generalizations increases the predictability
and thus the power and efficiency of our institutions,
heightening our sense of shared moral identity which brings
us together in a moral community.136

It is Rorty's claim that the emergence and spread of the
human rights culture owes nothing to increased moral
knowledge, rather it is the result of hearing "sad and
sentimental stories." Since nothing useful seems to arise
from insisting on a "purportedly ahistorical" human nature,
there probably is not one. If there is, it is probably
irrelevant to our moral choices. It is important to note
that Rorty's doubts about the effectiveness of appeals to
moral knowledge are doubts about causal links and causal
efficacy, not about epistemic status. To question their
epistemic status would be to restart the debate Rorty finds
so pointless.137

136 "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality", p. 117.
Before investigating how Rorty came to hold this position, we must look at an ironic oversight of his: despite his Deweyan focus on practice and activism to be found elsewhere, in this discussion Rorty relies almost entirely upon the power of redescription. Rorty inexcusably ignores the role of human-rights activists for whom the motivations would almost certainly be found to be based upon metaphysical absolutes, the same Platonic/Kantian/Christian beliefs Rorty claims have done little to help the cause. In the broad sense, I believe Rorty’s claims to be correct, without imaginative redescriptions to help us identify with suffering others, human rights activists would be nothing more than gadflies; the publications of Amnesty International and its sister organizations, where suffering is plainly spelled out, must be recognized (by Rorty most of all) as playing a role complementary to the novel. I believe Rorty would readily accede to this point.

For Rorty, moral philosophy has become largely irrelevant to our lives. The story begins between Kant and the present, when Darwin convinced most Western intellectuals that there was no special added ingredient making humans unique. For Darwin, we are simply exceptionally talented animals clever enough to take charge of our own evolution (change our environment). This fit nicely with the dominant historicist trend in philosophy of the time, which had arisen
as a response to Kantian transcendentalism. These historicists look to the future, not to eternity. For them, ideas about how change can come about are more interesting than discussion about the criteria for determining the desirability of change.\textsuperscript{138}

The same period saw a great increase in wealth, literacy and leisure which made possible an unprecedented acceleration in the rate of moral progress (as defined by Rorty — enlarging the group defined as “us”). It is enough, suggests Rorty, to know that we live in an age in which we can make things better for ourselves; we do not need to dig behind the historical facts for non-historical (the existence of which Rorty, of course, dismisses) ones about what we really are. The more we see a chance to recreate (redescribe) ourselves, the less likely we are to read Darwin as offering another theory about what we really are, and the more likely we are to take him as providing reasons about why we need not even ask what we really are.\textsuperscript{139}

We should cease asking questions about what human nature truly is and focus on more tangible, pragmatic issues like “What sort of world can we prepare for our great-grandchildren?” If we must establish a difference between

\textsuperscript{138} “Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality”, pp. 120-121.

\textsuperscript{139} “Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality”, p. 121.
ourselves and the animals, it is not that we can know and they can only feel; it is more properly (especially for the aims of promoting a human rights culture) that we can feel for each other to a much greater extent.\textsuperscript{140}

Rorty's final argument for the replacement of foundationalism is purely pragmatic: it would be more efficient. By doing so, it would let us concentrate on manipulating the sentiments. Rorty is speaking here of what he calls "sentimental education", which as we shall see, and as was alluded to earlier, is the linchpin of his proposals. A sentimental education is one that sufficiently acquaints people of different kinds with one another, so that they are less likely to think of those different from themselves as less than human. This is the expansion of "we consciousness" mentioned previously.\textsuperscript{141}

Plato thought the way to get people to be nicer was to point out what they all had in common, but this has been historically of little avail. Kant was scarcely more successful; pinning his hopes on saying that one should not treat rational agents as means hinges on who counts as a rational agent. Traditionally, rational agency was synonymous with membership in one's own moral community.

\textsuperscript{140} "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality", p. 122.

\textsuperscript{141} "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality", pp. 122-123.
People with fundamentally different moral beliefs could of course only hold such misguided beliefs because they are irrational, and hence, only quasi-human.

Kant’s Categorical Imperative tells one that she should extend the respect she feels for people like herself to all “featherless bipeds.” Outside of post-Enlightenment European culture, most people have no conception of why membership in homo sapiens is supposed to suffice for membership in a moral community. This is not because they are insufficiently rational; it is because they “live in a world in which it would be just too risky to let their sense of moral community stretch far.”

It is of no avail to tell them to look at all that they have in common and see that it is more important than the trivial differences, because they will see nothing of the sort. They will in all likelihood be offended by the very suggestion that they treat people whom they do not think of as human as if they were. Their rejection is neither rhetorical nor irrational, but is rather heartfelt and sensibly pragmatic. The identities of these people are tied to a sense of who they are not. They do not think of themselves as human per se, but rather a particular, good kind which is defined in opposition to a particular bad kind. Insofar as they are impoverished and their lives are

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perpetually at risk, they have little except pride in not being this other to sustain their self-respect.143

Such persons should not be treated as irrational, but rather deprived; not deprived of (moral) knowledge as foundationalists would have it, but rather deprived of security and sympathy. For Rorty, security is simply the having life’s conditions sufficiently risk-free to make one’s differences from others inessential to one’s self-respect. Sympathy is best described by example: reactions white Americans had after reading Uncle Tom’s Cabin; the bourgeoisie had after reading Bleak House and Oliver Twist; what we today feel seeing news reports from Bosnia and Rwanda. It would seem guilt is a large, but implicit factor.144

For Rorty, security and sympathy go together. The more dangerous one’s situation, the less one can afford the time to think what it might be like for people with whom one does not immediately identify. A sentimental education can only work if people can relax long enough to listen.

The spread of the human rights culture is not a matter of becoming more aware of the requirements of moral law, but rather a “progress of sentiments.” It consists in an

143 “Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality”, p. 125.

144 “Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality”, p. 128.
increasing ability to see the similarities between ourselves and people very unlike ourselves outweighing the differences. The relevant similarities are not a matter of sharing a "deep true self which instantiates true humanity, but such little similarities as cherishing our parents and children."145

An obvious objection to the reliance upon sentiment intrinsic to the recommendations Rorty has presented is that reliance upon it rather than the command of reason, natural law or divine will is to rely upon powerful people gradually ceasing to oppress others out of mere (newfound) niceness or guilt. It is quite revolting to think that our only hope for a decent society consists in softening the hearts of the leisure class. Allow me to quote Rorty at length on this:

We want moral progress to burst up from below, rather than waiting patiently upon condescension from the top. The residual popularity of Kantian ideas of "unconditional moral obligation" -- obligation imposed by deep ahistorical noncontingent forces-- seems to me almost entirely due to our abhorrence for the idea that the people on top hold the future in their hands... that there is nothing more powerful to which we can appeal against them... prefer a bottom-up way of achieving utopia...which will make the last first. But I do no think this is how utopia will in fact come into being... why does this preference make us resist the thought that sentimentality may be the best weapon we have? We resist out of resentment; We resent the idea that we shall have to wait for the strong to turn their piggy little eyes to

145 "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality", p. 129.
the suffering of the weak. We desperately hope that there is something stronger and more powerful that will hurt the strong if they do not... The desperate hope for a noncontingent and powerful ally is, according to Nietzsche, the common core of Platonism, of religious insistence on divine omnipotence, and of Kantian moral philosophy.\textsuperscript{146}

In conclusion, the best answer to the question "Why should I care about a stranger, a person who is not kin, whose habits I find disgusting?" is a "long, sad, sentimental story" which begins "Because this is what it is like to be in her situation..." or "Because he may become your son-in-law..." or "Because their mothers would grieve for them..." It is Rorty's contention that such stories repeated and varied over the centuries have gotten us to tolerate and even cherish people whose appearance, habits or beliefs seemed initially an insult to our own moral identity.\textsuperscript{147}

Can Rorty's nominalist anti-foundationalism offer anything to the cause? Williams offers a sympathetic account.

The image of tortured innocents has played a central role in the intellectual history of nonfoundationalist thought... [For nonfoundationalists] The torture of innocents is wrong because it violates our culture's celebration of the individual and our sense of the essential

\textsuperscript{146} "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality", pp. 130-131. Emphasis in original.

\textsuperscript{147} "Human Rights, Rationality and Sentimentality", p. 133.
dignity and equality of human beings [Rorty would studiously avoid the term "essential]... A Wittgensteinian strategy provides the most direct response. The torture of innocents is wrong because of the grammar of the sentence. If someone is "innocent," then by definition she should not be punished: by calling her innocent the speaker presupposes that conclusion. And "torture"? Let us begin by noting that, within our contemporary language of morality, torture provides the touchstone of moral bankruptcy. Whatever Evil Ones did to their Innocents, if Amnesty International can successfully label it as torture, it has won the battle for moral condemnation. A successful charge that someone has tortured innocents ends the discussion: Torture’s status as a trump card signals its central ideological role as the reference point of immorality.\textsuperscript{148}

This is precisely the task and self-image of the pragmatist philosopher; she works in a role ancillary to the activist. She lends support to the activist when the activist is challenged on philosophical grounds. Presumably the pleasure is particularly sweet, when taking a page from Wittgenstein as Williams does, the pragmatist gets to demonstrate that the challenge is, in fact not a problem at all.

\textsuperscript{148} "Rorty, Radicalism, Romanticism...", pp. 157-158.
Chapter VI

Conclusions
In exploring Richard Rorty’s thought we have uncovered a tension between his emphases on negative liberty and radical egalitarianism, and the tension between private irony and public solidarity.

There is another apparent inconsistency; in his advocacy of the public role of the novel, it would seem that Rorty repeats the mistake he identifies in Nabokov of splitting novels into the important and the unimportant. I think this is a non-issue. I will address this aestheticism question before offering a concluding analysis of the liberty-equality problem.

**Rorty’s Aestheticism**

Because Rorty’s choices of moral exemplar novels comes from the canon of the cultural elite, he has been accused of aestheticism and snobbery; I believe that they were chosen, to the contrary, because of their familiarity, both to Rorty and to his projectd readership. It was not an aesthetic decision.

Rorty’s criteria for literary merit are certainly different than those of Nabokov, for example. For Nabokov, it is sublimity that marks a novel’s merit. Rorty sees the criterion as awakening readers to the various forms of humiliation which people are forced to endure, and the means by which it is inflicted.
The first sort of novel (identifying suffering) is what Nabokov labeled "topical trash". In such works -- Rorty particularly singles out Dickens' and Orwell's writings -- we are taken into the very details of the suffering inflicted upon people. In this genre (if that is an apt term), the suffering is conveyed particularly effectively because it is told from the perspective of the sufferer. "Fiction like that of Dickens, Olive Schreiner, or Richard Wright gives us the details about the kinds of suffering being endured by people to whom we had previously not attended."149

It is Rorty's very strong belief (this has come up repeatedly) that seeing the suffering of others will make them less an other to us, because we are shown that the only thing all persons share (inasmuch as this is not a claim about essences), suffering, is being endured by these previously non-persons. If they can feel what we feel, they are more worthy of consideration.

The second type of novel is the sort which is told from the perspective of the inflicter of the suffering. In many instances, particularly those important to Rorty, the suffering is not inflicted intentionally, but is rather the effect of an individual's pursuit of private perfection or autonomy upon those around him -- Nietzsche's life is a fine example. "Fiction like that of Choderlos de Laclos, Henry

149 "Introduction" Contingency..., p. XVI.
James, or Nabokov gives us the details about what sorts of cruelty we ourselves are capable of, and thereby lets us redescribe ourselves."^{150}

For Rorty, by seeing ourselves as inflicters of pain, as humiliaters, we will hopefully alter our self-image and our behavior toward others. With luck and perserverance, perhaps this will spread, making our community as a whole less likely to inflict humiliation.

Critics claim that Rorty sets a hurdle of aesthetic merit below which a novel can offer few lessons. Rorty does not prioritize among genres, he uses "novel" as a generic term, and, in fact, allows that such various media as television, newspapers, film, rap, punk, even comic books can convey important messages. Regrettably, he does not do this in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, beyond which few readers (or critics) venture; in it, he focuses almost exclusively on novels. Having been raised among the high culture, he undoubtedly has private preferences, but any work which expands our sensitivity to the suffering of others counts for Rorty as important.

There are works which in no way expand our sensitivity to the suffering of others, and Rorty would plainly see no public role for such works; he would not, however, dismiss them, for they may provide some certain nameless thing which

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^{150} "Introduction" Contingency, p. XVI.
is central to the ongoing process of rediscription of some individual.

Rorty may have been raised to appreciate high culture, and he may have private preferences which reflect that, but I see no reflection of this in his politics. Where he appears dismissive is in his dispute with the cultural politics thinkers. They valorize popular forms of literature, music and art over those appreciated by people sharing Rorty’s background and taste; Rorty does not accept this valorization, but neither does he invert it. Rorty simply demands that they go beyond kritik to action.

**Mill, Marx, and Rorty**

Can Rorty’s love of liberty be reconciled with his desire for radical economic egalitarianism? This matter was further muddied in the last chapter when Rorty distanced himself from the critical-theoretical orientation and revolutionism of Marxism in favor of a more Deweyan approach. He even rejects much Marxist vocabulary, doing so, however, because it is no longer useful -- a quintessentially Pragmatist consideration.

We are told in “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids” that Rorty was raised a Marxist, and brought up to believe that only the overthrow of capitalism will equalize life opportunities for all. In the same piece, however, we are told that not only
was Dewey one of his parent’s greatest heroes, but that Sidney Hook, one of Dewey’s closest disciples, was one of their closest friends -- he later became one of Rorty’s. Their influence on him was as great as Trotsky’s.

Neither Dewey nor Hook were Marxists, neither were revolutionaries (the claim has been made of Hook, who later became a supporter of both the Cold War and Reagan\textsuperscript{151}), and their \textit{bona fides} as Trotskyites are suspect, although Dewey did head the commission of inquiry into the trial and assassination of Trotsky. It would seem that the seeds of Rorty’s apparent schizophrenia were planted early. This leads to the question of whether Dewey shared this inconsistency, because it is his Social Democracy which Rorty now embraces.

I do not believe that liberty and economic equality are, \textit{a priori}, antithetical; Rorty does get into trouble when he states that each is the highest public aspiration. They can not logically both be primary; this is a problem which is further complicated when he claims that not being cruel to others is the highest expectation to which we can be held. I believe that this is nothing more than carelessness on Rorty’s part; the various essays in which these claims were made were written several years apart, and for different audiences.

\textsuperscript{151} "A Post-Philosophical Politics?", pp. 203-204.
It may perhaps be useful to attempt to synthesize the positions, staking out the position I believe Rorty would take if confronted with this inconsistency.

Basic material (economic) security and basic physical security are the absolute bedrock needs for any person or community -- Rorty would probably dislike the foundation metaphor, but it is properly evocative. In Western political theory, physical security is usually assumed to require some sort of empowered authority (there is no need to investigate the lengthy debates about the meaning, nature, and sources of these two terms for these purposes). Hobbes' Leviathan is the archetype; later theorists realized that we no longer needed an authority quite so intrusive, and sought to articulate a system where the rulership's power had been pared down to the least necessary levels: the provision of security.

Concomitant with the narrowing of government authority is the demand for democracy, this happens, however, only once people are secure enough in their day-today lives to care. Not only do people want the government as much out of their lives as possible, but they want it to be of, by, for and accountable to the people. As we have seen in the evolution of democracy in the West, who counts as mattering evolved only very slowly, but we now enshrine the ideal of universal adult franchise. Rorty would remind us that none of this
happened of necessity, each step was wholly contingent; things could have gone otherwise.

The concept of provision of security, for contingent reasons, evolved in the West to mean only the provision of physical security, protection from violence. Economic security was not considered a right by many thinkers until the nineteenth century. Although not the first to articulate it, we associate this idea most often with Marx. Marx provided the West with a vision of a future where all would be materially secure and equal.

For Marx, the realization of this vision required the usurpation of the existing order. Although a subject of debate, Marx’s vision is often interpreted as anti-democratic; he did promise democracy at the end of the socialist road, but it was to be totally unlike the bourgeoisie parliamentary democracies the world had yet known.

Rorty is unwilling to sacrifice one freedom for another. Social Democrats, among whom Rorty would count himself, both of Marx’s day, and our own, have held that democracy and economic equality are not mutually exclusive. They do not advocate the (violent) overthrow of the existing order, but a gradualistic reform of its economic inequalities. Ultimately, socialism is realizable, but not, for Rorty, at the cost of violence or repression. What is important to
note about social democrats is that they most often work within a democratic framework. Or, more precisely, they have been most successful working within democracies. One might infer from this that democracy is a precondition for economic equality; certainly Marxists would reject this; they would presumably invert this conclusion.

I believe that Rorty would concur with my inference. It is a necessary but insufficient condition, however. First the wealthy, the powerful, must be made aware of the suffering of those less materially well of than they; here again we see the role of the imaginative identifier, the novelist, the investigative journalist.

The Marxist inversion of my social-democratic scenario has one inescapable seed of truth: even after physical security was secured, it was only after the bourgeoisie were economically secure that they began to make demands for democracy. It is plausible to claim that some level of basic economic security is essential for democracy.

I believe that social democrats come down sensibly between laissez-faire capitalists who claim that if we take care of freedom (i.e., leave the market alone), economic well being will take care of itself; any claim about equality beyond the claim that all have the chance to become wealthy at the expense of others is in manifest bad faith, and Marxists who claim that if we level the circumstances of all,
democracy will take care of itself. I believe that in this regard, I am in accord with Rorty and Dewey.

I would like to close by looking again at two passages from Rorty's credo and considering whether there is, indeed a tension between liberty and equality.

Given the failures of central governmental planning, we can no longer make "nationalization of the means of production" a central element in our definition of "socialism"... we have to use some such definition of "socialism" as...

"overcoming the greed and selfishness which are still built into the motivational patterns impressed on our children, and into the institutions within which they will have to live." We have to find a definition that commits us to both greater equality and a change in moral climate without committing us to any particular economic setup. Nobody so far has invented an economic setup that satisfactorily balances decency and efficiency... There is nothing sacred about either the free market or about central planning; the proper balance between the two is a matter of experimental tinkering.152

Is there anything which a priori infringes on the individual's right to be left alone in this passage? Rorty has rejected nationalization. He will not take from the individual; he rejects this not on principled grounds, but on grounds of efficacy -- central planning and collectivization were failures. On grounds of cruelty, the Soviet experience certainly argues against collectivization.

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He wants to attack inequality through guilt, not through restructuring the economy. Rorty is not a fan of capitalism, but the coincidence of capitalism and democracy cannot allow him to call for its dissolution without a concrete alternative; in this case, given the magnitude of the undertaking, I believe he would want the alternative to have already succeeded in practice; "Try it, you might like it" would not be sufficient when democracy and freedom are at stake.

Rorty advocates socializing our children in such a way that not only democracy is held as a good, as part of our community's self-image, but so is equality. We must educate our children to fight inequality; when they get older, we must show them that they are surrounded by greed, and that this is to be abhorred, but for now, we must work to not teach them greed.

We have... universities in which teachers continually urge students to combat... 'the forces and tendencies at work (e.g., class conflict, social division, patriarchy, racism) which are compatible with liberal political practices but nevertheless foster real inequality and limit effective political freedom.153

In this passage, our children are now in universities. They are being taught that our liberal society, the same we previously taught them was the most free yet created, has

long been tolerant of many inequalities which were long left in place because they do not interfere with our liberal institutions. They are hopefully going to combine all of the commitments inculcated in them through the years and strive to overcome all of the inequalities remaining in our community. They will do this not because it is objectively correct, the will of God, the law of nature or the inherent role of man, but simply because the culture in which they were raised believes that freedom is good and inequality is bad, and this they were taught to believe and act upon.
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