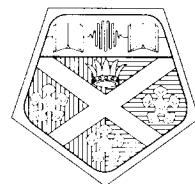


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READING, RIGHTING AND RORTY

by

Earl R Smith II

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Introduction

Every once in a while a thinker comes along who seems to serve a role in excess of the exposition of a perspective - a writer who induces responses which 1) demonstrates the utility and limits of that perspective and 2) yields information about his readers - their strengths and weaknesses - the tenor of their courage and intellectual integrity. Certainly this is true, for example, of Nietzsche and Emerson. It is also true, I am going to argue, of Richard Rorty.

Rorty is, to be sure, much less obtuse than Nietzsche. His writings are, for the most part, very straight forward (Rorty has to date, for example, not produced a *Zarathustra*) and he tends, only very infrequently, to 'start off left in order to get right'. Like both Nietzsche and Emerson, Rorty's work is subject to a great deal of vandalism - produces responses which, when laid next to Rorty's relevant texts, causes, in some cases, bemusement and, in others, wonder at what appears to be a completely self-serving lack of intellectual integrity. His work also seems to stimulate a good deal of 'soul searching' among some of his readers. His tendency, which he shares with the other two authors, to declare openly 'who he is', the 'world he lives in' and to openly discuss his own beliefs and prejudices, seems to induce a range of responses from open derision to simple recognition (human to human). It is those responses that I would like to discuss in this paper.

It seems to me that Rorty's writing produces a crowd when read. There is, of course, the text and Rorty. These I take to be separate. Rorty, unlike many writers, insinuates himself openly into the process of reading. He seems to believe that it is important that we understand something of the author - his context, image of self and personality - as well as read the words that he has written. He draws frequently on his own experience and belief structure in order to provide examples to highlight points which he is trying to make. Rorty claims as Rorty's the words which Rorty has written. He draws from his personal and contingent experience and openly admits to doing so.

In addition, Rorty seems to tease out, at minimum, a couplet on the other side of the reading experience. There is the reader who, using a particular vocabulary, absorbs the words that Rorty has written. But, beyond that presence, there seems to rise up, in reactions which range from bemusement to rage, a whole spectrum of 'selves' within each reader. Rorty seems to release these shades. The responses that this release generates is, at least to me, almost as interesting as, and inseparable from, Rorty's writings.

Things get more complicated, and the resulting crowd larger, when responses to Rorty are tendered in print. Many of these responses are obviously not directed toward Rorty or his work, but towards the peers of the respondent. As a result, you can get some very schizophrenic papers in which, after the obligatory nod towards Rorty, and the equally obligatory production and knocking down of a selected range of straw men, the respondent turns to the 'real' agenda and rolls out a shopworn mass of ideological mumbo jumbo which serves as the 'blamey stone' in some particular group's version of a scent recognition ritual. In these cases, I am most often left with the feeling that I have witnessed a public masturbation rather than a response to Rorty. The exercise of response seems to be designed more to isolate and defend the assumed purity of the respondent's 'community' from the polluting implications of Rorty's thinking than as a response to Rorty's invitation to discuss.

Others seem to respond to Rorty in quite a different way. For them, he seems to bring up issues that intrigue and, in some cases, result in substantial rethinkings. Again, this process seems to involve more than just the reading of words which Rorty has written - the individual reader, in all complexity, seems to become involved in the 'conversation' which results. Along this line, Rorty seems to induce real, and in some cases, extended and continuing dialogues.

Of course, there are variations on these two basic reactions to Rorty across the spectrums of a hundred dimensions and, as an observer (one among many) of these virtual ping-pong matches (some with only one and others with many returns) I claim nothing but my own prejudices as guides for selection among them. Nevertheless, I think that these are interesting aspects of the literature which is generating in response to Rorty; particularly that writing that seems intent on *righting* Rorty.

I want to begin my look at some of this literature by describing in some extended detail a group of concepts which I take to be central to Rorty's thinking. In an attempt at coherency, I have drawn most of the materials from *Contingency, irony and solidarity*.¹ References to this work included in this paper will be referred to as (CI&S) and inserted in the text.

¹ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

Private and Public sides

I want to begin my discussion of what I think Rorty is up to in *Contingency, irony and solidarity* with a consideration of what he means by the 'public' and the 'private' in humans. He makes the distinction between the *private world of self-perfection* and the *public world of human solidarity*. Both, for Rorty, are human creations. For individuals who tend to see humans as unitary, internally commensurable beings (particularly those who translate the idea of commensurability into one of common and eternal human essence such as 'soul' or 'humanity'), this division can present real problems. Rorty, to them, will appear unintelligible or irrational - which is exactly what he is within such a perspective. But, the exercise within this section of the paper is to attempt to see Rorty (and by that, Rorty's thinking) through Rorty's eyes and in terms of Rorty's vocabulary.

Rorty sees the efforts of writers working in one or the other - the public and private 'worlds' - developing vocabularies which have proven useful in either - as significant contributions to the growth in human understanding. But a third, less desirable and far less productive, type of writer - the one who tries to unite the first two types under a single framework - is one which Rorty thinks we are better off without.

Efforts to fuse these two aspects of humans under one overarching theory has been and, in some schools continues to be, a major and rather unproductive tradition within Western philosophy. Such efforts began to gather momentum with Plato and his attempts to provide answers to questions like, 'Why would it be in the interest of any individual to be just?' 'Why should one avoid being cruel?' Rorty sees evidence of similar efforts in the Christian dogma that salvation and 'perfect self-realization' can be found through service to others. In both these cases (the one metaphysical and the other theological), there is an attempt to unite a sense of striving for personal perfection with a sense of solidarity with a broad human community (ideally 'mankind'). Both attempts are grounded on the assumption that there is such a thing as a common human nature (an essence sometimes called the self) and a world which is really out there (reality).

Such writers may be engaged in a genuine project. More often they seem to be a partisan of one camp applying internal and self-serving criteria to writings of the other in order to 'prove' error: in other words something approaching a 'political hack'. Rorty is clear about the nature of the problem which the third type of writer finds so fascinating. It is, in his thinking, a 'made up' problem

which is best left 'un-made up' - for it is a problem seen where, in his judgement, no problem exists.

It would be easy to take this to mean that a term like 'political hack' would be pejorative for Rorty - and this would be a mistake. Rorty's use of language in this area presents difficulties for those who insist on interpreting his words in their own, rather than his, frame of reference. As it will become clear later, Rorty sees a problem not in an individual being a political hack - but in having confused political 'hack-dom' with 'god-dom'.

In an attempt to show how, for him, various writers divide into his two basic categories of 'private' and 'public', Rorty spends a good deal of time demonstrating the relevance of some writers to one area; while also showing how their ideas are non-sequiturs or non-productive in the other. He makes a distinction between 'exemplars' (or those individuals who can serve as sources of inspiration in our efforts towards private perfection) and 'fellow citizens' (those providing guidance in our efforts to develop a less cruel and more just society). Rorty sees no need to evaluate these two types of writers on the same set of criteria - in fact, he suggests that such efforts are completely unproductive. He says, for example:

'Authors like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Proust, Heidegger, and Nabokov are useful as exemplars, as illustrations of what private perfection - a self-created, autonomous, human life - can be like. Authors such as Marx, Mill, Dewey, Habermas, and Rawls are fellow citizens rather than exemplars. They are engaged in a shared, social effort - the effort to make our institutions and practices more just and less cruel. We shall only think of these two kinds of writers as *opposed* if we think that a more comprehensive philosophical outlook would let us hold self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity, in a single vision.' (CI&S, p. xiv)

Lest we jump to the conclusion that Rorty is just segregating writers into categories, (as, for example, traditional modernist dogma segregates science, philosophy and poetry into separate disciplines) it is important here to affirm his underlying belief - and that is that the attraction of these writers and their utility to Western thought reflects needs in the two worlds which we all inhabit - the public and the private. Rorty makes the distinctions as he does because he sees such writers as providing more useful insights - more helpful ideas - in one or the other of these two sides of the human experience. He clearly states his conclusion about the nature of the relationship between these two worlds (and the incommensurability of their vocabularies) when he writes:

'... there is no way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory. The vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to

argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange.' (CI&S, p. xiv)

Another way to see this separation (an incommensurable separation, as Rorty contends) is in a piece by Jacob Boehme:

'For according to the outward man, we are in this world, and according to the inward man, we are in the inward world ... Since then we are generated out of both worlds, we speak in two languages, and we must be understood also by two languages.'²

The tension which exists between these two 'worlds' is one which Rorty sees as unavoidable and efforts to force them together as a simple waste of time. Furthermore, he sees great benefits flowing from the acceptance and even celebration of this tension. Here, you encounter a decision typical of Rorty's thinking (and, I need to add, a wide range of thinkers from Nietzsche and Emerson onward) when it comes to a certain type of traditional philosophical problem. It is Rorty's intention to point out the benefits of dissolving or avoiding these problems rather than attempting solutions. He is essentially saying - this is a 'dry hole', let's move on to more fertile ground:

'If we could bring ourselves to accept the fact that no theory about the nature of Man or Society or Rationality, or anything else, is going to synthesize Nietzsche with Marx, or Heidegger with Habermas, we could begin to think of the relation between writers on autonomy and writers on justice as being like the relation between two kinds of tools - as little in need of synthesis as are paintbrushes and theory. One sort of writer lets us realize that the social virtues are not the only virtues, that some people have actually succeeded in re-creating themselves. We thereby become aware of our own half-articulate need to become a new person, one whom we as yet lack words to describe. The other sort reminds us of the failure of our institutions and practices to live up to the convictions to which we are already committed by the public, shared vocabulary we use in daily life. The one tells us that we need not speak only the language of the tribe, that we may find our own words, that we may have a responsibility to ourselves to find them. The other tells us that that is not the only one we have. Both are right, but there is no way to make both speak a single language.' (CI&S, p. xiv)

So here, in this paragraph, is an idea which is central to Rorty's thesis in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. He is, in a way, issuing an invitation - a proposal that we embark on an experiment. He is asking us to 'try thinking of it this way' - to suspend the efforts 'to hold all the sides of our life in a single vision, to describe them with a single vocabulary' and see what happens. The rest of the book, as Rorty clearly says:

² Cited in Robert Bly, *The Light Around The Body*. (London: Rapp & Whiting, 1968), p. 47.

'... tries to show how things look if we drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and private, and are content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable.' (CI&S, p. xv)

Final Vocabulary

Rorty uses the term 'final vocabulary' to describe the words that humans carry around to 'justify their actions, their beliefs and their lives'. The words in this 'final vocabulary' are final in the sense that, if challenged, the user has no non-circular defense - being limited to restatement in argument or recourse to belligerence or force. In a very fundamental way, these words exist at the limits of language for the individual using them.

It is important here to hold clearly in focus Rorty's acceptance of the inevitable effects of reflexive analysis. The same type of effects that have 'logically' undermined, from within, modernist pretensions of 'truth' and 'reality' and have, thus, precipitated the postmodernist perspective, find a comfortable and central place in Rorty's thinking about human beings. He not only accepts as unavoidable that any possible final vocabulary will, by its very nature, have to resort in the final instance to 'circular' justifications, but also contends that the recognition and acceptance of this inherent and completely contingent necessity is the doorway through which humans might move in order to reach a state which Rorty calls 'irony'.

Rorty suggests that an individual's final vocabulary divides into two general areas. The first, which I will call the 'motherhood and apple pie section', is populated with general terms of flexible meaning (true, good, interesting, beautiful, justified, wonderful, evil, bad and so forth). These types of terms tend to carry relatively abstract value loadings and serve as a kind of background 'wall paper' for an individual's image of self and world. Their meaning is 'thin' in that they are defined in very general terms and are quite often found, with minor variations, in all cultures. However, they are abstract, non-weight-bearing components of a given final vocabulary.

The second, more parochial, section of an individual's final vocabulary (which I will call the, 'Gee, aren't we grand' section) is made up of more culturally specific terms which are designed to carry positive value loadings and the primary weight of an individual's image of self and world. These might be terms such as British, Scottish, European, liberal, democratic, feminist, professor, scholar, and so forth. This second list is by far the more extensive and finely textured. Seen from one way, these are the terms which define the

nature of any individual's bigotry - the road map to his prejudice and presumption. From another way, these terms, and indeed the whole final vocabulary, can be seen as a definition of the limits of an individual. From a third perspective, this final vocabulary is an item to be compared with the final vocabularies of others in a process which creates the idea of a "we" - the process of the formation of "solidarity" with other beings. All of these perspectives are helpful, in one way or another, in following Rorty's analysis.

It is critical to grasp the idea of final vocabulary as Rorty's conceives it, not as it would seem according to traditional, modernist dogma. Rorty is not contending that, for instance, there is one final vocabulary that more accurately reflects 'reality' or 'truth' - in fact, he would contend that there is no absolute standard by which to rank final vocabularies (you get a C+, but your friend there is a definite A-), except from within the 'pretension to god-hood' perspective of the modernist. And that pretence is precisely what Rorty contends that we would be better off doing without.

Irony

A third idea which Rorty employs in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* is that of irony. Rorty's use of the term is not limited to the everyday usage such as "That's ironic." or "Can't you see the irony in the situation?" Neither is 'irony' a form of transgression.

'In my use, it [irony] is not [a form of transgression]. The kind of irony I have in mind doesn't care about transgressing, because it doesn't think that there is anything to transgress. It is just a sort of attitude, the way you feel about yourself, a form of life.'³ (bracketed additions are mine)

For Rorty, then, irony is a state of mind or, perhaps better, a way of seeing, and, in this light, Rorty defines 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, that it is in touch with a power not herself.' (CI&S, p. 73)

³ Giovanna Borradori, *The American Philosopher: Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, and Kuhn*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) p. 115.

Here, it seems to me, Rorty is saying that an ironist is simply one who, having discovered that there are final vocabularies other than the one she grew up with, has further decided that this realization should be the basis for a radical questioning of the presumption to primacy of her own final vocabulary. Here Rorty is separating out the 'ironist' from the bigot, the fascist, the racist, the academic and the nationalist - for each bounded condition, under the influence of irony, gives way to a wider, rather than narrower, final vocabulary. Irony, in Rorty's terms, signals a journey out. For him, each of the types (the bigot, fascist, racist, academic and nationalist - plus, I would hasten to add, a vast variety of other types) face the clear choice between claiming primacy for their particular final vocabulary or recognizing the essentially contingent nature of it. The first choice follows the modernist tradition and all that it implies while the second begins the journey which Rorty is describing in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*.

Having said that, it is important to say exactly what 'journey out' is being referred to. The temptation, enforced by Western philosophical tradition, would be to think of 'out' as increasingly wider theories and vocabularies - meta-narratives - until the whole of humanity is subsumed under one great theory or meta-narrative. But, for reasons which will become clear later, this is not the case. For now, Rorty's own statement will have to suffice:

'Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old.' (CI&S, p. 73)

This process of 'playing the new off against the old' brings Rorty's ironist to a very important conclusion. She realizes that 'anything, literally anything, can be made to look good or bad or useful or useless (or according to any term in any final vocabulary) by simply being redescribed'. By such a process, the ironist reaches Sartre's 'meta-stable' position. In that position, the ironist is never able to take her own final vocabulary as a serious reflection of 'truth' or 'reality' in any sense common to, for instance, the metaphysician or theologian. She will recognize, further, that her own final vocabulary is completely contingent and subject to change. From this point of view, she sees not only her 'self' but her 'community' as contingent; spatio-temporally defined by chance rather than by any manifest destiny.

Having defined 'irony', Rorty then proceeds to define it's opposite; what he terms common sense. It is the implications of this common sense that interest Rorty and he touches on one major implication of the perspective when he writes:

'... For that is the watchword of those who unselfconsciously describe everything important in terms of the final vocabulary to which they and those around them are habituated. To be commonsensical is to take for granted that statements formulated in that final vocabulary suffice to describe and judge the beliefs, actions and lives of those who employ alternative final vocabularies.' (CI&S, p. 74)

Under such a definition one would find all schemes rooted in a theory of 'manifest destiny' no matter how attenuated that presumption had become. In a very fundamental way, common sense is seen as an assumption of certainty under circumstances in which certainty is only sustainable by a recourse to provincialism, brutish behaviour or, in extreme cases, force. It would be easy, in this position, to conclude that Rorty is suggesting a critical reaction to those who mark their lives in a provincial way, but this would be a mistake - for this is clearly not his intention at all. Rorty is not making a distinction between those who are provincial (for Rorty is convinced that we are all unavoidably provincial) and those who are not (a type of individual which, for Rorty, cannot possibly exist) - but, between those who recognize their final vocabularies as provincial and those who do not.

What is at issue, then, is not that provinciality but awareness of the unavoidable character of it and the implications which it holds for the ironist - and, of course, the implications of the lack of this awareness for the metaphysician or theologian. Rorty's problem is not so much with 'provincial putz-dom' in general, but, with a particular and pretentious form of 'provincial putz-dom' that attempts to elevate it's own final vocabulary to the level of 'certainty' or 'a more accurate description of reality'.

The two basic ideas (that of the distinction between the private and public worlds in each individual and the concept of an individual's final vocabulary) are then used to draw a sharp distinction between the metaphysician (as a representative of modernist perspective) and the ironist:

'... the metaphysician is someone who takes the question "What is the intrinsic nature of (e.g., justice, science, knowledge, Being, faith, morality, philosophy)?" at face value. He assumes that the presence of a term in his own final vocabulary ensures that it refers to something which has a real essence. The metaphysician is still attached to common sense, in that he does not question the platitudes which encapsulate the use of a given final vocabulary, and in particular the platitude which says there is a single permanent reality to be found behind the many temporary

appearances. He does not redescribe but, rather, analyzes old descriptions with the help of other old descriptions.'

The ironist, by contrast, is a nominalist and a historicist. She thinks nothing has an intrinsic nature, a real essence. So she thinks that the occurrence of a term like just or scientific or rational in the final vocabulary of the day is no reason to think that Socratic inquiry into the essence of justice or science or rationality will take one much beyond the language games of one's time. (CI&S, p. 74)

Contingency

1) ... and language: Central to Rorty's discussion of the contingency of language is his analysis of the nature of 'truth' and 'reality'. He begins with language because Rorty feels that it is vital to be clear about exactly what is being contended when these terms are used. In this initial discussion of contingency, he contrast two perspectives; one the primarily modernist perspective that there is a 'real world' and that it contains 'truth' to be discovered and the second, far older and far more widely held perspective that 'truth' and 'reality' are human manufactures.

Rorty identifies the notion of 'truth', as well as that of the 'real world' being 'out there', as:

'... a legacy of an age in which the world was seen as the creation of a being who had a language of his own.' (CI&S, p. 5)

This notion has been translated into the idea that there is an underlying 'logic' to the world (the residual logic of the language of the creator being) which it is the task of humans to discover and understand; and that a language can be seen in terms of being more or less adequate for that discovery. Such a perspective has led to the tendency to see reality as an array of self-subsistent facts which permit the capitalizing of the word 'truth' and its identification of the idea with God or God's project. Such tendencies lead, of course, to human professions of the 'special understandings' under which all sorts of barbarism and inhumanities have been and continue to be committed - the eternally recurring version of 'kill a commie for Christ', the fundamentalist Moslem attitude towards the slaughter of 'infidels', ethnic cleansing, fascism, communism, imperialism, nationalism, socialism, (all one form or another of the 'final solution') or any of a vast range of 'justifications' under which cruelty is perpetrated in the name of an absolute or ideal.

Rorty is specifically not interested in declaring ‘false’ or ‘inaccurate’ any of these many ‘extreme prejudices’. To do so would, for Rorty, be a pretence to variations of the same claims that he is trying to induce us to give up. In fact, he strictly and specifically avoids the kind of ‘catty’ criticism which so often passes as ‘thinking’ in these areas. He does not see his work as a ‘polemic against’, but a process of ‘advocacy for.’ Rorty is very explicit about this and goes to very great lengths to make it clear. For example:

‘... I am not going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace. Instead, I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favor look attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics.’ (CI&S, p. 9)

Rorty then goes on to apply the idea that any individual’s final vocabulary is, by its very nature, spatio-temporally contingent through and through, to two concepts frequently at the core of modernist Western philosophy - ‘truth’ and ‘reality’. From his perspective, as indeed from the perspective of major lines of Western philosophical thinking extending back over two hundred years, ‘truth’ is made rather than discovered. In taking this position Rorty is explicitly discarding (or, far more properly, explicitly accepting the two centuries old discarding of) the notion that there is a ‘truth’ out there in the world which is discovered by humans using language. He traces the primary emergence of this perspective in Western thinking (that truth is made rather than discovered) to the period of the French Revolution which, he maintains, had clearly demonstrated that an entire vocabulary of social relations, a whole spectrum of social institutions, and a supposedly eternal set of definitions such as ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ could be replaced by human events; and in a completeness and shortness of time that was breathtaking.

Under Rorty’s reading of events surrounding and immediately following the French Revolution, the demonstrated possibility of wholesale replacement of the “old” with a “new” of recent human manufacture opened up the possibility of a new way (new, of course, mostly only to Western Europeans) of approaching the issues of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’. Principally, it opened up the possibility that a ‘truth’, which was made rather than found, could form the basis of a form of Utopian politics which would set aside (consider unproductive of reflection) questions about both the ‘will of God’ and the ‘nature of man and the real world’. Thinkers began to realize that the possibilities which humans faced were neither severely proscribed by an embedded language nor forced into increasingly narrow channels by some preordained destiny. As a result, the nature of the relationship between an

individual thinker and the product of his thinking became radically different - or, at least, potentially so. With the introduction of the idea that truth was made rather than found came the realization that such efforts could productively concentrate on the creation of hitherto unknown forms of society which would improve the human condition in ways which the 'old' way demonstratively could not.

One of the major efforts by Western philosophers to extend this idea was mounted by the German idealists who sought to put science and its activities in a broader perspective - as just one human activity among others. Their attack was focused on (or, perhaps better, caused by) the presumption of science to a privileged place among human activity - as a purveyor and sole arbiter of 'the truth' - a describer of the 'real world which is out there'. They accepted the premise that humans make truth rather than find it. In the process they sought to define science as just another form of human activity. But, as Rorty points out, the German idealists' efforts created a problem which was easily as big as the one that they wanted to solve:

'German idealism, however, was a short-lived and unsatisfactory compromise. For Kant and Hegel went only halfway in their repudiation of the idea that truth is "out there." They were willing to view the world of empirical science as a made world - to see matter as constructed by mind, or as consisting in mind insufficiently conscious of its own mental character. But they persisted in seeing mind, spirit, the depths of the human self, as having an intrinsic nature - one which could be known by a kind of non empirical super science called philosophy. This meant that only half of truth - the bottom, scientific half - was made. Higher truth, the truth about mind, the province of philosophy, was still a matter of discovery rather than creation.' (CI&S, p. 4)

Rorty correctly identifies the hypocrisy in this position and declares, quite openly and in plain language, his intention to follow the line of critics of the German idealists and seek a way to extend their insights over the entire range of human activities:

'What was needed, and what the idealists were unable to envisage, was a repudiation of the very idea of anything - mind or matter, self or world - having an intrinsic nature to be expressed or represented. For the idealists confused the idea that nothing has such a nature with the idea that space and time are unreal, that human beings cause the spatio-temporal world to exist.' (CI&S, p. 4)

There is another, related, line of thought which Rorty interweaves closely with this one. What is at issue here is not just the question of whether language is 'that way in which humans represent the world that is out there' (although this 'fitting the world' perspective is the most frequently encountered one) but also

whether 'language' might be, in some way, a reflection of the inner essence of the human (self) as it is in relation to the 'world out there'. This second major strand in Rorty's discussion of the contingency of language confronts the modernists' assumption of the existence of essences - the existence of a 'world out there' and a 'self in here' both of which are (at least in part) eternal and predetermined independent of contingency. These presumptions form a central part of the foundations of the modernist approach to the consideration of human experience and the possibility (and nature) of knowledge. Rorty suggests that we are better off without this assumption of essences and marks the principal emergence of this view:

'At about the same time [as the German idealists were writing], the Romantic poets were showing what happens when art is thought of no longer as imitation but, rather, as the artist's *self-creation*. The poets claimed for art the place in culture traditionally held by religion and philosophy, the place which the Enlightenment had claimed for science. The precedent the Romantics set lent initial plausibility to their claim. The actual role of novels, poems, plays, paintings, statues, and buildings in the social movements of the last century and a half has given it still greater plausibility.' (CI&S, p. 3) (italics and bracketed comments are mine)

Rorty sees these two currents flowing together and providing a new, more useful approach to the issues of truth and reality:

'By now these two tendencies [seeing truth as made rather than as being discovered and seeing art as self-creation rather than representation of reality] have joined forces and have achieved cultural hegemony. For most contemporary intellectuals, questions of ends as opposed to means - questions about how to give a sense to one's own life or that of one's community - are questions for art or politics, or both, rather than for religion, philosophy, or science.' (CI&S, p. 3) (Bracketed additions are mine)

Rorty discusses, in the last half of his chapter on the contingency of language, some of the implications of such a hegemony. He makes clear that he is asking us to give up the view that the primary role (or, in fact, any part of the role) or function of language is 'fitting the world' or 'expressing the real nature of the self'. He goes to great pains to specify exactly what he is and is not contending. He is, for instance, not contending that the 'world is not out there' - this question Rorty feels is unproductive of reflection. He makes a distinction between this contention and the contention that 'truth is out there'. For Rorty, truth is not out there and he is, again, very specific about what that contention does and does not entail:

‘... To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations.’ (CI&S, p. 4)

‘Truth cannot be out there - cannot exist independently of the human mind - because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is 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 human beings - cannot.’ (CI&S, p. 5)

‘To say that there is no such thing as intrinsic nature is not to say that the intrinsic nature of reality has turned out, surprisingly enough, to be extrinsic. It is to say that the term “intrinsic nature” is one which it would pay us not to use, an expression which has caused more trouble than it has been worth. To say that we should drop the idea of truth as out there waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have discovered that, out there, there is no truth.’ (CI&S, p. 7)

Rorty wants us to consider the implications of this understanding. He wants us to be able to understand the implications of the distinction between the claim that the ‘world is out there’ and that ‘truth is out there’. The first he describes as contending that ... “most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states”. The second statement contends that truth, as a product of language, is somehow the result of a ‘reality’ which conveniently parcels itself into sentence shaped segments called ‘truths’ or ‘facts’ and which just happen to fit the currently fashionable vocabulary of a segment of Western academic elite. Rorty accepts the first (although he considers it a philosophically uninteresting contention) and discards the second. In the latter, he finds a variation of the ‘there is twice good news’ view common in theology (the first is that there is only one God, and second - He has chosen us!!!!) - a way of saying that there is only one reality and our language - as an early form of an eventual ur-language - just happens to anticipate it.

Rorty then moves on to the question of ‘criteria’ and the role of this concept in the grounding of language:

‘The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only other human beings can do that. The realization that the world does not tell us what language games to play should not, however, lead us to say that a decision about which to play is arbitrary, nor to say that it is the expression of something deep within us. The moral is not that objective criteria for choice of vocabulary are to be replaced with subjective criteria, reason with will or feeling. It is rather that the notions of criteria and choice (including that of “arbitrary” choice) are no longer in point when it comes to changes from one language game to another.

The temptation to look for criteria is a species of the more general temptation to think of the world, or the human self, as possessing an intrinsic nature, an essence.

That is, it is the result of the temptation to privilege some one among the many languages in which we habitually describe the world or ourselves. As long as we think that there is some relation called "fitting the world" or "expressing the real nature of the self" which can be possessed or lacked by vocabularies-as-wholes, we shall continue the traditional philosophical search for a criterion to tell us which vocabularies have this desirable feature. But if we could ever become reconciled to the idea that most of reality is indifferent to our descriptions of it, and that the human self is created by the use of a vocabulary rather than being adequately or inadequately expressed in a vocabulary, then we should at last have assimilated what was true in the Romantic idea that truth is made rather than found.' (CI&S, p. 6)

So, for Rorty, his ironist comes to the realization that not only are the terms or concepts within her final vocabulary determined by chance - that is to say, spatio-temporally - but she is unavoidably led to the conclusion that there will never be a set of grounding criteria available which will eliminate the contingent nature of that final vocabulary. The search for such criteria is then seen as a fruitless quest which is best abandoned - with her energies better deployed in more productive areas.

In discussing the contingency of language Rorty takes pains to make it clear that he is not making any claims about his perspective with regard to its primacy or its correctness. He wants to conduct his thinking (and to have the results of that thinking understood) not on the basis that he has produced a vocabulary that more adequately reflects reality, but on the basis that it is more productive within his (and fellow liberal ironists') contingently determined present:

'The difficulty faced by a philosopher who, like myself, is sympathetic to this suggestion - one who thinks of himself as auxiliary to the poet rather than to the physicist - is to avoid hinting that this suggestion gets something right, that my sort of philosophy corresponds to the way things really are. For this talk of correspondence brings back just the idea my sort of philosopher wants to get rid of, the idea that the world or the self has an intrinsic nature. From our point of view, explaining the success of science, or the desirability of political liberalism, by talk of "fitting the world" or "expressing human nature" is like explaining why opium makes you sleepy by talking about its dormitive power. To say that Freud's vocabulary gets at the truth about human nature, or Newton's at the truth about the heavens, is not an explanation of anything. It is just an empty compliment - one traditionally paid to writers whose novel jargon we have found useful.' (CI&S, p. 7)

Rorty then goes on to describe his form of philosophy as being akin to utopian politics or revolutionary science as opposed to the modernist approach which he considers more akin to parliamentary politics or normal science. He wants to redescribe "lots and lots of things in new ways". His objective is the creation of a new vocabulary, a new metaphor, which he hopes will be more useful than

others in attempting to understand and deal with the contingent nature of the human condition. In a very fundamental way, Rorty sees himself as a maker of tools - tools whose purpose will only become clear after they are constructed and put into the hands of future generations. The philosophy which creates these tools:

‘... does not work piece by piece, analyzing concept after concept, or testing thesis after thesis. Rather, it works holistically and pragmatically. It says things like “try thinking of it this way” - or more specifically, “try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting questions.” It does not pretend to have a better candidate for doing the same old things which we did when we spoke in the old way. Rather, it suggests that we might want to stop doing those things and do something else. But it does not argue for this suggestion on the basis of antecedent criteria common to the old and the new language games. For just insofar as the new language really is new, there will be no such criteria.’ (CI&S, p. 9)

2) ... and the self: An interesting way to look at Rorty’s analysis of the nature of the self is through his discussion of “impress”. By impress, he means the contributions to an individual’s ‘self’ which were not created by that individual. The distinction between modernism and Rorty’s neo-pragmatist perspective can be usefully highlighted by seeing the differences in the assumed source of these ‘outward originating’ effects: the difference between the determinists impress of genetic inevitability (modernism) and the ‘blind’ impress of contingency (ironism).

But, the discussion, for Rorty, is not about whether it is one way or another. He would agree, I am sure, that the facts that most humans are born with two arms and legs, or see binocularly in color, or carry their brains between their ears and their gonads between their legs (or is it the other way around?) have an undeniable effect on the individual’s image of self. The fact that Rorty (or anyone else, would accept these ‘determinisms’ does not, however, make them important or interesting when it comes to thinking about the nature of the self. One argument between modernism and neo-pragmatism centers on the issue of what is important. It is not a matter of controversy, to return to the initial discussion in this section, whether there are impresses - but what their nature is and their source.

Traditional modernist dogma contends that impresses (far from being blind) are imprinted in each individual by the very fact that she is human - by nature of a common human core which we all get at birth. In traditional terms, the self is an essence common to all humans that interfaces with that world through one of a number of mechanisms (depending on which period of modernist thought and

geographic region you are focusing on). This is the classical subject/object perspective (self/reality) with language (or in a previous iteration, mind) providing the interface between the two. Rorty observes that this perspective produces a particular mind set among its advocates and describes the search and the searchers as follows:

‘... the universal conditions of human existence, the great continuities - the permanent, ahistorical, context of human life. This is what the priests once claimed to have done. Later the Greek philosophers, still later the empirical scientists, and later still the German idealists, made the same claim. They were going to explain to us the ultimate locus of power, the nature of reality, the conditions of the possibility of experience. They would thereby inform us what we really are, what we are compelled to be by powers not ourselves. They would exhibit the stamp which had been impressed on *all* of us. This impress would not be blind, because it would not be a matter of chance, a mere contingency. It would be necessary, essential, telic, constitutive of what it is to be a human. It would give us a goal, the only possible goal, namely, the full recognition of that very necessity, the self-consciousness of our essence.’ (CI&S, p. 26)

For the modernist, the project of philosophy, and indeed the search for knowledge in general, is the working out of the implications of this impress - the irrefutable and unavoidable implications of being ‘human’. They see the central role of human inquiry as having the function of providing increasing clarification of this central, common core and they see their relationship to the ‘non-intellectual’ part of humanity as deliverers of the ‘truth’ - providers of glimpses into the inner self common to all and from which none can escape. They split us all into two parts and call one ‘reason’ and the other ‘unreason’. We are connected to something ‘eternal and divine’ by the first and subject to contingent and idiosyncratic impulses (such as avarice, greed, stupidity, prejudice, perversion and so forth) by the second. We are then all a potentially ‘good’ side that needs to be elevated and a persistently ‘evil’ side that needs to be curtailed.

At base, this contention amounts to an attempt to privilege one vocabulary over all others. But, the extent of this pretence, from the perspective of ‘non-modernists’ and ‘non-Westerners’, is breathtaking indeed. These priests of modernity preach to not only contemporary members of the rich Western democratic societies - not only to members of European societies - not only to all humans alive on the earth during the last years of the twentieth century - but to all humans who have ever lived, live now or will ever live. Such is the pretense of these ‘would be gods’. Such is the congregation which these ‘priest’ seek to assemble before them - to receive their ‘wisdom’. They must be drawn from truly ‘eternal stock’ indeed!!!!

But, in the end, they are just human and, by that fallible. Pretension does not ratify opinion to certainty and their exhortation - that we all need to somehow break out of our contingent worlds of appearance and idiosyncratic opinions into a 'world of enduring truth' - will certainly vanish into history as just one more contingent world of appearance and idiosyncratic opinion.

It was Nietzsche, more than any other thinker, who first challenged the modernist pretensions to 'knowing and expounding the truth'. He claimed that the 'real world' which we inherited from Plato was pure human fiction and that Plato's ideas about 'truth' and 'reality' were fictions as well. From Nietzsche's perspective, truth was a "mobile army of metaphors" and the idea that humans would be able to find a single language (a single context into which all human lives could be put) should be abandoned.

Nietzsche put forth what was then a radically different conception of the human self. When he abandoned the idea that the human search for knowledge was not predestined to center-in ever more closely on fundamental and eternal truths, he then came to see self knowledge as self creation. For Nietzsche:

'... in abandoning the traditional notion of truth, Nietzsche did not abandon the idea of discovering the causes of our being what we are. He did not give up the idea that an individual might track home the blind impress all his behaviors bore. He only rejected the idea that this tracking was a process of discovery. In his view, in achieving this sort of self-knowledge we are not coming to know a truth which was out there (or in here) all the time. Rather, he saw self-knowledge as self-creation. The process of coming to know oneself, confronting one's contingency, tracking one's causes home, is identical with the process of inventing a new language - that is, of thinking up some new metaphors. For any *literal* description of one's individuality, which is to say any use of an inherited language-game for this purpose, will necessarily fail. One will not have traced that idiosyncrasy home but will merely have managed to see it as not idiosyncratic after all, as a specimen reiterating a type, a copy or replica of something which has already been identified. To fail as a poet - and thus, for Nietzsche, to fail as a human being - is to accept somebody else's description of oneself, to execute a previously prepared program, to write, at most, elegant variations on previously written poems. So the only way to trace home the causes of one's being as one is would be to tell a story about one's causes in a new language. (CI&S, p. 27)

So, for Nietzsche, the human self was a human creation - and each particular self was the creation of a particular individual within a particular spatio-temporal situation, and subject to a vast range of contingencies over which she had little or no control. For him the impress was blind and the self was contingent through and through. Attempts to find common essences within this incredible diversity were not only hopeless enterprises doomed to failure, but also inquiries which missed the real nature of the human self - that it was the individualistic product of each individual's efforts at self creation. For

Nietzsche, humans were engaged in an exercise of increasing diversity and the creation of new types of human selves (and by that, new types of humans) which had never existed before - rather than on a journey toward sameness which would end when humans discovered the 'true nature of their selves' in some 'pre-ordained reality'.

Nietzsche saw the slavish fixation on 'truth as an eternal reality' (and, indeed, all concepts which pretended to an eternal nature) as not only counterproductive but seriously damaging in a human's attempt to create an idiosyncratic self. Much of his writing is designed to induce the abandonment of the ideas of 'reality' and 'truth' as goals of human inquiry and he:

'... hoped that once we realized that Plato's "true world" was just a fable, we would seek consolation, at the moment of death, not in having transcended the animal condition but in being that peculiar sort of dying animal who, by describing himself in his own terms, had created himself. More exactly, he would have created the only part of himself that mattered by constructing his own mind. To create one's mind is to create one's own language, rather than to let the length of one's mind be set by the language other human beings have left behind.' (CI&S, p. 27)

So, in Nietzsche's concept of the human self:

'... the important boundary to cross is not the one separating time from atemporal truth but rather the one which divides the old from the new. He thinks a human life triumphant just insofar as it escapes from inherited descriptions of the contingencies of its existence and finds new descriptions. This is the difference between the will to truth and the will to self-overcoming. It is the difference between thinking of redemption as making contact with something larger and more enduring than oneself and redemption as Nietzsche describes it: "recreating all 'it was' into a 'thus I willed it.''" (CI&S, p. 29)

It might seem that Rorty, or for that matter, anyone else, has to choose between the two concepts of the human self. Clearly the perspectives of the modernists (as exemplified by Kant, for instance) and Nietzsche are incompatible and it would then seem easy to assume the individual's right to choose between them, as an exercise of a kind of 'religious preference'. I say 'might' because the issue of such a choice, although comprehensible in metaphysical and theological terms, is not in Nietzsche's terms. But, there is a way out of the dilemma. In *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, Rorty suggests that we 'try and think of it this way' and see how it goes. Part of that 'way' is to shelve the idea of a human self as the modernists see it. Rorty has not, however, made this request lightly and without some reason to believe that it will be productive.

Many of his reasons for asking us to suspend acceptance of the modernist concept of the self can be found in the writings of Sigmund Freud. Rorty refers

extensively to Freud in pointing out why the choice between 'Kant and Nietzsche' is not what it appears initially to be:

'It has often seemed necessary to choose between Kant and Nietzsche, to make up one's mind - at least to *that* extent - about the point of being human. But Freud gives us a way of looking at human beings which helps us evade the choice. After reading Freud we shall see neither Bloom's strong poet nor Kant's dutiful fulfiller of universal obligations as paradigmatic. For Freud himself eschewed the very idea of a paradigm human being. He does not see humanity as a natural kind with an intrinsic nature, an intrinsic set of powers to be developed or left undeveloped. By breaking with both Kant's residual Platonism and Nietzsche's inverted Platonism, he lets us see both Nietzsche's superman and Kant's common moral consciousness as exemplifying two out of many forms of adaptation, two out of many strategies for coping with the contingencies of one's upbringing, of coming to terms with a blind impress. There is much to be said for both. Each has advantages and disadvantages. Decent people are often rather dull. Great wits are sure to madness near allied. Freud stands in awe before the poet, but describes him as infantile. He is bored by the merely moral man, but describes him as mature. He does not enthuse over either, nor does he ask us to choose between them. He does not think we have a faculty which can make such choices.' (CI&S, p. 35)

So Freud has proposed a different concept of 'rationality', one which breaks us out of the 'truth and reality is out there' paradigm of the modernist into a vista which Rorty, and many others, contend is potentially much more productive. For Freud 'rationality' is a mechanism whereby humans 'adjust contingencies to other contingencies'. As such, rationality is not an abstract proposition at all - not an insight into the structure of 'reality', but one human mechanism among many to be used in the creation of self and community out of the pure contingency of existence.

Through this perspective, Freud suggests that 'rationality' has no claim to primacy among human perspectives and, further, that science is not privileged over other human activities in its access to 'truth' or 'reality'. As Rorty says: Freud

'... makes it possible for us to see science and poetry, genius and psychosis - and, most importantly, morality and prudence - not as products of distinct faculties but as alternative modes of adaptation.' (CI&S, p. 32)

In addition, Freud suggested that we give up the attempt to fuse the private and public parts of our selves under one, overarching theory of being. He suggests that this search for an overarching theory and the concomitant concepts of 'truth', 'reality' and the 'essential human self' gets in the way. He contends that, not only is the human self a product of human creation, but also the solidarity between and among human beings is, as well, a product of human striving.

'Another way of putting this point is that Freud gave up Plato's attempt to bring together the public and the private, the parts of the state and the parts of the soul, the search for social justice and the search for individual perfection. Freud gave equal respect to the appeals of moralism and romanticism, but refused either to grant one of these priority over the other or to attempt synthesis of them. He distinguished sharply between a private ethic of self-creation and a public ethic of mutual accommodation. He persuades us that there is no bridge between them provided by universally shared beliefs or desires - beliefs or desires which belong to us *qua* human and which unite us to our fellow humans simply *as human*.' (CI&S, p. 33)

Freud (and Rorty as well) sees human evolution not as being towards a common base which we all inherently share, but as an evolution of increasing diversity - the creation of new forms of human selves whose common characteristics with the balance of humanity are merely at the level of the uninteresting and unimportant - while their idiosyncratic diversity defines what is important and interesting about them.

So, Rorty comes to the conclusion that it is not just language that is of human manufacture, but the self as well. And, in doing so, he agrees with Nietzsche that the project of self knowledge is, in fact a project of self creation - that the goal for the strong poet, in her efforts towards self creation, is reached through the creation of an idiosyncratic final vocabulary which celebrates her uniqueness and allows her to say "Thus I willed it." He also accepts Freud's refusal to privilege any one type of self (way of being) over any other and, thus, is led to see Nietzsche, Heidegger, Marx, and the common man on the street as variations of self-dom whose only common thread being that they have, to some extent more and others less, been an original creation of a unique individual. In any case, according to Rorty, all are contingent, at base, and their creation has unavoidably been the product of spatio-temporal chance.

3) ... and community: It sometimes strikes me that there are seeds of 'realization' within us all which are waiting for the correct or adequate conditions for flowering. I am also struck by the often trivial appearance of these seeds when they first arrive and the subsequent service that their flowering can provide. As an example, let me relate a story which I heard when I was young.

'It seems one bright and sunny day the Lone Ranger and his faithful Indian sidekick, Tonto, were riding across the Badlands in search of bad guys to bring to justice. From out of nowhere, suddenly there came a very large band of Indians. Our two heroes were attacked and, only by their skill and courage, made it to the safety of a sheltering cave.

But their success was to be short lived. The Indian Chief sent wave after wave against them until all of the ammunition was gone and they were defenseless. As the end was in sight and the final attack imminent, the Lone Ranger said, "Well, Tonto, I guess this is the end. There is no way out of this and we are done for."

From over his shoulder he hears Tonto say, "What do you mean 'we' white man?"

Rorty defines community on the basis of shared values which are codified in the shared portions of the final vocabularies of individuals which make up that community. This is an important component of his thinking as it serves as a description of the extended environment in which a given individual finds one's self. But, there is a trap here for modernists who might still be trying to understand Rorty on their own terms. They might be led to conclude, for example, that Rorty's concept of community is really a description of the 'world as the individual finds it'. In such a way, one might be tempted to see 'community' as coterminous with, for example 'state' or 'nation', that is with some political unit. In another way, they might see 'community' as meaning 'ethnic group' or 'family'. But, this recourse to modernist categories (which in Rorty's terms involves the assumption of "presuppositionless critical reflection, conducted in no particular language and outside of any particular historical context". (CI&S, p. 54)) will lead to a misunderstanding of Rorty's use of the term.

Community is as contingently determined and as much a product of an individual's efforts at self creation as is the creation of the contingently created self. Rorty's community, for example, cannot be the 'world into which he has contingently arrived'. Nor can it be the 'world into which he has entered' as a result of his efforts toward self creation. Either option creates the same problem that Rorty has with the modernists' conception that there is a 'world out there'.

What then can this community be? Is it all just an illusion - a mental creation encompassed within the mind of the liberal ironist? The short answer might be - Yes! But, in this case as with others touching on important concepts, the short answer is not very interesting.

It might be helpful here to re-introduce the distinction between the 'public' and 'private' and then to see the 'self' as the result of essentially private efforts at self perfection and 'community' as the result of essentially public efforts at producing (for instance) a more just and less cruel society. Under this description, community is a way of seeing which is codified in an individual's final vocabulary and the basis for finding common areas, through comparison with the final vocabularies of others, upon which to build something which

Rorty calls human solidarity. So, let's follow this thread and see where it might lead us. For instance, Rorty writes that:

'To accept the claim that there is no standpoint outside the particular historically conditioned and temporary vocabulary we are presently using from which to judge this vocabulary is to give up on the idea that there can be reasons for using languages as well as reasons within languages for believing statements. This amounts to giving up the idea that intellectual or political progress is rational, in any sense of "rational" which is neutral between vocabularies. But because it seems pointless to say that all the great moral and intellectual advances of European history - Christianity, Galilean science, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and so on - were fortunate falls into temporary irrationality, the moral to be drawn is that the rational-irrational distinction is less useful than it once appeared. Once we realize that progress, for the community as for the individual, is a matter of using new words as well as of arguing from premises phrased in old words, we realize that a critical vocabulary which revolves around notions like "rational," "criteria," "argument" and "foundation" and "absolute" is badly suited to describe the relation between the old and the new.' (CI&S, p. 48)

Here, Rorty seems to be suggesting a similarity between the ideas of progress for the individual and progress for the community. Clearly he is not saying that they are the same, but he is just as clearly suggesting that the idea of 'progress' would benefit from a redescription in a non-modernist, alternate vocabulary. Further on, he reinforces this argument when he says that:

'The idea that it ought to have foundations was a result of Enlightenment scientism, which was in turn a survival of the religious need to have human projects underwritten by a nonhuman authority. It was natural for liberal political thought in the eighteenth century to try to associate itself with the most promising cultural development of the time, the natural sciences. But unfortunately the Enlightenment wove much of its political rhetoric around a picture of the scientist as a sort of priest, someone who achieved contact with nonhuman truth by being "logical," "methodical," and "objective". This was a useful tactic in its day, but it is less useful nowadays. For, in the first place, the sciences are no longer the most interesting or promising or exciting area of culture.' (CI&S, p. 52)

It is vital in reading such sections from *Contingency, irony and solidarity* to always remember that Rorty is, and accepts that he always will be, writing from the perspective of Rorty. This observation might seem simple minded at first, but I need only to point out that the tradition for modernist or theological writers is quite the opposite. Pretensions to access to something 'eternal' or 'divine' have led such writers to write from the perspective of 'telling the truth' or 'describing the world as it really is' - or in another vernacular, 'telling it like it is'. In order to do this they 'climb out of their own minds' and onto a meta level. Their pretence is to the 'god's eye view'. Rorty allows himself no such pretence. So, when Rorty talks about 'community' he is talking about 'his'

community (the community of a particular liberal ironist locked in a particular spatio-temporal situation). He does hope, I am sure, that certain parts of his description will strike common chords with some of the terms in the final vocabularies of some of his readers - but, he is not trying to get anybody to adopt his community as their own. Perhaps a productive way of looking at Rorty's writing might be that we are allowed by the wonders of modern technology to listen in on what are essentially his private musings. For example, he writes:

'In my view, an ideally liberal polity would be one whose culture hero is Bloom's "strong poet" rather than the warrior, the priest, the sage, or the truth-seeking, "logical," "objective" scientist. Such a culture would slough off the Enlightenment vocabulary ... It would no longer be haunted by specters called "relativism" and "irrationalism." Such a culture would not assume that a form of cultural life is no stronger than its philosophical foundations. Instead, it would drop the idea of such foundations. It would regard the justification of liberal society simply as a matter of historical comparison with other attempts at social organization - those of the past and those envisaged by utopians.' (CI&S, p. 53)

This is Rorty writing about Rorty's ideals - not a modernist snake oil salesman trying to sell as 'eternal and factual' his particular view of 'truth' and 'reality'. Such an undertaking as Rorty's, according to him, is all that he can do and all that he sets out to do. In that effort, Rorty is demonstrating how his conception of 'community' works for him and coexists with his idiosyncratic 'self'. His hope is that this redescription of community will prove valuable to others who might incorporate some variation of it into their own final vocabulary and thus form a bridge over which an expanded community - a wider human solidarity - might be built.

Beyond this, Rorty is clear about the pointlessness of criticizing one community from the perspective of another (of attempting to privilege one community over another). He tries to make clear the implications of accepting this exercise as pointless when he writes:

'To think such a justification sufficient would be to draw the consequences from Wittgenstein's insistence that vocabularies - all vocabularies, even those which contain the words which we take most seriously, the ones most essential to our self-descriptions - are human creations, tools for the creation of such other human artifacts as poems, utopian societies, scientific theories, and future generations. Indeed, it would be to build the rhetoric of liberalism around this thought. This would mean giving up the idea that liberalism could be justified, and Nazi or Marxist enemies of liberalism refuted, by driving the latter up against an argumentative wall - forcing them to admit that liberal freedom has a "moral privilege" which their own values lacked. From the point of view I have been commanding, any attempt to drive one's opponent up against a wall in this way fails when the wall against which he is driven comes to be seen as one more vocabulary,

one more way of describing things. The wall then turns out to be a painted backdrop, one more work of man, one more bit of cultural stage-setting. A poeticized culture would be one which would not insist we find the real wall behind the painted ones, the real touchstones of truth as opposed to touchstones which are merely cultural artifacts. It would be a culture which, precisely by appreciating that *all* touchstones are such artifacts, would take as its goal the creation of ever more various and multicolored artifacts.' (CI&S, p. 53)

So, Rorty's 'community' is contingent through and through and isolated from other communities by lack of overlap in their final vocabularies. He is also limited in the questions that he can ask about it - or, at least, in the productive questions that he can ask about it. For instance he contends that:

'... We can keep the notion of "morality" just insofar as we can cease to think of morality as the voice of the divine part of ourselves and instead think of it as the voice of ourselves as members of a community, speakers of a common language. We can keep the morality-prudence distinction if we think of it not as the difference between an appeal to the unconditioned and an appeal to the conditioned but as the difference between an appeal to the interests of our community and the appeal to our own, possibly conflicting, private interests. The importance of this shift is that it makes it impossible to ask the question "Is ours a moral society?" It makes it impossible to think that there is something which stands to my community as my community stands to me, some larger community called "humanity" which has an intrinsic nature. This shift is appropriate for what Oakeshott calls a *societas* as opposed to a *universitas*, to a society conceived as a band of eccentrics collaborating for purposes of mutual protection rather than as a band of fellow spirits united by a common goal.' (CI&S, p. 59)

Further, he can identify the circumstances of an individual's exclusion from his community:

'... An immoral action is, on this account, the sort of thing which, if done at all, is done only by animals, or by people of other families, tribes, cultures, or historical epochs. If done by one of us, or if done repeatedly by one of us, that person ceases to be one of us. She becomes an outcast, someone who doesn't speak our language, even though she may once have appeared to do so. On Sellars's account, as on Hegel's, moral philosophy takes the form of an answer to the question "Who are 'we', how did we come to be what we are, and what might we become?" rather than an answer to the question "What rules should dictate my actions?" In other words, moral philosophy takes the form of historical narration and utopian speculation rather than of a search for general principles.' (CI&S, pp. 59-60)

Rorty is clear that the definitions of terms like 'immoral' and 'moral' are contingent through and through - that they are spatio-temporally determined. He is willing to accept that what is 'moral' within his community may be 'immoral' within yours. Further, he feels no need to attempt an explanation of why this should be so beyond recognizing each as contingent. Rorty is fully

prepared to let you have your morality and defer questions about its legitimacy so long as it does not impinge on his 'morality.'

In his discussion of community, as in his discussion of self, Rorty uses his own terms and values as examples. But to say it again, and perhaps for the last time, he is, in doing so, not trying to get us to adopt his particular version of 'self' or 'community'. He is also not saying that ... 'if you only will try thinking about it this way, I am sure that you will come to the same conclusions that I have.' Rather, I see him as saying ... 'I have found this way of thinking helpful and maybe you will as well. If you do, then maybe we have the basis for a common dialogue.'

Solidarity

The traditional philosophical way of spelling out what we mean by human solidarity is to say that there is something within each of us - our essential humanity - which resonates to the presence of this same thing in all other human beings. The essence of this position is that through objectivity - an accurate perception of reality and truth - humans will be brought to discover the essence which is common to them all. This awareness of a common, pre-ordained essence will then, the modernist story goes, serve as the glue that will finally bind all of humanity into a single (and one would suppose, peaceful) unit. The guiding light on this journey is, for the modernist, the light of reason, in which she has ultimate faith.

This definition is, of course, not available to Rorty. He has denied that there is anything like a core self which is common to all humans, that there is eternal reality or truth and that there is any foundation or grounding available for his own perspective. As a result, he can't claim primacy for his final vocabulary and neither can he set himself up as an arbiter of what should be considered, for instance, good/bad or human/inhuman in any absolute way. He is limited to framing his views as historically and spatio-temporally determined - as contingently provisional.

For Rorty, human solidarity is made by humans through their efforts to come to terms with their own contingency and to find common ground with other humans through open and dominance-free communication:

'I have been urging in this book that we try not to want something which stands beyond history and institutions. The fundamental premise of the book is that a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance.' (CI&S, p. 189)

‘My position entails that feelings of solidarity are necessarily a matter of which similarities and dissimilarities strike us as salient, and that such salience is a function of a historically contingent final vocabulary.’ (CI&S, p. 192)

Solidarity, then, entails the recognition of similarities and dissimilarities - the creation of a “we” and, a resultant “they”, through finding similarities and dissimilarities in final vocabularies. To that extent, as the languages in which it is framed are contingent human creations, solidarity is created and maintained solely through human efforts. There is much in this definition which gives people pause and concern. It might seem that, in some fundamental way, Rorty is ratifying bigotry, fascism and racism - for, after all, aren’t these the codification of created ‘we’s which form around similarities in final vocabularies? The answer to the question is that they are ‘solidarities’ and they do arise from similarities in final vocabularies. But Rorty would respond that they are neither ratified nor rendered immoral by his, or any other competing, final vocabulary and just to the extent that we ‘combat’ these ‘solidarities’ by hurling ‘eternal truths’ and absolute moral judgments’ at them have we defined ourselves as impotent and ineffective in dealing with their effects.

An implication of Rorty’s work is that not only aren’t there ‘truths’ and ‘reality’ out there - nor ‘absolute morality’ or ‘a god’s eye platform from which to judge’; he further suggests that everybody (including the bigot, the fascist and the racist included) recognizes that - everybody except, of course, the modernist. The singular reason that such preaching is ineffective, and gratifying only to the preachers and their shrinking flocks, is that the rest of the world has increasingly abandoned (that is if it ever had internalized) the modernist pretence.

Academics are increasingly seen, by what some of them derisively describe as the ‘non-intellectual segment of humanity’, as disconnected fools muttering unintelligible gibberish about things that don’t exist. They are ‘useful idiots’ for politicians and would be dictators, but, by and large, except for the harms that are perpetrated with their blessings and under their ‘isms’, irrelevant to the bulk of humans.

Rorty is interested in having the academic community rejoin the rest of us on a far less absolutist basis. His view of solidarity is that gradual expansion of the “we” is a completely worthwhile project and that academics could benefit from such an expansion. He thinks that some of the components of his final vocabulary will be of use to others and accepts that parts of other final vocabularies will bring advantages to him. He sees the project as importing

terms from many others' final vocabularies and re-weaving them with his own into a richer and more varied tapestry.

In following Rorty's prescription, we will engage as human to human rather than as priest to human (or ideological groupie to ideological groupie) and thereby, through extended efforts, expand our definition of "we" to include an ever wider scope. Through this effort, we might break through into cells of racism or bigotry and pollinate such final vocabularies with ideas and ways of seeing that will gradually change them.

Rorty, I am sure, would agree that the modernist tendency towards shouting absolutes - as judgments from above - has been a major roadblock to the extension of human solidarity. The European experience, where modernism has had its most persistent and extended flowering, should serve as a good example of how damaging this roadblock can be. All of the 'isms' that flourish here (and the terrible cruelties which are perpetrated in their names) are sanctified, and indeed underpinned, by one or another set of academic 'priests' who regularly sprinkle the holy water of modernist dogma, in the form of absolute truths, on the heads of the builders of this 'tower of Babel'. Rorty is suggesting a different approach and, to induce us to do so, describes part of his own final vocabulary:

'The view I am offering says that there is such a thing as moral progress, and that this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity. But that solidarity is not thought of as recognition of a core self, the human essence, in all human beings. Rather, it is thought of as the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation - the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of "us." That is why I said ... that detailed descriptions of particular varieties of pain and humiliation (in, e.g., novels or ethnographies), rather than philosophical or religious treatises, were the modern intellectual's principal contributions to moral progress.' (CI&S, p. 192)

So, Rorty is suggesting that his alternative to modernism, his neo-pragmatism, is a more productive avenue to follow if we are interested in extending solidarity. That avenue leads us to a form of liberal democracy in which individuals communicate on a non-absolutist basis about issues which effect their 'public side' and try to find common ground which will allow as broad a definition of 'we' as possible. The goal of these efforts would be to reduce the incidence of those things abhorrent to that 'we' (such as cruelty, suffering, or isolation) while extending the latitude available to the 'private' sides of each member of the 'we'. For Rorty, solidarity is a matter for the 'public' side and he is specific about how the 'private' side should exist in proximity to it:

‘Another central claim of this book, which will seem equally indecent to those who find the purity of morality attractive, is that our responsibilities to others constitute *only* the public side of our lives, a side which competes with our private affections and our private attempts at self-creation, and which has no *automatic* priority over such private motives. Whether it has priority in any given case is a matter for deliberation, a process which will usually not be aided by appeal to “classical first principles.” Moral obligation is, in this view, to be thrown in with a lot of other considerations, rather than automatically trump them.’ (CI&S, p. 194)

Under Rorty’s definition of solidarity, obligations to expand the ‘we’ exist side by side with a whole range of other obligations which relate to either the public or private side of each individual. He sees real benefits in this expansion, but considers it one among many that any individual might accept. He also freely admits that this effort at expansion is important within his ‘community’ and ‘solidarity’. Rorty also maintains that, within that community and solidarity, cruelty is the worst thing we do. But, in the end, he also recognizes that such valuation is contingently determined and that, for him:

‘... there is nothing to back up such a request, nor need there be. There is no *neutral, noncircular* way to defend the liberal’s claim that cruelty is the worst thing we do.’

Rather than sum up Rorty and *Contingency, irony and solidarity* in my own words, I think Rorty himself does it far better than I could. In the last paragraph of his book he writes:

‘To sum up, I want to distinguish human solidarity as the identification with “humanity as such” and as the self-doubt which has gradually, over the last few centuries, been inculcated into inhabitants of the democratic states - doubt about their own sensitivity to the pain and humiliation of others, doubt that present institutional arrangements are adequate to deal with this pain and humiliation, curiosity about possible alternatives. The identification seems to me impossible - a philosopher’s invention, an awkward attempt to secularize the idea of becoming one with God. The self-doubt seems to me the characteristic mark of the first epoch in human history in which large numbers of people have become able to separate the question “Do you believe and desire what we believe and desire?” from the question “Are you suffering?” In my jargon, this is the ability to distinguish the question of whether you and I share the same final vocabulary from the question of whether you are in pain. Distinguishing these questions makes it possible to distinguish public from private questions, questions about pain from questions about the point of human life, the domain of the liberal from the domain of the ironist. It thus makes it possible for a single person to be both.’

Responses to Rorty - Three Variations

Rorty and Davidson: The series of interchanges which have taken place over the years between Rorty and Donald Davidson would seem to me to be, from

Rorty's perspective, a good example of how individuals with final vocabularies which contain a great deal of overlapping components can work together to their mutual benefit - in the process re-weaving each individual's web of beliefs - enriched by the contributions of the other. Both of these thinkers have, by their own admissions, been helped by the contributions of the other. Rorty comments on his debt to, and his somewhat playful relationship with, Davidson in the introduction of his *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (CR&T):⁴

'The antirepresentationalism I advocate here harks back to my 1979 book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Although the figures looming in the background of that book were Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey, my most proximate intellectual debts at the time I was writing it were to Wilfrid Sellars and Willard van Orman Quine. In the subsequent ten years, I have come to think of Donald Davidson's work as deepening and extending the lines of thought traced by Sellars and Quine. So I have been writing more and more about Davidson - trying to clarify his views to myself, to defend them against actual and possible objections, and to extend them into areas which, Davidson himself has not yet explored.' (CR&T, p. 1)

Davidson has responded in kind (for example in an interview with Giovanna Borradori) in which he, again somewhat playfully, comments on Rorty's image of him.⁵

Borradori: In this sense, you don't identify a distinctly American line of thought?

Davidson: No, the only peculiarly American line of thought is pragmatism. But I do not have as keen a sense of what pragmatism did to philosophy as, let's say, Rorty does. Rorty claims that I'm a pragmatist.

Borradori: Don't you consider yourself a pragmatist?

Davidson: No. I don't disbelieve in it, but I don't particularly understand what Rorty means by that, because for him that's a special kind of anti-metaphysical attitude. At one time, he actually had a pragmatic theory of truth, and then dropped it. I remember one of his articles, called "Truth, Pragmatism, and Davidson," in which he explains what he means by calling me a pragmatist. But part of what he has in mind is just that I seem to have dropped the attempt to get a certain definition of the notion of truth. I've certainly dropped the idea that philosophers are in charge of a special sort of truth. But I don't think of that as being any more pragmatic than a lot of other positions.

⁴ Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), references are included in the text and referred to as CR&T.

⁵ Giovanna Borradori, *The American Philosopher: Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, and Kuhn*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) pp. 43-4.

So, Rorty has redefined Davidson in terms of Rorty's own final vocabulary - an event which Rorty clearly says could possibly have some humiliating effects on the redescribed. But, this is, just as clearly, not the effect that such a redescription has had on Davidson. In fact, their relationship and interchange seems to have become deeper and more productive through mutual redescriptions - each contributing to the other's understanding of particular problems or interests which were not necessarily shared ones. Take, for example, Davidson's comments in his 'After Thoughts, 1987 - A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge:

'The paper printed here was written for a colloquium organized by Richard Rorty for a Hegel Congress at Stuttgart in 1981. W. V. Quine and Hilary Putnam were the other participants in the colloquium. Our contributions were published in *Kant oder Hegel?* After Stuttgart the four of us had a more leisurely exchange on the same topics at the University of Heidelberg. When the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association met in March of 1983, Rorty read a paper titled 'Pragmatism, Davidson, and Truth'. It was in part a comment on 'A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge'. I replied. Rorty subsequently published his paper with revisions in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*. This note continues the conversation.

In his paper, both early and late, Rorty urges two things: that my view of truth amounts to a rejection of both coherence and correspondence theories and should properly be classed as belonging to the pragmatist tradition, and that I should not pretend that I am answering the skeptic when I am really telling him to get lost. I pretty much concur with him on both points.

In our 1983 discussion I agreed to stop calling my position either a coherence or a correspondence theory if he would give up the pragmatist theory of truth. He has done his part; he now explicitly rejects both James and Peirce on truth. I am glad to hold to my side of the bargain. If it had not already been published, I would now change the title of 'A Coherence Theory', and I would not describe the project as showing how 'coherence yields correspondence'. On internal evidence alone, as Rorty points out, my view cannot be called a correspondence theory.'⁶

And, somewhat later, Davidson writes:

'Where Rorty and I differ, if we do, is in the importance we attach to the arguments that lead to the skeptic's undoing, and in the interest we find in the consequences for knowledge, belief, truth and meaning. Rorty wants to dwell on where the arguments have led: to a position which allows us to dismiss the skeptic's doubts, and so to abandon the attempt to provide a general justification for knowledge claims - a justification that is neither possible nor needed. Rorty sees the history of Western philosophy as a confused and Victorless battle between unintelligible skepticism and lame attempts to answer it. Epistemology from Descartes to Quine seems to me just one complex, and by no means unilluminating, chapter in the philosophical

⁶ Donald Davidson, 'A Coherence Theory of Knowledge', in Alan Malachowski (ed.) *Reading Rorty*, (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990) p. 134.

enterprise. If that chapter is coming to a close, it will be through recourse to modes of analysis and adherence to standards of clarity that have always distinguished the best philosophy, and will, with luck and enterprise, continue to do so.⁷

So here, in this relationship between Rorty and Davidson, we can see something of an interchange of ideas and modifications of final vocabularies along the lines which Rorty envisions in *Contingency, irony and solidarity*. There seems to be, between the two thinkers, no conversationally lethal disagreements. Neither seems to be taken by the other as a direct threat to some basic component of self-image, or as an 'anti-Christ' (devil incarnate) whose mission is to subvert or turn them away from the 'true path'.

Some of the similarities which these writers share are obvious. First, they are both Americans out of roughly the same philosophical and political traditions. Second, they are academics within a school where interchange of ideas and expansion of intellectual horizons are positively valued. Third, neither seems to be captive of an ideological perspective - in the sense of being rigidly dedicated to a dogma - and both seem to evidence a real tendency towards nurturing tolerance and an intellectual growth. Other factors may be less obvious from their writings. I might, for instance, suggest that there are similar personality characteristics, patterns of communication, attitudes toward civility or cruelty which form the basis for their ability to communicate. Further (and I admit to sensing that this is important) they may have a somewhat similar concept of the relationship between themselves and their work - a similar perspective on 'What it's all for'.

For whatever reasons, it seems to me that Rorty has found a partner in demonstrating just how *his* ideas about 'liberal irony' can be put into practice. We can, by 'listening in on the Rorty-Davidson interchange', get some idea as to how Rorty's ideas can be translated into real life communication. We can see two relatively non-ideologically-driven liberals engaging in just the sort of communication which Rorty thinks is central to the formation of human solidarity in a democratic liberal society.

From this, some of us may see relevance in our own contingent communities and communication patterns - not, of course, adopting either the form or content of the Rorty-Davidson connection, but learning, from observing the process of modification of final vocabularies, something of what Rorty is getting at - and maybe finding in that something - some thread - which we can reweave into our own existence.

⁷ Ibid. p. 137.

But, negatives are as often sources of valuable lessons and I would like to turn to two instances where the writings of Rorty have generated quite different responses - where the interchange seems either poorly connected or completely un-made.

Rorty and the Continental Turn: There is a second type of response to Rorty's writings - this by a group which I will call 'perspectively challenged'.⁸ They are individuals who, in their attempts to engage with Rorty, are limited by one or more components of their own language-self-community complex. These components conflict with something central to Rorty's final vocabulary and thus inhibit attempts at the formation and extension of dialogues similar to the one between Rorty and Davidson.

A major source of this difficulty, for both European thinkers and their adherents in America, is something that Giovanna Borradori had aptly called the 'Atlantic Wall' - the "screen of mutual misunderstandings that for years has divided the philosophical scenes on the two shores of the ocean."⁹ Borradori limits the description of this 'Wall' to the area of philosophy, but it is clearly an issue in a much broader area of attempted communication - for example, politics. An American encountering the 'We're subjects - and proud of it.' attitude of the Briton might understand the pride, but conversations about the meaning of individual freedom or liberty, for instance, might be strained or difficult to ground in sufficient common terms in each final vocabulary to be very productive. That same American encountering Scots (or when it is convenient, English) talking about Scotland as if it was a nation might find fairly extensive difficulty in taking such contentions seriously.

One major, and philosophically pervasive, source of this type of difficulty is the modernism of some thinkers on 'the European side of the pond'. A second source is the difference in the relationship which some European thinkers maintain to one or another form of 'ism' and Rorty's indifference to such issues. Clearly, to the extent that a reader of Rorty is dedicated to traditional, modernist dogma, there will be a problem in finding a common ground to

⁸ Like Rorty, I have no use for absolutes. In choosing this descriptive term, I am only indicating how adequate to the job of 'understanding and communicating with Rorty' these perspectives are. I am not comparing them with Rorty's in any but this sense and would resist any suggestion that Rorty's is 'superior' to the others which I will describe under any absolute scheme of measurement. The exercise is to demonstrate that Rorty's style of communication works better *within his context* than either of the types I am going to discuss and that the differences, between them and Rorty's, present difficulties for Rorty's scheme when moved out of that context.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-25.

discuss, for instance, the nature of the human self. This gap, one which these readers also have with a line of thinkers which include Nietzsche and Freud, seems relatively un-bridgeable. But dialogue nevertheless does seem to take place in a manner which is valued by both sides. A good example is the exchanges between Rorty and Habermas. Here both sides seem to have accepted that some differences between them are not going to dissolve, but there is good reason to persevere in attempts to find common ground - or, at least, to exchange views.

Here, again, Rorty's prescription *seems* to be working more or less as he suggests that it might. Keeping in mind that it is not Rorty's intention that his particular, contingent view is 'right' or 'true', it nevertheless seems to be able to coexist and interact with one which does make that contention. Habermas, dedicated as he is to the completion of the 'modernist project' can apparently converse with Rorty who thinks that it is past time to abandon the project in favor of something more productive. So, this way of relating to others outside of an immediate 'we' seems to work between Rorty and Habermas. I would not hazard an opinion on why this is so - for irreconcilable differences would seem to preclude it - but, I have a sense that the answer might lie in more extensive similarities in the 'private' final vocabularies of these two thinkers than exist within their 'public' final vocabularies. By that, I mean that the self-images of Rorty and Habermas (as well as their attitudes towards issues such as fairness, integrity and cruelty) may contain substantial areas of common agreement, even though their perspectives on such issues as 'reality' and 'truth' are incommensurable.

These differences within the 'public' final vocabularies do, however, tend to generate an interesting and fairly consistent pattern of responses to Rorty from some European thinkers. But, before I get to this pattern, I want to turn to a second source of difficulty which exists in attempts at Rorty-style communications 'across the pond' - and that is the difference in attitudes towards 'isms', particularly, but not limited to, communism, socialism and Marxism. Rorty is a good source here. In his 'The priority of democracy to philosophy', he traces some of the underpinnings of American attitudes towards these 'isms' back to contributions by Thomas Jefferson:

"Thomas Jefferson set the tone for American liberal politics when he said "it does me no injury for my neighbor to say that there are twenty Gods or no God." His example helped make respectable the idea that politics can be separated from beliefs about matters of ultimate importance - that shared beliefs among citizens on such matters are not essential to a democratic society. Like many other figures of the

Enlightenment, Jefferson assumed that a moral faculty common to the typical theist and the typical atheist suffices for civic virtue.' (CR&T. p. 175)

But, Jefferson's true contribution, according to Rorty, was not just in accepting this Enlightenment idea - it is what he did not do - what he could not accept, that defines his contribution to the American attitude towards dogma (religious or political):

'Many Enlightenment intellectuals were willing to go further and say that since religious beliefs turn out to be inessential for political cohesion, they should simply be discarded as mumbo jumbo - perhaps to be replaced (as in twentieth-century totalitarian Marxist states) with some sort of explicitly secular political faith that will form the moral consciousness of the citizen. Jefferson again set the tone when he refused to go that far. He thought it enough to privatize religion, to view it as irrelevant to social order but relevant to, and possibly essential for, individual perfection. Citizens of a Jeffersonian democracy can be as religious or irreligious as they please as long as they are not "fanatical." That is, they must abandon or modify opinions on matters of ultimate importance, the opinions that may hitherto have given sense and point to their lives, if these opinions entail public actions that cannot be justified to most of their fellow citizens.' (CR&T, p. 175)

This division between civic responsibility and individual freedom of conscience has insinuated itself deeply within the American psyche. Americans may be a contentious and divided bunch on most issues, but dogma is something which doesn't, by and large, impress them.

Jefferson, and indeed most of the founders of American democracy, saw it as an "experiment." This idea was echoed later by pragmatist philosophers such as Emerson and John Dewey. Under such an understanding there are no truths, either philosophical or religious, to be learned as a result of the success or failure of the American experiment. As Rorty puts it:

'If the experiment fails, our descendants may learn something important. But they will not learn a philosophical truth, any more than they will learn a religious one. They will simply get some hints about what to watch out for when setting up their next experiment. Even if nothing else survives from the age of the democratic revolutions, perhaps our descendants will remember that social institutions can be viewed as experiments in cooperation rather than as attempts to embody a universal and ahistorical order. It is hard to believe that this memory would not be worth having.' (OR&T, p. 196)

So Americans, by and large, eschew the idea of a manifest destiny encapsulated in the eventual triumph of any given philosophical or political dogma. They see addiction to 'isms' as evidence of cultural immaturity. They, as individual citizens working together, might be able to solve their problems, but an ideology - an 'ism' - certainly won't. This attitude which Rorty calls 'American

anti-ideological liberalism', can create significant problems in trans-oceanic attempts at political or philosophical dialogues - for thinkers who cannot envision life without an 'ism', will have great difficulty communicating with individuals whose final vocabularies are strongly adverse to them.

Attempts by some European thinkers to deal with Rorty, thereby tend to evidence a certain and predictable pattern. They find him interesting and provocative - their papers and books are split into a first half of praise and a last half of demurring. For in the end those that can't accept that Rorty really means to live life without either modernist dogma or the security of an 'ism', can't really believe that Rorty can accept that language is contingent. So they work to find 'evidence' that he is 'sneaking' truth and reality in by the back door. They can't accept that he really sees the human self as completely contingent and a self creation, so they go about finding 'evidence' that Rorty 'really' believes that there is such a thing as a human essence.

In this case, thinkers are redefining Rorty in their own terms. It is like an Englishman perusing a text written in Japanese and, after a careful look, declaring that it is interesting but not written in 'good English'. There are the surface appearances of Rorty-style communication working - but, perhaps, not the substance. At the end of the day, there may be small (but, not necessarily unimportant) progress towards a common final vocabulary and the deep divisions will remain. In any case, there is generally not the wide scale cooperation in the formation of a jointly held final vocabulary which occurs in Rorty-Davidson style communication.

It might be helpful for me to provide a recent example of this Euro-style re-description of Rorty. In a recent paper, Alan Apperley referred to Rorty's attitude towards meta-narratives:

'Rorty, for example, argues that the pragmatist has no theory of intrinsic or objective truth and therefore has no role for relativism to play since there is nothing for the embedded truths of the pragmatist to be relative to.'¹⁰

This is not totally accurate as you have seen in the discussion of CI&S above but, for my purposes it is 'close enough for government work'. Rorty argues that there is no such thing as a 'truth out there to be found' or a 'reality out there to be perceived'. The real problem shows up when Apperley begins to discuss

¹⁰ Alan Apperley, 'The Postmodern Self: Between or Beyond, Grand and Local Narratives?', an unpublished paper presented at the Political Studies Association's Annual Conference in Swansea, March 1994, p. 8. The author wishes to thank Dr Apperley for his kind permission to reference this most interesting work.

what, for him, meta-narratives, or for that matter narratives in general, are all about. He contends that a “narrative is nevertheless in some sense a contextualizing device, since it orients us to a particular situation. It makes sense of ‘our’ position - whether as a singular subject or as a unit - part of a collective.”¹¹ This approach, however, begs questions that Rorty thinks are important to address. Apperley seems to be describing meta-narratives from an extra-linguistic position - in other words, from outside of his own final vocabulary.¹² He contends that these ‘narratives’ are somehow ‘contextualizing’ - but I wonder in who’s vocabulary these ‘narratives’ exist and in who’s the ‘contextualizing’ takes place.

It seems to me that Apperley has been caught in the middle of the Continental Turn. From his point of view, there must be narratives and they must exist in an ur-language which is independent of ‘vocabularies’ as Rorty defines them and to which all vocabularies can be translated. This suspicion gains credence if we read further in Apperley’s paper.

‘If this is true, it is true of both grand narratives and of local narratives, and in this sense - in terms of the function of narratives - it is difficult to see that there is any difference between grand and local narratives. There remains a difference in scope, perhaps. Grand narratives extend beyond the boundaries of localities, to make universal claims about abstractions, such as ‘the human race’, or ‘humanity’. Local narratives are more modest, more limited in their claims which merely extend (as Rorty puts it) to the boundaries of ‘my tribe’ or ‘my group’ or ‘my nation’.’¹³

Apperley is correct when he suspects that there is no difference between ‘grand and local narratives’. But that, of course, is not the point. The point is that there is a great deal of difference between ‘narratives’ as Apperley conceives them and ‘final vocabularies’ as Rorty uses the term. ‘Narrative’ is a term residual of modernism and more reminiscent of the writings of continental thinkers like Lyotard and Derrida. Their use of that term has both intention and context quite different from Rorty’s use of vocabulary. Apperley, in mid turn, seems to be trying to induce a kind of forgetfulness which would allow the translation, and then criticism, of Rorty in modernist terms.¹⁴ But, Rorty into modernism just won’t go and Apperley’s ‘local narratives’ can’t be deemed equivalent to

¹¹ Ibid., p. 12.

¹² I take this interpretation because to assume the other (that Apperley sees himself as carrying out his critique from within his own final vocabulary) would preclude him from being able to make the statements which he does further on in his paper.

¹³ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁴ From the vocabulary of American non-ideological liberalism through the filter of Continental Postmodernism and finally into modernist terms.

Rorty's 'final vocabularies'. The end of Apperley's project in this area becomes clear when he declares that:

'Rorty, for example, poses the question in the form of a stark choice; "Objectivity or Solidarity?" Rorty's task is to overcome the dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity by jettisoning subjectivity altogether, and enlisting objectivity in the service of solidarity. But it seems to me that Rorty under these circumstances begins to walk on his hind legs with the moderns he decries. In this he is (to invoke another vocabulary) one-sided when he should be many-sided.'¹⁵

Here the question of categories, their function, use and reality, comes into sharp question. Consider, for instance, Rorty's use of the terms 'public' and 'private'. These exist within a human self which Rorty defines as a 'centerless web of beliefs and desires'. Within this web there are no incommensurable substances - no oil and water, if you like. Rorty sees categories as useful perspectives rather than more or less accurate descriptions of 'reality'. Apperley, on the other hand, seems to see categories as designating incommensurable substances, even when those substances are conceptual. This leads him to an either/or scenario on issues such as solidarity and objectivity which would not be coherent within Rorty's vocabulary. Rorty, it seems to me, posses no 'stark choices' (particularly at any meta level). He sees objectivity as a modernist convention which has somewhat outlived it's usefulness and now hinders rather than promotes the extension of human solidarity. I am not sure how it is possible to read Rorty as having made a decision between two modernist concepts (Objectivity and Subjectivity) and, having chosen Objectivity - enlists it in any service. But that is, perhaps, another discussion.

A final piece of Apperley's agenda comes clear when he makes a series of statements which show his 'from above down' perspective - statements which can only make sense under a convenient but inaccurate reading of Rorty's definition of community.

'But the problem here is in identifying the limits of one's group. Rorty, for example, has recently been criticized for attempting to generalize an American nationalism - a *Pax Americana* - that makes constant (and, it is claimed, dubious) reference to a 'we' or an 'us' that aspires 'to speak for all the world', despite Rorty's specific claims to the contrary. I do not think this a fair criticism of Rorty, but neither do I think Rorty's position entirely free of difficulty. For it seems to me that even if Rorty is endorsing an American nationalism, it is not clear to which America he is appealing. In other words, it is not clear that the 'postmodern bourgeois' liberal-democracy he advocates is the only account that we can offer of contemporary America.'

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

The introduction of the term ‘limits of one’s group’ seems to me to introduce a particularly difficult problem. It is, I can only assume, to stand in rough equivalence to Rorty’s term - community. However, this equivalence seems tenuous at best and difficult to defend. It posits the existence of something called a ‘group’ which has defined and identifiable (and I would assume, fairly stable) limits. And, further, seems to imply that members of the group all recognize the group, its characteristics and limits, in roughly the same terms. Under that, fairly traditional, reading, groups are units embedded within something called ‘society’ from which it’s members are drawn. But I don’t think that this is what Rorty has in mind when he uses the term ‘community’ and I am not sure that he would accept the usage of terms like ‘limits’ and ‘group’ as Apperley uses them.

Rorty is clear when he comes to define *his* ‘community’ - as a solidarity formed between Rorty and those with whom he has established common basis within vocabularies. His community, then, is a personal and completely contingent creation which is unique from all other communities (including those of individuals which Rorty would include within his own). It must be clear from this that the perspectives outlined in Apperley’s statements presupposes a meta-perspective which Rorty would deny is possible on several levels. Rorty cannot, it seems to me, be taken to be advocating a ‘we’ that “speaks for all the world”. The entire concept of “speaks for” is alien in Rorty’s writings except as it, might be stretched to apply to an individual creating a ‘final vocabulary’ which ‘speaks for’ that individual. Apperley, after laying out the claim, says that he does not see it as “a fair criticism of Rorty”, but quickly follows with the observation that Rorty’s position is not “entirely free of difficulty”. Apperley’s implied contention that such a position is possible is bedrock modernism - a position of ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ combined in a position entirely free from difficulty. But, in Rorty’s perspective, the appropriate response is ‘So what?’ The possibility of a position entirely free from difficulty is zero - or, at least, philosophically uninteresting to the extreme. To paraphrase Zorba the Greek: “Life is difficulties! Only dead is easy!”.

Finally, Apperley ends his series of statements with the observation that “it is not clear that the ‘postmodern bourgeois’ liberal democracy he (Rorty) advocates is the only account that we can offer of contemporary America”. Surely this observation, and its implied modernist category, cannot be taken seriously in a discussion of Rorty’s thinking. Surely, after reading the quotes from CI&S which I have laid out above, there can be no confusion about Rorty’s reply to this kind of statement. There is not only not an ‘only account’

but more accounts than Apperley could possibly imagine - as many accounts as there are Americans and many, many more than that. It comes down to Apperley's apparent inability to take Rorty at his word - to suspect that no one can exist without modernist presuppositions underlying their perspective - that no one can seriously intend to 'go it alone' without an 'ism'. But this tells us more about Apperley than Rorty.

So, the 'perspectively challenged' attempts to re-describe Rorty in his own terms and in doing so produces an analysis which is un-edifying in either vocabulary. The resulting 'turn back' creates a mangled language which serves no real purpose in Rorty's scheme of gradual expansion of his 'we' through finding common parts of differing final vocabularies. But the process does continue and small steps toward common ground - distanced by the very nature of the process from both 'initial' positions - seem to be all that Rorty could hope for when starting final vocabularies are so diverse. Here, public solidarity (to use Rorty's term) may be built slowly but surely on the basis of a more extensive sharing within private 'final vocabularies'. Here, as well, the interest of both sides in expanding their respective 'we's seems a major factor arguing for at least some mutual enrichment and growth.

Rorty and the Ideologically Rigid: There is a third kind of response to Rorty which seems to hold much less promise of interesting or useful exchange - this from a type which I will call the 'ideologically challenged'.¹⁶ By this, I mean readers of Rorty who seem to see him as a threat to their most closely held beliefs - a prophet of the untenability of their own church and religion. Some of these individuals work in the area of theology, but mostly they are simply 'ism'-addicted, indeed often 'ism'-worshipping, modernists - the religious fundamentalists of modernism.

I make a distinction between the 'perspectively challenged' and the 'ideologically challenged' in three ways. Whereas the first shows characteristics which Rorty would identify with the 'ironist' the second does, by and large, not. Here I am referring particularly to the individual's relationship with their final vocabulary and a tendency to see that vocabulary as either contingent through and through and therefore subject to change or, on the other hand, as representing an immutable underlying truth and reality. The first, it seems to me, is likely to offer dialogue in response to Rorty (even if that dialogue is

¹⁶ See footnote 8, above.

made difficult by meager areas of agreement within respective final vocabularies); while the second merely offers characterization and dogma.

Related to this first dimension is the intention of the readers towards their own particular definition of “we”. In the first case, the perspectively challenged is interested in expanding that definition - encompassing an ever greater scope of types within ‘community’ and seeing that process as one of enrichment and growth. This perspective is, within Rorty’s terminology, liberal and pluralist. The ideologically challenged, on the other hand, sees this process as a threat to the purity of their particular “we”, and puts forth themselves as a kind of self-appointed gatekeeper. The issue becomes expansion of the “we” only on the basis of predetermined criteria needing a kind of ‘thought police’. In comparison with Rorty’s, this attitude is conservative, reactionary and, in the extreme, tends toward fascism.

Finally, I make a distinction between the two perspectives on the basis of the perceived relationship of each to their thought and its purpose. The easiest way to describe this difference is to point out that there is a difference in ones self-image as ‘human in human’s’ clothing and ‘god in human’s clothing’. The tendency of the ideologically challenged is to act as priest and pronounce. This tendency is very noticeable in some responses to Rorty - as he is antithetical to priest-dom. Rorty is antithetical to a primary presumption - a central part of their final vocabulary.

The pattern within these responses is very noticeable. Some initial discussion of Rorty’s thought is used to generate a series of straw men which are easily knocked down. This process is, however, fairly transparent to those who either have read Rorty or take the time to go back and read him. Somewhere near the middle of the reply there is a ‘sea change’ and the real agenda begins to emerge along with the soapbox, pre-packaged jargon and priestly vestments. The response, it turns out, is simply a pretext for a sermon to the choir.

An example of this type of response to Rorty is a contribution to *Reading Rorty* by Nancy Fraser.¹⁷ Fraser begins the paper with cartoonish characterizations of Romanticism and Pragmatism which she immediately

¹⁷ Nancy Fraser, ‘Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty between Romanticism and Technocracy’, in Alan Malachowski (ed.) *Reading Rorty* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990) pp. 303-338. An interesting aspect of this paper is that the word Technocracy appears only in the title. One would assume that what would follow would be a discussion of Rorty’s position vis-à-vis these two concepts. What does follow, however, is a discussion of Rorty between Romanticism and Pragmatism leaving the reader to decide whether Technocracy and Pragmatism are identical in Fraser’s view or whether the word is simply a non-sequitur (scent marking) inserted for effect.

translates into something called Romantic and Pragmatic 'impulses'. The Romantic impulse is then defined as:

'Think of this impulse as the valorization of individual invention understood as self-fashioning. A Romantic impulse of this sort would lionize the figure of the extraordinary individual who does not simply play out but rather rewrites the cultural script his socio-historical milieu has prepared for him. It would represent this individual as a 'genius' or 'strong poet', irrespective of the field of his inventiveness.'¹⁸

The posited 'opposite' to this romantic impulse, the pragmatic impulse, is then defined as:

'... an impatience with differences that do not make a difference. Take it as a distaste for baroque invention and for useless epicycles, for whatever does not get to the point. Thus, the pragmatic impulse would be goal-directed and purposive; it would care less for originality than for results. Problems solved, needs satisfied, well-being assured, these would be its emblems of value.'¹⁹

Fraser seems to be contending that both Romanticism and Pragmatism are reducible to 'impulses', and that a serious discussion of the relationship between them in Rorty's thought can be conducted by considering each philosophical perspective and the associated impulse as interchangeable.

Beyond that, it seems to me that Fraser has selected straw men carefully for the eventual purpose of the paper but poorly as representations of competing factors in Rorty's thinking. It is fairly clear that Rorty's references to Romanticism are designed to serve a particular purpose within his thinking. He draws on the 'insights of the Romantics' in order to further his argument that the self is a human creation. In other places, he describes how attempts at self creation can conflict with attempts at creating solidarity with ones community. But whole sections of CI&S (and whole sections elsewhere) show that Rorty accepts Freud's reading of the strong poet - neither lionizes nor elevates the strong poet to a privileged position.

I also find no evidence in his writings that Rorty sees Romanticism and Pragmatism in conflict as similar concepts. Rather, if I am reading Rorty correctly, Pragmatism (or more properly his Neo-Pragmatism) is a term which Rorty would use to roughly describe his philosophical perspective while Romanticism was a historical epoch from which Rorty draws to enrich that philosophical perspective. Fraser, however, differs in this view and persists:

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 303.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 304.

'If these cartoonlike characterizations do not do justice to the complexities of the Romantic and Pragmatic traditions, I trust that they none the less mark out two recognizable strands in the recent writings of Richard Rorty. These writings, in my view, are the site of a struggle between just such a Romantic impulse and a Pragmatic impulse. Moreover, it is a struggle which neither impulse seems able decisively to win. Sometimes one, sometimes the other gains a temporary advantage here or there. But the overall outcome is stalemate.'²⁰

Out of this characterization does come, however, a bit of accuracy to which I think Rorty would subscribe (although, I suspect, Fraser might not). I think that Rorty would be content to see life as a struggle without decisive results - to some degree, more or less of a stalemate. Clearly the alternative is a final determination - a resolution of issues - which smacks of the modernist belief in a determinate reality. It is further obvious that Rorty does discuss Romanticism and Pragmatism in his writings - so, I suppose, we could call them strands. But, the 'site of struggle' reference is difficult to accept as Fraser seems to intend it.

Fraser then goes on to say that it is:

'... symptomatic of Rorty's inability to resolve this contest that he oscillates among three different views of the relationship between Romanticism and Pragmatism, poetry and politics. These in turn carry three different conceptions of the social role and political function of intellectuals.'²¹

There follows a somewhat extended discussion of these three 'different views' (which Fraser chooses to call 'the invisible hand', 'sublimity or decency?' and the 'partition position'). Space and time will not allow a through going examination of the analysis of these views, but perhaps a few observations are in order. The term 'invisible hand' is chosen to describe a 'natural' partnership between Romanticism and Pragmatism. Since it is not clear why such a partnership should be considered the result of a 'invisible hand', I can only wonder if, for instance, Fraser would describe the partnership which she sees between feminism and left-wing politics or Marxism as describable in the same way. Whether, in other words, Fraser sees the 'invisible hand' as an accurate reflection of a 'reality out there' or simply as the 'ghost in the machine'. Further, one might gainfully inquire about the nature of the 'invisible hand' which is guiding Fraser's thinking.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 304.

²¹ Ibid, p. 304.

‘Sublimity or decency?’ is put forth to describe the apparently antithetical relationship between Romanticism and Pragmatism. Here, according to Fraser we need to choose one or the other - somehow (and I admit to not being able to see from a reading of Rorty how this is possible) identifying ‘sublimity’ with the “cruelty of the strong poet” and ‘decency’ with the “beautiful kindness of the political reformer”. Here Fraser finds the ‘dark side’ of Romanticism (are there any Star Wars fans in the house? Jung would be amused) which Fraser somehow construes to be ironism in its totality. It is clear, given the emerging agenda which Fraser is unfolding, that such an interpretation of Romanticism and Pragmatism is useful to her purposes - but it does seem a strong bit of intellectual dishonesty to remanufacture Rorty to serve these purposes.

After *partitioning* these two views at the extremes of the continuum, Fraser goes on to describe ‘Rorty’s compromise’ - that: “If Romanticism and Pragmatism are not exactly ‘natural partners’, but if, at the same time, one is not willing to abandon either one of them, then perhaps they can learn how to live with one another.” This view is then described as untenable because such partitionings are not viable in the long run:

‘The partition position represents a new and extremely interesting development in Rorty’s thinking. It is his most sophisticated effort to date to take seriously the problem of reconciling Romanticism and Pragmatism. And yet this position is seriously flawed. It stands or falls with the possibility of drawing a sharp boundary between public and private life. But is this really possible? Is it really possible to distinguish redescriptions which affect actions with consequences for others from those which either do not affect actions at all or which affect only actions with no consequences for others?’²²

Rorty’s position in CI&S couldn’t be clearer in this matter. Casting away Fraser’s self-serving redefinition of ‘public’ and ‘private’ and returning to the original text, he makes it clear that the ‘public’ and ‘private’ are parts of his vocabulary - parts that he has found useful - and parts that have, given their presence and meaning to him, no choice about ‘learning to live with one another’. He does not expect them to meld into one unified and internally consistent whole - nor to cease tensioning each other.

Further, there is nothing in CI&S or any other of Rorty’s writings that indicates that the existence of two ‘area’s within the human self - public and private - implies a fixed and shape boundary between them. Although Fraser seems to see the world in terms of either/or,²³ Rorty clearly cannot be accused

²² Ibid, p. 312.

²³ Subsequent materials will make clear how accurate this interpretation is.

of the same disposition. I would suspect that a suggestion that something might be 20% private and 80% public would be seen by him as an invitation to a potentially interesting discussion rather than a heretical suggestion that we abandon reason. Rorty's response would be "Yes, it is possible ... or impossible ... depending on your own personal final vocabulary." At least within Rorty's vocabulary, what is impossible for Fraser clearly could be possible for Rorty - and *vice versa*.

As I turn to the last half of Fraser's paper, I want to suggest that this standard of criticism of ideas such as 'sharp boundaries' and the questions which follow from it are ones which Rorty sees as relatively unproductive of reflection - based upon a counter-productive, absolutist concept of a reality in which 'sharp boundaries' do exist. Fraser, I would take to believe, contends that such sharp boundaries are, under certain circumstances, possible and maintainable on a basis other than historically determined contingency - in other words on the basis of an eternal 'truth' or 'truths' which Fraser has discovered. It is not clear, however, what the difference is, in Fraser's terms, between sharp boundaries and partitions. But, in the end, I think that these terms exist in Fraser's final vocabulary for personally determined purposes and, as with all such terms, are supported by no non-circular justification.

After knocking down the requisite number of straw men, Fraser then turns to what I see as the true purpose of the paper - Rorty and his writings having been reduced to pretext. What is on offer as an alternative to Rorty and his expansion of the "we" is something which Fraser calls "a democratic-socialist-feminist pragmatism: a recipe."²⁴ Fraser takes us into the kitchen and, in a fit of 'Romanticism', leads us through a 'recipe' for an "alternative combination".

I don't think that Fraser's choice of metaphor is completely accidental. The view is that we are about to be told how it should be done - in fact, we, ourselves, are obviously considered ingredients in Fraser's recipe. Well, some of you are anyway - I apparently am not! From the very title of the 'recipe', Fraser intends to apply at least three filters - democratic, socialist and feminist and subsume this restrictive perspective legitimately under the heading of pragmatism. Clearly, membership in Fraser's version of pragmatism is intended to be more restrictive (dare I say elitist?) than Rorty's. So, how does this pragmatism unfold?

Fraser begins with something called 'zero degree pragmatism' which is described as "compatible with a wide variety of substantive political views,

²⁴ Ibid, p. 316.

with socialist-feminism as well as bourgeois liberalism." It is, I suspect, a waste of time to inquire whether this pragmatism is also compatible with capitalism or right-wing politics, or cruelty or masculinism. According to Fraser, this particular form of pragmatism is "simply anti-essentialism with respect to traditional philosophical concepts like truth and reason, human nature and morality." Rorty's anti-essentialism leads him all the way through to complete contingency - to both categories within a final vocabulary (the parochial as well as the 'thin' terms). Fraser seems to be able to stop half way and preserve that parochial part of her final vocabulary - this feat seems somewhat similar to that attempted by the German Idealists, and equally as poorly defensible.

Fraser then suggests that we mix the pragmatism with a proscribed form of holism and "a keen sense of the decisive importance of language in political life" until we get:

'... a distinction between making a political claim in a taken-for-granted vocabulary and switching to a different vocabulary. This distinction clears a space for those far-reaching redescriptions of social life at the heart of every new political vision, from bourgeois liberalism to Marxism to contemporary feminism.'²⁵

It is not clear how this 'distinction' comes about or how, given Fraser's criticism of Rorty's partition, it is maintainable other than as an article of faith, but it seems to have only accomplished what Rorty had on offer in the first place - 'a space for those far reaching redescriptions'. But the hook comes at the end. Fraser's list of 'redescriptions' seems painfully restrictive and provincial.

The exercise, it turns out, is to produce a "first order, substantive social theory that is non-foundational, fallibilistic and historically specific". I freely admit to not being able to make sense out of this description and further admit to the suspicion that, should it be produced, it would turn out to be just one more self ratifying, contingent, final vocabulary. Rorty's aversion to designating any perspective as warranting 'primacy' would, I think lead him to consider this exercise hopeless.

Fraser's sermon rises to its crescendo towards the end of the paper. The 'view from above' - 'engineer of reality' - perspective is clearly visible:

'Then, add a non-Leninist, non-vanguardist conception of the role of intellectuals in radical Left-wing democratic politics. Think of such intellectuals first and foremost as members of social groups and as participants in social movements. Think of them, in other words, as occupying specifiable locations in social space rather than as free-floating individuals who are beyond ideology. Think of them, in addition, as having acquired as a result of the social division of labour some politically useful

²⁵ Ibid, p. 317.

occupational skills, for example, the ability to show how the welfare system institutionalizes the feminization of poverty or how a poem orientalizes its subject. Think of them as potentially capable of utilizing these skills both in specialized institutions like universities and in the various larger cultural and political public spheres. Think of them, thus, as participants on several fronts in struggles for cultural hegemony. Think of them, also, alas, as mightily subject to delusions of grandeur and as needing to remain in close contact with their political comrades who are not intellectuals by profession in order to remain sane, level-headed and honest.

Combine all these ingredients with a non-individualist, non-elitist, non-masculinist utopian vision. Articulate this utopian vision in terms of relations among human beings, instead of in terms of individuals considered as separate monads. Imagine new relations of work and play, citizenship and parenthood, friendship and love. Then consider what sort of institutional framework would be needed to foster such relations. Situate these relations in the institutional framework of a classless, multicultural society without racism, sexism or hetero-sexism, an international society of decentralized, democratic, self-managing collectivities.

Combine all the above ingredients and season to taste with social hope. Concoc just the right mix of pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will.²⁶

This romanticism is entertaining but unedifying. At the end, I am left with the question - "Why a response to Rorty? Why not just make the speech?" It is hard to see that anything in common has come out of this effort (at least in the sense of in common between Rorty and Fraser, for clearly other audiences were considered). But, it is also clear that Rorty tends to illicit this kind of response and that some of his ideas bring out resentment and reactionary responses. I cannot confess to finding much interesting in them other than the fact that they seem to occur. However, I suspect that here, as with the two prior examples, the reasons for outcomes lie mostly within the private final vocabularies of the respective individuals and that, given a closer fit from a different writer, the responder would engage in Rorty-style communication with less hesitation.

Further thoughts

A Self-demonstrating Philosophy: I began this missive with a discussion of a number of key concepts in the thinking of Richard Rorty and then compared what I take to be three general types of responses to that writing. These responses interest me almost as much as Rorty's writings because I see them as inseparable from his efforts - a combined self-demonstration of the implications (strengths and limitations) of his philosophy.

²⁶ Ibid, pp. 319-20.

Taken together, writings and responses serve to demonstrate the kinds of gaps which can exist between various final vocabularies. Additionally, it seems possible to talk more effectively about the nature of those gaps by using tools which Rorty has provided - concepts which are included in his philosophy. Beyond that, and independent of Rorty's contingent and idiosyncratic personal perspective, these tools seem to hold promise in analyzing gaps that might appear between any originating and responding perspectives.

It seems to me that gaps which exist between the distinctive final vocabularies of neighbors - perhaps a strong poet and a civil servant living next door to each other - might seem different and more manageable under Rorty's scheme, which would focus on the existence of sufficient similarities in the respective final vocabularies to allow peaceful co-existence without requiring either to adopt a cloned identity of the other. Further, difficulties caused by modernist dogma, ideological rigidity, ethnic hatred and the like might be effectively highlighted through this approach.

It seems to me, as well, that Rorty's writings contain useful perspectives for attempting trans-cultural communication. Even in the face of substantially different experiences of acculturation, Rorty's tools seem to offer a way to establish and expand solidarity. Furthermore, given his non-ideological tendencies, there seems to be little in his philosophy which should offend either side in such an attempt. Beyond that, he seems to have provided effective tools for addressing differences and establishing and deepening solidarity. Rorty's suggestions may hold value in all but the most proscribed attempts at such communication.

Finally, Rorty seems to be offering a perspective which would allow us to understand at a kind of 'nuts and bolts' level why some attempts at communication across these gaps seem to work while others are non-starters - why some go easily and others are terribly difficult. Such a perspective might also be very useful in assessing, before hand, the inherent difficulties and possibilities of success or failure of these types of attempts. Certainly, Rorty has provided a set of relatively non-ideological concepts that might serve as a common starting ground for such discussions and a tool kit for proceeding. None of these guarantee success - but some of them might prove very useful.

A maker of tools: Rorty often refers to the makers of new final vocabularies and metaphors, the strong poets, as makers of tools. He uses this analogy to describe others such as Nietzsche, Galileo, Yeats, Hegel and Freud, but I think that the term is well applied to him too.

Rorty also observes that the makers of new descriptions cannot know, during the time of creation, the purposes which these new ways of looking will serve. In an interesting way, that is exactly what the responders to Rorty are beginning to flush out. These dialogues very often serve as demonstrations of the tools which Rorty has produced and laid before us. Seen as such, these are 'try before you buy' advertisements for Rorty's ideas.

Vocabularies as metaphor: Rorty's definitions of vocabulary and metaphor present an interesting couplet and open the possibility of seeing the intrusion of one final vocabulary into another as a kind of metaphor. From this point of view, for instance, the easy and relatively intelligible incursion of Continental Postmodern analysis (in the form of its unique vocabulary) into some American philosophical and political arenas might be more effectively understood. The difficulties in communication between political thinkers in America and Europe might take on a different cast under a similar perspective. Finally, the extensive impacts of new types of political organizations such as United We Stand America (UWSA) and the relatively modest impacts of the more traditional ones such as Charter 88 in Britain might be usefully analysed from the perspective of their viability as metaphors within their respective contexts.

To expand on this last point, The United We Stand America organization seems to be a non-sequitur in traditional American political terms. It is not a political party, has no codified ideology in the form of a platform or manifesto, runs no candidates for office and operates as a non-profit organization which, under the laws of the United States, prohibits it from doing so. Membership comes from across a wide range of political perspectives and standard categories do not seem to adequately address what UWSA is all about. But it is undeniably a force in American politics and its members have joined hoping to have precisely that impact. It is equally clear that the movement, having transformed at least part of itself from metaphor to conventional presence - from UWSA to the Reform Party - has lost much of its potency.

In Rorty's terms, UWSA might be viewed a metaphor implanted within the traditional political vocabulary of professional politicians, journalists and academics. These groups seem to have the most difficulty coming to terms with what the organization is and what it is up to. The man on the street seemed from the very beginning more able to grasp what is going on than a United States Senator, seasoned political pundit or professional academic. This makes some sense within a perspective which Rorty's thoughts suggest. His ideas about the

nature of metaphors and the incommensurability of disparate final vocabularies seems to me to be well on point. Metaphors are unintelligible in terms of the languages into which they are introduced until they are, by gradual use and through re-weaving of the final vocabulary, converted into dead metaphors - or ordinary language.

Beyond that, and again in Rorty's terms, UWSA might be seen as the creation of a new type of political player on the individual level of the citizen. Membership of UWSA might be seen as individuals engaged in the process of self creation and creation of community on a basis radically new. What emerges, under this interpretation, is a type of being that has never before existed and is unintelligible from within the traditional vocabularies.

A look at a less effective attempt at political reform, that of Charter 88 in Britain, through the same filters might yield a different but equally interesting set of conclusions. Perhaps the vocabulary underlying this organization either isn't at all, or isn't enough of, a metaphor within the political vocabulary of Britain. As such, it would exhibit none of the 'social change' characteristics which metaphors are assumed to possess. Its intents would seem as just a minor reshuffling of existing components of a traditional vocabulary and, therefore, of no threat to the established order. Its members might then appear as simply minor variations of culturally traditional political activists and, therefore, pose no threat to other minor variations on the same theme.

The de-divination of philosophy and political theory: Finally, Rorty offers a 'Ye gods be gone - every one' perspective. In a real sense it is an invitation to a dance - a dance of humans rather than pseudo-gods. In the move from internally justified and privilege jargon to vocabularies which are contingent and change over time, Rorty is offering a way back into human society for the academics which he sees as prisoners of their own presumptions. He is pointing out that philosophy, and indeed political theory and all other academic disciplines, need to stop claiming such a privilege. I am reminded of a poem by Bill Holm:

Advise

Someone dancing inside us learned only a few steps:

the “Do-Your-Work” in 4/4 time
the “What-Do-You-Expect” Waltz.

He hasn’t noticed yet the woman standing away from the lamp,

the one with black eyes who knows the rumba
and strange steps in jumpy rhythms from the mountains
in Bulgaria.

If they dance together, something unexpected will happen.

If they don’t, the next world will be a lot like this one.

Bill Holm

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