

Contingency, Irony, Solidarity

Richard Rorty's position is as close to the inspired madness of some contemporary Continental thinkers as can be found within the heirs of classical analytic philosophy. It is also widely influential outside the philosophy profession, for example among educationists associated with the cultural Left.¹ But his chief importance lies in his claim to represent the direction in which contemporary philosophy, both English-speaking and Continental, is heading. I take the title of one of his books as a framework for my critical exposition of his views.

Any critic of Rorty quickly encounters a fundamental equivocation in his writings. Sometimes he writes as a professional philosopher, whose arguments need to be evaluated accordingly, and sometimes as an "edifying" philosopher whose aim is to improve our intellectual habits (others would say: to corrupt them) by any rhetorical means available. Switching back and forth between these two roles enables him to circumvent any criticism. I shall treat him here more or less as a conventional philosopher.

CONTINGENCY

A constant theme in Rorty's thought is his rejection of all positions that imply the necessity of any entity or principle. Language, like everything else in human life, "is a product of time and chance."² This is a metaphysical position, though it implies the impossibility of all metaphysical positions including itself. He formulates it in a number of different ways.

Pragmatism

While Rorty's most frequent self-description is as a pragmatist (e.g. PP 1:29), for whom questions of truth are replaced by questions of what helps us cope (CP xvi-xvii), his relationship to the pragmatic tradition is ambiguous. When he gets around to defining pragmatism (CP 160-6), C.G. Prado³ attempts to evade the problem of definition by treating pragmatism in entirely negative terms. "Whereas one can say what most philosophers are *for*, one can best say what pragmatists are *against*. But even in stating what they oppose, one must be careful not to characterize pragmatists -- certainly neither Rorty nor Dewey -- as critics within the philosophical tradition. The point is that they are critics of that tradition itself." But this formulation does not distinguish pragmatists from the legendary student who turned in a paper entitled "Metaphysics is Bullshit," which showed no evidence of his having ever read a single metaphysician. Rorty does not include sensitivity to the consequences of his ideas among the accounts he considers, and he frequently ignores likely bad consequences of his own ideas.

In his closest approximation to old-style pragmatism, Rorty attempts to show that "light-minded aestheticism" can have a "moral purpose" and even be "an important vehicle of moral progress" (PP 1:193-4), namely making "the world's inhabitants more tolerant, more liberal, more receptive to the appeal of instrumental rationality" (PP 1:193). He ignores the fact that some people will take a light-minded attitude toward such a goal while others will firmly oppose it. Most of us can see the need for greater liberalism and tolerance in many parts of our world, even though liberalism and tolerance are, like most things, mixed goods. Jeffrey Stout's comment is to the point: "At his worst, Rorty seems to be working within something like MacIntyre's dualistic vision, content merely to take the opposite side, making liberals out to be children of light and their

critics the children of darkness."⁴ But many contemporary human beings are by any standard adequately (or more than adequately) responsive to the claims of instrumental rationality.

The first of Rorty's formal definitions of pragmatism is "that it is simply anti-essentialism applied to notions like 'truth,' 'language,' 'knowledge,' 'morality,' and similar objects of philosophical theorizing" (CP 162). On such a view "the distinction between reality and appearance seems merely the distinction between getting things right and getting things wrong" (PMN 184). But this is merely the sensible view of Donald Davidson, that "truth is as clear and basic a concept as we have" (RR 135), supplemented by analogous positions about language, knowledge, and morality. Even Plato is a pragmatist by this criterion.

Rorty's second definition is if anything even less distinctively pragmatist. Plato and Aristotle could agree with Rorty that "there is no epistemological difference between truth about what ought to be and truth about what is, nor any metaphysical difference between facts and values, nor any methodological difference between morality and science" (CP 163).

Rorty's final and preferred characterization of pragmatism is: "the doctrine that there our no constraints upon inquiry except conversational ones" (CP 165). Thus he rejects all attempts to "make truth something more than what Dewey called 'warranted assertability': more than what our peers will, *ceteribus paribus*⁵ let us get away with" (PMN 176). From Rorty's subsequent writings, it appears that his cultural peers are his fellow postmodern bourgeois liberals, rather than just any member of contemporary American, or world, society.

But the most effective conversational constraints are those imposed by those persons -- be they dictators or colleagues -- who impose, with the help of sanctions ranging from torture to ostracism, some notion of political correctness. For that reason among others, in a healthy philosophical community, one's peers will not let one get away with this sort of move.

Nonetheless, in a recent response to Hilary Putnam, Rorty has reaffirmed this way of thinking, for warrant though not for truth. He writes: "I view warrant as a sociological matter, to be ascertained by observing the reception of S's statement by her peers" (PRM 449). The majority, he admits, can be wrong about some questions of warrant, but one cannot, he maintains, be warranted in holding some position in the teeth of overwhelming majority disapproval (PRM 450). Warranted assertability in this sense is truth as orthodoxy or correctness,⁶ the sort of truth that might be claimed for statements of law.

But, in the same essay, he admits, a bit surprisingly, that a statement made by minority of one might be true, on the grounds that it might be vindicated at some time in the future (PRM 450). He is here invoking what he calls the "cautionary" use of 'true'. This is the use to be found in such sentences as 'Your arguments satisfy all our contemporary norms and standards, and I can think of nothing to say against your claim. but still, what you say might not be true'. I take this cautionary use not to be a gesture toward "the way the world might be anyway" but toward possible future generations -- toward the "better us" to whom the contradictory of what now seems unobjectionable may have come, via appropriate means, to seem better (PRM 460).

But this "cautionary use" of *true* is precisely the *Grenzbegriff* Rorty scornfully rejects when Hilary Putnam proposed it,⁷ as "merely a way of telling ourselves that a nonexistent God would, if he did exist, be pleased with us" (PP 1:20). And -- in the absence of some version of, or replacement for, the doctrine of divine Providence -- there is no reason why we now should take an interest in the views of people in the distant future, whose judgments may be reversed by people more distant still.

Rorty himself supplies at least two self-descriptions more accurate than *pragmatism*. One of these is *left wing Kuhnianism*; another is Clark Glymour's phrase, *the new fuzziness* (PP 1:38).

All well express the view that our language and methods of reasoning lack any determinate structure, and for that reason are indefinitely manipulable.

Relativism

What helps one person or group cope may not help another one do so. And there are at least three sorts of coping: managing the material world, getting other people to do what one wants, and living with oneself. Hence the inference from pragmatism to relativism is very quick.

Rorty handles this inference by a bit of definitional sleight of hand.

Relativism [he writes] is the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about every topic, is as good as any other. ... The philosophers who get *called* relativists are those who say the grounds for choosing between such opinions are less algorithmic than had been thought. (CP 166)

These sentences recognize no middle ground between out-and-out subjectivism and moderate intellectual sophistication⁸.

A more accurate statement of relativism is that rational grounds can be given for choosing between some opinions, but other choices -- between rival scientific or philosophical paradigms, say -- are matters of choice or convention alone.⁹ Rorty proposes at one point "to limit the opposition between rational and irrational forms of persuasion to the interior of a language game, rather than to try to apply it to the interesting and important shifts in linguistic behavior" (CIS 47). But defending moderate relativism of this sort would require showing the existence of stable "language games," protected, at least for the time being, against "interesting and important" challenge. But Rorty makes no attempt to define such language games; on the contrary, he agrees with Davidson in rejecting the attempt to delimit rival "conceptual schemes" (PMN 310; CP5-9,

12-4). And many of Rorty's formulations go beyond relativism to a thoroughly anarchic subjectivism.

Again and again Rorty's thought runs into the central contradiction of contemporary relativist culture: diversity, and the proliferation of rival doctrines, are welcomed -- so long as no one is led to "posit gods" (see PP 1:20). Thus, despite the offhand way in which Rorty treats religious issues, his thought can be understood as the working out of an atheistical program. But Rorty's form of atheism has undercut its own claims to superior rationality and is content to rest its claims on the brute fact of its prevalence among academics, educators and other intellectuals (not, as such people need from time to time to be reminded, among human beings at large). One thing that holds his thought together is a dogmatic closedness to the transcendent, combined with an unwillingness (of the sort despised by Nietzsche) to pay the moral and political price for the rejection of God.

Thus Rorty is prepared to call himself a "freeloading atheist" (PP 1:202), opportunistically appealing to ancestral Jewish and Christian beliefs whenever it suits his rhetorical purposes. He remarks of the "substantial majority of college students [who] have been voting for Reagan, and now Bush, ... May God forgive them" (TC 240n.6).¹⁰ But the same time he treats the notion that "we take Christianity seriously" as a sufficient refutation of any argument that implies it (TT 577n.18).

Rorty's version of atheism involves the unargued rejection, not only of God in the traditional sense, but also of anything -- including standards of good argument -- capable of resisting the vortex of contingency. He insists that "nobody can set *a priori* limits to what changes in philosophical opinion can do" (PP 2:6), but he is confident that no changes of opinion in favor of religion are in the offing. He is prepared to blur the philosophy-literature distinction in favor of the

"general text" (PP 2:88-87), thus returning us to the situation of the Biblical writers, for whom there is no firm distinction between cosmology, history, and law. But he does so in the confidence, unsupported by anything like a reason, that none of these texts will turn out to have divine authority.

Rorty's contemptuous dismissal of religion is a boon to the apologist, since it effectively excludes religion from the scope of his skeptical rhetoric, while at the same time it undermines the critique of religion generated by the Enlightenment. For anything Rorty shows, we can make an act rational faith (in Kant's sense) in a God Who has created a world that we as human beings can know, and us as human beings as capable of knowing the world. (This harmony between self and world can extend to questions of value as much as those of fact.) And we can also believe in an interventionist God, Who can rescue us from the consequences of our folly when we go astray (as we very often do). Since Rorty's atheism rests on nothing but appeal to fashion, the last word can go to the *Boston Phoenix* (December 7, 1990): "God is back."¹¹

Redescription

Rorty asserts, "man is always free to choose new descriptions (for among other things, himself)" (PMN 362n.8). And he frequently proposes to replace argument with redescription. He proposes a view of "new philosophical paradigms nudging old problems aside rather than providing new ways of stating or solving them" (PMN 264) to account for the fact that "Aristotle's remarks about knowing do not offer answers, good or bad, to Locke's questions, any more than Locke's remarks about language offer answers to Frege's" (PMN 263). As he puts it,

The method is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a new pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby

causing them to look for appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behavior, for example the adoption of new scientific equipment or new social institutions (CIS 9).

Yet Rorty is aware of the sinister side of programs of redescription.

[Orwell's] O'Brien [he writes] reminds us that human beings who have been socialized -- socialized in any language, any culture -- do share a capacity which other animals lack.

They can all be given a special kind of pain: they can all be humiliated by the forcible tearing down of the particular structures of belief in which they were socialized (or which they pride themselves on having formed for themselves). More specifically, they can be used, and animals cannot, to gratify O'Brien's wish to "tear human minds down and put them together again in shapes of your own choosing." (CIS 177)

The most fundamental issue here is whether we can maintain our attitude of what Putnam, following James, calls "natural realism" in the teeth of the following anti-realist challenge.¹² All our experiences have a multitude of causes, so that an indefinitely large number of redescriptions are consistent with a causal account of reference and belief acquisition. If I see a cat, and trust my perceptions, these events have among their causes the matings of my distant ancestors. Most of us would say that it is a cat, and not my distant ancestors, that I see, but Rorty uses the multitude of causal antecedents of perceptual beliefs to undermine our attempt to understand our language. Rorty has respectable arguments against the correspondence theory of truth -- arguments chiefly derived from other writers such as Putnam and Donald Davidson. One cannot get outside our propositions and compare them with extra-linguistic reality. And there is no way of specifying the "facts" to which our statements correspond except by reiterating those statements themselves. Yet Putnam at least insists that

it doesn't follow that language and thought do not describe something outside themselves, ... and the belief that they do plays an essential role *within* language and thought themselves and, more important, within our lives."

For example,

there is a difference -- *a difference in what justifications of conduct make sense when viewed from within our language and thought*, and not from some impossible Archimedean point -- between regarding other people as merely a convenient intellectual devices for coping with one's own experiences and (to borrow a term from Stanley Cavell) *acknowledging* them.¹³

In attempting to decide between Rorty and Putnam, is useful to focus on self-(re)description (see Taylor, RR, 271-3). The correspondence theory of truth works particularly badly here. For, as I change my understanding and description of myself, the self understood and described changes. But it does not follow that there cannot be progress in self-understanding: it a commonplace that people deceive themselves about their motives and character, and sometimes achieve insights that enable to overcome these self-deceptions. Nor does it follow that I can describe myself just anyhow; say as King of Peru or as having realized the God-self within, without fear of being corrected by other people or an unco-operative natural environment.

Irrationalism

Rorty does not appeal to the positivistic distinction between the cognitive and the non-cognitive; his doctrines are applicable equally to scientific and to ethical argument (see CIS 54n.8). Hence he might accept the Kantian-Platonic view that ethical evaluation is a primary exercise of reason. But he in fact believes in a world where nothing is fixed, and hence there are no standards

of argument or morals immune to revision when the desire to defend some position might lead one to change them.

In short, his philosophy supports a cynical approach to the intellectual life, in which argument is a way of winning adherents to positions dictated by interest or passion. And Rorty's writings are replete with expressions denigrating rational argument in all departments of thought.

Such arguments -- logical arguments -- are all very well in their own way, and useful as expository devices, but in the end not much more than ways of getting people to change their practices without admitting that they have done so. (CIS 78)

The charge of irrationalism that I am bringing against Rorty needs some qualification. First, he offers some serious arguments. According to one of these (CIS chap. 1), truths can only be expressed in sentences, sentences are contingent historical constructions; therefore, truth is a contingent historical construction. Or, as he also puts it, "truth cannot be out there -- cannot exist independently of the human mind -- because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there" (CIS 5). But this argument is easily evaded.

One way out is to hold that sentences express statements or propositions, i.e., abstract entities that can be true or false regardless of the linguistic *mores*. Another is to affirm, without any *systematic* attempt to explain how or why, that, to say that the candidates for truth and falsehood in ethics can be brought into being by creative human effort of moral *bricolage* is not to deny that the candidates thus brought into being really possess truth-value or can be discovered to be true or false by rational means.¹⁴

Yet another way of escape is Plato's doctrine of the Forms, or its theistic restatement for which the Forms are in the mind of God. Or alternatively, one might adopt the Aristotelian doctrine that there are universals somehow "in" things, or its theistic restatement that such essences

are God's plan for the sort of thing in question. The relative merits of these responses need not concern us here, since Rorty has not taken the trouble to examine, let alone, refute any of them. These responses to Rorty are consistent with the "methodological nominalism" he takes as central to contemporary analytic philosophy (see LT 1-39)¹⁵

For *methodological* nominalism is not a dogmatic rejection of the possibility of subsistent universals, but a decision to begin by looking at language, without postulating universals unless that should prove necessary. But if the refusal to postulate universals leads to the sorts of implications Rorty draws from it, we have excellent reasons for postulating them, reasons that closely resemble some of Plato's reasons for postulating divine originals against the sophists' insistence on the relativity and malleability of language. In other words, it is possible to defend Platonism or Aristotelianism in Wittgensteinian or pragmatic terms, by showing what such doctrines might play in our lives. We need, for example, to assume that our environment is composed of entities of stable sorts, and that we ourselves form a stable sort as well, if we are to reason about our world and the sort of life we are to live within it; no further justification is either possible or necessary.

But Rorty goes beyond methodological to dogmatic, metaphysical nominalism, stating categorically "language [is] just human beings using marks and noises to get what they want" (PP 2:127).¹⁶ This move allows him to escape one horn of the dilemma only by impaling himself on the other. For statements about what language essentially is are barred by many of his statements elsewhere. And the corresponding picture of extra-linguistic reality, as not composed of any stable sorts of things, but capable of being reshaped in an indefinitely large number of ways, as our will or imagination might lead us to describe it, is strongly metaphysical as well. In any event, Rorty is

wrong when he remarks of Platonic notions that "there is no way to ... connect them with the rest of inquiry, or culture, or life" (PMN 311).

Not only does Rorty offer some serious arguments; in several places he backtracks from his aspersions on the appeals to reason characteristic of "metaphysicians,"¹⁷ and makes limited room for rational argument in his philosophy. For example, he writes:

All the traditional metaphysical distinctions can be given a respectable ironist sense by sociologizing them -- treating them as distinctions between contingently existing practices, or strategies employed within such practices, rather than between natural kinds. (CIS 83n.4)

But, judged by these standards, appeals to racial prejudice and sexual scandal about opponents are as effective as the argumentative practices taught in logic books.

A glance at Rorty's argumentative practice is also in order. His most characteristic argument is an appeal to the authority. Strings of names are in fact one of the most noticeable -- and most annoying -- features of Rorty's philosophical style. At one point he appeals to the beliefs of "most contemporary intellectuals" to support a controversial premise (CIS 3). The crux of his critique of Allan Bloom (SDA) is that Bloom has dared to reject Dewey's teaching that democracy is not just the best form of government available under present circumstances, but also the supreme principle of all thought and action. But since in each case the authorities are selected only for their agreement with Rorty, this "argument" has little if any force.

Sometimes, however, Rorty talks like a thoroughly traditional philosopher. He is prepared to demand consistency when it suits his argumentative purposes: he dismisses Marxism as "an inconsistent mixture of the pragmatism of the 'Theses on Feuerbach' with the scientism common to Marxism and positivism" (PP 2:10n.3). He is even prepared to use essentialist language to make a

rhetorical point, as when he remarks "although Heidegger was only accidentally a Nazi, Dewey was essentially a social democrat" (PP 2:19). He warns against *ad hominem* arguments and "attempts to simplify the thought of original thinkers by reducing them to moral or political attitudes." (TPS 33) He says things like "This thought is hard to live with" (CP xliii) in a way which implies that, far from being able to choose our beliefs to suit our purposes, we must pay the price of consistency and take the bitter with the sweet (see Taylor, RR 259).¹⁸ And, while agreeing with Alasdair MacIntyre that present thought is a mixture of Aristotelian and other elements, he proposes to "make [our] discourse coherent by discarding the last vestiges of [Aristotelian] ways of thinking" (PP 2:159).

Such expressions are perhaps relics of a philosophical training not entirely thrown off, though Rorty has ceased to believe in its operative assumptions. Or perhaps he is simply working within a profession that values rational argument though he heartily wishes it did not, as a lawyer might argue from the principles of a society of whose institutions he disapproves. In that case, Rorty's "use of piecemeal argumentation is perfectly compatible with his desire to diminish the *global* role of reason" (Malachowski, RR 142).

Irony

As a way of coping with the radical uncertainties his metaphysics of universal contingency generates, Rorty endorses Schumpeter's maxim: "To realize the relative validity of one's convictions, and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian" (CIS 46). In technical terms, Rorty defends liberal "ironism," and rejects liberal (or other) "metaphysics."

To stand for one's conclusions unflinchingly does not mean simply continuing to hold them. It means to hold them in such a way as to assure others that one will change them only for good reasons, and not too quickly even then. It means not changing them by way of half-conscious adaptation to circumstances, as so many people do. A man or woman of principle must also be prepared to defend his convictions by reason, and to respond intelligently to rational criticisms of them. In short, a man or woman of principle avoids the sort of behavior described by Tolstoy:

Oblonsky subscribed to and read a liberal newspaper, not extremist, but the one most people went by. ... He was firmly guided by the views that most people and the newspaper held; he only changed them wherever most people did, or rather he did not change them -- they imperceptibly changed with him of their own accord.¹⁹

I do not see how someone who accepts Rorty's philosophy can fulfill these requirements.

When Rorty distinguishes the "ironist" from his opponent the "metaphysician" he argues as if the two sorts of person represented a-historical essences, between which there is no common ground (CIS chap. 4). But he himself is prepared to talk like a "metaphysician" when it suits his argument.

Rawls and Dewey [he writes] have shown how the liberal state can ignore the difference between the moral identities of Glaucon and Thrasymachus, just as it ignores the differences between the religious identities of a Catholic archbishop and a Mormon prophet. (PP 1:192)

And the "metaphysician" can adopt many of the attitudes of the "ironist" without losing his belief in transcendent truth. He can and must acknowledge that not all people will agree with him. He should also acknowledge his own fallibility, even if he is so certain of his convictions that he is prepared to die for them. And, despite Rorty's insinuations (e.g., CIS 75), no metaphysician need

hold that his "common sense" final vocabulary is immune to revision. Socrates continues to provide a model for both moral commitment and intellectual openness.

There is also the question of the "ironist"'s relationship to others. "Ironism, as I have defined it," Rorty writes, "arises from awareness of the power of re-description. But most people do not want to be re-described" (CIS 89). "Metaphysicians" re-describe people too, but they at least offer arguments, which enable us to describe the objects of their attention "as *educated* rather than simply reprogrammed" (CIS 90). If people could be just left alone, this difference would not matter, but social conflicts sometimes require that one or both parties change if peace is to be secured. And one aim of education is to create citizens who, though they do not of course agree about all issues, are at least able to communicate with one another in rational terms. Hence the "metaphysician" would appear to have the *pragmatic* advantage -- so long as arguments supporting re-description are, in fact, available.

A fundamental paradox afflicts Rorty's war against "metaphysics" (and most other such wars). He argues that in giving up "metaphysics" we give up nothing: that as one of his admirers puts it, "what lies on the 'other side' of thought does not make any epistemological contribution to knowledge.... By ceasing to talk about it we are losing nothing at all."²⁰ But, if so, giving up "metaphysics," and adopting "irony" instead, cannot have the promised benefits either. But Rorty's invocation of "irony" makes it possible for him to evade this criticism (and any criticism whatever).²¹ If his statements are meant ironically, then perhaps it is inappropriate to take them seriously. But if it is a mistake to take Rorty seriously, then it is difficult to see on what grounds we supposed to pay attention to him at all.

Solidarity

Following Wilfrid Sellars, Rorty proposes to replace claims to objective truth with appeals to the "we-intentions" of groups of people (PP 1:21-34). As he vividly puts it, with a rare reference to human beings as such, what is central is "our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark" (CP 166). Society should be conceived as a "band of eccentrics collaborating for the purposes of mutual protection rather than a band of fellow-spirits united by a goal" (CIS 59). Moreover, science, as much as ethics, rests on solidarity rather than objectivity (PP 1:35-45). Rorty's appeal to solidarity has some unexpected implications. As Putnam points out,²² Rorty's ontology needs to include groups of people and their shared dispositions to assent or dissent from one another's statements. To use such a metaphysics as a replacement for the traditional sort "privilege[s] one story within the vast array of stories our culture has produced in just the way [he] criticize[s] other philosophers for doing."

Moreover, Rorty's framing of the opposition between solidarity and objectivity begs an important issue. He distinguishes those who give sense to their lives by "telling the story of their contribution to a community" from those who "describe themselves as standing in immediate relation to a nonhuman reality" (PP 1:21). He ignores a third possibility, that one might describe one's contribution to a community, that itself stands in a special relation to a nonhuman reality -- be it the People of Israel, the Church, the working class, the Party, or the scientific community. When it comes to justifying his preference for solidarity over objectivity, Rorty writes: "The best argument we partisans of solidarity have against the realistic partisans of objectivity is Nietzsche's argument that the Western metaphysico-epistemological way of firming up our habits simply isn't working anymore" (PP 1:33). He is not clear about whether this failure afflicts appeals to objectivity taken alone, or whether appeals to objectivity plus solidarity, of the sort he excludes by

definition, are also supposed to have been proven failures. In any event, the only support I know of for the contention that the Western philosophical tradition has failed is the endlessness of philosophical and moral debate, and the difficulty of getting people to act on even the clearest principles of justice. But in Rorty's hands such debate is as endless as it ever was, nor does he show evidence of being in possession of any especially effective way of getting people to behave decently.

Rorty draws from Davidson the notion that truth is a primitive notion, without any necessary link to the criteria by which intellectual issues are judged (PM 300; CP xxvi; see generally PP 1 Pt. II). Hence "the distinction between true and false ... is as applicable to statements like 'Yeats was a great poet' and 'Democracy is better than tyranny' as to statements like 'The earth goes around the sun'" (CIS 54n.8). We are thus left with whatever standards of truth and falsity we were employing when he began inquiry; since we cannot "step outside our language in order to compare it with something else" (CIS 75), ethnocentrism in one sense is inescapable (PP 1:203-10). This conclusion, applied to moral issues, "coincides with Wilfrid Sellars's thesis that morality is a matter of what he calls 'we-intentions,' "that the core meaning of 'immoral action' is 'the sort of thing *we* don't do'" (CIS 59; see also PP 1:200).

But the specification of *we* cannot be taken for granted. Rorty's use of *we* is no doubt intended not to report, but to invite, consensus, but that merely raises the issue, among what groups it is reasonable even to make the attempt. And there are, at least in the present world, profound obstacles to the creation of solidarities strong to replace objectivity and reasonableness as central concepts of public discourse. He frequently uses such expressions as "we ... people who have been brought up to distrust ethnocentrism" (CIS 198). He specifically refuses to speak of "we human beings" (CIS 190), a refusal that has not

prevented his being praised for his "humanism."²³ Logically speaking, he could equally well speak of "we English-speaking heterosexual white males."

Rorty's choice of solidarities is determined by the conventions of the professorate, at some distance from the power centers of American life but unable to challenge them seriously, and for that reason always tempted to play at subversion. As Nancy Fraser has put it, "there is no place in Rorty's framework for genuinely radical political discourses rooted in *oppositional* solidarities" (RR 316). Among such solidarities can be included not only Marxist and feminist social criticism, but also social criticism rooted in Christian faith.

In any event, an ethics based on solidarity must first tell us what the limits of solidarity are: whether it extends to earthworms, to Iraqis, to fetuses, to serial murderers, or to intravenous drug users. Rorty (CIS chap. 9) firmly rejects any resolution not based on the contingencies of human association. In his own words,

We figure out what practices to adopt first, and then expect our philosophers to adjust the definition of "human" or "rational" to suit. For example, we know that we should not kill a fellow human being, except in our official capacity as soldier, hangman, abortionist, or the like. So are those whom we *do* kill in these capacities -- the armies of the invading tyrant, the serial murderer, the fetus -- not human? Well in a sense yes, and in a sense no -- but defining the relevant senses is an after the fact, largely scholastic exercise. We deliberate about the justice of war, or the rightness of capital punishment or of abortion first, and worry later about the "status" of the invader or the murderer or the fetus (CIS 194-5n.6).

But "we" are in disagreement about these and other life-and-death issues, disagreement that shows no sign of disappearing or even narrowing. (But I do not know of any serious moralist who defends war or capital punishment on the ground that those killed are not human.)²⁴ But we

observe constraints toward even the worst criminals that we do not observe toward mad dogs (we give them trials, for example).» All Rorty's approach does is to block the attempt to articulate principles with whose help such disagreements can be resolved or at least talked about.²⁵ In short, Rorty endorses a conventionalist approach to ethics, for which the question, "Is this a moral society?" fails to make sense (CIS 59). An immoral action, in his view, is one that "if done by one of us, or done repeatedly by one of us, that person ceases to be one of us" (CIS 59). He concedes that, on his view, "a child found wandering in the woods, the remnant of a slaughtered nation whose temples have been razed and whose books have been burned, has no share in human dignity"(PP 1:201), though he appeals to "the tradition of *our* community" as to support the requirements of human decency in such cases (PP 1:202). But he shows Orwell as portraying the sadistic police chief O'Brien as one of us (CIS 175-85, esp. 183), especially if "we" are intellectuals. In short, the appeal to "what we don't do" accomplishes nothing.

When it comes to defending liberal democracy against its critics, Rorty's conventionalism is particularly strident:

We heirs of the Enlightenment think of enemies of liberal democracy like Nietzsche and Loyola as, to use Rawls's term, "mad." We do so because there is no way to see them as fellow citizens of our constitutional democracy, people whose life plans might, with ingenuity and good will, be fitted in with those of other citizens. ... They are crazy because the limits of sanity are set by what *we* can take seriously. PP 1:187-8)

It is hard to see why he should not defend the practice of confining dissidents within mental institutions such an attitude appears to entail.²⁶

Nor does there seem to be any possibility, on Rorty's account, that a dissident might justify himself by claiming to represent the future. For he has no plausible "story" to offer, whereby the

ambiguities and conflicts in our present conventions might yield to a better future (CIS 181-2), though he is prepared to "tell a story of progress, showing how the literalization of certain metaphors served the purpose of making possible all the good things that have recently happened" (CIS 55). As he puts it in one of his more complacent moods, "the product is *us* -- our conscience, our culture, our form of life" (CIS 55-6).

Sometimes Rorty is prepared to make the most categorical claims concerning the course of history and attitudes of future generations. "If only [literary immortality] is at stake," he writes, "then, indeed, Plato was wrong and Nabokov, Heidegger, and Derrida are right" (CIS 151). And again:

About two hundred years ago ... the French Revolution had shown that the whole vocabulary of social relations, and the whole spectrum of social institutions, could be replaced almost overnight. This precedent made utopian politics the rule rather the exception among intellectuals. Utopian politics sets aside questions about both the will of God and the nature of man and dreams of creating a hitherto unknown form of society (CIS 3)

But I find it hard to imagine a world in which Derrida was read but not Plato. And the French Revolution did not replace the whole spectrum of social institutions "almost overnight," nor did utopian politics ever become the norm.

Many critics of a Leftist persuasion have noticed Rorty's status quo conventionalism.²⁷ (This is not to say that professed conservatives are happy with his arguments either).²⁸ As Cornel West has put it,

He is unashamedly ethnocentric in that he holds that no civilization is worth choosing over the modern West. Yet his viewpoint differs from both Matthew Arnold's bourgeois humanism and John Dewey's plebeian humanism because he believes that no philosophical

case can be made for this civilization.... Rorty's neo-pragmatism is, in part, a self-conscious post-philosophical ideological project to promote the basic practices of bourgeois capitalist societies while discouraging philosophical defenses of them²⁹.

Rorty shows little interest in identifying, or attempting to overcome, the socioeconomic conditions that stand in the way of a deepened sense of solidarity, and exclude all but a tiny minority of the human race from the quest for private perfection.

David L. Hall defends Rorty against the charge of conservatism³⁰ in the following way:

For the pragmatist, personal identity is focused by a description. This description is one shaped by the linguistic resources of the community of which one is a part. Segments of a society -- minorities, social outcasts, women -- may historically have been described in manners which they themselves, upon reflection, found illegitimate. If forced by political, social, or interpersonal oppression to accept that illegitimate description, then members of these groupings experience humiliation. The pragmatist encourages the unrestrained development of new vocabularies of self-description. This is hardly conservatism.³¹

But, conservative or not, such a view permits both too much and too little to be useful in the cause of political or social change. A German who finds himself humiliated by insistence that his nation was responsible for the Holocaust might develop a "new vocabulary of self-description" including the assertion that the Holocaust never took place. And, if one is in a concentration camp, or without the means to support oneself or one's family, the ability to re-describe oneself as free and rich is not all that valuable. 3

The only sort of fundamental critique of existing institutions Rorty takes seriously is Foucault's refusal to accept the claims of any "we"(PP 2:193-8). He attempts to accommodate this sort of radicalism by distinguishing between authors of two sorts:

authors [who] ... are useful as exemplars, as illustrations of what private perfection -- a self-created autonomous human life -- can be like [and] ... authors [who] are fellow-citizens rather than exemplars. [The latter] are engaged in a shared, social effort -- the effort to make our institutions more just and less cruel. (CIS xiv)

Or, as he puts it in another place,

we [should] distinguish between books which help us become autonomous from books which help us become less cruel. ... The books which help us become less cruel can be roughly divided into (1) books which help us see the effect of social practices and institutions on others, and (2) those which help us to see the effects of our private idiosyncrasies on others. (CIS 141)

In other words, we can follow Foucault on our own time, so long as we are conservative Rawlsians for public purposes.

Rorty gives some indication of what the quest for private perfection means in practice when he advocates an ethics of "self-enlargement": one that expresses "the desire to embrace more and more possibilities, to be constantly learning, to give oneself over entirely to curiosity, to end by having envisaged all the possibilities of the past and the future" (PP 2:154). Rorty mentions three ways in which an ethics of self-enlargement could be expressed: in "sexual experimentation," in "political engagement," and in "the enrichment of language" (PP 2:154). But, for some unexplained reason, Rorty holds that the prohibition on sex with near relations belongs with commonsense requirements such as the Golden Rule, and thus "swings free of religion, science, metaphysics, and psychology" (PP 2:153).

But private experiments in living can have large public effects, including demands on public money.³² And intellectuals, particularly those involved in education, must defend

themselves against the charge of wasting collective resources, even if their experiments in living do no visible damage. The sponsors and constituents of an institution of higher education are unlikely to want to promote an "intricately textured collage of private narcissism and public pragmatism"(PP 1:510) among its faculty, nor are parents likely to want to spend large sums on subjecting their children to such influences.

There is, on Rorty's view, no common ground on which the effort to become more autonomous and the effort to become less cruel both proceed, and in terms of which conflicts between them can be resolved. He is prepared to say that it is "perfectly reasonable" for Plato to seek private perfection and for Mill to seek to serve human liberty, as if Plato were not concerned with the well-being of the political community, and Mill were not concerned with the good life for individuals (CIS 145). In Rorty's own words,

The closest we will come to joining these two quests is to see the aim of a just and free society as letting its citizens be as privatistic, "irrationalist," and aestheticist as they please, so long as they do it on their own time -- causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by the less advantaged. (CIS xiv).³³

That Rorty is here ignoring the recent social movements that have urged that "the personal is the political" (cf. Fraser RR 342) might not matter, if he had anything like a clear and defensible principle marking out the division between private and public life. But Rorty manifests a disposition to reject any ordering of either self or society that would make it possible stably to harmonize the two sorts of demands.

Philosophers have distinguished the requirements of conscience from prejudice, economic interest, and the lure of pleasure; they have also distinguished the requirements of justice from the demands of social conformity. Many writers have distinguished the deepest demands of the self

from those inclinations that, however urgent, do not touch its core, and thus may be constrained for the sake of peace and justice. But Rorty praises Freud on the ground that "he breaks down all the traditional distinctions between the higher and the lower, the essential and the accidental, the central and the peripheral" (CIS 32).

Rorty also rejects the claim that the open-mindedness valued by liberals should be prized for the usual reasons:

because, as Scripture teaches, Truth is great and will prevail [or] because, as Milton suggests, Truth will always win in a free and open encounter. ...A liberal society is one which is content to call "true" whatever the upshot of such encounters turns out to be. (CIS 52).

Thus if a liberal society decides to abolish liberal institutions, say out of fear of freedom, a liberal of Rorty's stripe is bound to endorse this result as "true."

Rorty cites with approval a remark of Judith Shklar's, that cruelty is the worst thing we do (CIS xiv, 74, 146). His discussion of George Orwell's *1984* (CIS chap. 8) dwells on the cruelty of the society ruled by Big Brother, while neglecting the systematic deceit practiced both there and in actual fascist and Stalinist societies. Freedom, Rorty almost says, is the freedom to say that two plus two equals five: once that is granted, all else follows (see CIS 176).

But sometimes Rorty attempts to go beyond an uncritical celebration of things-as-they-are. The view I am offering [he writes] says that there is such a thing as moral progress, and this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity. ... The right way to take the slogan "We have obligations to human beings as such" is as a means of reminding us to keep trying to expand our sense of "us" as far as we can. (CIS 192, 196)

«USNX»This statement would appear to imply not only the stock liberal position on persons of other colors, cultures, and modes of life, but also a pro-life position in the abortion dispute or belief in animal rights (or both) -- and in any case a serious challenge to existing practice. But how such a position could be defended within Rorty's larger scheme escapes me.³⁴ An appeal to conversation accomplishes nothing by itself: discussion can easily intensify our sense that open or concealed warfare is the only possible relationship among contending groups.

Conclusion

The most fundamental assumption of Rorty's philosophy is metaphysical despite all his avowals to the contrary -- is his endorsement of a "picture of humans-as-slightly-more-complicated-animals" (PRM 448), a picture shared, or at least not overtly challenged, by many contemporary philosophers who shun Rorty's more extreme formulations. His importance lies in his efforts to work out the implications of a thoroughly naturalized picture of humanity. In his own words,

We should try to get along without the remnant of those earlier self-images [proposed by Plato and Kant]. We should try to see what happens, if in Jean-Paul Sartre's words, "we attempt to draw the full conclusions from a consistently atheist position, a position in which such phrases as "the nature of human life" no longer distract us from the absence of a God's-eye view. (PRM 448-9)

Thus Rorty replies to Putnam's charge of decadence not with a denial but with a *tu quoque*: "as far as decadence goes, there is little to choose between us" (PRM 452n.15).

What Rorty is getting at can be gleaned from an examination of one of Putnam's recent discussions of reference.³⁵ There Putnam supports the "the Aristotelian insight that objects have

structure," but only "provided we remember that what counts as the structure of something is relative to the ways we interact with it" and consequently to our point of view (including our purposes.

But different people have different purposes, and consequently different points of view. And it is central to Putnam's arguments in many places that we can, if we will, divide up the universe in an infinitely large number of ways.³⁶ So he hastens to say that "not all points of view are reasonable, and not all rational points of view are sufficiently important to our lives ... for us to feel that what is necessary for someone who holds them to know about Xs justifies such a grand name as 'the nature of Xs.'"

The issue immediately arises, what points of view are reasonable and, if reasonable, important. It is Rorty's contention that we have no way of doing so, in the absence either of a unmediated contact with the world, of a sort Aristotle but not Putnam believes in, or of a humanly attainable God's-eye point of view from which other perspectives can be definitively ranked. We are then left with the reassertion of our own ethnocentric biases, and the ungrounded hope that they will prevail in the struggle for existence.

In short, even though Rorty's larger positions and arguments are unacceptable, he remains of importance insofar as he brings out the nihilism latent in other philosophers, or at least challenges them to show how they avoid his conclusions. The question for the naturalistic philosopher is always the same: how to avoid the collapse of the normative, and the consequent loss of the ability either to criticize any set of practices, however brutal, or to defend any set of practices, however just and necessary.

NOTES

¹ René Acrilla ("Education, Conversation, and Narrative," *Educational Theory*, 40 [Winter, 1990], 35-44) takes Rorty's work as defining the situation in which contemporary philosophers of education must work. John Willinsky cites Rorty (along with Salman Rushdie), as showing how "the postmodern mix of feminism, new historicism, deconstruction, and poststructuralism has the potential to expand the English curriculum until it spills happily over into other subject areas in a flow of cultural studies." (*The Triumph of Literacy* (New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1991), p. 190.) Carol Nicholson uses Rorty's thought to advance a "rainbow coalition of postmodernists, feminists, and educators who are committed to the task of making sure that no serious voices are left out of the great conversation that shapes our curriculum and our civilization." ("Postmodernism, Feminism, and Education," *Educational Theory* 39 [Summer, 1989], 204.) C. A. Bowers and David J. Flinders invoke his ideas against "Cartesian" ways of thinking about education, including the belief that "nonattendance ... can be objectively represented in thought." (*Responsive Teaching* [New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1990], pp. 9, 12.) Cleo H. Cherryholmes hails him as an apostle of something called "critical pragmatism," whose only well-defined feature is that it does not take the purposes of existing society as givens. *Power and Criticism* [New York: Teachers College Press, Columbia University, 1988], pp. 151, 171, 177, 179-80, 183-4.) Rorty's response to such uses of his thought has been ambivalent; see D, TC, and (on the broader political issues) TT.

² Konstantin Kolenda, *Rorty's Humanistic Pragmatism* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1990), p. 12, quoting CIS 22.

³ Prado, *The Limits of Pragmatism* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1987), pp. 28-9.

⁴ Stout, *Ethics After Babel* (Boston: Beacon, 1988), p. 231. This statement is perhaps not quite fair to MacIntyre.

⁵If this "all things being equal" clause means, "leaving aside mistakes, and considerations, such as power relations, irrelevant to truth," Rorty's formulation is vacuous.

⁶ To use the language I adopted in my *Relativism, Nihilism, and God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), p. 6.

⁷ See Putman, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 216.

⁸For a somewhat more nuanced account of relativism, that still does not grasp the essential point, see PP 1:23.

⁹ See my *Relativism*, esp. chap. 4.

¹⁰ The article cited was written before the election of President Clinton, and hence also before that of younger Bush.

¹¹For a more accurate discussion of the religion of the "baby boomers," the generational cohort closest to Rorty's outlook, see Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers* (N.p.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994). Of this group, 42% are "dropouts" from organized religion, 96% believe in God, and 70% desire a return to stricter moral standards. On Rorty's premises, though not on mine, this sort of sociological investigation is crucial.

¹² See Hilary Putnam's discussion of this issue in *Words and Life*, James Conant ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 284-7.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 297, 299.

¹⁴Stout, *Babel*, p. 77.

¹⁵ Since I am severely critical of Rorty, I should say that he is a first-rate historian of recent philosophy, particularly skilled at discovering convergences between apparently disparate philosophers, and digging up issues buried in jargon or "rigor business."

¹⁶David L. Hall asserts: "Rorty's nominalism is not based on the conviction that universals do not exist, or that there are no abstract entities, or that there are no such things as nonindividuals. ...His is a linguistic nominalism which makes at least the following important claims: (1) there are no nonlinguistic entities... (2) language, as the repository of all descriptions, is contingent upon use, and (3) "meaning" is what is produced by using words in familiar manners." *Richard Rorty* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), p. 90. These seem like strong metaphysical claims to me.

¹⁷Quotation marks indicate Rorty's special sense of the word *metaphysics* and *metaphysician* (likewise *ironist*).

¹⁸A flat-footed argument of this sort of may be found in Rorty's admirer Kolenda: "There cannot be such a thing as a paradigm human being. The attempts to subordinate human reality to some necessary pattern, biologically, theologically, or morally prestructured, *fly in the face of facts*." *Pragmatism*, p. 15; emphasis supplied. If these facts are facts of human nature (and what other sort of facts might they be?) this argument undermines itself.

¹⁹Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, Joel Carmichael trans. (New York: Bantam, 1970), p. 7.

²⁰ Kolenda, *Pragmatism*, p. 5.

²¹I am here indebted to a conversation with my colleague Fr. Nicholas Ingham, O.P.

²² Putnam, *Words*, pp. 342-46; quotation, p. 349.

²³ Kolenda, *Pragmatism*, pp. 111f. Kolenda's justification for speaking of Rorty's humanism is as follows: "Rorty's humanistic pragmatism is moved by the hope that humanity can keep bringing into being values that will help us cope with life intelligently and effectively" (ibid, p. 115). I see no grounds in Rorty's writings for speaking of "humanity" here.

²⁴John Kleinig has mentioned the possibility that "certain kinds of sociopaths ... might be thought to lack some essential human abilities or capacities [and] might, therefore, be considered on a moral par with animals." *Valuing Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 208.

²⁵ As in my book *The Ethics of Homicide* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press 1978; paperback ed., Notre Dame Notre Dame University Press, 1990), where I invoke human solidarity without isolating it from rational scrutiny.

²⁶Though in fairness to Rorty, he also says: "We do not conclude that Nietzsche and Loyola are crazy because they hold unusual views on certain 'fundamental' topics; rather we conclude this only after extensive attempts at an exchange of political views have made us realize that we are not going to get anywhere. ... Furthermore, such a conclusion is restricted to politics." PP 1:191 & n.42.

²⁷E.g., Richard J. Bernstein, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward," *Political Theory* 13 (November, 1987), 538-563; William E. Connolly, "Mirror of America," *Raritan* 3 (1983-4), 124-35.

²⁸ Richard John Neuhaus, "Josting Richard Rorty," *First Things*, no. 8 (December, 1990): 14-24.

²⁹"The Politics of American Neo-Pragmatism," p. 267.

³⁰ The word *charge* reflects the tone of the literature. Some philosophers are openly conservative in their outlook, and whatever other objections we may have to their positions, it is no refutation to point out the fact that they are such.

³¹ *Richard Rorty*, p. 193. Rorty himself says: "a human being, for moral purposes, is largely a matter of how he or she describes himself or herself." "Feminism and Pragmatism," *Michigan Quarterly Review* (spring, 1991): 244, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 195. I would like to know what sort of limitations this word *largely* implies.

³² See my article, "AIDS and the L-Word," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 5 (April, 1991): 137-47.

³³ The "partition position" suggested here is not Rorty's only approach to the question of relating the Romantic impulse to self-creation with the pragmatic demand for useful ideas. The "invisible hand" view assumes that what is good for poets is good for everybody else, and the "sublimity or decency" view demands a choice between social justice and artistic creation. (See Fraser, RR 306-13.) But the first of these positions is naive, and the second position leaves the crucial question unresolved.

³⁴ Kolenda (*Pragmatism*, p. 36) suggests a possible ground for extending solidarity at least to all (normal, adult) human beings: "If anything deserves respect, it is the human struggle to give meaning to its own existence. The self-creation of human beings must be seen as something *important*, different from all other events going on around us." This statement cannot be squared with Rorty's repeated denunciations of giving anything, and in particular any conception of human nature, a privileged intellectual position.

³⁵ Putnam "Aristotle after Wittgenstein," *Words*, chap, 3; quotations p. 78.

³⁶ Consider the theorem argued for in the Appendix to Putnam, *Representation and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1988): "Every ordinary open system is a realization of every finite automaton" (p. 121).