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The late Richard Rorty (October 4, 1931 - June 8, 2007) occupies a very peculiar place in the field of academic philosophy. The projection of his career can easily be divided into three strands of thought. In his early days he was an analytic philosopher as traditionally conceived, doing work with incorrigibility of mental statements. In 1979 with his publication of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* he made a decisive and dramatic break with the tradition. In this critical work, Rorty accuses analytic philosophy of unduly relying on a representational theory of perception, questioning the notion that our minds represent or mirror an external reality. Rejecting attempts to ground our beliefs in raw feels or analytic statements, Rorty would rather have us think of beliefs and knowledge as generated out of social practice. Such a conception of knowledge leads Rorty to question the cultural role of philosophy as an interdisciplinary arbiter of claims to truth. The third strand of Rorty's thinking is political in nature. At the most fundamental level, Rorty's politics are grounded in a basic desire to reduce the amount of cruelty in the world. Ideally, his politics would culminate in a "maximally free,

leisured, and tolerant global community."[1] This definition is narrowed considerably in Rorty's work *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity.* He stresses the fact that this ideal society is held together not by essentialist notions of a universally shared human nature but rather the collective agreement to allow everyone the freedom of self creation. Needless to say, his liberalism gets quite a bit more complicated from there, and it is a few of those complications that I would like to address here.

My main worry is that Rorty's critical arguments are too powerful for his liberalism to be supported. In order to save himself from relativism, Rorty relies on measuring the effectiveness of an action against a predetermined goal. However, his holism prevents him from constructing a broad political agenda that does not emerge directly from the process used to enact that agenda in the world. Even if Rorty's politics do not degrade to relativism, his liberalism is nevertheless unable to sustain itself without taking place within a broader pragmatic conversation. I believe Rorty's liberalism to be inextricably bound to his critical arguments, so I will discuss them briefly before turning my attention to his politics.

The target of Rorty's critique is the traditional epistemological attempt to find a "permanent neutral framework for inquiry" - a foundation removed from history which allows for the possibility of legitimate knowledge. [2] Rorty would rather see us turn to a philosophy more akin to that of his heroes Dewey,

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[1]Rorty, Richard. "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre." *Philosophy as Cultural Politics.* Cambridge UP. New York. 2007.

[2]Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature.* Princeton UP. New Jersey. 1979. *pg. 8*

Wittgenstein and Heidegger. He rejects any conception of philosophy that attempts to adjust our linguistic or mental representations in order to more accurately mirror the world. In so doing, his project is largely historical – he argues that some of the major problems of philosophy are not perennial but rather emerge out of particular historical circumstances and need not be of concern. It is important to realize that Rorty does not claim that these are not real problems, rather that they are problems of a particular language game – a game that philosophy as such has been caught in ever since the 17th century. Rather than trying to find just how we can ground knowledge in, for example, raw feels, Rorty would like to "try something new."

I see the main power of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* as nothing more than problematizing traditional epistemology to such a degree as to shift the question to one not of the accuracy of such philosophy but of its *necessity*. As Rorty says, "the seventeenth-century image [of the mind mirroring reality] is outworn – that the tradition which it inspired has lost its vitality. But this is quite a different criticism from saying that this tradition misunderstood something or failed to solve a problem."[3] Rorty's goal is not to show that epistemology as representation is *wrong* in some deep philosophical sense, but that it is not required.

The key distinction that makes this claim possible is that between cause or explanation and justification. Rorty is no idealist, he affirms a world of "brute causes"; however, he denies the possibility of, and, more importantly, the necessity of, basing our justifications on these causes. Instead of trying to find just where our causal

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[3] *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 114

interaction with the world gives rise to knowledge, we should see knowledge as arising out of a process of justification that is inevitably social. Indeed, this is the premise from which Rorty begins to build his liberalism – that knowledge arises out of social justification, of conversation, and not representation.[4] Rorty puts the choice (and I think it is important to think of this as a choice) succinctly:

> We can think of knowledge as a relation between the propositions in question and other propositions from which the former may be inferred. Or we may think of both knowledge and justification as privileged relations to the objects those propositions are about. If we think in the first way, we will see no need to end the potentially infinite regress of propositions-brought-forward-in-defense-of-other-propositions. It would be foolish to keep the conversation on the subject going once everyone, or the majority, or the wise, are satisfied, but of course we *can*. If we think of knowledge in the second way, we will want to get behind reasons to causes, beyond argument to compulsion from the object known, to a situation in which argument would be not just silly but impossible, for anyone gripped by the object in the required way will be *unable* to doubt or to see an alternative.[5]

When Rorty says that we could keep the conversation (of foundationalist epistemology) going, it reveals his move towards anti-representationalism as a choice, a choice to put something prior, namely utopian politics, to epistemological concerns. Framing the whole of Rorty's

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[4]*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 170.
[5]*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 159.

program as a choice closes off many of the more common criticisms; however, it also opens the way to others. One obvious worry in this selection is raised when Rorty says that "it would be foolish to keep the conversation on the subject going once everyone, or the majority, or the wise, are satisfied." Just who must be satisfied before a conversation is closed off is of course a problem for theory building *any* sort; however, I am concerned that Rorty's characteristic insouciance may exacerbate the issue.

Such worries aside, Rorty is able to strengthen his position by interpreting Wilfred Sellars' criticism of the "Myth of the Given" and W.V.O. Quine's analysis of the analytic/synthetic distinction as raising important questions about epistemic privilege and privileged representations that could easily be assuaged by understanding knowledge as social justification.[6] It is here that Rorty articulates his position as "Epistemological Behaviorism." The defining feature of epistemological behaviorism is in "explaining rationality and epistemic authority by reference to what society lets us say, rather than the latter by the former."[7] Thus we can think of the incorrigibility of a pain (Sellars) or the apparent difference between "all bachelors are unmarried males" and "all swans are white" (Quine) not as ontologically significant but simply as features of our

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[6]Once again, whether or not Sellars' or Quine's criticisms are successful is not my concern. I will assume that they make the "given" and the analytic/synthetic distinction sufficiently problematic to warrant Rorty's anti-representationalist response justifiable and will not discuss the specifics of their arguments here.

[7]*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 174.

To spell out epistemological behaviorism further: It is (1) common to Dewey and Wittgenstein, (2) holistic, (3) without need for metaphysics, and (4) it shows that if we understand the rules of a language game, we understand all the epistemology there is to know

behavior and language within the context of broader social practices. These seemingly special cases arise out of virtue of the fact that no one cares to question our raw feels or analytic statements. Such a position of defining truth in terms of social utility immediately raises the charge of relativism, which will be in due time. For now all that is important is the realization that the epistemologist must answer Quine and Sellars, whereas epistemological behaviorism, with a rejection of representationalism, avoids the issue all together. This, when combined with the benefits that epistemological behaviorism may accrue, gives us good reason to give up the project of foundationalist epistemology and choose instead to view knowledge and truth as emerging from social discourse.

Rorty's claim that truth is what our peers let us get away with saying should be read not simply as a matter of fact, but as a claim with significant moral force behind it. It is this very conception of truth which serves as the basic foundation of Rorty's liberalism, which I will turn to now. Rorty believes that *if* we can come to accept such a view of truth we would be taking the first steps toward clearing the ground for legitimate moral action, *not* committing ourselves to relativism. The key to understanding this is to see that Rorty is not making a positive claim about truth's relation to the nature of reality but rather saying that the trouble with any attempt to identify the nature of reality is such that we *can,* and more importantly, we *should* view truth as that which our peers let us get away with. This is perhaps best expressed in a passage from *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity:*

> 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. It is to say that our purposes would be served best by ceasing to see truth as a deep matter, as a topic of philosophical interest, or "true" as a term which repays "analysis."[8]

The language in this passage makes it clear that for Rorty, his pragmatic turn is a *choice*. It is a deliberate change in the direction humans should look in order to generate meaning and ethical guidance. Instead of searching for a reality of the external world, we should be responsible only to each other. Once the quest for absolute truth is given up, one is left with either a relativistic morass or an ironic, pragmatic commitment to one ideal or another grounded in nothing but faith and a desire for social cohesion.

This is how Rorty attempts to evade the charge of relativism. In order to invoke a pejorative sense of relativism, a possibility of a non-relative, a-historical, universal truth must be presupposed. Once Rorty, through the work of his predecessors, is able to sufficiently complicate this possibility, an ironic commitment is justifiable. Rorty is able to claim that even if there is no truth "out there" we are nevertheless able to weigh, for example, the different possible outcomes of a choice, it is just that that weighing is done in reference to a goal other than that of truth traditionally conceived. For those convinced that a foundational framework for epistemology

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[8] Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity.* Cambridge UP. New York. 1989. pg. 8

is an impossibility, Rorty's ironic commitment to a liberalism would avoid relativism better than any appeal to a universal human nature. This helps to explain the divisiveness of Rorty's views. No one is neutral on Rorty; you are either for him or (more often) against him. It all turns on whether or not the reader is convinced that the troubles besetting foundationalist epistemology warrant an entirely different approach.

The question then is what exactly is the new approach Rorty is asking for – what comes next? Over the years Rorty has come to advocate slightly different suggestions as to what should replace philosophy and the search for objective truth. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* Rorty advocates a practice closer to hermeneutics than epistemology, where "the point of edifying philosophy is to keep the conversation going rather than to find objective truth."[9] This is a practice in which that job of keeping the conversation going falls to the philosopher as an "informed dilettante, [a] polypragmatic, Socratic intermediary between various discourses." [10] Rorty identifies a problem that, at least in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* it is up to such a philosopher to solve. He says, "holistic theories seem to license everyone to construct his own little whole – his own little paradigm, his own little practice, his own little language-game – and then crawl into it." [11] In Rorty's early work it is the conversational philosopher who identifies these "hermetic thinkers" and "charm[s] [them] out of their self-enclosed practices."[12]

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[9] *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature,* 377
[10] *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 317
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.

In his later work, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity,* it is clear that Rorty has come to strongly endorse everyone's construction of his or her "own little whole." He terms such people ironists. Rorty defines his ironist as someone who "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."[13] This notion of a "final vocabulary" plays various significant roles in Rorty's position. Rorty identifies a final vocabulary as "a set of words which [human beings] employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives" from which the "user has no noncircular argumentative recourse." A final vocabulary ultimately consists in those words which a person uses to explain what it is in their life that is important to them.[14] It is final in the sense that it is limited. The ironist is willing to admit that her vocabulary is limited; the ironist doubts whether or not her vocabulary is the "correct" way of looking at the world. Furthermore, "she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts" and "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."[15]

It is crucial to notice that this is a direct nod to anti-representationalism. Rorty is not interested in those who see vocabularies as being better or worse according to any

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[13]*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 73

[14]The concept of a vocabulary plays a much broader role in Rorty's work, which I will discuss later. Here I am only concerned with its relevance on the concept of an ironist.

[15]*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 73

sort of accuracy. The ironist has given up on trying to mirror the world with his or her vocabulary, which, I am arguing, is the all-important and contentious first step in the process. Thus the very concept of ironism (and the entailed process of redescription) requires and presupposes the abandonment of the idea that our thoughts and language represent an external reality. As I have shown above, Rorty admittedly cannot give conclusive arguments for such an abandonment. The best he can do is offer it as an internally coherent choice and argue that it would be more expedient in achieving certain goals.

The ironist also realizes that "anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed."[16] This particular claim has generated a considerable amount of criticism. Many have taken it to be a flippant remark that discredits the significance of moral frameworks. I believe these criticisms to be almost always generated by misreading. This comment, that anything can be made to look good or bad by redescription, should not be read as a claim that we have no standards by which to measure an ethical statement, rather it is simply an indication that there is not a universal standard, that the standards by which we measure good or bad are contextual ones and should be spelled out if a moral statement is to be convincing. Rorty is not saying that anything could be made to look good or bad to *anyone*, instead, the point he is making is that anything can be made to look good or bad to *someone somewhere*.[17] This is made explicit in Rorty's defense from the attacks of Jean Elshtain. He says that in making this

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[16]Ibid.

[17]For a defense of Rorty against specific claims of this nature, see Frazier, Brad. "The Ethics of Rortian Redescription" *Philosophy and Social Criticism.* Vol. 32 no. 4. 2006.

assertion, he was trying to, in his words, "seize upon the grain of truth in Socrates' claim that nobody knowingly does evil. Everyone (usually just before doing evil, but if not, then shortly afterward) tries to whip up a story according to which he or she did the right thing, and usually succeeds."[18]

That being said, the role of redescription remains vague. In practice, all it amounts to is fessing up to the historical contingency of our most dear beliefs, but what does this do for the ironist? First of all, Rorty sees the process of redescription as an escape from contingency. The opportunity to redescribe one's self in a new vocabulary, or better yet, play vocabularies off one another, gives the ironist the ability to generate actual human agency through self creation. Rorty genuinely sees people as incarnated in their final vocabularies. Assuming we are the products of contingency and have no claim to an essential human nature, we are nothing more than the words we use to describe what we believe. To describe yourself in a new vocabulary of your own creation is to create a self, or, in Harold Bloom's words, to "give birth to oneself." For Rorty, a transition from self-discovery to self-creation "would consist in our becoming reconciled to the thought that this [self-creation within contingency] is the only sort of power over the world which we can hope to have,... that would be the final abjuration of the notion that truth... is to be found 'out there.'"[19]

Redescription also plays an important role in the generation of Rorty's liberalism. Such a claim contains obvious tension; the notion of ironic self-creation out of

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[18] Rorty, Richard. "Robustness: A Reply to Jean Bethke Elshtain", *Politics of Irony*, ed. Conway and Seery. pg. 220

[19] *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 40

idiosyncratic play with vocabularies seems to run, at best, contradictory to liberal ideals. Rorty's answer lies in a strict separation between the private and the public. In the private side of one's life, anything goes; one is free to redescribe the world in whatever vocabulary the ironist sees fit. However, within the public realm, "we all have an overriding obligation to diminish cruelty, to make human beings equal in respect to their liability to suffering...[which] suggests that a nonlingustic ability, the ability to feel pain, is what is important, and that differences in vocabulary are much less important."[20] The liberal ironist simply has a commitment to liberalism insofar as he or she thinks "that cruelty is the worst thing we do." This is the closest Rorty comes to admitting a universal human nature – the admission that all humans feel pain and can be humiliated. This is the primary vehicle of Rorty's morality, the "ability to see more and more traditional differences as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation."[21] It is through the process of redescription that we are able to encounter more ways of being human and more ways of experiencing pain. I would claim that this commitment to human solidarity is the best insight to come out of Rorty's work.

We now have the proper context to see the full extent of the circularity and resultant tension of Rorty's position. To summarize at risk of oversimplification: first we see the difficulty in finding a rational foundation for human knowledge, prompting a turn to acceptance of the contingency of belief and the realization that we ultimately do not need such a foundation for progression towards

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[20] *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 88

[21] *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 192.

goals we share with others. This motivates us to investigate what would be most advantageous to achieve those goals. However, once we try to flesh out the specific moves Rorty makes, this once linear transition turns into a tangled mess. Rorty's stated goal is that of the liberal utopia; however, that utopia is defined in terms of a maximization of "bourgeois" freedoms to give the ironist the freedom of redescription. This redescription serves two main purposes: (1) as a self-affirming full embrace of our contingency; vocabulary play is our best chance at self-creation and (2) a moral purpose of allowing us to engage other vocabularies, thereby expanding our notion of what it means to be human and the circle of those who we have moral commitments to.[22] It is evident that the transition Rorty is advocating is by no means linear – it is instead a mutually self-reinforcing web posited as an expression of nothing more than Rorty's prior commitments. Rorty's holism prevents him from simply constructing a political utopia and then measuring our actions in terms of their effectiveness in bringing about that utopia.

With this realization in mind, it seems that we cannot reasonably point to any one part of this web as the "goal" of Rorty's pragmatism. We can think of reading novels of as a means to the end of a liberal utopia just as well as the liberal utopia as a means to the end of reading

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[22] It is important to remember, as I have been emphasizing, that because Rorty refuses to talk about the ultimate nature of reality, he is unable to claim that contingency is a "fact of the matter" without directly contradicting himself. At best Rorty can "redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until [he] [has] created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it." (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 9.)

novels. In-and-of-itself, this criticism is not particularly harmful; Rorty would gladly accept such circularity as coming with the territory of anti-representationalism. The real worry is that when Rorty commits himself to multiple ideals (redescription and solidarity) he gets too far ahead of himself and spreads himself too thin. I think that one of the ways in which this is most apparent is in his selective use of different parts of other philosophers's work. Rorty is notorious for taking pieces of other theories that serve his purposes and rejecting the parts that hinder his politics. The only way to understand this is through the tension between the desire for authenticity through redescription and a liberalism built on solidarity. Rorty's conception of truth and contingency require the belief that there is not, in his words, "a natural terminus to inquiry, a way things really are, and that understanding what that way is will tell us what to do with ourselves." It seems that Rorty's multiple commitments force him to say that there is no natural terminus to inquiry, except when it comes to the political direction we should take. At the end of the day, if we are to accept Rorty's epistemology, or lack thereof, we should see his politics as one of many possible positions within a much broader pragmatic discourse.

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