Richard Rorty
and
The Myth of A Pluralistic Society

I have discovered Richard Rorty a bit late in the game. After thirty some years with little or no contact with academia, I resumed my attempt to understand Heidegger and stumbled across Rorty because of his involvement in a colloquium at Yale published as Martin Heidegger: Politics, Art, and Technology. I found his comments refreshingly commonsensical and at the same time challenging because he seemed to be debunking or discrediting some of the ideas that had excited me and inspired my intellectual life since college. I was intrigued enough to do a little research about Rorty on the internet. I read excerpts from his books and some essays about his ideas. Eventually I bought a copy of his most recent collection of essays, Philosophy and Social Hope.

There are two things that attract me to Rorty. First there was the impression that Rorty had assimilated the insights of "post-modern" thought and made them not only digestible but highly readable. While I was reading Rorty, I was also wading through Heidegger's Basic Problems of Phenomenology, and the difference in their prose styles is striking to put it mildly. Rorty is the ultimate conversationalist, the person you would pray to have seated next to you at a faculty dinner. His prose is fluid and direct. He is obviously committed to ideas and ideals, but he also has a sense of humor. Since I had run aground on Heidegger in college, I had never even attempted to read Derrida or Foucault or any of the other post-modern thinkers who pulled the rug out from under philosophical debate after I graduated. Rorty seemed to be conversant with post-modern thinkers and appeared to cut through their convoluted or overly self-conscious preoccupations to the heart of the matter.

The second thing that attracted me to Rorty was his politics. I was thrilled to discover that a prominent academic can write persuasively these days about the need for the government to be involved in the redistribution of wealth.

At the same time I felt challenged by a lot of the things that Rorty says or implies, and I could easily see why he is perceived as provocative or even symptomatic of a disease which threatens to undermine all that is good in Western culture. I felt that I needed to grapple with the real implications of Rorty's ideas, and this essay represents the first round of the wrestling match.

I have long been haunted by the specter of moral relativism and intrigued by the "What About Hitler" argument which cites a universally acknowledged evil as proof that there is still some universally valid, if only implicit, basis for moral judgment. When the evaporation of my adolescent religion left me groping for some foundation on which to base the decisions shaping my life, I turned to philosophy, literature and art in the hope of finding solid ground. I have "muddled through" without finding certainty, but I have clung to a belief that there is some dimension to life which is appropriately called divine and which offers a sense of meaning or purpose.

In other words, I may be Mr. Rorty's ideal reader -- completely in sympathy with his political agenda and desperately in need of liberation from the habit of outmoded "Philosophical" thinking.

Rorty is unequivocal in his belief that a pluralistic society based on liberal democratic principles is the best model for social organization the human race has yet devised. He acknowledges that it will always remain a goal, because there will always be varieties of human life which need to be brought into the fold. He is realistic enough to recognize that the struggle to include new cultures or life styles may be a difficult and even violent one, but the hope that a pluralistic society can be achieved seems to be the primary passion inspiring his work.

In my initial impressions of Rorty I balked at three things. 1) I am not so sure that the concept of a pluralistic society might not be self-contradictory; 2) I recoil at any suggestion that ideas of hierarchy and/or depth are simply nostalgic yearnings for authority which need to be cast overboard; and 3) I am suspicious of some of the conversational diction which seems to be glossing over complications and simplifying issues by rhetorical means. Whether these are characteristics of Rorty's writings or projections of my own fears and insecurities is what I need to explore.

The most fruitful place for me to begin may be Rorty's diction. He is fond of terms like "interesting", "useful", or "tedious." He likes the phrase (adopted from Sellars) "how things hang together" and he writes about philosophy in terms of "jargon" and "conversation." He seems to want to bring everything down to earth, and his subtext seems to be, "Don't worry about the pompous and convoluted terminology used by professional philosophers; what's really at stake here is something you and I can discuss like ordinary human beings using the language that serves us all so well in other areas of our lives." It is a reassuring tone, especially when it is accompanied by a healthy and even satirical sense of humor.

One of the first samples of this that I came across is in Rorty's introduction to Consequences of Pragmatism:

> Pragmatists think that the history of attempts to isolate the True or the Good, or to define the word "true" or "good," supports their suspicion that there is no interesting work to be done in this area. It might, of course, have turned out otherwise. People have, oddly enough, found something interesting to say about the essence of Force and the definition of "number." They might have found something interesting to say about the essence of Truth. But in fact they haven't. *(CP-xiv)*

"Interesting" has long been a suspect term for me. Sometime during my freshman year in college it dawned on me that anything can be interesting depending on what you bring to it. As I was fond of telling myself, a pile of dog droppings on the sidewalk can be "interesting" if you are engaged in the right research project. To say something is "interesting" is to say something about yourself; it is an expression of your interests. Likewise to say that one thing is not "interesting" is to say that you are interested in something else and therefore you find that thing "tedious" or "boring." And we all know that the cardinal rule for being a good dinner companion is not to go on about things the other person finds tedious or boring.

I don't know if I have ever read an interesting definition of "number." I confess I have read attempts to say something about the essence of truth which I found fascinating. And Rorty knows I have; or at least he knows that a lot of his readers will share my instinctive reaction to his choice of words. He is not just being simple and direct. He is being deliberately provocative or at least playful and teasing. And he may be being a bit disingenuous when he says it "might…have turned out otherwise," since his point ultimately seems to be that any inquiry into the essence of Truth is doomed to self-contradiction or pointlessness. The nonsense lyrics of Edward Lear are "interesting," of course, so perhaps someone might have written an inquiry into the nature of truth which Professor Rorty would find interesting as well.

There is actually a nice irony in the implied metaphor of dinner conversation. The rules for amusing conversation reflect a set of priorities in which the relationships between the individuals are ranked higher than the value of the ideas espoused by any one of the individuals. A conversation is about entertainment or some other kind of mutually satisfying exchange. The point is to be together or connect. While seeming to reduce grand philosophical debate to the level of society gossip, Rorty is actually underscoring what is in his view the ultimate purpose of communication. The priority lies with the coming together of human beings into a social group not in the intrinsic value of ideas or even in the achievement by an individual of an enlightened or exalted state.

Rorty's use of "interesting" is deliberately exploiting its connotations of having the value of something be a function of the "interests" of a person or group. My initial impression, at least, is that this is rock bottom for the pragmatist. There is no "other" in relationship to which human nature is defined. This is why pragmatism inspires anxieties about "decadence" which Rorty sees as being concerned with an

> unwillingness to submit oneself to something "out there" — to recognize that beyond the languages of men and women there is something to which these languages, and the men and women themselves, must try to be "adequate." *(CP-xxxiv)*

I am subject to these anxieties and I get uncomfortable when Rorty makes the same point in another way in his description of a "post-Philosophical" culture:

> The most powerful reason for thinking that no such culture is possible is that seeing all criteria as no more than temporary resting places, constructed by a community to facilitate its inquiries, seems morally humiliating. Suppose that Socrates was wrong, that we have not once seen the Truth, and so will not, intuitively, recognize it when we see it again. This means that when the secret police come, when the torturers violate the innocent, there is nothing to be said to them of the form "There is something within you which you are betraying. Though you embody the practices of a totalitarian society which will endure forever, there is something beyond those practices which condemns you." This thought is hard to live with, as is Sartre's remark:
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> Tomorrow, after my death, certain people may decide to establish fascism, and the others may be cowardly or miserable enough to let them get away with it. At that moment, fascism will be the truth of man, and so much the worse for us. In reality, things will be as much as man has decided they are.
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> This hard saying brings out what ties Dewey and Foucault, James and Nietzsche, together – the sense that there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions. *(CP-xlii)*

I want to start quibbling immediately with Sartre's use of terms like "cowardly" or "miserable" if they have no basis other than the attitudes he shares with the choir to which he is preaching. Such

quibbling is premature, but it points to the an issue I need to sort out with Rorty. It appears to me that the political values he espouses can not be debated or justified in any way. Anything he says or writes can only be rhetoric which attempts to persuade others to see things his way by some means other than "rational" discourse. How is it possible to "appeal" to someone who views things differently? Is it a simply matter of manipulating them by playing on their prejudices or emotions or is there some other form of interaction in which one can communicate a way of viewing things? He does in fact use the phrase "manipulation of sentiment" (TP-176) to describe a process which can promote progress towards utopia. How or whether philosophical thought and discussion can be brought to bear on political and social issues is one of the things I am looking for in Rorty.

How does one talk about the idea of a pluralistic society? Again my initial impression is that this idea is for Rorty a myth which defines him and the social network with which he identifies. It is his or their "project" which gives meaning to his work or direction to his life. Would it matter if it were self-contradictory? How inclusive can a society be without coming apart at the seams? It is easy enough to agree that personal beliefs and private behavior need not be legislated. What a man thinks or does in the privacy of his own home is nobody's business – unless, of course, his hobby involves sitting at the attic window with a high powered rifle picking off unsuspecting pedestrians in the street below.

The classic concept of the social compact is that the individual is free to pursue his projects so long as they do not prevent others from pursuing theirs. The problem with this formula is that it does not do justice to the complex way in which the public and private spheres interact. This is perhaps most immediately obvious with the projects of parenting and education. Do I have the right to raise my children in a way that ensures they will espouse the same values that motivate me? Most parents would insist on this even though they might feel it is a losing battle. It is a losing battle for many parents because parents, even in conjunction with schools, do not exercise full control over the shaping of their children's values. There are larger social forces which shaped me was well as my child. Children of racist bigots benefit from this process by most ways of reckoning. Parents with ardent religious beliefs or rigid sexual morality may not feel their children are benefiting from the process.

The notion of a pluralistic society involves a belief that even the most disparate lifestyles can find enough common ground to live and let live. The religious fanatic dos not fit into this plan very easily. Belief in a pluralistic society is inherently incompatible with any rigidly authoritarian or absolutist belief system. The true believer may tolerate the co-existence of deluded libertines, but he will never believe that the best society is one which exposes his children to all manner of evil or misguided perversions. He will continue to work to liberate society from these influences.

A pluralistic society may be an unachievable goal, but it is clear that Rorty sees it as the lighthouse towards which we should keep rowing. What makes it a worthwhile goal seems in some of Rorty's essays to boil down to a question of the reduction of cruelty. There may also be some celebration of the diversity of human culture as flora and fauna which make the universe more "interesting," but it is unclear to me whether Rorty is just accepting the corner into which his philosophical musings have painted him rather than abandon his logic so that he can find another way of articulating what he is really about.

Two things I do not share with Rorty are his involvement with analytic or linguistic schools of philosophy and his experience with professional philosophers. My interest in philosophy grew out of religion and parallels my interest in literature. I have no problem agreeing that "Blake is as much a philosopher as Fichte," (CP-xv) and I find much of Rorty's explication of analytic philosophy as "tedious" as the little bit of analytic philosophy I have bothered to read. I have never regarded science as the paradigm of wisdom even though my secondary education was much stronger in math and science than in the humanities. Mathematics and logic seemed to me to be mental gymnastics comparable to brain teasers and cross-word puzzles with nothing to offer the kind of reflection or understanding required by compelling moral and existential decisions. The one science course I took in college convinced me that scientific "knowledge" was the simplest or most elegant hypothesis for explaining and predicting natural phenomena, and as such it seemed irrelevant to decisions about how to live. In other words philosophy for me has always been rooted in a sense of moral or existential freedom and the need to make decisions. Wisdom always had connotations of guidance about how to conduct one's life, and I took philosophy to be literally "the love of wisdom."

I have been oblivious to the agendas of professional philosophers for the 35 years since I last studied philosophy in an academic setting, and the two places where I studied philosophy were extraordinary havens for professors who believed passionately in the moral, existential and even religious relevance of philosophical thinking. As a result I find the bulk of Rorty's seminal work, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* to be alien and beside the point. The "mind-body problem" has always seemed to me to be a conundrum which indicates on the face of it that something is wrong with the premises on which it is

based, and I have never felt a compelling need to sort it out. Only towards the end of the book when Rorty begins to discuss the difference between "systematic" and "edifying" philosophy do I finally catch a wave I can ride with him.

"Edifying" is a term I associate with Kierkegaard, although I gather more recent translators have felt a need to discard it in favor of something more literal like "upbuilding." It has obvious moral or religious connotations along with the associations of a difficult struggle to achieve a higher state of being as in a process which "builds character." I respond positively to the suggestion that philosophical discourse can or should be "edifying." In Rorty, however, the term seems to have slipped down a notch or two.

Rorty introduces the idea of edifying philosophy with a discussion of Gadamer's idea of hermeneutics, which he characterizes as an attempt to set aside the classic definition of the essence of man in terms of "knowledge of essences". He says that for Gadamer education or self-formation rather than knowledge is the goal of thinking. Gadamer's German term for this is *Bildung,* as in Bildungsroman, the German term for the literary genre describing the formation of a character's personality or the growth from childhood to maturity, and it has connotations of a Romantic concept of man as "self-creating." Rorty explains his choice of the term edification:

> Since "education" sounds a bit too flat, and Bildung a bit too foreign, I shall use "edification" to stand for this project of finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking. The attempt to edify (ourselves or others) may consist in the hermeneutic activity of making connections between our own culture and some exotic culture or historical period, or between our own discipline and another discipline which seems to pursue incommensurable aims in an incommensurable vocabulary. But it may instead consist in the "poetic" activity of thinking up such new aims, new words, or new disciplines, followed by, so to speak, the inverse of hermeneutics: the attempt to reinterpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions. *(PMN-360)*

Rorty is careful, however, to distance himself from any Romantic notion of Self or Spirit:

> To say that we become different people, that we "remake" ourselves as we read more, talk more, and write more, is simply a dramatic way of saying that the sentences which become true of us by virtue of such activities are often more important to us than the sentences which become true of us when we drink more, earn more, and so on. The events which make us able to say new and interesting things about ourselves are, in this nonmetaphysical sense, more "essential" to us (at least to us relatively leisured intellectuals, inhabiting a stable and prosperous part of the world) than the events which change our shapes or our standards of living ("remaking" us in less "spiritual" ways). *(PMN-359*)

What is accomplished by this re-statement? What does it mean to be less "dramatic" when speaking or writing about the self. Certainly his circumlocution is flatter and less stimulating in its impact. Even though he is confirming that education is more "important to us" than getting a raise, rhetorically he is equating the two; and, more importantly, he is reducing education or edification to reading, talking and writing "more." In other words he has reduced it to a matter of the quantity of the input. Out of context this seems perverse. Is it really more "interesting" that one has memorized the Los Angeles White Pages than that one can finally afford to take a vacation?

Surely what Rorty is doing is debunking the notion of the Self with its vestiges of the idea of the Soul. He does not want to be associated with the idea that there is any kind of substantial entity called the self "behind" the actions or behavior attributed to the individual. We can talk about "ourselves," but we must not be duped into thinking that we each have a soul which is striving to perfect itself or to realize its potential. What difference does it make, though, what we think or how we talk about ourselves? What is it that makes something we say about ourselves "interesting?" Novelty alone does not seem to be the criteria. "Fruitful" seems more promising. Edification is the "project of finding...more fruitful ways of speaking." Something that is fruitful produces positive results. A "new way of speaking" in physics can presumably unleash nuclear energy. What I am looking for is the fruit yielded by a new way of speaking about human beings.

Rorty has just referred to "our 'existentialist' intuition that redescribing ourselves is the most important thing we can do." (PMN-358f) This sounds suspiciously like a moral imperative or even an intuition concerning the nature and/or destiny of man. Everything I have read of Rorty up to this point gives me the impression that he would not want to be caught in bed with either. At this point, though, I am still inclined to knock before I enter; and I shall try not to jump to conclusions. Rorty is trying to put "objective" scientific "knowledge" in its place, and he finds in Sartre's ideas a handy hammer.

> The utility of the "existentialist" view is that, by proclaiming that we have no essence, it permits us to see the descriptions of ourselves we find in one of (or in the unity of) the

> Naturwissenshaften as on a par with the various alternative descriptions offered by poets, novelists, depth psychologists, sculptors, anthropologists, and mystics. The former are not privileged representations in virtue of the fact that (at the moment) there is more consensus in the sciences than in the arts. They are simply among the repertoire of self-descriptions at our disposal. *(PMN-362)*

Sartre's view is useful because it helps persuade us that the natural sciences do not have a lock on valid ways of talking about our lives. If we were already sufficiently persuaded that scientific knowledge is only good so far as it goes, do we need to look for anything else in Sartre's description of existence? Or perhaps more to the point, is there anything useful in Rorty's description of the human condition? Is he in fact offering us a description of ourselves? Is it a mistake to interpret his book as a description of ourselves? Is he "simply" attempting to dismantle (or discredit) an outmoded description of ourselves without suggesting a replacement since such a suggestion might imply that the replacement was "privileged" in a way that no description of ourselves can be? Did I build this merry-go-round or did he?

Rorty has developed a distinction between "normal" and "abnormal" discourse which is the basis for his interpretation of the idea of hermeneutics. It is tempting to parody Rorty and say that "abnormal discourse" is simply a more dramatic term for what we all know as "thinking outside the box." Normal discourse takes place within a framework of shared assumptions or of consensus on the methods used to determine the validity of statements. Abnormal discourse introduces a new framework which cannot be translated into an existing framework.

> [N]ormal discourse is that which is conducted within an agreed-upon set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as answering a question, what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it. Abnormal discourse is what happens when someone joins in the discourse who is ignorant of these conventions or who sets them aside....The product of abnormal discourse can be anything from nonsense to intellectual revolution, and there is no discipline which describes it, any more than there is a discipline devoted to the study of the unpredictable, or of "creativity." But hermeneutics is the study of an abnormal discourse from the point of view of some normal discourse -- the attempt to make some sense of what is going on at a stage where we are still too unsure about it to describe it and thereby to begin an epistemological account of it. *(PMN-320f)*

He expounds on this distinction by reducing it to a matter of "familiarity." He can do this because of his pragmatism which sees ideas in terms of "practices." If enough people do things in a certain way long enough, the practices can be adopted as a norm and a consensus becomes possible. Discourse based on these practices can then be considered normal. At any given time there can be any number of accepted forms of normal discourse, and each of these will inevitably be limited in its ability to encompass the whole of human experience. Regarding any particular form of normal discourse as "privileged" or definitive can produce disastrous results in Rorty's view, and the main value of abnormal discourse and therefore of hermeneutics is that it prevents any one form of normal discourse from gaining ascendancy to the point of being repressive. Edifying philosophy for Rorty is essentially reactive. Its mission is to puncture the pretense of any "systematic" philosophy based on a form of normal discourse and, as Rorty often puts it, "to keep the conversation going."

I am not at all sure that Gadamer would agree with Rorty's characterization of hermeneutics despite the seeming similarity of much of their terminology. I have read even less of Gadamer than I have of Rorty, but there is one passage in "On the Origins of Philosophical Hermeneutics" which I think may indicate a fundamental difference in their thought and which is worth quoting at length:

> In all recognition of the world and orientation in the world, the element of understanding is to be worked out, and with this the universality of hermeneutics is to be demonstrated. Of course, the fundamental linguisticality of understanding cannot possibly mean that all experiencing of the world takes place only as language or in language. All too well known are those prelinguistic and metalinguistic dawnings, dumbnesses, and silences in which the immediate meeting with the world expresses itself. And who would deny that there are real conditions to human life? There are such things as hunger and love, work and domination, which themselves are not speech and language but which circumscribe the space within which speaking-with-each-other and listening-to-each-other can take place. There is no dispute that it is precisely such preformations of human opinion and speech that make hermeneutic reflection necessary. In respect to a hermeneutic oriented toward Socratic conversation, it goes without saying that doxa is not knowledge and that the seeming agreement in which we live and speak quasi-consciously is no real agreement. But even the exposing of the illusory, as done in Socratic dialogue, completes itself only in the element of linguisticality. Dialogue lets us be certain of possible assent, even in the wreckage of

> agreement, in misunderstanding, and in the famous admission of ignorance. The communiality that we call human rests on the linguistic constitution of our life-world. Every attempt to bring suit against distortions of interhuman understanding on the basis of critical reflection and argumentation confirms this communality.
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> Thus the hermeneutic aspect itself cannot remain limited to the hermeneutic sciences of art and history, nor to intercourse with "texts," and also not, by extension, to the experience of art itself. The universality of the hermeneutic problem, already recognized by Schleiermacher, has to do with the universe of the reasonable, that is, with anything and everything about which human beings can seek to reach agreement. Where reaching an understanding {verständigung] seems to be impossible, because we "speak different languages," hermeneutics is still not at an end. Here the hermeneutic task poses itself in its full seriousness, namely as the task of finding a common language. But the common language is never a fixed given. Between speaking beings it is a language-at-play, one that must first warm itself up so that understanding can begin, especially at the point where different points of view seem irreconcilably opposed. The possibility of reaching an agreement between reasonable beings can never be denied. Even relativism, which seems rooted in the multiplicity of human languages, was already known to Heraclitus. The adult learning a foreign language and the child first learning to speak signify not just an appropriation of the means of producing understanding. Rather, this kind of learning by appropriation depicts a kind of preschematization of possible experience and its first acquisition. Growing into a language is a mode of gaining knowledge of the world. Not just such 'learning," however, but all experience realizes itself in ongoing communicative improvement of our knowledge of the world. In a much deeper and more general sense, as August Boeckh intended in his formula for the doings of philologists, experience is always "knowledge of the known." We live in traditions, and these are not a fragment of our world-experience, not a matter of "cultural transmissions" emerging from texts and monuments and communicating a meaning that is linguistically composed and historically documented. Rather, it is the world itself that is communicatively experienced and constantly given over to us as an infinitely open task. It is not the world of a first day but one that is always already handed down to us. In all those places where something is experienced, where unfamiliarity is overcome and what occurs is the shedding of light, the coming of insight, and appropriation, what takes place is the hermeneutic process of translation into the word and into the common consciousness. (*Gadamer:179-181)*

Despite Rorty's confidence that he has grasped Gadamer's ideas and translated them into more matter of fact language, I sense something very different in Gadamer, which is reflected in the difference in his interest in Plato. Perhaps it is that Gadamer believes it is possible and necessary to articulate things with philosophy that Rorty only believes can be articulated indirectly with poetry -- if at all. There is also a sense that "experience" means something broader or, dare I say, deeper for Gadamer than it does for Rorty. Rorty's efforts to free philosophical thinking from a simplistic visual metaphor and to recast everything in terms of human activities have, it seems to me, led him to be unnecessarily reductive.

> The term experience has come to be the epistemologists' name for their subject matter, a name for the ensemble of Cartesian cogitationes, Lockean ideas. In this sense, "experience" is a term of philosophical art (quite distinct from the everyday use, as in "experience on the job," in which it is equivalent to eμ□eiria). *(PMN-150)*

"Experience on the job" is not the only, or even the most common, everyday use of the term. It is carefully chosen to restrict the connotations to experience as accumulated practice in the performance of a set of tasks. I would suggest a more common use of the term is the one which has a larger component of passivity or receptivity as in "It was one of the worst experiences I have ever had." I suspect that on some basic level I "experience" life differently and perhaps more passively or receptively than Rorty.

In his explication of Gadamer Rorty reaches a boundary beyond which he is unable to go, and he says explicitly something which I had been seeing between the lines in other essays:

> So Gadamer's effort to get rid of the classic picture of man-as-essentially-knower-of-essences is, among other things, an effort to get rid of the distinction between fact and value, and thus to let us think of "discovering the facts" as one project of edification among others. This is why Gadamer devotes so much time to breaking down the distinctions which Kant made among cognition, morality, and aesthetic judgment. There is no way, as far as I can see, in which to argue the issue of whether to keep the Kantian "grid" in place or set it aside. There is no "normal" philosophical discourse which provides common commensurating ground for those who see science and edification as, respectively, "rational" and "irrational," and those who see the quest for objectivity as one possibility among others to be taken account of in wirkungsgeschichtliche

> Bewusstsein. It there is no such common ground, all we can do is to show how the other side looks from our own point of view. That is, all we can do is be hermeneutic about the opposition -- trying to show how the odd or paradoxical or offensive things they say hang together with the rest of what they want to say, and how what they say looks when put in our own alternative idiom. *(PMN-365)*

This is the description of how political debate is possible that I was looking for as I read some of his other essays. To describe it as "all we can do" has connotations of resignation which seem absent in Gadamer's sense of the urgency or "full seriousness" of the hermeneutic task. Nonetheless it does recognize the possibility of debate, even if that debate must be characterized in a way that makes it seem unscientific or lacking in philosophical rigor to some.

Before I confront the relationship between Rorty's political ideas and his philosophical ideas, I want to back up and come at Rorty's philosophical ideas from another angle. Much of what Rorty says is based on a distinction between "knowledge as representing reality rather than coping with it." (CP-202) "Coping" is a central idea he adopts from Dewey's pragmatism, and it is based on a biological metaphor concerning the interaction of an organism and its environment. It is also the root of what counts as "experience" for Dewey:

> Wherever there is life, there is behavior, activity. In order that life may persist, this activity has to be both continuous and adapted to the environment. This adaptive adjustment, moreover , is not wholly passive; is not a mere matter of the moulding of the organism by the environment….There is no such thing in a living creature as mere conformity to conditions, though parasitic forms may approach this limit. In the interests of the maintenance of life there is transformation of some elements in the surrounding medium. The higher the form of life, the more important is the active reconstruction of the medium…
>
> Such transformation scenes are so familiar that we overlook their meaning. We forget that the inherent power of life is illustrated in them. Note what a change this point of view entails in the traditional notions of experience. Experience becomes an affair primarily of doing. The organism does not stand about, Micawberlike, waiting for something to turn up. It does not wait passive and inert for something to impress itself upon it from without. The organism acts in accordance with its own structure, simple or complex, upon its surroundings As a consequence the changes produced in the environment react upon the organism and its activities. The living creature undergoes, suffers, the consequences of its own behavior. This close connection between doing and suffering or undergoing forms what we call experience. Disconnected doing and disconnected suffering are neither of them experiences. Suppose fire encroaches upon a man when he is asleep. Part of his body is burned away. The burn does not perceptibly result from what he has done. There is nothing which in any instructive way can be named experience. *(Dewey: 84-86)*

Knowledge as coping is the fruit of experience, perhaps the memory of experience. Even though Dewey indicates that an organism "acts in accordance with its own structure," I have the impression that Rorty would not want to say there is an inherent structure which limits the way in which the human species can interact with its environment, just is there is apparently no limit to the kinds of environments within which the human species can live, since its environment is largely of its own making. Every society or culture, every individual lifestyle is an experiment in the possible interactions between the organism and its environment, and there can always be new or different experiments taking place simultaneously at any point in history. There is nothing inevitable about the way in which these experiments develop, no inexorable evolutionary plan at work.

To see knowledge and truth in terms of coping or of an active involvement with one's environment which is the equivalent of "life" is, it seems to me, another way of saying that philosophy or thought is grounded in moral choice or existential decision. As Rorty puts it, "When the contemplative mind, isolated from the stimuli of the moment, takes large views, its activity is more like deciding what to do than deciding that a representation is accurate." (CP 163) Viewing truth as accurate representation has its uses, but ultimately our attachment to ideas is a function of our choices about how to live.

> To say that the parts of properly analyzed true sentences are arranged in a way isomorphic to the parts of the world paired with them sounds plausible if one thinks of a sentence like ":Jupiter has moons." It sounds slightly less plausible for "The earth goes round the sun," less still for "There is no such thing as natural motion," and not plausible at all for "The universe is infinite." When we want to praise or blame assertions of the latter sort of sentence, we show how the decision to assert them fits into a whole complex of decisions about what terminology to use, what books to read, what projects to engage in, what life to live. In this respect they resemble such sentences a "Love is the only law" and "History is the story of class struggle." The whole vocabulary of

> isomorphism, picturing, and mapping is out of place here, as indeed is the notion of being true of objects. If we ask what objects these sentences claim to be true of, we get only unhelpful repetitions of the subject terms –"the universe," "the law," "history." Or, even less helpfully, we get talk about "the facts," or "the way the world is." The natural approach to such sentences, Dewey tells us, is not "Do they get it right?", but more like "What would it be like to believe that? What would happen if I did? What would I be committing myself to?" *(CP 163)*

"Commitment " in this context sounds more like acceptance of the logical implications of a set of statements than anything resembling the commitment discussed by existentialists or Christian theologians; but it does seem possible to me that the underlying insight of pragmatism may well be something comparable to the starting points I associate with "life philosophy" or the existentialism of Karl Jaspers. Many of the connotations of pragmatism stem from the types of philosophy it is trying to discredit. I may be getting so put off by endless refutations concerning sentences and truth value or essences that I misconstrue the real point of what Rorty is saying. Certainly I sense Rorty's own commitment, and it has little to do with deductive logic or argumentative discourse. But just as I agree to travel with him and we begin to gather speed, Rorty gives the steering wheel a hard turn; and I find myself colliding with a brick wall—as in this paragraph:

> For the pragmatists, the pattern of all inquiry—scientific as well as moral—is deliberation concerning the relative attractions of various concrete alternatives. The idea that in science or philosophy we can substitute "method" for deliberation between alternative results of speculation is just wishful thinking. It is like the idea that the morally wise man resolves his dilemmas by consulting his memory of the Idea of the Good, or by looking up the relevant article of the moral law. It is the myth that rationality consists in being constrained by rule. According to this Platonic myth, the life of reason is not the life of Socratic conversation but an illuminated state of consciousness in which one never needs to ask if one has exhausted the possible descriptions of, or explanations for, the situation. One simply arrives at true beliefs by obeying mechanical procedures. *(CP 164)*

My foot starts to go for the brake pedal when I see "memory of the Idea of the Good" flash past headed in the wrong direction. I feel we have the vehicle under control again as we extol the virtues of "Socratic conversation," but it all falls apart when I am asked to reject out of hand the idea of "an illuminated state of consciousness."

Perhaps the myth to which I cling is Neoplatonic rather than Platonic, but I believe there is good evidence that human beings are capable of an "illuminated state of consciousness" which involves a certainty about how to behave and which has nothing to do with arriving at beliefs via mechanical procedures. Paul did not pick himself up off the road and find a rule book in his pocket any more than Hui Nêng, the Sixth Patriarch, acquired a computer when he received the transmission from Mind to Mind. Every mystical tradition with which I am familiar has described the limitations of language and conceptual thought in terms that parallel Rorty's discussion of normal and abnormal discourse, but there seems to be an unbridgeable chasm separating the two. It is tempting to conclude that Rorty's ideas represent the best that the mind can achieve when one steadfastly refuses to come out of the cave and face the sun.

Actually as we shall see when we explore his political ideas, Rorty can be interpreted as holding up a goal for human behavior which is the equivalent of (and every bit as demanding and impossible as) the Christian ideal of love. As much as he might balk at the characterization, the ultimate terms of existence which Rorty is proposing are faith, hope and love, none of which has anything to do with scientific explanations of natural phenomena or truth values assigned to sentences.

The best approach to Rorty's political ideas is probably via his idea of "solidarity." Because his analysis leads him to reject the notion that there is "anything like a 'core self'" (CIS 189) Rorty rejects the traditional explanation of human solidarity in terms of "something within each of us—our essential humanity—which resonates to the presence of this same thing in other human beings." (CIS 189) For him the very idea of "us" always implies a "them" who are also human beings and

> our sense of solidarity is strongest when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as "one of us," where "us" means something smaller and more local than the human race. That is why "because she is a human being" is a weak, unconvincing explanation of a generous action. *(CIS 191)*

Solidarity is a function of identity in the sense that one defines oneself by identifying with a group, which in term can only be defined by distinction from some other group. Identification with the human race as a whole, as a type of organism to distinct from plants or animals is either too vague to be

meaningful or dissolves when the boundaries defining the group are perceived as blurred. In Rorty's view there is no

> "natural" cut in the spectrum of similarities and differences which spans the difference between you and a dog, or you and one of Asimov's robots—a cut which marks the end of the rational beings and the beginning of the nonrational ones, the end of moral obligation and the beginning of benevolence. 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. *(CIS 192)*

Historically invocations of solidarity with the human race as a whole have really been much more limited expressions of solidarity. The idea that "all men are created equal" obviously did not include women or slaves, and there is no end to the literature revealing how European civilization at its best has been ethnocentric in the extreme.

The result of Rorty's analysis of the philosophical quest for certainty or for knowledge of essences is that moral obligation can no longer be viewed as having some universal or eternal basis. Moral obligation is a function of solidarity or identification with a group; and, as is abundantly clear in literature and drama as well as in everyday life, it is entirely possible for an individual to be subject to conflicting obligations depending on where his or her allegiances lie. (cf CIS-197) Rorty interprets Kant's categorical imperative as an expression of a sentiment he finds admirable, not as a formulation of a law based on insight into a universally valid concept of human nature. Moral progress for Rorty consists in the expansion of our sense of solidarity, the creation of ever more inclusive communities.

> The right way to take the slogan 'We have obligations to human beings simply as such" is as a means of reminding ourselves to keep trying to expand our sense of "us" as far as we can. That slogan urges us to extrapolate further in the direction set by certain events in the past — the inclusion among "us" of the family in the next cave, then of the tribe across the river, then of the tribal confederation beyond the mountains, then of the unbelievers beyond the seas (and, perhaps last of all, of the menials who, all this time, have been doing our dirty work). This is a process which we should try to keep going. *(CIS-196)*

When Rorty says "we should," he is not expressing a moral imperative; he is making a recommendation. This is not to say that his belief that we should try to do this is any less deeply felt than Kant's conviction that we should try to behave in a way that was universally valid for all human beings. He just does not want to pretend that he can construct a rational argument to justify his belief.

One way in which Rorty reconciles his political allegiances with his philosophical convictions is by means of an important distinction between the public and private spheres of an individual's life. The implications of existentialism and post-modernism in terms of individual autonomy and self-creation he sees as comparable to modern art and relevant only to the private sphere. These newer "vocabularies" are important "redescriptions of ourselves" which can perhaps be liberating for the individual, but they contribute nothing to political progress and can in fact be dangerous when applied to the public sphere.

> The compromise advocated in this book *[Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity]* amounts to saying: <u>Privatize</u> the Nietzschean-Sartrean-Foucauldian attempt at authenticity and purity, in order to prevent yourself from slipping into a political attitude which will lead you to think that there is some social goal more important than avoiding cruelty.(CIS-65)

Politics obviously exist in the public sphere, and Rorty insists that the public and private can be separated. This is part of what enables him to admire some of Heidegger's philosophical achievements while despising his political activities and at the same time to insist that there is no inherent connection between the two. Rorty sees no reason why the insights of post-modernism can not co-exist with a commitment to liberal democratic politics. He acknowledges that any individual regardless of his intellectual beliefs may find himself caught in a conflict between his private projects and his public obligations, but such dilemmas are resolved only by consideration of all the concrete implications of the situation and not by appeal to philosophical principles. Most importantly the obligations we have because of our participation in any human community do not automatically override considerations of our private agenda.

> …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.(CIS-194)

It is worth noting here that Rorty is not insensitive to the possibilities of transformation which can take place in an individual due to experience or insight. He has great admiration for poets and novelists who have broken through to new ways of thinking and have "re-created" themselves as a result. He is,

however, skeptical about religious conversion as described by Christianity because he does not feel that the historical evidence weighs in favor of the validity of the transformations which have taken place.

> …*[N]*o scoffer can be sure that what evangelical Christians call 'becoming a New Being in Christ Jesus' is not a genuinely transformative, miraculous experience. But those who claim to have been reborn in this way do not seem to behave as differently from the way they behaved in the past aw we had hoped. We have been waiting a long time for prosperous Christians to behave more decently than prosperous pagans. (PSH-201f)

In any event it is the rare individual who is able to achieve the sublimity of either sainthood or true artistic creativity just as it is the rare individual who is able to achieve a breakthrough in science or math. The relevance of such achievements to public moral or political debate is marginal at best. The commitment a person may make to the pursuit of any such exalted achievement or state of being is part of his private existence which may or may not involve potential conflicts which his public existence and the obligations deriving from his participation in a community. The ultimate goal of moral progress in Rorty's view is not the facilitation of such achievement by individuals but the reduction of cruelty to outsiders or marginalized members of the community.

He values the impetus to moral progress that has been derived both from Christianity and the Enlightenment, but that does not stop him from concluding that the central ideas associated with each are now outmoded. European civilization has evolved to a point where continued moral progress should be possible without having to be propped up by appeals to outmoded ideas like God or Rationality or the Nature and Destiny of Man.

At this point my sense that Rorty is somehow trying to have his cake and eat it too has expanded to the point where I feel compelled to back up and take a fresh look at his ideas. First of all there is his idea of moral progress. It is not based on a concept of the nature of man or at least not man as a "rational" being, but it is based on an idea that man is distinguished from other creatures by his susceptibility to pain. In describing his idea of the modern thinker as an "ironist" Rorty says:

> She thinks that what unites her with the rest of the species is not a common language but <u>just</u> susceptibility to pain and in particular to that special sort of pain which the brutes do not share with the humans--humiliation. On her conception, human solidarity is not a matter of sharing a common truth or a common goal but of sharing a common selfish hope, the hope that one's world--the little things around which one has woven into one's final vocabulary-- will not be destroyed. (CIS-92f)

The susceptibility to humiliation separates humans from brutes, but presumably there is no point in inquiring what makes it possible to be humiliated. Why is there not some characteristic which is unique to human beings, which distinguishes them from "brutes," and which makes it possible for human beings to experience humiliation? Two candidates immediately step forward from Rorty's own formulation: having a "world" and having a "vocabulary." How is this different from "rationality," provided one takes a broad open-minded approach to understanding what is meant by "rationality" rather than restricting its connotation to some kind of deductive logic?

Much of what Rorty writes is devoted to the idea that novels, journalism and ethnography do more to promote moral progress than philosophy, because these forms of communication can contribute to the development of sympathy for other human beings who had not previously been accepted as part of our community.

> For the liberal ironist, skill at imaginative identification does the work which the liberal metaphysician would like to have done by a specifically moral motivation — rationality, or the love of God, or the love of truth. *(CIS-198)*

"Skill at imaginative identification" sounds to me like the ability to empathize or feel compassion, and I would certainly agree that compassion is the main requirement for the ability to expand one's sense of solidarity to include the entire human race. The problem is that Rorty continues this paragraph with the following clarification:

> The ironist does not see her ability to envisage, and desire to prevent, the actual and possible humiliation of others-- despite differences of sex race, tribe, and final vocabulary-- as more real or central or "essentially human" than any other part of herself. Indeed, she regards it as an ability and a desire which, like the ability to formulate differential equations, arose rather late in the history of humanity and is still a rather local phenomenon. It is associated primarily with Europe and America in the last three hundred years.(CIS-93)

Obviously Rorty thinks he is talking about something other than compassion. Not even the most rabid post-modernist who has no problem conceding that every word he utters is inevitably ethno-centric would say out loud that Europe and America invented compassion some time since the 17th century. No

matter what one may think of institutionalized Christianity or certain sects of Buddhism, ancient cultures certainly contained individuals who understood the power of compassion and attempted to persuade others that the cure for what ails the human race is a radical expression of compassion. Rorty acknowledges this when he says,

> Moral development in the individual, and moral progress in the human species as a whole, is a matter of re-marking human selves so as to enlarge the variety of the relationships which constitute those selves. The ideal limit of this process of enlargement is the self envisaged by Christian and Buddhist accounts of sainthood—an ideal self to whom the hunger and suffering of *any* human being (and even, perhaps, that of any other animal) is intensely painful. *(PSH- 79)*

Rorty presumably wants to distinguish the imaginative identification inspired by the presentation of concrete details about specific individuals from a vague "philosophical" notion of compassion for all "sentient beings;" but as he insists, quoting Sellars, "a difference that cannot be expressed in behavior is not a difference that makes a difference." (TP-124) He also appears to believe that this form of imaginative identification is a luxury which is only available in developed societies which are relatively prosperous and secure. The difference between murderous barbarians and sensitive liberals is, in his view, best seen in terms of deprivation rather than "rationality."

> But the bad people's beliefs are not more or less "irrational" than the belief that race, religion, gender, and sexual preference are all morally irrelevant — that these are all trumped by membership in the biological species. As used by moral philosophers like McGinn, the term "irrational behavior" means no more than "behavior of which we disapprove so strongly that our spade is turned when asked *why* we disapprove of it." So it would be better to teach our students that these bad people are no less rational, no less clear-headed, no more prejudiced than we good people who respect Otherness. The bad people's problem is, rather, that they were not as lucky in the circumstances of their upbringing as we were. Instead of treating all those people out there who are trying to find and kill Salman Rushdie as irrational, we should treat them as deprived.
>
> Foundationalists think of these people as deprived of truth, of moral knowledge. But it would be better-- more concrete, more specific, more suggestive of possible remedies-- to think of them as deprived of two more concrete things: security and sympathy. By "security" I mean conditions of life sufficiently risk-free as to make one's difference from others inessential to one's self-respect, one's sense of worth. These conditions have been enjoyed by North Americans and Europeans--the people who dreamed up the human rights culture--much more than they have been enjoyed by anyone else. By "sympathy" I mean the sort of reactions Athenians had more of after seeing Aeschylus's *The Persians* than before, the sort that whites in the United States had more of after reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin* than before, the sort we have more of after watching television programs about the genocide in Bosnia. Security and sympathy go together, for the same reasons that peace and economic productivity go together. The tougher things are, the more you have to be afraid of, the more dangerous your situation, the less you can afford the time or effort to think about what things might be like for people with whom you do not immediately identify. Sentimental education works only on people who can relax long enough to listen. *(TP-180)*

The idea that only the leisure class in a technologically advanced society have the time and security to indulge in expansive sentiments may be an explanation for why we have cultural diversity sensitivity training seminars today, but it does not convince me that Europe and America have a monopoly on compassion or even that our culture has achieved a new world record in the ability to implement social policies based on compassion. An argument could be made that people who are comfortable tend to become complacent and that
suffering is more conducive to openness to others than security. Nor do I see any reason to maintain a distinction between imaginative identification with the despised or oppressed and what for centuries has been called compassion.

Rorty's point seems mainly to be that solidarity expands by small increments, that what is needed is not an appeal to love our fellow man but an appeal to understand a specific group who are currently being targeted in some way. This is why he sees novels and journalism as best suited to making a contribution to moral progress. It is the small concrete details that he feels enable one to identify with a member of an alien culture. Again this may be historically accurate, but I am not convinced that it is conceptually relevant. He might respond that concepts can only be understood or evaluated historically, and certainly his main point is the pragmatic one of wanting to reframe the discussion in terms that suggest remedies. Seeing that it is easier for healthy and prosperous citizens to be open to alien cultures may encourage us to promote openness by doing things that help other societies enjoy greater prosperity and security rather than just arming ourselves against them.

There is another intriguing angle from which to view Rorty's concept of solidarity. He summarizes his discussion by describing human solidarity in terms of self-doubt::

> 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. *(CIS-198*)

The award for achievement in the desire to be both a liberal and an ironist goes a single person, Richard Rorty. In his autobiographical essay "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids" Rorty describes the dichotomy driving his intellectual life since adolescence in terms of a need to reconcile his commitment to liberal or even revolutionary politics with his desire to indulge the socially useless, idiosyncratic enthusiasms which seem to make life satisfying. This reconciliation is achieved with the realization that there is no need to reconcile these two aspects of his life.

> As I tried to figure out what had gone wrong, I gradually decided that the whole idea of holding reality and justice in a single vision had been a mistake — that a pursuit of such a vision had been precisely what led Plato astray. More specifically, I decided that only religion—only a nonargumentative faith in a surrogate parent who, unlike any real parent, embodied love, power and justice in equal measure—could do the trick Plato wanted done. Since I couldn't imagine becoming religious, and indeed had gotten more and more raucously secularist, I decided that the hope of getting a single vision by becoming a philosopher had been a self-deceptive atheist's way out. So I decided to write a book about what intellectual life might be like if one could manage to give up the Platonic attempt to hold reality and justice in a single vision.
>
> That book — *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* — argues that there is no need to weave one's personal equivalent of Trotsky and one's personal equivalent of my wild orchids together. Rather, one should try to abjure the temptation to tie in one's moral responsibilities to other people with one's relation to whatever idiosyncratic things or persons one loves with all one's heart and soul and mind (or, if you like, the things or persons one is obsessed with). The two will, for some people, coincide — as they do in those lucky Christians for whom the love of God and of other human beings are inseparable, or revolutionaries who are moved by nothing save the thought of social justice. But they need not coincide, and one should not try too hard to make them do so. *(PSH-12f)*

The identification of solidarity with self-doubt seems to me to be a suggestion that the substitution of openness to others for self-righteousness is best achieved by an awareness of our own limitations. It parallels the idea that the principle function of philosophy is to puncture pretense and keep the conversation going. Humility fosters compassion. But "self-doubt" has slightly different connotations from humility and these connotations allow Rorty to view this as a modern phenomenon. There have, of course, almost always been prophets who doubted the adequacy of the current "institutional arrangements" to address the real needs of human society, but his claim is that only in the modern era has the questioning been shared by a large number of citizens. He probably avoids using the term compassion because it is associated with the notion of a shared humanity which can be accessed within oneself. He sees this notion as an obstacle to moral progress, as an indication of the desire to put an end to the conversation and thereby draw a line which, at least potentially, excludes some human beings from our community.

Rorty's use here of the phrase "love, power, and justice" is not the first time he has reminded me of Paul Tillich. (Tillich published a series of lectures as a book entitled *Love, Power, and Justice* in 1953.) Needless to say there is a world of difference separating the two thinkers, but I am tempted to say it is largely a matter of their "final vocabularies" or the traditions they are drawing on to express their visions of hope for humanity. The point is that despite his terminology Rorty is talking about compassion. His thought is motivated by hope; and, if philosophical thinking can not keep up with hope, so much the worse for philosophy. His hope is based on a "nonargumentative faith" which like Tillich's has dispensed with

the notion of God as Nobodaddy but retains a commitment to the realization of love and justice in human society. He hopes for a society which embodies compassion, which has expanded to the point where it include virtually the entire human race and which is open to including life styles as yet unimagined. He is realistic enough to believe that the achievement of such a society can only be a goal to be approached through gradual improvements and not something that will just happen miraculously with the Second Coming. He also believes that the kind of thinking and discussion which he labels "philosophy" has nothing to contribute to progress towards this goal. At best philosophy seems to be something which can be turned against itself so as to tear down the obstacles to progress which it has created--ideas which may have been useful or helpful in their time but which have become obsolete and counter-productive.

> I take [the] near unanimity among my critics to show that most people — even a lot of purportedly liberated postmodernists — still hanker for something like what I wanted when I was 15: a way of holding reality and justice in a single vision. More specifically, they want to unite their sense of moral and political responsibility with a grasp of the ultimate determinants of our fate. They want to see love, power and justice as coming together deep down in the nature of things, or in the human soul, or in the structure of language, or *somewhere*. They want some sort of guarantee that their intellectual acuity, and those special ecstatic moments which that acuity sometimes affords, are of some relevance to their moral convictions. They still think that virtue and knowledge are somehow linked — that being right about philosophical matters is important for right action. I think this is important only occasionally and incidentally.
>
> I do not, however, want to argue that philosophy is socially useless. Had there been no Plato, the Christians would have had a harder time selling the idea that all God really wanted from us was fraternal love. Had there been no Kant, the nineteenth century would have had a harder time reconciling Christian ethics with Darwin's story about the descent of man. Had there been no Darwin, it would have been harder for Whitman and Dewey to detach the Americans from their belief that they were God's chosen people, to get them to start standing on their own feet. Had there been no Dewey and no Sidney Hook, American intellectual leftists of the 1930's would have been as buffaloed by the Marxists as were their counterparts in France and in Latin America. Ideas do, indeed, have consequences.
>
> But the fact that ideas have consequences does not mean that we philosophers, we specialists in ideas, are in a key position. We are not here to provide principles or foundations or deep theoretical diagnoses, or a synoptic vision. *(PSH-19)*

In other words, "we philosophers" are not prophets or visionaries. Rorty has summed up his evaluation of philosophy earlier with a reference to "my disillusionment with Plato—my conviction that philosophy was no help in dealing with Nazis and other bullies." (PSH-16) My question is whether Rorty has limited his conception of philosophical thinking in a way that unnecessarily dooms it to inadequacy when confronted with the task of articulating the basic terms of human life or of articulating the connection between hope and insight or understanding. Love of wisdom for him no longer has anything to do with moral commitment. Philosophy seems to have been flushed down the drain by an equation of wisdom or understanding with knowledge as "intellectual acuity" or something based on a scientific paradigm. I have the lingering suspicion that Rorty has given up on philosophy, but he still loves wielding his machete in the field full of the straw men which he believes constitutes Western philosophy. His disillusionment may be what fuels his enjoyment of the role of provocateur.

"Dealing with" Nazis who are beating the door down may require a different mindset from understanding how Nazis can exist, much less acquire enough power and influence to dominate the planet. Rorty has said that attempting to understand Nazis in this way amounts to a waste of time.

> I disagree with Karsten Harries and with Derrida when they claim that the phenomenon of National Socialism is deserving of more thought, more intense philosophical reflection than it has received. It seems to me that Professor Harries tries to tell too big a story about National Socialism. I think it can be viewed as the most startling and most successful attempt by the thugs to take over from the liberal democrats. But I don't think that thinking about it is more a philosophical topic than thinking about the cocaine cartel, or thinking about the essence of technology. I think both the Nazis and the cocaine cartel indicate that if you can get hold of the army and the radio stations you can do almost anything you like, and that is about the only relevance of modern technology to the National Socialist movement. I think that since Heidegger we have been hypnotized by the idea that to think about the Nazis is to think about something on the scale of modernity or technology, and this seems to me playing Heidegger's game, which, it seems to me, when it came to reflection on politics and history, was the game of an essentially ignorant provincial. I don't think that Heidegger envisaged the recent political history of the West

> in any clear terms. I think he was merely reactive and merely blinked; and I regret that Derrida is now following him in his attitude toward internal connections between recent political movements and something large and world-historical like technology or metaphysics or modernity. *(MH-247f)*

Rorty is presumably satisfied with his understanding of how the humiliation and insecurity experienced by large portions of the German population after the Treaty of Versailles made them vulnerable to another form of hypnosis practiced by Hitler and his cronies. I do not imagine he would dispute the validity of historical and sociological inquiries into the circumstances which led to the dominance of National Socialism in a particular country at a particular time. He is just rejecting the fruitfulness of thinking about "larger" connections between technology and political philosophy or even inherent connections between Heidegger's ideas and his political allegiances. Since Rorty can make no "philosophical" connection between his own ideas and his liberal political instincts, he thinks it is a waste of time to look for philosophical connections between the thoughts and actions of others. There may of course be causal connections. Ideas can influence behavior, but apparently in Rorty's view Heidegger's political behavior was more influenced by his "ignorance" of the political realities engulfing him than it was by his ideas about the possibility of the regeneration of Western civilization via some fulfillment of the possibilities of the German philosophical tradition.

I am clearly not sympathetic to Rorty's reduction of the value of philosophical reflection. As persuasive as his arguments are I constantly see warning flares go off as he metaphorically skates over an issue. For example the notion that "we have been hypnotized by" an "idea" is used rhetorically without any acknowledgement of its implications in terms of an understanding of thought and culture. Use of a metaphor like this, to my mind, commits one to the kind of "deep theoretical diagnoses" that Rorty rejects. He is content to use the metaphor simply to evoke whatever associations it has for his listener since he knows it will be interpreted as discrediting the thinking of those who have been hypnotized. So far as I can tell this type of rhetoric is completely consistent with his view of public debate. Even at a conference for philosophy professors a commitment to moral progress overrides any obligation to engage in socially useless philosophical quibbling about the nature and destiny of man, and persuasion by rhetoric is a legitimate means of moral progress. But if the reader pauses to think about it, Rorty's metaphor of hynosis will surely backfire on him. If it is possible for sophisticated intellectuals to be hypnotized by an idea, how can they be awakened and what is the difference between Rorty's convictions and the hypnotic delusions of his colleagues? Hermeneutics may be a method for bringing to full consciousness ideas which had held us enthralled, but I can not see how Rorty's conception of "final vocabularies" as all equally unprivileged allows for such a process. He has no way of distinguishing an hypnotic trance from clear-headed thought in himself much less others.

Another example is Rorty's use of the term "intuition," especially when he refers to "our culturally influenced intuitions about the right thing to do in various situations" which philosophy simply summarizes in ethics. (TP-171) "Influenced" seems to imply that the intuitions may not be wholly determined by our culture, and the common sense understanding of the idea of "intuition" involves a kind of pre-verbal perception, understanding or knowledge. I have yet to find Rorty's explication of what intuition involves, but I suspect that he would not really agree to the idea that moral responses involve a component of knowledge or insight which might be capable of articulation much less a component of knowledge of something ineffable. Rorty might well decline to explicate "intuition" on the grounds that there will always be a limit to how far one can go explicating one concept by another. Any attempt to reach the bottom involves a circularity. The sand flows back in faster than you can shovel it out.

Ultimately it is clear that for Rorty novels, poetry, ethnography and journalism are better (or more socially useful) uses of language than philosophy. That he continues to engage in philosophical debate can be viewed as his choice of a socially useless, idiosyncratic enthusiasm. He acknowledges that what originally attracted him to philosophy was "intellectual snobbery" which he has learned to distrust, (PSH-20) but he clearly still enjoys "those special ecstatic moments which [intellectual] acuity sometimes affords."

If I do not accept all of his philosophical conclusions, can I still have an intelligent conversation with him about his political convictions or his moral intuitions? He does in fact express his moral intuitions via ideas which I would be inclined to label philosophical reflection despite his campaign against "foundationalism." He may say that it is impossible to define human nature because

> we have come to see that the main lesson of both history and anthropology is our extraordinary malleability. We are coming to think of ourselves as the flexible, protean, self-shaping animal rather than as the rational animal or the cruel animal**.** *(TP-170)*

Nonetheless he uses two ways of distinguishing man from animals. I have already mentioned the idea that the distinguishing feature is our ability to feel humiliation. He also uses a more positive characterization:

> To overcome this idea of a sui generis sense of moral obligation, it would help to stop answering the question "What makes us different from other animals?" by saying, "We can know and they can merely feel." We should substitute "We can feel *for each other* to a much greater extent than they can. This substitution would let us disentangle Christ's suggestion that love matters more than knowledge from the neo-Platonic suggestion that knowledge of the truth will make us free. *(TP-176)*

I read this as an intuition that man's ability to love, his ability to feel compassion, is, or should be, the foundation of moral commitment. Love matters more than knowledge. Even if philosophical insight is exhilarating and liberating, there are bigger issues at stake in our lives, issues which have a social dimension and require our ability to feel for and respond to the suffering of our fellow man. This is an idea which Rorty espouses even if he feels he must explain the presence of the idea in his consciousness via cultural conditioning or add the disclaimer that his position is an arbitrary choice which can not be justified in rational debate by appealing to other ideas. It is a self-defining commitment which is possible because he is indeed capable of compassion. For all he knows it could be a manifestation of the Holy Ghost. It may also just be proof that well-adjusted citizens of prosperous capitalistic societies are capable of being decent human beings.

The idea that moral progress is best defined as the creation of ever more inclusive communities is an expression of this compassion tempered by a realistic assessment of society and history. The sense of obligation is an expression of a sense of solidarity derived from the identification with a group. Love or compassion demands that the group be expanded to include as much of the human race (or even the universe) as possible. Realism about human beings sees that this implies a "pluralistic" society and expects the task of expanding the group to be never-ending.

The understanding of human beings as the self-creating species capable of feeling humiliation gives more substance to the commitment to pluralism by helping to define what is at stake. There is a striking moment in Rorty's description of the "ironist's" understanding of humiliation which seems to provide a theoretical basis for excessive concerns about political correctness:

> …[T]he best way to cause people long-lasting pain is to humiliate them by making the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete and powerless. Consider what happens when a child's precious possessions—the little things around which he weaves fantasies that make him a little different from all other children—are redescribed as "trash," and thrown away. Or consider what happens when these possessions are made to look ridiculous alongside the possessions of another, richer, child. Something like that presumably happens to a primitive culture when it is conquered by a more advanced one. The same sort of thing sometimes happens to nonintellectuals in the presence of intellectuals. *(CIS-89f)*

If sensitivity to humiliation is the only glue holding society together, then it does seem as though an inevitable consequence may be the mindset which awards medals to all the kids who participated in the track meet rather than singling out only the winners of the races. Perhaps it would require outlawing sports competitions as well as sorority rushes and allocating resources to deal with the lawsuits from pedophiles who feel they are the most misunderstood group in our society.

I would imagine Rorty himself has little patience with extreme political correctness, but I am not sure what he uses to draw the line. He does make a distinction between pluralism and multiculturalism in his critique of the unpatriotic academic left:

> …[A]ny left is better than none, and this one is doing a great deal of good for people who have a raw deal in our society: women, African-Americans, gay men and lesbians. This focus on marginalized groups ;will, in the long run, help to make our country much more decent, more tolerant and more civilized.
>
> But there is a problem with this left: it is unpatriotic. In the name of 'the politics of difference', it refuses to rejoice in the country it inhabits. It repudiates the idea of a national identity, and the emotion of national pride. This repudiation is the difference between traditional American pluralism and the new movement called multiculturalism. Pluralism is the attempt to make America what the philosopher John Rawls calls 'a social union of social unions', a community of communities, a nation with far more room for difference than most. Multiculturalism is turning into the attempt to keep these communities at odds with one another…
>
> [I]t is important to insist that a sense of shared national identity is not an evil. It is an absolutely essential component of citizenship, of any attempt to take our country and its problems

> seriously. There is no incompatibility between respect for cultural differences and American patriotism.
>
> Like every other country, ours has a lot to be proud of and a lot to be ashamed of. But a nation cannot reform itself unless it takes pride in itself—unless it has an identity, rejoices in it, reflects upon it and tries to lie up to it. Such pride sometimes takes the form of arrogant, bellicose nationalism. But it often takes the form of a yearning to live up to the nation's professed ideals. (PSH-252f)

There are actually two issues I see here. One is how to distinguish between humiliation which requires social redress and humiliation which might be better viewed as "childish" or as an inevitable price to be paid for individuality and something the individual should learn to deal with. The second, larger issue is how one limits the inclusiveness of a society. Rorty himself clearly wants to exclude some human beings from our community—as do most sane people. He tends to characterize the ones he wants to exclude as bullies, thugs, criminals, Nazis, drug lords and the like. He is also resigned to the idea that such individuals are irredeemable, that there is no point in trying to educate them into our way of viewing things. Only the young are malleable enough to be persuaded by means of "sentimental education" to join us and the success of such an effort depends on the circumstances in which they have been raised.

> It would have been better if Plato had decided, as Aristotle was to decide, that there was nothing much to be done with people like Thrasymachus and Callicles and that the problem was how to avoid having children who would be like Thrasymachus and Callicles. By insisting that he could reeducate people who had matured without acquiring appropriate moral sentiments by invoking a higher power than sentiment, the power of reason, Plato got moral philosophy off on the wrong foot. *(TP-176f)*

My guess is that Rorty might say that defining who is in and who is out is always a work in progress. What constitutes criminal behavior that merits exclusion is defined via a cumulative legislative and judicial process which one hopes is always subject to review and revision. This may not be philosophically satisfying, but it is probably realistic. Even if we have no universal consensus on the nature of human sexuality and the best way to educate children, we can still agree to declare pedophilia a criminal activity which is not welcome in our society. Whether pedophilia ever will (or should) be "redescribed" in the way homosexuality was remains an open question. Most current "final vocabularies" involve ideas about childhood and sexuality which do not even permit the issue to be discussed, and I certainly would not want to be the one responsible for adding the topic to an agenda. I am mildly curious as to whether Rorty would invoke some kind of Utilitarian calculus of pain and humiliation to determine that pedophilia lies beyond the pale of acceptable human behavior or whether he would be content to say that "we" sensible liberals have been conditioned to protect our children from premature exposure to physical expressions of sexual attraction even though we are happy to encourage the bombardment of our daughters with images of Brittney Spears strutting her stuff as she pretends that she is not yet a woman.

There is another aspect of Rorty's utopian vision which is not immediately evident as a corollary of the need to minimize cruelty and that is the maximization of equal opportunity. Social and economic inequities may seem cruel to some, but apparently the majority view them either as an inevitable fact of life or as considerations which are less significant than the promotion of the dream that anyone can climb to the top of the heap. It is easy, of course, to interpret the promulgation of "The American Dream" as simply a ploy by the establishment to make the disenfranchised accept the system as a lottery which they too could win. As Rorty puts it

> in every culture, under every form of government, and in every imaginable situation…the people who have already got their hands on money and power will lie, cheat and steal in order to make sure that they and their descendants monopolize both for ever. *(PSH-206)*

I personally tend to view The American Dream and the promotion of free market capitalism as the path to the greatest happiness for all as the greatest con since the Sun King persuaded France he needed a country home in Versailles. I admire Rorty's commitment to a more equitable distribution of wealth and power, and I respect his willingness to conclude that that only hope for achieving it is a "top-down" solution, i.e. governmental intervention. He does not see any need for (or even possibility of) justifying this commitment. He just assumes that there is a reasonably large liberal community which shares his idea of utopia and expresses his hope that we can evolve in that direction.

Just as love is more important than knowledge, Rorty sees hope as more important than philosophy in determining the future of humanity. He is concerned about a waning in the level of hope, which he sees as the root cause of certain recent trends in philosophy or social theory. (cf PSH-229f) A loss of hope is infinitely more dangerous than any form of nihilism or cultural relativism about which so many recent social thinkers have been concerned. His own assessment of the state of the world is fairly grim.

> I admit that the chance of revitalizing the United Nations, either for purposes of dealing with the warlords or for those of dealing with the conscienceless super-rich, is slim. But I suspect that it is the only chance for anything like a just global society. My own country is too poor and too nervous to serve as a global policeman, but the need for such a policeman is going to become ever greater as more and more warlords gain access to nuclear arms. No country can ask its own plutocrats to defend its interests, for any hard-nosed plutocrat will see economic nationalism as economically inefficient. (PSH-234)

The ultimate question then becomes whether individuals or even groups can contribute to a resurgence of hope, whether one person's expression of hope in the face of difficulty can encourage and inspire others and empower them with an infusion of hope. Preserving the myth of a pluralistic society is such an expression of hope, an act of "nonargumentative" faith which is self-justifying. To my mind these are philosophical issues, despite Rorty's insistence that philosophy has nothing to say about such matters.

> We [philosophers] are not here to provide principles or foundations or deep theoretical diagnoses, or a synoptic vision. When I am asked (as, alas, I often am) what I take contemporary philosophy's 'mission' or 'task' to be, I get tonguetied. The best I can do is to stammer that we philosophy professors are people who have a certain familiarity with a certain intellectual tradition, as chemists have a certain familiarity with what happens when you mix various substances together. We can offer some advice about what will happen when you try to combine or to separate certain ideas, on the basis of our knowledge of the results of past experiments. By doing so, we may be able to help you hold your time in thought. But we are not the people to come to if you want confirmation that the things you love with all your heart are central to the structure of the universe, or that your sense of moral responsibility is 'rational and objective' rather than 'just' a result of how you were brought up.
>
> There are still, as C. S. Peirce put it, 'philosophical slop-shops on every corner' which *will* provide such confirmation. But there is a price. To pay the price you have to turn your back on intellectual history and on what Milan Kundera calls 'the fascinating imaginative realm where no one owns the truth and everyone has the right to be understood…the wisdom of the novel'. You risk losing the sense of finitude, and the tolerance, which result from realizing how very many synoptic visions there have been, and how little argument can do to help you choose among them. Despite my relatively early disillusionment with Platonism, I am very glad that I spent all those years reading philosophy books. For I learned something that still seems very important: to distrust the intellectual snobbery which originally led me to read them. If I had not read all those books, I might never have been able to stop looking for what Derrida calls 'a full presence beyond the reach of play', for a luminous, self-justifying, self-sufficient synoptic vision.
>
> By now I am pretty sure that looking for such a presence and such a vision is a bad idea. The main trouble is that you might succeed, and your success might let you imagine that you have something more to rely on than the tolerance and decency of your fellow human beings. The democratic community of Dewey's dreams is a community in which nobody imagines that. It is a community in which everybody thinks that it is human solidarity, rather than knowledge of something not merely human, that really matters. The actually existing approximations to such a fully democratic, fully secular community now seem to me the greatest achievements of our species. *(PSH-20)*

But Rorty has a philosophical vision and a mission. It is not a narrowly academic and technical one, but a broadly human one. If I respond to a speaker who stands and boldly declares, "I have a dream…", does it matter whether I am responding because I have been culturally conditioned to share his views or whether I am responding because of a shared humanity and

> a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things.

Yes, it does, especially if the speaker's dream is one of revenge and world domination via nuclear or biological warfare rather than a dream of universal brotherhood and equal opportunity for all.

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