

**‘That’s the way we happen to do things around here’:
Richard Rorty and Political Liberalism.**

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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Abstract

This thesis advances a defence of Richard Rorty's political liberalism. It is widely held that what Rorty calls anti-foundationalism either consciously proposes, or logically entails, the denial both of ethical commitment and the possibility of moral justification. Others argue that Rorty reduces commitment to a parochial concern, and that justification is relative to the standards of a narrowly conceived community. Commitment and justification, it is said, reduce to pointing out whatever it is that constitutes 'the way we happen to do things around here'. In turn, anti-foundationalism is said to render obsolete any normative project in political theory.

The thesis rejects these claims, arguing that Rorty does not reduce commitment and justification in this way. Anti-foundationalism is shown not to reduce reason-giving to 'what we happen to think around here', and it is also cleansed of claims that it is relativistic, irrational and nihilistic. Justification as the response for reasonable requests for explanation of our beliefs and practices remains important for Rorty, centrally in his account of justification through 'wide reflective equilibrium'.

The thesis shows how Rorty's view of liberal ironism is the completion, not the negation, of liberalism. It demonstrates that he is able both to justify and defend liberal principles and institutions, and to do so in a way that undercuts many of the criticisms of liberalism that have been levelled by communitarian critics and others. It examines his view of liberal political thought not as providing a philosophical justification of liberalism, but as offering an articulation of it. It closes by considering the scope of liberal claims, suggesting that Rorty is, in the only meaningful sense of the term, a liberal universalist.

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Chapter One

Introduction

In this thesis I advance a defence of Richard Rorty's political liberalism, which he characterises as liberalism shorn of all forms of what he calls 'authoritarianism' – both religious and secular – that claim to stand over and above freely arrived at agreement between human beings.

Rorty's political liberalism is a form of what he calls 'anti-foundationalism'. Anti-foundationalism rejects the idea that there are unquestionable principles that exist independently of, and provide grounds for, our everyday practices. It is widely held that in advancing anti-foundationalism, Rorty either consciously proposes, or that his account logically entails, the negation of ethical commitment and the practice of moral justification. Others argue that Rorty reduces commitment to a parochial concern, and justification to correspondence to the standards of a narrowly conceived community. Anti-foundationalism is held to render obsolete any normative project in political theory; commitment and justification, it is said, are a matter of 'the way we happen to do things around here' or 'merely what we happen to think around here'.¹

¹ See for example Paul Kelly, 'Political theory in retreat? Contemporary political theory and the historical order', in Noël O'Sullivan (ed.) *Political Theory in Transition* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 225 – 241 at 233.

The thesis rejects these criticisms, arguing that the misunderstandings captured in them disguise Rorty's actual position, which does not reduce commitment and justification in the way such comments imply. The two main claims of the thesis are, first, that Rorty's anti-foundationalism does not collapse into parochialism, and secondly, that political liberalism can be justified and defended, indeed better defended, on Rorty's account, since it undercuts many of the criticisms of liberalism that have been levelled by communitarian critics and others.

1. The issues outlined

1.1 *Foundationalism and commitment*

Rorty has been criticized from a variety of perspectives for many different reasons. Narrowly philosophical criticisms claim that he has misunderstood both the history of philosophy², and issues within it, notably truth³, justification⁴, and hermeneutics.⁵ Others believe him to have misrepresented the claims of other philosophers, including those whom he takes himself to be following up; criticisms of his reading of John Dewey are particularly

² Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Philosophy, "Other" Disciplines and their Histories: A Rejoinder to Richard Rorty', *Soundings* 65 (1982), pp. 127 – 145; Terence Ball, 'Review Symposium on Richard Rorty', *History of the Human Sciences* 3. 1 (1990), pp. 101 – 122 at 101 – 104.

³ Richard N. Manning, 'Pragmatism and the Quest for Truth', *Metaphilosophy* 23 (1992), pp. 350 – 362.

⁴ Peter Munz, 'Philosophy and the Mirror of Rorty', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 14 (1984), pp. 195 – 238; Jakob Hohwy, 'Quietism and Cognitive Command', *Philosophical Quarterly* 47 (1997), pp. 495 – 500.

⁵ Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer, Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987).

pronounced.⁶ He has also been censured for his understanding of feminism⁷, natural science⁸, literary criticism,⁹ and economics and public choice theory.¹⁰ The criticisms that I am concerned with in this thesis are those which engage with Rorty's broader concern to show how what he calls 'social hope' can survive in a postmodern world. In this respect, the consequences of his position are not narrowly philosophical, but impact upon practices of reason giving and the grounds for belief.

Rorty agrees with Elizabeth Anscombe that the notion of unconditional, context-free, moral obligation only makes sense if one believes in God.¹¹ The Moral Law requires a lawgiver, and, unlike Anscombe, Rorty argues for the absence of any candidate for that role. Rorty accepts that this entails what for many are simply unacceptable consequences about the possibility of appealing over particular human practices to a privileged realm of moral truth. As he puts it in a particularly vivid passage:

[...] 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

⁶ Matthew Festenstein, 'Pragmatism, Social Democracy and Political Argument', in Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (eds.) *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), pp. 203 – 218; James Gouinlock, 'What Is the Legacy of Instrumentalism? Rorty's Interpretation of Dewey', in Herman J. Saatkamp Jr., (ed.) *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics* (London: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995), pp. 72 – 90.

⁷ Sabina Lovibond, 'Feminism and Pragmatism: A Reply to Richard Rorty', *New Left Review* 193 (May – June 1992), pp. 5 – 28.

⁸ Roy Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

⁹ Leon Surette, 'Richard Rorty Lays Down the Law', *Philosophy and Literature* 19 (1995), pp. 261 – 275.

¹⁰ Richard Posner, 'Richard Rorty's Politics', *Critical Review* 7 (1993), pp. 33 – 49.

¹¹ Richard Rorty, 'Response to Jürgen Habermas', in Robert B. Brandom (ed.) *Rorty and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 56 – 64 at 61.

totalitarian society which will endure forever, there is something beyond those practices which condemns you.”¹²

Many critics believe that it follows from what they take to be Rorty’s abandonment of notions of truth and rationality that there is no way to justify our beliefs, and that all we can do is to point to current practices, be they good or bad. Thus, although Rorty speaks of ‘the fact that our human rights culture is morally superior to other cultures’¹³, it is thought that this is merely an unsupported – and, on his account, unsupportable – assertion. If as he claims there is no ‘neutral ground’ but only an ‘indefinite plurality of stand-points’¹⁴, and that we ‘should simply drop the distinction between rational judgement and cultural bias’¹⁵, how far can one remain committed to any particular standard of value? Against Rorty’s claim that ‘*Nothing* is more important than the defence of [the] liberal institutions’¹⁶ many argue that he removes the resources with which we might go about making that defence. With respect to the example of torturers, there is of course something that can be said if, as Gary Gutting points out, the torturers violate their *own* values.¹⁷ That is however to grant the point that those values are the result of contingent historical influences, and do not reflect the ahistoric moral order or facts about human nature.

¹² Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. xlvi.

¹³ Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers volume 3* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 170.

¹⁴ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 51.

¹⁵ Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 207 – 8.

¹⁶ Richard Rorty, ‘Thugs and Theorists’, *Political Theory* 15 (1987), pp. 564 – 580 at 567, emphasis in original.

¹⁷ Gary Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 54.

From different political perspectives, and for a range of specific technical reasons, critics unite in arguing that, although Rorty seeks to defend liberal democracy, his postmodernist account undercuts the philosophical and moral resources necessary to make that defence. Postmodernism, in Adam Swift's summary, entails scepticism about the notion of truth and a mistrust of reason, notions which it is said are vital to make sense of our moral commitments.¹⁸ In denying a substantive notion of truth or rationality that exists independently of the standards of any particular community, Rorty is held to endorse a form of relativism in which the standards of truth or goodness are determined solely within particular communities. Writing of 'historicalist' accounts such as Rorty's, Thomas Nagel claims that '[i]n the name of liberation, these movements have offered us intellectual repression'.¹⁹ Nagel thinks of Rorty as grounding objectivity in consensus²⁰, something that, together with his preference for 'conversation' rather than argument, is dangerous, denying truth or objectivity as existing independently of the practices and beliefs of any particular community.

A different concern has been raised by 'communitarian' writers who, in contrast for example to Nagel, censure Rorty for not taking the standards of particular communities seriously enough. Philosophers such as Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre emphasise the situatedness of human beings and the importance of social embeddedness in shaping the shared meanings and understandings of particular communities. In ascribing ontological and moral significance to community, they charge their own critics with neglecting the role of community and identity in giving content and meaning to morality. For them, Rorty is a

¹⁸ Adam Swift, *Political Philosophy: A Beginners' Guide for Students and Politicians* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2001), p. 4.

¹⁹ Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 11.

²⁰ Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 29.

single manifestation of a more general trend away from questions of truth and judgements about what constitutes the good life towards prudential and utilitarian calculations that seek merely to secure accommodation between different views of these matters. In Taylor's words, 'Things that were once settled by some external reality – traditional law, say, or nature – are now referred to our choice'.²¹ At the same time, Rorty is an especially important target, since he is not merely agnostic on the question of ultimate value, but holds that the capacity to set aside such questions is a desirable stage in the development of humanity. Significantly, Rorty accepts MacIntyre's purported criticism that liberals are, in effect, utilitarians.²² For him, there is a relationship between the liberal view that 'cruelty is the worst thing we do'²³, and the utilitarian claim, which he ascribes to William James and John Dewey, 'that in the end the only moral or epistemological criteria we have or need is whether performing an action, or holding a belief, will, in the long run, make for greater human happiness'.²⁴ Rorty speaks approvingly of the increasing ability of more and more people and societies 'to put aside the question What is the meaning of human life? and to substitute the question What meaning shall *we* give to *our* lives?'²⁵, and claims that 'no past human achievement, not Plato's or even Christ's, can tell us about the ultimate significance of human life. No such

²¹ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (London: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 81.

²² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1985, second edition).

²³ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. xv.

²⁴ Richard Rorty, 'Pragmatism as anti-authoritarianism', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 1 (1999), pp. 7 – 20 at 9. This connection between liberalism and utilitarianism is also seen in Rorty's criticisms of the continuing interest within Anglo-American philosophy with the conflict between consequentialism and deontology. See Richard Rorty, 'Trapped Between Kant and Dewey: the Current Situation of Moral Philosophy', at <http://www.law.berkeley.edu/cenpro/kadish/rorty.doc>, p. 9 (viewed 22 March 2003).

²⁵ Richard Rorty, 'Response to Richard Bernstein', in Herman J. Saatkamp Jr. (ed.) *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics* (London: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995), pp. 68 – 71 at 71, emphasis in original.

achievement can give us a template on which to model our future'.²⁶ For MacIntyre, however, Rorty's account is one which, in contrast to his claims, exhibits not 'moral argument freed from unwanted philosophical pretensions, but the decay of moral reasoning'.²⁷

A criticism that unites rationalists like Nagel and 'communitarians' like MacIntyre is that Rorty is not simply anti-foundationalist but claims that, for some at least, anti-foundationalism has consequences, in that they recognise both that current beliefs and practices cannot be regarded as final, and that it is impossible to resolve doubts about them by appealing to those beliefs and practices themselves. This situation, which Rorty terms 'ironism', he describes as a form of 'private narcissism',²⁸ one which celebrates that recognition. It seems to many, however, that the problem with ironism, over and above those identified with anti-foundationalism, is the question of detachment. Rorty's view of increasing individual freedoms as a form of private narcissism comports, it is said, badly with the needs of public and political life. This concern is raised by John Horton, for whom ironists are detached from their values, and thus from their communities. At best, the ironist will, he writes, feign 'a solidarity which cannot genuinely be felt. Indeed cynicism must be an abiding temptation for the ironist'.²⁹ Similarly, for Susan Haack, the ironist's concern and preparedness to share in the moral commitments of her community depends on whether

²⁶ Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (London: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 24.

²⁷ Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Moral Arguments and Social Contexts: A Response to Rorty', in Robert Hollinger (ed.) *Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), pp. 222 – 223 at 222. See also Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (London: Duckworth, 1999), pp. 151 – 153.

²⁸ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 210.

²⁹ John Horton, 'Ironism and Commitment: An Irreconcilable Dualism of Modernity', in Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (eds.) *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues* (Oxford: Polity, 2001), pp. 15 – 28 at 27.

those standards enable her to secure private perfection through the provision of freedoms that facilitate renewed self-description. It follows from (what Haack believes to be) Rorty's rejection of the role of truth that for him moral commitment, if it exists at all, is cynical: "irony" reveals that Rorty's supposed solidarity is no more than *pro forma*, cynical conformity with those [our local] practices'.³⁰

1.2 Anti-foundationalism and political theory

Critics take different views of what Rorty's position entails for political theory. Liberal theorists tend, as Horton notes, to ignore Rorty.³¹ In part, this is an understandable consequence of the fact that Rorty does not address in any detail many of the questions that are central to current debates within political theory. He does not offer his own theory of justice, and although he endorses John Rawls's 'justice as fairness', he does not enter into discussion concerning interpretations or alternatives. Indeed he seems unconcerned by such debates, and his tendency to speak of 'we liberals' seems to blur the differences between liberals. Insofar as he acknowledges differences, these are methodological, or more accurately, meta-philosophical, concerning whether liberals rely for example upon Kantian foundations. His interest is how, given his 'anti-foundationalism', liberalism and liberal theories of justice can be articulated and defended.

³⁰ Susan Haack, 'Vulgar Pragmatism: An Unedifying Prospect', in Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr. (ed.) *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics* (London: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995), pp. 126 – 147 at 139.

³¹ Horton, 'Ironism and Commitment', p. 15.

There is indeed confusion as to the nature of these meta-philosophical commitments. Some see Rorty as a communitarian³², whereas others take him to be a liberal whose primary concern is to defend Rawls against his communitarian critics.³³ Such confusion is understandable. The first criticisms of Rawls were from writers who came to be known as communitarians, some of whom hold similar views to Rorty. Despite the differences spoken of above between Rorty and writers like Taylor and MacIntyre, like them Rorty is held to be proposing a communitarian rather than a rational justification of liberalism.³⁴ Liberalism is held to possess nothing of value other than its constituting part of our current practices; as Paul Kelly puts it, 'what political theorists try to defend on the ground of universal abstract rationality is [for Rorty] merely what we happen to think around here'.³⁵ It is claimed that this rules out justification, or that, insofar as it allows for reason giving, justification is made not by reference to notions of truth or rationality but on the grounds that beliefs and practices are justified simply because they are *our* beliefs and practices.

As has been remarked upon, liberals regard Rorty as passing over important differences among different thinkers, a tendency that has seemed to some to stem from his view of morality as a matter of 'we intentions'.³⁶ Richard J. Bernstein argues that on this point, Rorty substitutes an 'historical myth of the given' for the 'epistemological myth of the given' that

³² Jean Hampton, 'Should Political Philosophy Be Done without Metaphysics?', *Ethics* 99 (July 1989), 791 – 814; Steven Kautz, *Liberalism and Community* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995); John R. Wallach, 'Liberals, Communitarians, and the Task of Political Theory', *Political Theory* 15 (1987), pp. 581 – 611.

³³ Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

³⁴ Although Rorty sees his account as following up on Rawls, his interpretation of Rawls as a pragmatist is one that some find problematic. See for example, Ian Shapiro, *Political Criticism* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1990).

³⁵ Kelly, 'Political theory in retreat?', p. 233.

³⁶ Rorty's tendency speak in terms of 'we liberals' and 'we pragmatists' is well known. For a list of many of his formulations, see Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*, p. 94.

he has himself helped to expose, and that '[s]ometimes it seems as if what Rorty means by "we" are "all those who agree with me".'³⁷ This is exacerbated because what Rorty calls 'ethnocentrism' is taken to be the view that nothing can, and indeed should, be said to non-liberals. If there are no principled grounds on which to justify liberalism, nothing can be said to those who call into question its legitimacy.

Rorty also seems not to allow for efforts to justify or rationally commend liberalism to non-liberal societies, ruling out the normative task of defending liberalism as something of universal value. The moral requirement to seek to extend liberal values and institutions is for many integral to liberalism. For Brian Barry, this task is central, so much so that he has claimed that '[t]he point of liberalism is that it is universalistic'.³⁸ Rorty seems unable to press for the truth or goodness of liberalism in societies other than those where it is already taken to be true or good; liberalism on his account possesses, in Kelly's words, 'no philosophical warrant, and cannot be the basis for a philosophical imperialism of the true and the good'.³⁹ By '[a]bandoning universalism',⁴⁰ Rorty seems not only to be at odds with many liberals but, insofar as Barry is correct in identifying the point of liberalism to be its universality, has also seemingly excluded himself from counting as a liberal at all. At best, he appears to be what John Gray calls a liberal relativist, holding liberalism to be suitable and legitimate only for liberal societies.⁴¹

³⁷ Richard J. Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 247. For the 'Myth of the Given', see chapter 2 of this thesis.

³⁸ Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), p. 138.

³⁹ Kelly, 'Political theory in retreat?', 233.

⁴⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 68.

⁴¹ John Gray, *Mill on Liberty: A Defence*. 2nd edition. (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 151.

Rorty is further held to rule out the possibility of genuine or meaningful social criticism, and his account is believed to entail uncritical endorsement of the standards of our community, whatever they may be. Rorty argues that political theorists ought to be concerned not with offering a philosophical justification of liberal democracy but with the articulation of the practices of liberal societies. The task for the theorist ought, he suggests, to be to draw attention to the ways in which the practices of those societies fail to live up to their self-image. This type of approach has been criticized, either for being critically impotent, since it cannot employ a standard of value other than that which communities already endorse, or, if it does in fact implicitly draw upon such a standard, as incoherent, since the existence of those standards is what it claims to deny.⁴² Rorty's account is often charged with the former, that social criticism, if it takes place at all, is a matter of consistency, not of moral value. Ian Shapiro criticizes what he believes to be its conservatism in allowing culture too much importance: "The primacy Rorty ascribes to received beliefs in a culture generates a mindless, if genial, political conservatism".⁴³ Though Rorty claims not to be a conservative, his account is said to lead to conservative conclusions in which radical social criticism is outlawed and where scrutiny can only be made by reference to our own particular standards.

It is interesting to note, finally, that for other critics it is precisely the supposed denial of universalist and normative concerns that does the work in Rorty's account. Like their liberal counterparts, Marxist critics tend to think of him as removing the role for normative political theory. They go on to argue however that this is a justificatory move in itself, serving the ideological function of providing an *apologia* for the political and socio-economic status quo

⁴² Brian Barry, *Justice as Impartiality: A Treatise on Social Justice Volume 2* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 3 – 10.

⁴³ Shapiro, *Political Criticism*, p. 41.

by ruling out any criticism of present practices by any standards other than those which lead to the legitimation of those practices in the first place. Markar Melkonian writes that when it comes to defending liberalism, Rorty's 'conversation abruptly fades to silence, irony lapses into apologetics, and lightmindedness becomes heavy-handedness'.⁴⁴ Jo Burrows claims that Rorty takes 'liberalism as a non-ideological "given"'.⁴⁵ Rorty's notion of 'we intentions' is similarly held to serve this agenda by assuming a falsely homogenizing 'we' which claims to speak for the entire community; for Michael Billig, the use of the word 'we' 'might be called the syntax of hegemony'.⁴⁶ Further, if in judging other societies all that we have to do is evaluate them with reference to our particular standards, then this is merely a form of cultural imperialism. Honi Haber believes this to be the case, arguing that it is perhaps especially pernicious through being cloaked in the language of Foucault and Lyotard. For him, it is precisely the rejection of a radical philosophical critique of liberalism, combined with his inability 'to give up the modernist demand for totality', that means that Rorty can 'be viewed as an apologist for cultural imperialism'.⁴⁷ Haber thus shares with liberals like Kelly the view that Rorty denies the possibility of principled philosophical justification, but draws exactly the opposite conclusion: far from removing any defence of liberalism, it is by

⁴⁴ Markar Melkonian, *Richard Rorty's Politics: Liberalism at the End of the American Century* (Amherst, NY.: Humanity Books, 1999), p. 183. See also Enrique Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation*, translated by Eduardo Mendieta (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1996); Peter McLaren, Ramin Farahmandpur and Juha Suoranta, 'Richard Rorty's Self-Help Liberalism: A Marxist Critique of America's Most Wanted Ironist', in Michael A. Peters and Paulo Ghiraldelli Jr. (eds.) *Richard Rorty: Education, Philosophy, and Politics* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), pp. 139 – 162.

⁴⁵ Jo Burrows, 'Conversational Politics: Rorty's Pragmatist Apology for Liberalism', in Alan R. Malachowski (ed.) *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (and Beyond)* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1991), pp. 322 – 338 at 329.

⁴⁶ Michael Billig, 'Nationalism and Richard Rorty: The Text as Flag for *Pax Americana*', *New Left Review* 202 (1993), pp. 69 – 83 at 77.

⁴⁷ Honi Fern Haber, *Beyond Postmodern Politics: Lyotard, Rorty, Foucault* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 44.

denying the possibility of a radical philosophical critique of liberal democracy that Rorty provides a defence by shielding it from criticism and challenge.

2. The aim of the thesis

It is perhaps no surprise then that in academia, citing Rorty is rapidly becoming analogous to quoting Marx after October 1917 – something that cannot be done innocently.⁴⁸ Against this prevailing view, in this thesis I advance two claims.

First, it is argued that summarising Rorty's view of truth, goodness and rightness as 'merely what we happen to think around here' misrepresents his views of truth and moral value. Although the exact nature of this criticism is rarely spelt out, it raises at least four separate issues: whether or not there is anything beyond contingent human practice; whether 'around here' must be narrowly conceived; whether Rorty has anything to say to those who want to challenge what we do 'around here', or do not feel themselves to be part of it; and finally, whether it rules out any normative project in political theory – if, as Steven Lukes believes, 'this is the way we do things here' necessarily contrasts with 'this is the way things ought to be done everywhere'.⁴⁹ By addressing these different concerns, I will argue that a better appreciation is available not just of Rorty, but of our understandings of moral belief and conviction more generally.

⁴⁸ I owe this observation to Rodney Barker.

⁴⁹ Steven Lukes, *Liberals and Cannibals: The Implications of Diversity* (London: Verso, 2003), p. 36.

Secondly, it is argued that Rorty is able both to justify and defend liberal principles and institutions, and does so in a way that undercuts many of the criticisms of liberalism that have been levelled by communitarian critics and others. An adequate account of liberalism must recognize the historical location of liberal values. Liberalism cannot be deduced from what Barry calls the 'bare notion of rationality'⁵⁰, and it cannot be justified without reference to particular, historically formed and informed, values and interests. This does not, however, reduce to the claim that liberalism and liberal societies are justified simply because they *happen* to exist, or that liberalism cannot be commended to other societies with a view to securing universal adoption and consent.

It will be argued that there are no necessary political or moral conclusions to be drawn from anti-foundationalism. For some, anti-foundationalism brings with it the consequence that there is no standpoint from which to make judgements of other societies. For critics of at least some forms of liberalism, such as John Gray, liberalism is sometimes an instance of 'Western cultural imperialism', reflecting a particular, specifically North American, form of life whilst claiming to be a neutral view from nowhere.⁵¹ A somewhat similar view is assumed by many multiculturalists, who tend to treat notions like 'culture', 'community', and 'tradition' as givens.⁵² There is however no need to accept either of these conclusions. The alternative is to agree that any standpoint is bound to a particular form of life, but that it is none the worse for that. Contextualism, or what Rorty calls ethnocentrism, should not rule

⁵⁰ Barry, *Justice as Impartiality*, p. 8.

⁵¹ John Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake: politics and culture at the close of the modern age* (London: Routledge, 1995).

⁵² See especially Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), and Chandran Kukathas, 'Cultural Toleration', in Will Kymlicka and Ian Shapiro (eds.) *Ethnicity and Group Rights. Nomos XXXIX* (New York: New York University Press, 1997) pp. 69 – 104.

out normativity, either in justification, or in terms of critical morality. For Rorty, traditional philosophical terms can be given sense, but must be ‘sociologized’, by treating them as distinctions within contingent sets of beliefs and practices.⁵³ Notions like ‘criteria’, ‘mistake’, ‘truth’, ‘justification’, and ‘reasonableness’ can be given content, and can be given all the content that they need, without foundationalism. Terms such as moral obligation must be understood in a non-transcendental way, in terms of the obligations that humans acculturated in a certain way recognise and accept as a result of that socialization. Further, it will be argued that there is no reason why an historicist account of liberalism needs to entail a relativistic account of value, and that there is nothing wrong with the aspiration to a universal justification of liberalism. I argue that political theory on Rorty’s account is not reduced to explaining or justifying practices as something that we ‘happen to do around here’. For Rorty, liberalism is morally superior to other forms of life, even though this judgement is not, and cannot be, made from a standpoint outside of any particular practice.

3. The approach adopted in the thesis

In arguing for these claims, I proceed by closely reconstructing the arguments of both Rorty and his critics. There are, I suggest, three advantages to such an approach. Firstly, some of the criticisms levelled against Rorty are, I will show, largely stylistic rather than substantive. This is evidenced for example in Lynn A. Baker’s summary of Rorty’s pragmatism as the Nike slogan ‘Just do it’.⁵⁴ A similar approach is evidenced when James Risser misconstrues

⁵³ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 83 n. 4.

⁵⁴ Lynn A. Baker, “Just Do It”: Pragmatism and Progressive Social Change’, in Michael Brint and William Weaver (eds.) *Pragmatism in Law and Society* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1991), pp. 99 – 119.

Rorty's use of the word 'conversation'. Rorty speaks of replacing confrontation with conversation, summarising his view of pragmatism as the view that there are 'no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones'.⁵⁵ Risser defines 'conversation' invidiously, associating it with superficiality and contrasting it with the rigour and rationality of argument.⁵⁶ These criticisms are especially effective if they are contrasted with a concern for truth, rationality, and objectivity, honorific titles that Rorty's critics typically claim for themselves whilst taking him to deny. Such critics can of course be read sympathetically, as taking Rorty at his own word when he claims that philosophy tends to make progress not by argumentation but by re-description: 'Interesting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis. Usually it is, implicitly or explicitly, a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things'.⁵⁷ This thesis will proceed in a similar manner, seeking to reconstruct both his position, and the arguments of his critics, in order to understand precisely what is at issue between them.

More substantially, this approach helps to disentangle precisely what is at issue with purported criticisms. For upon inspection it is often difficult to see what it is with which a critic is concerned. To take a significant example, it is frequently said in respect of Rorty's anti-foundationalism that some form of higher-order, typically metaphysical, standard, is necessary to sustain moral value and political commitment. Rorty's view that there is no such standard, which different people or communities can be closer to or further away from, is

This reference to Nike is taken up, rather more polemically, by Alan Johnson, 'The Politics of Richard Rorty', *New Politics* (Summer 2000), pp. 103 – 221 at 115 – 116.

⁵⁵ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 165.

⁵⁶ James Risser, "Rortyan Pragmatism as Hermeneutics Praxis," *Modern Schoolman* 63 (1986), pp. 275 – 287.

⁵⁷ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 9.

held by critics to mean that there is no standard up to which any individual or society should be seeking to live. There are however two, quite separate, issues that arise in relation to this. One is whether Rorty is correct to deny the existence of a metaphysical order. The other whether humans need to assume its existence to make sense of moral commitment. These are different claims, but not only is this difference frequently passed over, but these two points are often run together. Throughout the thesis, I seek to clarify what is at issue, showing that upon inspection, criticisms are often misguided and misplaced.

This leads to a third point, that, in attempting to summarise Rorty's views, critics frequently read their own views into his, and criticise him by (explicit or implicit) reference to their own presuppositions rather than his. Thus they rephrase his claims in terms that they, not he, hold, and then criticise him for the consequences of holding his position once it is recast in this way. This is of course natural, but it does mean that criticisms often make sense not only if they assume things that Rorty does not, but also if they assume things against which he is in fact setting out to argue. Rorty makes this point in a discussion of how realists tend to project their 'own habits of thought upon the pragmatist', criticising pragmatists for holding the views that they do were they to express them in the manner of realists.⁵⁸ It will be seen however that this tendency is not limited to Rorty's realist opponents.

For some important criticisms, these three points come together. This is seen in the assertion that Rorty takes truth, rationality, and justification to be *merely* 'the way we do

⁵⁸ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 30. This manner of argument is neatly summarized by Simon Thompson: 'Since Rorty does not endorse the former account [foundationalism], the critics argue, he must endorse the latter [relativism]'. Simon Thompson, 'Richard Rorty on Truth, Justification and Justice', in Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (eds.) *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), pp. 33 – 50 at 34.

things around here'. The use of the terms such as 'merely' or 'happen' in such phrases implicitly conveys a pejorative meaning, of light-mindedness and lack of intellectual substance. It also implies a contrast to something that is *not* 'merely' a function of what is done 'around here'. However, one of the questions that Rorty raises is what happens if there are no reasons that are universally valid or compelling. If there is no such thing, the 'merely' loses all sense, since it has no contrastive force, as there is nothing which is *not* a function of the beliefs and practices of a particular historically situated community.

One final point: political liberalism is, for the purpose of this thesis, a generic category, meaning liberalism that does not make reference to any comprehensive view of the good. As such it includes, but is not limited to, John Rawls's *Political Liberalism*, and the writings of liberals such as Brian Barry and Charles Larmore.⁵⁹ Although there are differences between these writers⁶⁰, all are concerned with institutional arrangements designed to mediate conflict between different views of the good, rather than to suggest or recommend comprehensive or perfectionist (and therefore controversial) views of the good. Rorty sums up this position by writing that 'The point of a liberal society is not to invent or create anything, but simply to make it as easy as possible for people to achieve their wildly different private ends without hurting each other'.⁶¹ My exemplar of political liberalism throughout this thesis is primarily Barry. For although a political rather than a comprehensive liberal, Barry is considered an

⁵⁹ Barry, *Justice as Impartiality*; Charles Larmore, *The Morals of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁶⁰ See for example Barry's review of *Political Liberalism*, 'John Rawls and the Search for Stability', *Ethics* 105 (July 1995), pp. 874 – 915. Barry argues that the concern for 'stability' that animated Rawls's writings after *A Theory of Justice* is superfluous since, insofar as stability is an issue, it was addressed perfectly adequately in that earlier work. Contrary to Rawls's claims in *Political Liberalism*, *A Theory of Justice* does not contain a comprehensive philosophical doctrine, and stability is assured by reasonable people endorsing the principles of justice from behind the veil of ignorance.

⁶¹ Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 196.

uncompromising universalist, and as such serves as a good case against which to test and argue for my reading of Rorty's claims to be a political liberal.

3.1 Argument and re-description

In a rather condescending remark, Thomas Nagel writes that views such as Rorty's 'have a self-evident air if they are not examined too closely, which may account for their greater popularity outside philosophy than in it'.⁶² It is therefore somewhat ironic that Nagel himself does not examine them too closely, preferring instead to speculate about the contents of Rorty's psyche in an effort to explain why he has been tempted away from traditional philosophical concerns. He thus informs us that 'I always feel when reading Rorty that his philosophical position must reflect his own mental experience, which is very different from the norm',⁶³ the norm apparently being to take at face value the sort of questions, about the external world and other minds, that Nagel believes force themselves upon every reflective mind.

It must be said that such conjecture does not sit well with the forceful warnings Nagel elsewhere issues against replacing reasoned argument with psychological and sociological explanation of belief.⁶⁴ Far better to heed those warnings, and take up Rorty's claims at the level of reason. There is however a question of whether it is possible to engage with Rorty through argument and reason. His reluctance to admit that he is making truth-claims, and

⁶² Nagel, *The Last Word*, p. 29.

⁶³ Thomas Nagel, *Concealment and Exposure* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 160.

⁶⁴ Nagel, *The Last Word*, especially pp. 103 – 106.

desire to change the subject matter of philosophical discussion, has given credence to those critics who present him as someone who has turned his back on truth and rationality. For Susan Mendus, Rorty is a ‘conversationalist’, and a ‘poet’,⁶⁵ the implication being that he opposes reason and the arguments of philosophers. In the view of Stanley Rosen, this is just what Rorty intends. He writes that *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* ‘contains no single instance of what professional philosophers call a genuine argument purporting to refute the traditional thesis [the Platonist and Cartesian views of philosophy], either in its own terms or on the basis of Rorty’s own theoretical position’.⁶⁶ Some have gone on to argue that this means that Rorty’s own position cannot be challenged by reason or argument; that it is, as David L. Hall puts it, ‘closed to rational analysis, critique or dialectic’.⁶⁷ This charge is taken up, and combined with criticisms of Rorty’s supposed frivolity and intellectual decadence, by Akeel Bilgrami. Bilgrami writes of the person who fails to accord proper value to the truth. This person, who he terms ‘the bullshitter’, is ‘the person who merely sounds off at parties or, alas, gets published in some academic journals just because he is prepared to speak or write in the requisite jargon, without any goal of getting things right’.⁶⁸ Bilgrami wavers as to whether or not Rorty is guilty of such things, but Jonathan Culler is more forthcoming, suggesting that, aside from the desire for notoriety or (as Nagel suggests) concern to alleviate tedium, there lie more basic human motives. Culler writes that exponents of pragmatism like Rorty and Stanley Fish attained their positions of professional eminence by serious

⁶⁵ Susan Mendus, “What of soul was left, I wonder?” *The Narrative Self in Political Philosophy*, in John Horton and Andrea T. Baumeister (eds.) *Literature and the Political Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 53 – 69 at 55.

⁶⁶ Stanley Rosen, *The Ancients and the Moderns: Rethinking Modernity* (London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 177.

⁶⁷ David L. Hall, *Richard Rorty: Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 6.

⁶⁸ Akeel Bilgrami, ‘Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry?: Rorty and Davidson on Truth’, in Robert B. Brandom (ed.) *Rorty and His Critics*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 242 – 262 at 260.

engagement in intellectual disputes with other members of academia, but that, once secure, they went on to claim that the practice of intellectual inquiry should be abandoned. ‘They thus seek systematically to destroy the structure through which they attained their positions and which would enable others to challenge them in their turn’.⁶⁹

I will consider in some detail Rorty’s views on truth and rationality in subsequent chapters, but it is important at this point to consider the specific claim that he gives up on argument and is simply making rhetorical assertions. Rorty uses ‘argument’ in a specific sense. To argue requires some vocabulary, some structure of thought: argumentation ‘requires that the same vocabulary be used in premises and conclusions – that both be part of the same language-game’.⁷⁰ On Rorty’s account however no structure of thought is foundational or not open to revision. In criticizing Rorty and others for giving up on the traditional problems of philosophy, Nagel writes that certain questions are inescapable and that therefore ‘[p]hilosophy cannot take refuge in reduced ambitions’.⁷¹ In so doing, he makes two assumptions: first, that there is a fixed set of problems that constitute genuine philosophical inquiry; and secondly, that they are necessary questions, ones that cannot be set aside without impoverishing the human condition. Rorty disputes both claims. Regarding the former, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is an historicist account of the reasons why

⁶⁹ Jonathan Culler, ‘In Defence of Overinterpretation’, in Umberto Eco *et al*, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 109 – 123 at 118. Dianne Rothleider believes that, in its own terms, this strategy is successful: ‘If we wish to argue with Rorty ... he puts us in the position of having to be the aggressors. That is, either we silence him into passivity, “helpless passivity” even, or we declare war. Either way, we look ridiculous for disagreeing with a platitudinous tautology, and we look criminal for attacking a helpless, good-natured philosopher.’ Dianne Rothleider, *The Work of Friendship: Rorty, His Critics, and the Project of Solidarity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 95.

⁷⁰ Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 125.

⁷¹ Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, p. 10. Similarly, Charles Taylor speaks of ‘the inescapability of certain philosophical issues.’ Taylor, ‘Rorty in the Epistemological Tradition’, in Alan R. Malachowski (ed.) *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (and Beyond)* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1991), pp. 257 – 275 at 273.

philosophical problems have come to us in the form that they have. Nagel's claim for the eternal importance of certain philosophical questions, specifically 'the problem of the external world and the problem of other minds'⁷² can, in the light of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, be seen to assume that these name two fixed and readily identifiable problems to which different philosophers have successively sought answers, a claim that cannot on inspection be sustained.⁷³

In terms of whether addressing the supposedly perennial questions of philosophy is necessitated by the needs of human beings, Rorty believes that philosophy has often advanced not by the rigorous examination of a thesis, but by changing the subject; not by solving old problems, but by letting them quietly pass out of interest. He notes for example that scholasticism was never refuted, but simply left behind as an object of intellectual interest. He goes on to point out that:

Hobbes did not have theological arguments against Dante's world-picture; Kant had only a very bad scientific argument for the phenomenological character of science; Nietzsche and James did not have epistemological arguments for pragmatism. Each of these thinkers presented us with a new form of intellectual life, and asked us to compare its advantages with the old.⁷⁴

⁷² Nagel, *Concealment and Exposure*, p. 158.

⁷³ For example, Rorty lists nine of the different ways in which philosophers have understood 'the mental'. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1979), p. 35.

⁷⁴ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 156.

Philosophers who wish to set aside one set of problems or propose an alternative are however presented with a difficulty, for they must be careful to avoid relying on the same kind of assumption to those that they are trying to leave behind. Rorty points out the tendency amongst those who engage in argument against metaphysics to replace one metaphysical system with another. Heidegger called Nietzsche 'the last metaphysician', and Rorty views the later Heidegger to be suffering from the same contradiction, of substituting one form of metaphysics with another.⁷⁵ In *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Rorty writes that pragmatists such as himself face a dilemma: 'if their language is too unphilosophical, too "literary," they will be accused of changing the subject; if it is too philosophical it will embody Platonic assumptions which will make it impossible for the pragmatist to state the conclusion he wants to reach'.⁷⁶ In both *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, he claimed to have grasped the first horn of this dilemma, seeking to change the subject in order 'to avoid hinting that this suggestion gets something right, that my sort of philosophy corresponds to the way things really are',⁷⁷ a notion that he viewed as being tainted by metaphysics. His way of doing so in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* is to eschew any suggestion that he is arguing, or making truth claims.

Rorty however uses argumentation in a very specific way, and it is important to be clear that his rejection of the term in this sense does not commit him to discard the term in its

⁷⁵ Rorty discusses the tendency of contemporary Continental philosophers to put forward a post-Nietzschean method in Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), pp. xx – xxi. Steven Yates believes that Rorty himself falls foul of the same self-referential contradiction in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, by relying on the foundation of language to argue against foundations. Yates, 'Rorty's Foundationalism', *Reason Papers* 14 (1989), pp. 130 – 136.

⁷⁶ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. xiv. Rorty thus allows for some sense to Nagel's assertion that Rorty's views are more popular outside of philosophy than within: since Rorty is seeking to change the subject, this is what we might expect from those wedded to current concerns.

⁷⁷ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 8. See also Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 371 – 2.

everyday sense. His point is that argumentation has no application beyond the interior of vocabularies. This is seen in the following illustration:

Europe did not *decide* to accept the idiom of Romantic poetry, or of socialist politics, or of Galilean mechanics. That sort of shift was no more an act of will than it was a result of argument. Rather, Europe gradually lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others.⁷⁸

These stories, as Rorty writes elsewhere, could not be told *in advance* by appealing to a neutral criterion of rationality. It is this claim, and this notion of rationality, that Rorty takes to mark modern philosophy, namely to specify ‘in advance the terms in which all possible problems are to be set, and the criteria for their resolution’.⁷⁹ It is this sense of ‘rationality’ that Rorty means when he writes of the need to give ‘up on the idea that intellectual or political progress is rational, in any sense of “rational” which is neutral between vocabularies’.⁸⁰ This is true, but for all that, the change to Galilean cosmology was a rational one in the sense that there were causes for the change as opposed to their being random or arbitrary events.⁸¹ To give a further example, Rorty comments that Orwell’s writings help us to ‘see that it *just happened* that rule in Europe passed into the hands of people who pitied the humiliated and dreamed of human equality, and that it may *just happen* that the world will wind up being

⁷⁸ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 6, emphasis in original.

⁷⁹ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 109.

⁸⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 48.

⁸¹ As for example Jonathan Salem-Wiseman takes Rorty to be claiming. Salem-Wiseman, ‘Absolute Knowing and Liberal Irony: Hegel, Rorty, and the Criterion of Progress’, *International Studies in Philosophy* 31 (1999), pp. 139 – 153. The distinction between ‘reasons’ and ‘causes’ is discussed in chapter 2.

ruled by people who lack any such sentiments or ideas'.⁸² In this passage, Rorty's concern is to contrast contingent historical events – 'just happen' – with inévitability, for example the working out of the logic of pure practical reason, or the dialectical unfolding of history. He is not however saying that such changes were not, and would not be, explicable in terms of cause and effect and not random events.

There is I suggest therefore no need for Rorty to claim that he is not arguing us into changing our way of speaking. Bjørn Ramberg is quite correct to say that Rorty argues in 'the sense of attempting to rationally persuade',⁸³ where of course 'rationally' is taken to mean that Rorty gives reasons and explanations in order to convince others and, for this reason, I also agree with Gutting that Rorty 'sells himself short by suggesting that he is not persuading us by argument'.⁸⁴ Rorty has subsequently dropped the idea that he not seeking to argue with the aim of getting things right. In *Truth and Progress* he writes that he is 'happy to say that when I put forward large philosophical views I am making "claims to truth" rather than simply a recommendation to speak differently'.⁸⁵ Nevertheless he continues to emphasise the dismissive rather than the argumentative aspects of his writings, writing that the essays in the first part of that book 'are not constructive in tone, but dismissive: they dismiss various questions and controversies as leading nowhere'.⁸⁶ This should not blind us to the fact that Rorty does not merely assert that philosophers should change the subject. From *Philosophy*

⁸² Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, pp. 184 – 185, emphasis in original.

⁸³ Bjørn T. Ramberg, 'Rorty and the Instruments of Philosophy', in Michael A. Peters and Paulo Ghiraldelli Jr. (eds.) *Richard Rorty: Education, Philosophy, and Politics* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), pp. 15 – 45 at 29.

⁸⁴ Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity*, p. 58; see also Matthew Festenstein, *Pragmatism and Political Theory* (Oxford: Polity, 1997), p. 114, and Alan Malachowski, 'Review Symposium on Richard Rorty, *History of the Human Sciences* 3 (1990), pp. 101 – 122 at 117.

⁸⁵ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 92, n. 16. The quotes around 'claims to truth' reflect the fact that Rorty is quoting Charles Taylor.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

and the *Mirror on Nature* onwards, he has engaged with the tradition of modern philosophy in order to illustrate its failings and limitations. He has done so in a way that, although ‘therapeutic’ rather than ‘constructive’, addresses those issues from the inside, not by explaining them away as for example the result of particular socio-historical developments. Rorty, in short, is engaging in argumentation. In what follows I will proceed by taking Rorty to be making truth claims, claims that are opened to challenge by reason and argument.⁸⁷

4. Organisation of the thesis

In chapter 2, I examine Rorty’s account of the relationship between philosophy and politics. Although famous for his criticisms of philosophy as an academic discipline, in his recent writings Rorty has increasingly placed that critique within a broader narrative. This narrative is one of what he calls human maturation, in which concern with philosophical notions of Truth and Rationality is viewed as a half-way stage between the world of religious certainties and a fully matured humanity that can thrive without reliance on or backup from any non-human authority. I examine criticisms of this view, notably in respect of Rorty’s understanding of philosophy as foundationalism, by relating the criticisms of foundationalism with his broader, political vision, taking up his view that post-modernism is

⁸⁷ I will thus leave aside criticisms such as those of Culler’s, that amount to nothing more than petty slights and vague and unsupported conjecture about Rorty’s psychology and intellectual integrity. Interestingly, in such cases, where evidence is proffered, it often counts against the stated objection. Culler, by correctly pointing out that *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is a work of systematic engagement with philosophical questions, obligingly refutes himself, since that book was published in 1979 when Rorty was a tenured professor at Princeton and so on Culler’s logic had no need to publish that type of work but ought rather have been busily attempting to immunise himself from critical challenge. It is also clear that if Rorty really had sought to protect himself from challenge, he has made an extraordinarily bad job of it.

the culmination, not the negation, of the hopes and aspirations of the Enlightenment. I conclude by considering Rorty's view of political liberalism, which he sees as the full application of what he terms 'anti-authoritarianism'.

The consequences of Rorty's anti-foundationalism for reason-giving are considered in chapter 3. In the absence of the sort of foundations Rorty takes philosophers typically to have sought, many claim that Rorty reduces truth, goodness, etc. to a matter of what 'we happen to think around here'. The chapter begins with an examination of the claim to 'universal validity', made by among others Jürgen Habermas and Thomas Nagel. I argue that no substantive content can be given to this notion, and that the charge of 'merely' fails because it has no contrastive force; there is nothing that is *not* a historically contingent belief. I go on to defend ethnocentrism by showing that beliefs and values are not morally arbitrary: they are the result of particular historical influences, but that does not make them relativistic or irrational.

In chapter 4, I examine what for Rorty is a further consequence of anti-foundationalism, ironism. It has been suggested that Rorty's conception of ironism removes any basis for moral belief or conviction (even relativistic ones). For, as he accepts, awareness of contingency will leave us with fears that we will be unable to dispel. Rorty's account of ironism is taken up by addressing the question of whether it is possible to remain committed to beliefs if we are aware of their contingency and, secondly, whether ironism is compatible with liberalism. I suggest that ironism is not only compatible with holding liberal beliefs, but that a fully political liberalism ought to be an ironic liberalism.

Having demonstrated that anti-foundationalism and ironism do not reduce to ‘what we happen to think around here’, in the second part of the thesis I take up the normative question of the scope and application of liberalism.

In chapter 5, Rorty’s ethnocentric defence of political liberalism is considered. Commentators have claimed that Rorty’s anti-foundationalism entails unacceptable consequences for moral justification. I reject this reading, showing that justification is important, but that it is tied to the standards of a particular *ethnos*. I go on to show how political liberalism can be justified on ethnocentric grounds, by suggesting that it is the most successful way of bringing together holders of different views of the good with a degree of fairness, but in a way that amounts to more than a Hobbesian *modus vivendi*.

I turn to consider the role of political theory in chapter 6. For Rorty, the task for the political theorist is to draw attention to the ways in which the practices of those societies fail to live up to their self-image. This view is examined and defended against the objection that it is critically impotent. I then take up what has been seen as Rorty’s impoverished view of philosophy and political theorising, and the criticism that he promotes (either by design or by default) an uncritical endorsement of the status quo. Finally, I compare Rorty’s account of political theory with that of Michael Walzer’s account of what he calls ‘internal social criticism’. While Walzer makes a strong contrast between the two projects, I argue that, properly understood, there is no difference, and that liberal political theorists such as John Rawls are engaged in the same enterprise as Walzerian social criticism, of articulating the values of liberal society.

In chapter 7, I consider how ethnocentric justification can escape making the standards of a particular *ethnos* the last word, and whether Rorty's account adequately addresses challenges from non-liberals. I show that Rorty avoids allowing justification to entail the uncritical endorsement of values and practices by advocating what John Rawls calls 'reflective equilibrium'. I go on to argue against the claim that 'we' must, on Rorty's account, be narrowly constituted by showing that there is no logical or moral reason why the boundaries of the liberal *ethnos* cannot potentially be global.

In chapter 8, I examine the scope of liberal claims. I argue that despite Rorty's hostility to Kantian universalism, he is a universalist in the sense that he believes in the desirability of extending liberal values and institutions as widely as possible. Rorty's hostility to universalism stems from a rejection of the Kantian notion of unconditional moral obligation, an idea not present in the accounts of political liberals like Brian Barry. I contrast Rorty's view of universalism with that of Barry, showing that he agrees with Barry about the desirability of extending liberal values and institutions, ideally globally.

In summary, the argument of this thesis falls into two claims. Firstly, anti-foundationalism is shown not to reduce reason giving and justification to *merely* what 'we happen to think around here'. It is also cleansed of claims that it is relativistic, irrational and nihilistic. Secondly, liberalism is shown to be capable of being defended on an anti-foundationalist account, and that a correct understanding of ethnocentrism leaves a robust and refreshed account of political liberalism.

The thesis is original in interpretation and goes beyond the standard critiques of Rorty. It contrasts with the near-consensus that Rorty is a relativist, one who denies any normative project in political theory and for whom anti-foundationalism collapses into parochialism and conservatism. Against this, I argue that his position, far from being antithetical to political liberalism, is able to support a liberal agenda.

Chapter Two

Anti-authoritarianism and political liberalism

Famous for his criticisms of philosophy as an academic discipline, in recent writings Rorty has come increasingly to place that critique within a broader historical narrative revolving around what he views, controversially, to be a story of human maturation. In this narrative, humanity is held to be gradually putting aside non-human forms of authority, be they religious or secular, and coming to recognise nothing other than the authority of human beings. This narrative, and its culmination in political liberalism as a form of what he calls ‘anti-authoritarianism’, is examined in this chapter, which begins by examining Rorty’s understanding of philosophy as a foundational enterprise, one which takes knowledge to be the attempt to represent the world in its own terms. Retrospectively, we can see Rorty’s earlier works, such as *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and *Consequences of Pragmatism*, as focusing on *philosophical* anti-authoritarianism, which rejects as nonsensical the attempt to represent the world as it is ‘in itself’, and as putting forward his views of a ‘post-Philosophical culture’, in which ‘men and women felt themselves alone, merely finite, with no links to something Beyond’.¹ This account has been criticised in many respects, but my concern here is to examine Rorty’s view of anti-foundationalism specifically in the context of his narrative of maturation. For John McDowell, far from being a sign of maturity, the ability to set aside philosophical questions about ‘our answerability to the world’ is a regressive step; for him, the maturity to which Rorty refers is in fact secured by recognising our obligations to the world. The political side of this story is then examined, starting with Rorty’s account of the relation

¹ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, pp. xlii – xlvi.

between Enlightenment and postmodernism. Rorty regards postmodernism to be the culmination, not the negation, of the aspirations of the Enlightenment. For many, however, postmodernism is antithetical to those aspirations of the Enlightenment that Rorty seeks to preserve. For John Gray, although Rorty is correct to see the Enlightenment culminating in postmodernism, this also marks its undoing. I reject both claims, and go on to show how anti-authoritarianism is central to Rorty's view of liberalism which seeks above all the avoidance of cruelty. Critics like John Kekes attack Rorty's presentation on this point as vacuous, arguing that it tells us nothing substantial about what it is that is cruel, but that it is merely a 'slogan' that exemplifies liberal high-mindedness. I show how political liberalism thus understood is not vacuous, and is intimately related to the full application of anti-authoritarianism.

5. Philosophical narrative of maturation

5.1 'The philosophical urge'

Rorty has become infamous among philosophers for what many take to be his postmodern efforts to displace philosophy as a discipline or field of knowledge. The association of Rorty with postmodernism is often made carelessly – sometimes, as I show below, by Rorty himself – but it is clear that taken together, his books and essays amount to a rejection of many of the practices and concerns of Western philosophy. His critique of 'the tradition' is, in part, a highly personal one. In his essay 'Trotsky and the wild orchids',² Rorty traces his intellectual development as a process of breaking away from the picture that he found attractive in his youth. In this autobiographical piece,

² In Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, pp. 3 – 20.

Rorty says that he came to study philosophy as a secular means to access absolute Truth, to rise to the top of Plato's divided line. However, he gradually came to see the history of philosophy as a series of failed attempts, one marked by an inability to get 'beyond hypotheses', to find the standpoint from which alternative first principles could be neutrally evaluated.

Rorty views this search – the history of philosophy – as a series of attempts to escape from history by a discipline which claims to possess access to necessary truth. It is animated by what he calls '*the* philosophical urge'³, the urge for something certain and eternal to back up our human beliefs and practices. Pre-modern (that is, pre-Cartesian) philosophy sought to do this by uncovering the reality behind the everyday world of appearances, for example by reaching the top of Plato's divided line. The burgeoning of the natural sciences from the early sixteenth century led to science taking the place of philosophy as the means to uncovering and understand reality, and that, together with later cultural changes such as those brought about by the French Revolution, led to a turn inwards, to a concern with how we can be sure of the truth of the knowledge the new sciences claim to provide.

Descartes, who can be seen retrospectively as the founder of modern philosophy, wrote of the mind being cut off from the world by a 'veil of ideas', creating the image of the mind as something that seeks to represent the world, with philosophy seeking to guarantee the fidelity of those representations. Rorty writes that: 'In Descartes' conception – the one which became the basis of "modern" epistemology – it is *representations* which are in the "mind". The Inner Eye surveys these representations

³ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 179, emphasis in original.

hoping to find some mark which will testify to their fidelity'.⁴ Thus arises the problem of scepticism in its modern form, for if knowledge is conceived of in terms of accurate representations and the mind as an inner arena which scrutinises the sense impressions of the outside world, a gap opens up between reality and the images that seem to represent it. The reconciliation between the two, between the representations of the individual subject and the object which is represented, has for Rorty been the goal of most subsequent philosophy. It is thus 'representationalist', concerned to represent accurately the nature of reality: 'Philosophy's central concern is to be a general theory of representation, a theory which will divide culture up into the areas which represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all (despite their pretense of doing so).'⁵

This aspiration to accuracy of representation relies on the assumption of a world waiting to be represented according to its own lights. Ancient philosophy was characterised by the distinction between Appearance and Reality, and although epistemology came to dominate modern philosophy over the ancient metaphysical concerns,⁶ it retains something of the ancient distinction in its claim that a break exists between the mind and the world, with some representations being more accurate than others. Beyond the differences between philosophers, modern philosophy is characterised by a central metaphysical claim, that of postulating the existence of what Kant called the *Ding an sich*, a world that exists before and behind the everyday world that we inhabit, a world which 'so to speak, looms behind such things – something august and remote'.⁷ Philosophy's

⁴ Ibid., p. 45, emphasis in original.

⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

⁶ Recently, Rorty has called his claim, made in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, that modern philosophy reversed the ancient priority of metaphysics over epistemology, 'hopeless'. Richard Rorty, 'Response to Michael Williams' in Robert B. Brandom (ed.) *Rorty and His Critics*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 213 - 219 at 213.

⁷ Rorty, 'Pragmatism as anti-authoritarianism', p. 8.

concern with what Rorty variously calls 'Reality as It Is in Itself'⁸ or the 'Intrinsic Nature of Reality'⁹ through its attempt to represent 'Nature's Own Vocabulary'¹⁰ or 'The One Right Description'¹¹ or 'the One True Account of How Things Really Are'¹² led to its self-description as serving as the foundation for all areas of human inquiry, since its knowledge of necessary truths enables philosophers to adjudicate the claims of the other, empirical, disciplines. It seeks, in Rorty's words, 'to map out all possible logical space, to make explicit our implicit grasp of the realm of possibility ... philosophy [on this account] consists in clarification, in patiently making explicit what has remained implicit'.¹³

The critique of the Western philosophical tradition is however but one part of a broader narrative of maturity that Rorty has started to tell about Western society. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is a sustained analysis of the questions and issues that have been central to the Western philosophical tradition since Descartes, but as is clear, particularly in the third part of the book, that Rorty regards the urge for certainty over and above the contingencies of everyday life as a symptom of a more general immaturity, of 'a desire for constraint – a desire to find "foundations" to which one might cling, frameworks beyond which one must not stray'.¹⁴ He has come increasingly to see philosophy, with its origins with Plato, as a secular version of religious abasement before God, in which the Forms take the place of God. This is seen for example in his view that today, 'the role once played by defenders of religious belief is played by defenders of realism'.¹⁵

⁸ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 72.

⁹ Rorty, 'Pragmatism as anti-authoritarianism', p. 7.

¹⁰ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 140.

¹¹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 40.

¹² Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 270.

¹³ Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 12.

¹⁴ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 315.

¹⁵ Rorty, 'Response to Michael Williams', p. 217.

The 'philosophical urge' is the secular counterpart of the religious notion that only the eternal is of ultimate value. Without the reassurance of eternity, everything is transitory and thus for many merely contingent and so ultimately worthless.¹⁶ There is also a moral aspect to this concern, which is that without the standpoint of eternity, we deny the possibility of giving a final answer to those who challenge our views of the content and purpose of morality. These two concerns unite in the need Rorty diagnoses in many to feel in touch with something over and above the human, and leads to the contrast he sees between those who see fraternity between human beings as the highest hope for the future and those for whom this is not enough, and who seek a higher authority. 'These two types of people', he writes, 'are conveniently describable in Freudian terms: they are the people who think subjection to an authority-figure is necessary to lead a properly human life and those who see such a life as requiring freedom from any such subjection'.¹⁷

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty agrees with Sartre that the attempt to gain objective knowledge is an attempt to avoid responsibility for choosing one's own projects¹⁸. This is a claim that he has spelt out much more fully in later writings, notably the essay 'Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism':

¹⁶ Rorty suggests that the realist's desire for objectivity over and above that of solidarity is a disguised form of the fear that one's community, and thus its values, may die. Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 31 – 32.

¹⁷ Rorty, 'Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism', p. 15. Roy Bhaskar argues that Rorty himself remains trapped within the traditional philosophical problematic, and that his own 'critical realism' leads to full de-divinization of the world. It is clear that Rorty would not view critical realism in this way, particularly Bhaskar's claim that it entails 'the de-anthropomorphization and de-humanization of nature'. Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*, p. 33.

¹⁸ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 361. He might also agree with Thomas C. Grey's view of philosophy as 'escapism', the retreat from the problems of life into the supposed problems of eternity. See Grey, 'Freestanding Legal Pragmatism, in Morris Dickstein (ed.) *The Revival of Pragmatism* (London: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 254 – 274.

The pragmatists' anti-representationalist account of belief is, among other things, a protest against the idea that human beings must humble themselves before something non-human, whether the Will of God or the Intrinsic Nature of Reality. Seeing anti-representationalism [as] a version of anti-authoritarianism permits one to appreciate an analogy which was central to John Dewey's thought: the analogy between ceasing to believe in Sin and ceasing to accept the distinction between Reality and Appearance.¹⁹

It is worth pausing to note that there is a tension in Rorty's writing regarding religion. Sometimes monotheistic religion is seen as a form of authoritarianism, one that in Rorty's narrative of maturation is replaced by secular versions starting with the Platonic Forms. This idea is central to the distinction drawn in the essay 'Solidarity or Objectivity?' where he writes that there are two ways in which humans, by placing their lives in a larger context, give them meaning: by contributing to a community, real or imagined, or to a non-human reality.²⁰ In other places, notably the essay 'Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism', Rorty seeks to make space for religion by suggesting how religious visions of truth and goodness can be seen as one 'poem' amongst many others, and he seeks to defend this view of religion against the aggressive atheism of Nietzsche on the one hand and scientism on the other.²¹ Rorty, I suggest, resolves this tension in a way that coheres with his other concerns in his essay 'Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility and Romance', where he writes approvingly of a religious faith that 'is hard to distinguish from love for, and hope for, the human community'.²² This is

¹⁹ Rorty, 'Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism', p. 7. See also Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 78.

²⁰ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 21 – 34.

²¹ Richard Rorty, 'Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism', in Morris Dickstein (ed.) *The Revival of Pragmatism* (London: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 21 – 36.

²² Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, pp.148 – 167 at 160.

however to adopt a particular view of religion, and although we do not have to go as far as Stanley Fish and say that Rorty is calling for a ‘de-divinized’ theology,²³ he is certainly promoting a particular image of Christianity, and of religion in general, which is highly controversial,²⁴ drawing as it does on Dewey’s view of the stages of religious consciousness.

5.2 Answerability to the world

To claim that giving up on responsibility to any form of non-human authority, be it God or the Intrinsic Nature of Reality, is a form of maturation is provocative, and it has been challenged in its own terms. For Thomas Nagel, ‘Philosophy is the childhood of the intellect, and a culture that tries to skip it will never grow up’.²⁵ It can further be argued that refusal to recognise a responsibility to the world is itself a form of immaturity. For John McDowell, ‘[a]cknowledging a non-human external authority over our thinking, so far from being a betrayal of our humanity, is merely a condition of growing up.’²⁶ To see exactly what is at issue here, it is important to consider what Rorty means by responsibility to the world. His denial of ‘Reality as It Is in Itself’ follows up on Wilfred Sellars’ criticisms of the empiricist foundationalism of Locke, who held that knowledge emerges through direct acquaintance with objects that appear immediately before the mind. Sellars argued that nothing – no thing – can require us to represent it in any particular way. The idea that it does he termed the ‘Myth of the Given’, the myth that there is a pre-linguistic ‘thing in itself’ which holds that truth is the result of a causal

²³ Stanley Fish, *The Trouble with Principle* (London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 297.

²⁴ As we will see in chapter 5.

²⁵ Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, p. 12.

²⁶ John McDowell, ‘Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity’, in Robert B. Brandom (ed.) *Rorty and His Critics*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 109 – 123 at 120.

relationship between objects and the mind, which produces indisputable knowledge. Drawing on Kant, Sellars claimed that sensations alone do not count as knowledge, because there is no ‘direct acquaintance’, with any object; there are no objects that are ‘immediately before the mind’.²⁷ Any report, be it of science or commonsense, is mediated by language, which is itself the product of social practice.

Sellars follows up on Kant’s claim that intuitions without concepts are blind, and Rorty, accepting the claim that there is no way to distinguish what is innately given from what is contributed by the mind, has seemed to commentators like McDowell to endorse the Kantian notion of the mind-dependence of phenomenal reality.²⁸ However, Rorty argues that Kant’s position is flawed because it preserves the misconceived Cartesian concern of getting the content of our minds to match up to the external world in its claim that the categories of the mind *constitute* experience. It assumes what Donald Davidson calls ‘the third dogma of empiricism’, that there is a pre-conceptual world upon which humans impose our own concepts and understandings.²⁹ In contrast, Rorty argues that it is impossible to divide up the parts of the world contributed by the mind from the world itself; he quotes Hilary Putnam approvingly when he says that ‘elements of what we call ‘language’ or ‘mind’ penetrate so deeply into what we call ‘reality’ that the very project of representing ourselves as being ‘mappers’ of something ‘language-independent’ is fatally compromised from the start’.³⁰

²⁷ Rorty quoting Sellars in Rorty’s ‘Introduction’ to Wilfred Sellars, ‘Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind’, (London: Harvard University Press, 1997) edited by Robert Brandom, pp. 1 – 12 at 5.

²⁸ McDowell draws out the parallels in his essay, ‘Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity’.

²⁹ See chapter 7.

³⁰ Hilary Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face* (London: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 28, emphasis suppressed. Quoted by Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 43.

This claim has led several critics to take Rorty to be proposing a form of linguistic idealism. Frank Farrell understands Rorty to be saying that the world can be conceived of in any way, simply by an act of will. Rorty is said to offer a ‘narcissistic version [of idealism] of encountering only ourselves when we think and talk. To come to grips with the world is just to encounter our own present cultural artefacts … we never encounter anything but what we have made.’³¹ Rorty’s point is not however that humans ‘construct’ the world; he further agrees with Putnam’s metaphor of ‘cookie cutting’³²: unlike the relationship between the cookie cutter and her dough, humans cannot simply cut the world up in any way that we please but are constrained by the world to accept and reject different pictures. Rorty specifies this claim by distinguishing ‘causal’ relations to the world from ‘representational’ relations. The world *causes* us to experience many things; we cannot help our physical interaction with it. However, the sensations that we experience do not have to be *represented* in any particular way: as Rorty puts it, ‘The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not’.³³ The world is indifferent, for example, to how we measure temperature, or geographical distance, and the ways in which temperatures and distances are measured are conventions, created by humans for their own purposes. Rorty rejects both the idea that dispositions are ‘in the things themselves’, and the view that they are something we ‘project’ as, respectively, metaphysical realism, and idealism: ‘the idealists confused the idea that nothing has … [an intrinsic nature to be

³¹ Frank B. Farrell, *Subjectivity, Realism and Postmodernism – The Recovery of the World in Recent Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 139. See also Jim Garrison, ‘Rorty, Metaphysics, and Human Potential’, in Michael A. Peters and Paulo Ghiraldelli Jr. (eds.) *Richard Rorty: Education, Philosophy, and Politics* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), pp. 47 – 66; Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*, p. 38; Gideon Calder, *Rorty and Resdescription* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2003), pp. 40 – 41.

³² Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1987), p. 19.

³³ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 5. See also Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 83.

expressed or represented] with the idea that space and time are unreal, that human beings cause the spatiotemporal world to exist.³⁴

Other commentators, recognising that Rorty is not a linguistic idealist, and that he affirms the existence of a world existing independently of us, think that he can only say this on pain of contradiction. Ian Shapiro writes that for Rorty ‘there is an external world that operates (at least partly) independently of our beliefs about it and indeed that it partly shapes those beliefs’. In saying this, Shapiro correctly counters claims such as Farrell’s, but he does so only to offer another criticism, that ‘this view rests on an implicit version of the realism that Rorty claims to reject’.³⁵ However, like Farrell, Shapiro misses the distinction between causal and representational connection to the world. As Rorty has recently written in response to a similar criticism, ‘if all it takes to be a realist is to grant that “human practices and languages are conditioned by determinate features of the world”, then I certainly count as a realist’.³⁶ So does everybody else. To be a realist is to affirm much more than this. It means that there is a way that the world really is, one that lies behind our various attempts to cope with it, and which determines the utility of these different attempts. For Rorty, realism is a form of representationalism; it is not the view that there is a world that exists independently of us, but rather the view that the world can be represented in its own terms. This Rorty rejects, and for the same reason rejects the label ‘anti-realist’³⁷, viewing the realism–anti-realism debate to presuppose the

³⁴ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 4. See also Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 276.

³⁵ Shapiro, *Political Criticism*, p. 34. See also Jacek Holówska, ‘Philosophy and the Mirage of Hermeneutics’, in Alan R. Malachowski (ed.), *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (and Beyond)* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1991), pp. 187–197.

³⁶ Richard Rorty, ‘Response to Kate Soper’, in Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (eds.) *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), pp. 130–133 at 130.

³⁷ Attributed to him by Ben H. Letson, *Davidson’s Theory of Truth and Its Implication for Rorty’s Pragmatism* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), p. 20; Taylor calls Rorty a ‘non-realist’ in Taylor, ‘Rorty and the Epistemological Tradition’, p. 258.

representationalist picture of the world which he rejects, with realists and anti-realists differing over which areas of inquiry, if any, represent the ‘facts of the matter’.

5.3 Understanding under a description

Against the representationalist/realist claim that there is some metaphysical order of reality, Rorty argues that understanding is always of objects under a description, a view which necessitates giving up the claim to describe the thing as it is in itself.³⁸ This point becomes clearer if we consider the claims of those who adopt a representationalist view of the world. Thomas Nagel refers to ‘the world as it is in itself’,³⁹ the objective world which he believes lies untouched behind the world of appearance produced by human subjectivity. Similarly, Norman Geras writes that Rorty ‘cannot cope with explaining how, if there is not something which is what it is apart from any description, there could be something which pre-existed all description; as to the best of our knowledge there is’.⁴⁰ But, given Rorty’s rejection of linguistic idealism, and his claim that ‘there is such a thing as brute physical resistance’,⁴¹ what exactly is it that exists prior to description? Neither Nagel or Geras tell us, and on Rorty’s account, the reason for this is, straightforwardly, that it is impossible to do so. If one specifies a feature of the world that is purportedly free of subjective features, questions arise as to whether that description really is objective or, despite Nagel’s conviction, a mere appearance. Rorty writes:

³⁸ Calder is therefore mistaken to summarise Rorty as claiming that “‘nature’ and ‘reality’ in themselves are strictly beyond the scope of our description’ (Calder, *Rorty and Redescription*, p. 31): they are not *beyond* description, but have no referents without descriptions.

³⁹ Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, p. 5.

⁴⁰ Norman Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind: the Ungroundable Liberalism of Richard Rorty* (New York: Verso, 1995), p. 138.

⁴¹ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 81.

As soon as we start thinking of “the world” as atoms and the void, or sense data and awareness of them, or “stimuli” of a certain sort brought to bear upon organs of a certain sort, we have changed the name of the game. For we are now well within some particular theory about how the world is.⁴²

Nagel fails to specify content to the world ‘as it is in itself’. Steven Lukes is more forthcoming, writing that ‘not all the world’s furniture is moveable, and both gods and atoms are anchored in theory-neutral, if not theory-free, observations of a boring, mundane sort’.⁴³ Lukes leaves the distinction between something being ‘theory-neutral’ and its being ‘theory-free’ unspecified but, whatever it might be, it is not the case that gods, or indeed atoms, have an existence that is neutral in the sense that it is unmoved in the change from one theory to another. In claiming that what he says is mundane and boring, the sort of thing we can infer that only a relativist would be crazy enough to call into question, Lukes passes over the fact that what is taken to be boring or mundane will vary from person to person, and community to community.

A more nuanced account is that of Bernard Williams, who discusses what he calls the ‘absolute conception’ of the world, the ‘world that is there *anyway*, independent of our experience’.⁴⁴ The absolute perspective is, he claims, the one that ‘finished science’ would ideally converge upon, since physics, unlike ethics, is in his view untainted by human perspectives that stem from our particular psychology. Williams distinguishes ‘absolute

⁴² Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 14.

⁴³ Steven Lukes, ‘Relativism in its Place’, in Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (eds.) *Rationality and Relativism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), pp. 261 – 305 at 271.

⁴⁴ Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985), p. 138, emphasis in original.

qualities' from 'perspectival qualities', arguing that the absolute description of the world would be a description that used only the former. Thus, the absolute conception of the world would use physical terms like 'extension' but not ones like 'colour', the latter stemming from a peculiarly human perspective. However, although Williams spells his position out in greater detail than either Nagel or Lukes, the same problem remains, namely how to distinguish non-perspective and perspectival states of the world. Why should we assume for example that scientific concerns, such as the ability to predict and control physical objects, is any freer of human perspectives than the ascription of colour?⁴⁵

Rorty is clear that there is no description of the world – commonsensical, scientific, ethical, etc., – that describes that world as it is in itself, that is, the world separate from any human interests or concerns and the vocabularies that they give rise to. This idea Rorty believes to follow on from a Darwinian account of human behaviour, which sees humans as seeking to cope with, rather than represent, the world. Vocabularies are tools for coping with, rather than mirrors for representing, reality: 'One of the things we want to do with language is to get food, another is to get sex, another is to understand the origin of the universe'.⁴⁶ Different historical and environmental conditions mean that we cope in different ways, but there is no overarching task of representing Reality As It Is in Itself.

The idea of correspondence to the world 'as it is in itself' is without content, because there are no criteria specified by the world. Within a vocabulary, there are facts, but all

⁴⁵ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 57 – 59. In proposing some examples of absolute qualities, Williams also assumes that the world breaks down neatly into areas such as ethics which (he claims) are perspectival, and natural science which (he says) is not. As Putnam shows, this division itself breaks down upon inspection. Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy* (London: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 80 – 107.

⁴⁶ Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 127.

knowledge-claims are regulated by those vocabularies, and there is no neutral way to test how accurately different vocabularies represent reality. For those in different language games, the claims of others will not be *reasons*, but errors and symptoms of irrationality.⁴⁷ Conversely, those who seek change will treat the old vocabulary as a mere prejudice, etc. However, if we give up on the idea of what Hilary Putnam calls the ‘God’s Eye View’ or Way the World Is that many assume afford us insight into which changes are rational and which irrational, then we must recognize that there is no standpoint from which neutrally and definitively to judge this matter, and that our individual standards are reflections of particular needs, beliefs and interests.

Rorty suggests, therefore, that we should ‘limit the opposition between rational and irrational forms of persuasion to the interior of language game[s], rather than try to apply it to interesting and important shifts in linguistic behaviour’.⁴⁸ This entails a distinction between reasons and arguments on the one hand, and causation on the other. Arguments take place within an established set of practices, and reasons are given within them. Rorty’s difference with representationalists like Nagel, it is important to recognise, concerns the distinction between vocabularies and statements. Once one has ‘decided’ on a vocabulary, there are arguments to be had about truth-claims. Rodney Barker writes that “‘the language games of one’s time’ should not be dismissed as trivial. They are engaged in with serious and benign intent by many who seek thereby to advance the happiness of humanity or the justice with which it arranges its affairs”.⁴⁹ Barker intends this as a challenge to Rorty, but Rorty would however agree about the importance of reason giving within language games. His claim is that one cannot move beyond language games to ask whether one particular

⁴⁷ Recall Nagel’s claim that views such as Rorty’s ‘have a self-evident air if they are not examined too closely, which may account for their greater popularity outside philosophy than in it’. Nagel, *The Last Word*, p. 29. Compare Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 370.

⁴⁸ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 47.

⁴⁹ Rodney Barker, *Legitimizing Identities: the self-presentation of rulers and subjects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 19.

language game somehow represents reality more accurately than any other. That is, against the realist/representationalist, he denies that vocabularies themselves can be true or false. In opposing ‘argument’, his claim is that one cannot *argue* from one vocabulary to another, for there is no independent ground for adjudicating between them:

[...] we often let the world decide the competition between alternative sentences (e.g., between “Red wins” and “Black wins”...)...But it is not so easy when we turn from individual sentences to vocabularies as wholes...[here] the idea that the world decides which descriptions are true can no longer be given a clear sense.⁵⁰

Anti-foundationalism entails that we ‘give up on the idea there can be reasons for using languages as well as reasons within languages for believing statements.’⁵¹ Here, ‘as well as’ means ‘over and above’, not ‘and’; there are reasons within vocabularies, but not across them.

The postulation of a Reality that stands behind our different descriptions of it has led to the fruitless but often pernicious tendency to divide areas of inquiry according to the cognitive or ontological status of academic disciplines and of the truth claims they make. It has led, notably, to the distinction between the ‘hard’ ‘factual’ subjects, such as mathematics and physics, and the ‘soft’ ‘subjective’ ones such as art and literary criticism. Foundationalists are likely to allow scepticism and subjectivity into ethics, and are more likely to be anti-realists in ethics than in physics, because it is harder to see what moral values, unlike hard physical substances, represent. Nagel for example believes that

⁵⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

subjectivism is more credible in ethics than science: ‘The standpoint of morality is more objective than that of private life, but less objective than the standpoint of physics’⁵², and for morality he denies the existence of ‘a universe of moral facts that impinge on us causally’.⁵³ Rorty also denies the existence of moral facts existing independently of us out there in the world, but unlike Nagel this is because he thinks there are no facts of any kind ‘out there’ in the world. Different areas of culture aim at different things, but none is closer to representing reality than any other. They are rather severally the products of our culturally informed way of coping with the world that confronts us.

6. The political narrative of maturation

6.1 Postmodernism and the Enlightenment

Although interesting in itself, Rorty has come to place this interpretation of the history of Western philosophy within a broader, political, narrative. It is a narrative in which (as we will see) philosophy can play a role – for him, ‘the pragmatist tradition not just as clearing up little messes left behind by the great dead philosophers, but as contributing to a world-historical change in humanity’s self-image’⁵⁴ – but it is one that is clearly much wider than the scope of philosophy.

In Rorty’s account, by far and away the most significant milestone on the way towards full human maturity was the European Enlightenment, which called into question beliefs and traditions that claim authority over human beings. It is in his discussion of the

⁵² Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, p. 5.

⁵³ Nagel, *The Last Word*, p. 101.

⁵⁴ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 132.

Enlightenment that Rorty's philosophical and political narratives come together. His account is indebted to Heidegger, who viewed Western metaphysics as a series of attempts to empower human beings by uncovering the truth behind the everyday world of appearances. Heidegger argued that philosophers have increasingly allowed human interests to enter the philosophical enterprise, reaching its logical conclusion with the Enlightenment and American pragmatism, which he takes to hold that there is no truth beyond that which we create to satisfy our everyday finite – human – ends.

For Heidegger, this was a disaster,⁵⁵ and like him, postmodernists are often held to be opposed to the legacy of the Enlightenment. Rorty has called his own view a postmodernist one, but his relation to postmodernism is complex, evidenced by his equivocation over his readiness to identify himself with it. Although he embraced the term in essays such as 'Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism',⁵⁶ he subsequently came to be wary of it, writing at one point that 'I now regret ever having used this term'.⁵⁷ It is possible to identify several interrelated reasons for this. Part of the regret is probably because the term has come to mean all things to all people, relating to everything from philosophy to architecture. Rorty however means it very specifically, in the sense of what Jean-Francois Lyotard called "distrust of metanarratives," narratives which describe or predict the activities of such entities as the noumenal self or the Absolute Spirit or the Proletariat.⁵⁸ Postmodernism in this sense means a rejection of notions that history is

⁵⁵ For Rorty's overview of Heidegger's account of the history of Western metaphysics, see Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, pp. 27 – 49.

⁵⁶ In Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 197 – 202.

⁵⁷ Rorty, 'Thugs and Theorists', p. 578, n. 23. See also Richard Rorty, *Truth, Politics and 'Postmodernism': the Spinoza Lectures* (Amsterdam: Van Gorcum, 1997), p. 13, where Rorty says that the term has been 'ruined by over-use'. Significantly, one of the papers in this book, 'Is "Post-Modernism" Relevant to Politics?' (pp. 35 – 52), was subsequently re-published with the title: 'The Continuity between the Enlightenment and "Postmodernism"', in Keith Michael Baker and Peter Hannis Reill (eds.) *What's Left of Enlightenment? A Postmodern Question* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001), pp. 19 – 36.

⁵⁸ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 198 – 199.

shaped by forces beyond human control, such as the Hegelian Absolute, the historic role Marx assigned the Proletariat by virtue of their function in bringing about communism, and Kant's claim that the noumenal self is the essence of humanity.⁵⁹ Although Rorty continues to oppose metanarratives, he now thinks that calling this position postmodernism is misleading. In his paper 'Thugs and Theorists', Rorty writes that he was persuaded by Jürgen Habermas's book *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* that calling his position 'postmodernism' failed to capture the distinction he wanted to draw, between historicists like Hegel who rely on metanarratives, and those like Derrida who do not.⁶⁰

A final reason that Rorty has equivocated over his status as a postmodernist is, I suggest, that it has come to be used largely as a term of censure, specifically from its supposed hostility to the Enlightenment. Rorty however takes himself to be unequivocally committed to the moral and political legacy of the Enlightenment, of freedom from unvindicated sources of authority. He has expressed his view of the matter in the following way:

These days intellectuals divide up into those who think that something new and important called 'the postmodern' is happening, and those who, like Habermas, think we are (or should be) still plugging away at the familiar tasks set for us by the Enlightenment. The ones who, like me, agree with Habermas typically see the secularisation of public life as the Enlightenment's central achievement, and see our job as the same as our

⁵⁹ I will discuss the claim that Rorty's view itself rests upon a metanarrative in chapter 8.

⁶⁰ Rorty, 'Thugs and Theorists', p. 578, n. 23.

predecessors': getting our fellow citizens to rely less on tradition, and to be more willing to experiment with new customs and institutions.⁶¹

As well as setting out his view of the central issue confronting Western intellectuals today, this passage knowingly subverts the expectations of many of Rorty's readers as to his position within that debate. The first sentence, with its homely reference to 'plugging away at familiar tasks' perhaps gives the impression that Rorty is presenting the Enlightenment as something that, like a lot of things he discusses, has come to outlive its usefulness and which ought therefore to be replaced. This is however not the case, for he is clear that the political and moral legacy of the Enlightenment is vital: 'There is', he writes, 'no more worthy project at hand; we have nothing better to do with our lives'.⁶²

However, a different legacy of the Enlightenment is rationalist philosophy. This aspect of the Enlightenment has, he believes, come to stand in the way of securing the moral and political goals of full human emancipation, and it is *this* legacy that, in calling himself a postmodernist, Rorty seeks to oppose. The rhetoric of rationality, specifically scientific rationality was, he argues, vital for the first stage of the Enlightenment. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, opposition to the established religious authorities primarily came from the newly emerging natural sciences, and it was therefore natural for liberals to use the language and methodology of science. However, its political rhetoric retained forms of the religious need for human projects to connect with a non-human reality, evidenced in its view of scientists as priests.⁶³ The perceived need to isolate an ahistoric reason which can guide moral and political decision-making is, Rorty believes, no longer necessary. He welcomes the secularisation of the West heralded by the

⁶¹ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 168.

⁶² *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁶³ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 52.

Enlightenment as a significant stage in human maturity, but thinks that can now ‘throw away a set of ladders which, though once indispensable, have now become encumbrances’⁶⁴ that our forebears erected. Therefore, although Rorty sides with critics of postmodernism such as Habermas in thinking the Enlightenment concerns the ones that remain salient to us today, postmodernism understood in the sense of ‘distrust of metanarratives’ is, he believes, central to the realisation of those Enlightenment concerns. Realising them is finally to give up on any non-human authority – God, reason, history, or nature – as dictating human happiness.

Enlightenment rationalism is for Rorty not merely superfluous, but now stands as an obstacle to finally securing the goals of the Enlightenment: ‘the vocabulary of Enlightenment rationalism, although it was essential to the beginnings of liberal democracy, has become an impediment to the preservation and progress of democratic societies.’⁶⁵ Liberalism can and should be defended politically and morally,⁶⁶ and does not require the extra, philosophical, support that it has been thought to need.

To claim that rationalism is not only superficial, but positively harmful, to the political legacy of the Enlightenment is highly controversial. For many, a lot would be lost if we abandon these philosophical supports. J. Judd Owen, writing of Rorty’s denial of philosophical foundations, asks:

How can Rorty ignore the possibility that his own rejection of political rationalism – his headlong rejection of all “absolute truths,” such as “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with

⁶⁴ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 12.

⁶⁵ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 44.

⁶⁶ As we will see in subsequent chapters.

certain unalienable rights" – could prove (as earlier cases have in fact proved) more dangerous?⁶⁷

Rather than ignoring this possibility, Rorty urges that the attempt to provide rationalist foundations is in fact a conservative desire. It assumes that there is a fixed set of problems to be solved, 'a natural order of topics and arguments which is prior to, and overrides the results of, encounters between old and new vocabularies'.⁶⁸ In doing so it becomes a further instance of authoritarianism, of the view that there is something that can stand over freely arrived agreement between human beings. As Rorty argued in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 'investigations of the foundations of knowledge or morality or language or society may be simply apologetics, attempts to eternalize a certain contemporary language-game, social practice, or self-image'.⁶⁹ Far from securing freedom, attempts to provide it with philosophical foundations endanger it by assuming a fixed set of questions that need to be discussed. Rorty argues for instance that the sorts of thing Owen thinks vital have often perpetuated injustice. Thomas Jefferson could for example affirm the absolute truth that all men are created equal whilst owning slaves. Similar language has also served to exclude women 'from true humanity: for example, using "man" as a synonym of "human being." As feminists have pointed out, such

⁶⁷ J. Judd Owen, *Religion and the Demise of Liberal Rationalism: The Foundational Crisis of the Separation of Church and State* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 94.

⁶⁸ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 52. This answers Daniel Conway's question: 'Why would a philosopher who is committed to the historical disenfranchisement of metaphysics avail himself so readily of the metaphysically freighted practice of utopian theorising?' Conway, 'Irony, State and Utopia: Rorty's "We" and the Problem of Transitional *Praxis*', in Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (eds.) *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), pp. 55 – 88 at 66. The answer is that Rorty would say that utopian thinking need not be metaphysical; indeed, if it is truly utopian, it *cannot* be metaphysical.

⁶⁹ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 9 – 10. For this reason, I think Jonny Steinberg simply mistaken when he writes that Rorty nowhere explains why rejecting 'rationalism' will benefit liberalism. Steinberg, *Post-Enlightenment Philosophy and Liberal Universalism in the Political Thought of Isaiah Berlin and Richard Rorty* (Thesis (D.Phil.) University of Oxford, 1998), p. 46.

usages reinforce the average male's thankfulness that he was not born a woman, as well as his fear of the ultimate degradation: feminization'.⁷⁰

6.2 The relationship between philosophy and democracy

It is central to Rorty's account to stress what he calls the priority of democracy to philosophy. This is captured in his claim that liberal societies are those which are 'content to call "true" (or "right" or "just") whatever the outcome of undistorted communication happens to be, whatever wins in a free and open encounter'.⁷¹ There is nothing that stands over this process of communication or dictates the terms in which it is to be carried out. He writes that,

[...] in its ideal form, the culture of liberalism would be one which was enlightened, secular, through and through. It would be one in which no trace of divinity remained, either in the form of a divinized world or a divinized self. Such a culture would have no room for the notion that there are nonhuman forces to which human beings should be responsible.⁷²

This sounds very anti-philosophical, and indeed Rorty is frequently held to be giving up on philosophy as an academic discipline.⁷³ His relationship with philosophy is rather subtler than this however, as is seen most clearly in his book *Consequences of Pragmatism*.

⁷⁰ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 169.

⁷¹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 67.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁷³ See for example Tibor R. Machan, for whom Rorty is a 'pseudo-philosopher'. Machan, 'Indefatigable Alchemist: Richard Rorty's Radical Pragmatism', *American Scholar* 65 (1996), p. 417 – 424.

There he distinguished Philosophy (with a capital P) from philosophy in order to present what he takes to be two distinct forms of philosophising. Whereas Philosophy is the quest for the essence of Truth or Goodness, philosophy is what Sellars called 'an attempt to see how things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest possible sense of the term.'⁷⁴ It is not an attempt to uncover the intrinsic nature of reality but to bring together and examine the findings of different areas of culture. Although it is not the way he formulates the distinction outside of *Consequences of Pragmatism*, the distinction is present throughout his writings, for example in a distinction presented in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* between tough and tender-minded philosophers, the former who aim at Truth and the latter at Significance,⁷⁵ and between both 'systematic' and 'eductive' philosophers and metaphysicians and ironists in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.

It is certainly the case that Rorty opposes what he takes to be the central assumptions of philosophy when it has sought procedures or methods for neutrally arbitrating between beliefs and values. Rorty takes this to be the desire to avoid confronting difficult questions by closing off options in advance through the provision of an algorithm, and against it he joins with Putnam in arguing that the idea that philosophy is concerned with making explicit criteria 'contradicts the very idea of philosophy'.⁷⁶ He further recognises that one reason many philosophers treat this view of philosophy with disdain is that foundationalism has become so central to philosophy that to repudiate the idea of foundations seems to repudiate philosophy itself. This he rejects, pointing out the contrast between contemporary philosophers who defend their subject as a discipline that trains one for clear thinking with an older, romantic view of philosophy which is utopian

⁷⁴ Quoted in Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. xiv.

⁷⁵ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 73.

⁷⁶ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 25.

and hopeful. This latter type of philosopher inspire us, bringing issues into the public sphere for discussion. Those philosophers can help the process of maturation, turning away from the eternal and towards the future. Rorty writes that philosophers should:

[...] agree with Marx that our job is to help make the future different from the past, rather than claiming to know what the future must necessarily have in common with the past. We have to shift from the kind of role that philosophers have shared with priests and sages to a social role that has more in common with the engineer or the lawyer.⁷⁷

Philosophy can help to fulfil human needs and interests, but, as is consistent with Rorty's 'anti-authoritarianism', he denies that philosophy has any privileged role in deciding what those things should be.⁷⁸ Rorty's account is, centrally, a political one⁷⁹, one in which any attempt to make oneself answerable to, or 'mirror', an independent reality or moral order, is replaced with that of human answerability to each other, of attempts to forge an ever-greater degree of what he calls, controversially, solidarity.

6.3 Liberalism and the 'Enlightenment Project'

⁷⁷ Richard Rorty, 'Philosophy and the Future' in Herman J. Saatkamp Jr. (ed.) *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics* (London: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995), pp. 197 – 205 at 198.

⁷⁸ The priority of democracy to philosophy precludes such an idea. His view of what this means for philosophy is occasionally somewhat cynical, for example when he writes that '[d]emocracies make political decisions about what principles to compromise. Philosophers then clean up the mess by formulating new principles which justify their having compromised the old principles'. Richard Rorty, 'A Defence of Minimalist Liberalism', in Anita L. Allen and Milton C. Regan, Jr. (eds.) *Debating Democracy's Discontent: essays on American politics, law and public philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 117 – 125 at 121. For an illustration, see Brian Barry on crash helmet exemption for Sikhs in Barry, *Culture and Equality*, pp. 40 – 53.

⁷⁹ Rorty claims that twentieth century philosophy was marked by three conceptions of the aim of philosophizing. 'They are the Husserlian (or 'scientific') answer, the Heideggerian (or 'poetic') answer and the pragmatist (or 'political') answer.' Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 9.

Rorty has been challenged about his understanding of the relationship of philosophy, particularly, postmodernism, to the Enlightenment. John Gray argues that there is an inextricable relationship between the philosophy of what he calls 'the Enlightenment project', and its political legacy in liberalism. Gray views the Enlightenment project as 'refounding morality and society on universal, tradition-independent rational principles',⁸⁰ the attempt to free morality from the contingent influences of traditional forms of life. Like Rorty, Gray characterises what he terms the Enlightenment project as secular and humanist, animated by the belief that there are no limits to what humans can achieve and no problems that they cannot solve. Both agree that whereas earlier forms of knowledge had sought an accommodation with the world, the Enlightenment came to see the world as existing simply for the sake of humanity. He further agrees with Rorty that postmodernism is not the rejection of modernist Enlightenment hopes, but its culmination.

Gray however draws a very different conclusion from Rorty. He argues that the legacy of the Enlightenment is one that cannot be sustained, because the very process of ceaseless rational disclosure came to apply to itself, showing up the absence of its own foundations. This he calls its 'self-undermining effect'.⁸¹ For Gray, although Rorty's account has the advantage of the explicitness with which it accepts the philosophical groundlessness of the political legacy of the Enlightenment, he mistakenly thinks that legacy unaffected by the failure of the philosophy upon which it rests. His account is therefore 'an exercise in illusion'⁸² and, far from being the culmination of the Enlightenment as Rorty takes it to be, postmodernism culminates with its destruction.

⁸⁰ Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake*, p. 149.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 150.

⁸² Ibid., p. 172. For Gray, it is an illusion that betrays Rorty's modernism. This point is taken up by Raymond D. Boisvert, who claims that Rorty's attachment to the political legacy of the Enlightenment means that he is a modernist, not a postmodernist. Boisvert, 'Philosophy:

In response to Gray, Rorty writes that should this prove to be so, it is postmodernism that ought to be rejected, not the political aims that he hopes it serves:

[M]y reply to Gray really boils down to saying that his empirical predictions are needlessly pessimistic. Maybe he is right that political hope cannot survive in a post-modernist intellectual climate. But maybe it can. Only experiment will tell. If it turns out that it cannot, however, we should say “So much the worse for ‘post-modernist’ and pragmatist philosophy”, rather than “So much the worse for the Enlightenment political project”.⁸³

This is to beg Gray’s question, however. For Gray’s point is that there is no way back, and that once post-modernism has done its work, then there will be nothing left of the Enlightenment political project to recover, even if it were possible to disaggregate these different elements of the Enlightenment.

What is ultimately at issue between Rorty and Gray is a view of the relationship between philosophy and politics. Rorty agrees with Horkheimer and Adorno, and thus with Gray, that ‘the forces unleashed by the Enlightenment have undermined the Enlightenment’s own convictions’.⁸⁴ However, for him they then falsely infer that liberalism is ‘intellectually bankrupt’. This, for Rorty, is mistakenly to assume that the rhetoric of

Postmodern or Polytemporal?’, *International Philosophical Quarterly* 40 (2000), pp. 313 – 326. See also Hall, *Richard Rorty: Prophet and Poet of the New Pragmatism*, p. 51, and Justin Cruickshank, ‘From Metaphysics to Pragmatism: Rorty on Liberalism and Social Justice’, in Gideon Calder, Edward Garrett and Jess Shannon (eds.) *Liberalism and Social Justice: International Perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. 113 – 127.

⁸³ Rorty, *Truth, Politics and ‘Post-modernism’*, p. 50.

⁸⁴ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 56.

‘rationality’ (and ‘human nature’) is essential to the political legacy of the Enlightenment. Rorty is keen to emphasise the priority of the latter over the former, and thinks that, at best, philosophy can be used to support politics. It is not a pedestal upon which politics rests however, and should it – as he believes is the case with Enlightenment rationalism – come to be an obstacle, it should be abandoned. The question however is whether this position is coherent. Can the different legacies of the Enlightenment be so easily disentangled, and can we choose to hold on to some whilst rejecting others? Gray’s claim is that they cannot, and in saying so he is joined by among others Paul Kelly, who writes that Rorty’s mistake ‘is to think that we can attack Enlightenment philosophical discourse and still engage in either constructive political theory or the assertion of liberal values’.⁸⁵

In response, we can note that it is not only those such as Rorty, whom Kelly terms ‘anti-Enlightenment critics’, who take the view that liberalism is not bound up so tightly with the philosophical legacy of the Enlightenment as Gray and others believe. Brian Barry has repeatedly sought to expose misunderstandings of the origin and nature of liberalism, taking to task Alasdair MacIntyre’s account of the relationship between liberalism and the Enlightenment. For Barry, MacIntyre falsely asserts that liberalism was a conscious offshoot of the Enlightenment, implying that ‘that liberalism was simply willed into existence quite gratuitously by something called “the Enlightenment”’.⁸⁶ To be sure, as Barry writes, ‘Liberalism is *par excellence* the doctrine of the Enlightenment’⁸⁷, but it is a philosophical articulation of specific events, namely the European wars of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: ‘liberalism developed not as an a priori doctrine but as an attempt (or more precisely as a set of alternative attempts) to rationalize an

⁸⁵ Kelly, ‘Political Theory in Retreat?’, p. 236. See also MacIntyre, ‘Moral Arguments and Social Contexts’; James Conant, ‘Freedom, Cruelty, and Truth: Rorty versus Orwell’ in Robert R. Brandom (ed.) *Rorty and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2000), pp. 268 – 342.

⁸⁶ Barry, *Justice and Impartiality*, p. 170, note e.

⁸⁷ Brian Barry, *Liberty and Justice: Essays In Political Theory 2* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 23.

emergent liberal social order.⁸⁸ The idea that a vast array of writers, separated by time, distance, interests and concerns, can be united in any way other than for the most rudimentary classification is, he argues, illusory. If one can meaningfully talk of *a concern* which unites many of the thinkers of the Enlightenment, then one could say that this was to question the assumptions of the day by, as in the famous phrase, throwing light into the dark, reacting against unquestioned forms of received, traditional, wisdom. This concern may have a philosophical element, but it certainly does not entail a notion of liberalism that requires philosophical foundations. It is then at least plausible to claim that there is no such thing as *the* Enlightenment project. Barry writes that 'It is surely plain that there is no party line on foundations among liberals. Liberalism does not therefore stand or fall with the viability of the "Enlightenment project"'⁸⁹ and that, as the case of Barry himself illustrates, it is perfectly consistent to deny the 'reason-worshipping' aspect of the Enlightenment and remain committed to liberalism. For Barry, the philosophical articulation of liberalism was not an *a priori* justification but an *a posteriori* rationalisation, and thus liberalism has no need of the sort of philosophical grounding of which writers like MacIntyre and Gray believe it is now being deprived.⁹⁰

My suggestion is that Barry is better able to respond to the charge levelled by Gray, MacIntyre and others than Rorty, because Rorty grants too much, in his discussion of Horkheimer and Adorno, to those who view liberalism as having started life as a philosophical project. Similarly, when Rorty argues that writers like MacIntyre, Michael Sandal and Charles Taylor believe that 'that liberal institutions and culture either should not or cannot survive the collapse of the philosophical justification that the

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 118.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Barry makes this point in a discussion of the origin of liberal principles. The 'harm principle' stemmed from religious toleration; freedom of speech is a generalization of freedom of the press, and equal citizenship status from the liberal rejection of servile civil status. Ibid., p. 23.

Enlightenment provided for them',⁹¹ this seems mistakenly to accept with them that the Enlightenment started with just such a philosophical justification of liberalism. Rorty goes on to argue that it is a mistake to think that the terms in which a discussion was started remain the terms that should be used to criticise it. This may be so, but it also mistakenly grants them the premise that the politics of the Enlightenment stemmed initially from its philosophy, and thus gives some plausibility to the suggest liberalism cannot survive without its philosophical foundations. It would be more accurate to say that particular writers like Kant thought that liberalism depended on the philosophical foundations, but that they were mistaken, and to agree with Barry that liberalism started life as a political project. This I take it is, in fact, Rorty's point as well, for example when he writes that 'The idea that liberal societies are bound together by philosophical beliefs seems to me ludicrous. What binds societies together are common vocabularies and common hopes',⁹² a claim which is consistent with his view of the priority of political matters over philosophical speculation about them.

6.4 Political liberalism as the avoidance of cruelty

The culmination of the Enlightenment is for Rorty a truly anti-authoritarian society, one in which all trace of non-human authority has been vanquished. This Rorty takes to result in political liberalism. Rorty is widely criticised for his ambiguity regarding the content of liberalism. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, he gives what initially appears to be a bland and unhelpful definition of liberalism: liberals are said to hold that 'cruelty is the worst thing we do'.⁹³ Eric Gander calls this a 'platitide'⁹⁴, and it does indeed seem to

⁹¹ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 177.

⁹² Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 86.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. xv.

tell us nothing about that which characterises liberal writers, or what distinguishes them from non-liberals. It is something less of a platitude however once it is taken in the context of Rorty's narrative of human maturity. He tells us that his definition of liberalism is borrowed from Judith Shklar, but it is surprising that he tells us nothing more.⁹⁵ For Shklar, cruelty stands in contrast to sin. Whereas cruelty is to inflict pain upon another human being, to sin is to transgress against God. There is, says Shklar, no necessary conflict between sin and cruelty, but someone who categorically puts cruelty as 'the worst thing we do' is necessarily relegating sin:

To put cruelty first is to disregard the idea of sin as it is understood by revealed religion. Sins are transgressions of a divine rule and offenses against God. ... However, cruelty – the wilful inflicting of physical pain on a weaker human being in order to cause anguish and fear – is a wrong done entirely to *another creature*.⁹⁶

Rorty develops Shklar's definition to make a contrast between obligation to our fellows and obligation to a non-human authority, be it God or the Intrinsic Nature of Reality. This distinction captures what Rorty takes to be the central idea of liberalism, that it is wholly a matter of relations between human beings. Those who in any sense privilege any goal over the practical avoidance of causing pain are not for him liberals. John Kekes

⁹⁴ Eric M. Gander, *The Last Conceptual Revolution: A Critique of Richard Rorty's Political Philosophy*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 65.

⁹⁵ David Owen discusses this in his paper 'The Avoidance of Cruelty: Joshing Rorty on Liberalism, Scepticism and Ironism', in Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (eds.) *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), pp. 93 – 110. In his reply, Rorty says that he wishes he had developed the point in this way in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.

⁹⁶ Judith N. Shklar, *Ordinary Vices* (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 8, emphasis in original. Shklar goes on to suggest that not all forms of cruelty entail *physical* pain. Annette Baier joins Shklar and Rorty in defining liberalism in this way. Annette Baier, 'Moralism and Cruelty', *Ethics* 103 (1993), pp. 436 – 457. She aligns herself with Shklar and Rorty on p. 437.

complains of the ‘specious moralizing that informs’ the idea that ‘cruelty is the worst thing we do’, writing that if genocide, terrorism, betrayal, exploitation, humiliation etc., are all forms of cruelty, then this makes the account vacuous, since there is no one who would disagree.⁹⁷ Like Gander, Kekes is obviously correct when he says that non-liberals also worry about cruelty. Rorty’s point is however that liberals are concerned *solely* with cruelty. When Gander writes that medieval Christians were cruel to make others come to take God into their lives, and that not to have done so would for them have been an act of cruelty,⁹⁸ we can respond by noting that this was not for the alleviation of cruelty itself, but to a higher, metaphysical, end.

But even when we see Rorty’s point, we can still ask for greater content to be given to the notion of cruelty. Some commentators think Rorty has provided that content. Charles Jones, seemingly interpreting ‘cruelty’ exclusively in the light of Rorty’s discussion of torture, argues that Rorty is wrong to be concerned simply with the cruelty produced by torture:

If we can sympathize with the plight of persons who are victims of torture in faraway lands, why can we not also sympathize with those far-off persons who lack access to basic nutritional requirements, adequate housing, education, and health care? That is, there is nothing in this [Rorty’s] argument that explains why expressions of concern should be limited to ‘instances of cruelty’.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ John Kekes, ‘Cruelty and Liberalism’, *Ethics* 106 (1996), pp. 834 – 844 at 835.

⁹⁸ Gander, *The Last Conceptual Revolution*, p. 68.

⁹⁹ Charles Jones, *Global Justice: Defending Cosmopolitanism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 146.

Such things, as the surrounding discussion in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* and elsewhere illustrate, are however precisely the sort of things that Rorty thinks of as instances of cruelty. The lack of nutrition, education, housing and health care are forms of cruelty to which Rorty says novelists and social critics like Dickens were so good at alerting Victorians. Lying behind Jones's misunderstanding is the desire to give specific content to cruelty. Daniel Conway addresses this point, asking Rorty to specify the content of cruelty, to give some indication of what actions are cruel, and which are not.¹⁰⁰ In response, Rorty points out neither he, nor anybody else, has ever been able to do this.¹⁰¹ To do so would require the Cartesian natural order of reasons of the sort he denies.¹⁰² It is perhaps because he assumes such a thing that Gander writes that deciding what counts as cruelty forces us to address metaphysical questions such as the relationship between mind and body.¹⁰³ Rorty of course denies this, arguing that we should give up on the attempt to specify the necessary and sufficient conditions of cruelty precisely because we need to be alive to new instances of cruelty that we had previously not recognised as cruel. Thus he would I think dissent from Shklar's view that cruelty must involve the *wilful* infliction of pain. Keeping the 'definition' of cruelty open allows for awareness of alternatives, even those which we previously did not notice or think of as cruel. Part of the value of, for example Dickens, was that he provided details of forms of cruelty that we had previously not thought of as cruel on people with whom we had hitherto not concerned ourselves. If specific content was given beyond this, this might well rule out such new forms being accepted as instances of cruelty in the future. Matthew Festenstein is thus I think correct when he writes that 'The injunction to avoid,

¹⁰⁰ Conway, 'Irony, State and Utopia'. See also John Horton, 'Irony and Commitment', p. 26; Enrique Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity*, pp. 103 – 106.

¹⁰¹ Richard Rorty, 'Response to Daniel Conway' in Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (eds.) *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), pp. 89 – 92.

¹⁰² This notion is discussed in chapter 3.

¹⁰³ Gander, *The Last Conceptual Revolution*, p. 68.

or minimize cruelty, is a placeholder for the ironist's ethical beliefs rather than an account of them'.¹⁰⁴

To give content to cruelty would be to give the priority to philosophy, or at least foundationalism, over democracy, whereas the point of liberalism is that democracy decides what counts as cruel rather than seeking to settle it *a priori*. As Rorty puts it,

Your devotion to democracy is unlikely to be wholehearted if you believe, as monotheists typically do, that we can have knowledge of an "objective" ranking of human needs that can overrule the result of democratic consensus. But if your devotion is wholehearted, then you will welcome the utilitarian and pragmatist claim that we have no will to truth distinct from the will to happiness.¹⁰⁵

Rorty writes that he regards his liberalism to flow directly out of Mill's *On Liberty*. J. S. Mill's suggestion that governments devote themselves to optimising the balance between leaving people's private lives alone and preventing suffering seems to me pretty much the last word'.¹⁰⁶ This does not mean that the balance between these two concerns is not contested, or that what 'preventing suffering' means or entails will not be highly controversial and problematic.¹⁰⁷ The point is, once again, that is to be settled democratically, not philosophically.

¹⁰⁴ Festenstein, *Pragmatism and Political Theory*, p. 131. The difference between cruelty as a category, and as a specific condition, is seen in an ambiguity present in Kekes' paper, in which he moves between treating cruelty as a name for the different things, such as torture, that we think cruel, and as a fixed thing in itself and which therefore contrasts with for example torture.

¹⁰⁵ Rorty, 'Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism', p. 27.

¹⁰⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 63.

¹⁰⁷ It also says nothing about specific economic structures within liberal democracies: it does not indicate a preference for free market-style economy of North America or the social democratic ones of Western Europe. Rorty's preference is for the latter, but he accepts this is not required by

In conclusion, in this chapter I have examined the claims that lie behind Rorty's view that political liberalism, the freely arrived at agreement of human beings, is the culmination of the Enlightenment. For Rorty, nothing can stand over and above this agreement, although he controversially views both religion and traditional philosophy as attempts to do just that. The felt need for such a position he takes to be a symptom of immaturity, one that in the West at least he believes we are coming to cast off. However, the political and moral legacy of the Enlightenment is for him vital. It is moreover a legacy that Rorty thinks enhanced by casting off Enlightenment rationalism, and focusing on relations between human beings. Political liberalism as the avoidance of cruelty was seen, first, to be exclusively a matter of human relationships, and secondly, an open ended concern which reflects the constant need to recognise and adapt to new and presently unseen cases of cruelty. In subsequent chapters, I take up in detail specific criticisms of this vision, starting with the claim, in chapter 3, that on Rorty's account, we have no good reasons for our beliefs and practices, and that they are merely 'what we happen to think around here'.

Mill's characterisation of liberalism as belief in the value of individual freedom. The creative, interpretive, aspect of political theory will be discussed in chapter 6.

Chapter Three

Contingency and universal validity

In chapter 2 I sought to show that Rorty regards his critique of the Western philosophical tradition as part of a larger concern to free humanity from forms of 'authoritarianism' that he claims seek to stand over and dictate to it. In the absence of the sort of foundations philosophers have sought, it has been said that Rorty's account reduces truth, goodness, etc. to a matter of 'what we happen to think around here'. By removing any transcendental standards, he is said to leave humans to the caprices of the traditions and communities in which they happen to live. Rorty is thus said to be a relativist, or a conservative, taking values to be of value simply because they are *ours*. This chapter begins by exploring the accounts of philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas and Thomas Nagel who argue that the presuppositions of thought and argument presuppose the universal validity of truth claims. I argue that no sense can be given to this notion, because there is no 'order of reasons' that structures thought and which must be adopted by any thinking human being. The charge that Rorty's account entails that beliefs are morally arbitrary therefore fails because it has no contrastive force; there is nothing that is *not* a historically contingent belief. In the second part of the chapter, I argue against the view that Rorty adopts a relativistic account of value. Beliefs and practices are the result of historical contingencies, but that does not mean that beliefs are morally arbitrary or that they 'merely', or 'happen', to be held. I argue, against the claims of writers such as Cheryl Misak, that for Rorty beliefs are endorsed for reasons, even if they are reasons that need not be shared or endorsed by all rational human beings.

7. The inescapability of ethnocentrism

7.1 *Ethnocentrism, acceptance, and validity*

Rorty's central argument against foundationalism is that no sense can be given to the notion of the world being represented other than through human perspectives. He writes that the attempt to do so, Philosophy (with a capital P) 'is the impossible attempt to step outside our skins – the traditions, linguistic and others, within which we do our thinking and self-criticism – and compare ourselves with something absolute'.¹ For Rorty, no standard of value exists beyond contingent social practices. We cannot compare ourselves with something that is not part of a practice; 'the only thing that can transcend a social practice is another social practice'.²

For Rorty then, knowledge claims are constrained by the sociologically and historically conditioned rules of communities. This he terms, provocatively, ethnocentrism, a condition which he argues is inescapable. All concepts derive their status from human communities, and even concepts such as rationality are values, not algorithms.³ This does not, importantly, mean that we have no grounds or justification for our beliefs. Those grounds are the standards provided by human practices, including for example works of authority, legal precedents, traditions, professional standards, etc. There is however no standard, or criterion beyond such things against which to appeal. Rorty therefore denies sense to the notion of something being 'merely what we think around here' by denying

¹ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. xix.

² Richard Rorty, 'Universality and Truth', Robert B. Brandom (ed.) *Rorty and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 1 – 30 at 7.

³ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 331.

the force of the word *merely*. To describe a belief as merely being the result of contingent historical reasons only makes sense if there is a way to contrast that belief with beliefs that are not contingent, something of which Rorty thinks cannot be made sense. As he puts it, ‘no description of how things are from a God’s-eye point of view, no skyhook provided by some contemporary or yet-to-be-developed science, is going to free us from the contingency of having been acculturated as we were’.⁴

Philosophers have however sought to make a contrast between what is merely thought around here and something more substantial by proposing a standard of purportedly universal validity. This contrast has been made by Shane O’Neill, who claims that valid moral arguments are rational arguments, supported by what he calls ‘the most convincing reasons’. They contrast with arguments that are accepted as a matter of ‘convention’. O’Neill believes that, by rejecting this notion, Rorty cannot distinguish between arguments that are ‘valid’, that is, ‘most convincing’ irrespective of context, and those that are simply ‘widely accepted’.⁵

It is far from clear however of what, exactly, this distinction consists. The tone of O’Neill’s piece suggests a contrast between and objective, rational reasons for viewing reasons as ‘valid’, and subjective, idiosyncratic reasons for thinking them ‘attractive’. But what is that contrast? O’Neill writes that for Rorty, views are held simply out of ‘convention’. If he means by that for Rorty, one does not reflect upon one’s beliefs and revise them in the light of critical challenge or new evidence, then he is, I will show below, obviously wrong (indeed it is hard to imagine that anyone would ever hold a belief on that basis). O’Neill continues by claiming that something is valid if ‘it is justified

⁴ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 13.

⁵ All quotations in this paragraph are from Shane O’Neill, ‘Private Irony and the Public Hope of Richard Rorty’s Liberalism’, in Maurizio Passerin d’Entrèves and Ursula Vogel (eds.) *Public and Private: Legal, Political and Philosophical Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 51 – 67 at 54.

as the most reasonable morality available to citizens of modern pluralist societies'.⁶ Rorty need, and would, not deny one interpretation of this notion. For him, reasonableness is contextual, differing according to time and place. What he takes to be the liberal view of reasonableness, its openness to alternative viewpoints and willingness to consider alternative sources of belief makes it, as O'Neill says, particularly suited to citizens of modern pluralist societies. There is however no way to prove this to all comers: there is 'no non-question-begging demonstration of the epistemic superiority of the Western idea of reasonableness'.⁷ If O'Neill accepts this point, then he is in agreement with Rorty, and the contrast he seeks to draw between Rorty's account of 'acceptance' and his own of 'validity' dissolves, since both are relative to context, the only difference between them being a function of the style in which O'Neill chooses to express them.

7.2 *The order of reasons*

It has been argued however that the context- and practice-bound nature of human activity itself depends on the existence of a realm that is not so bounded, but which has universal validity. On this account, many claims can be ruled out as violating the canons of rationality upon which they necessarily depend. Thus, Richard Wolin rejects Rorty's claim (discussed in chapter 1) that torturers do not violate some transcendental set of values which therefore condemns them. He writes:

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Richard Rorty, 'Justice as A Larger Loyalty', in Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (eds.) *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), pp. 223 – 237 at 230. In a recent response to Kwame Anthony Appiah, Rorty accepts that in his earlier paper he made too much of the 'West – non-West' contrast. By 'Western' I take it Rorty really means openness and tolerance, virtues that as I discuss in chapters 7 and 8 are for him not limited to Westerners. Richard Rorty, 'Response to Appiah', in Matthew J. Gibney (ed.) *Globalizing Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1999* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 233 – 237 at 235.

The self-justifications of torturers and inquisitors become self-negating *as soon as they are put into language*: for they fail to measure up to the context-transcendent, moral idealizations inherent in the linguistic expectations of a posttraditional culture based on universalizable – hence, non-particularistic – norms. According to this logic, as soon as such particularistic worldviews partake of the language-game of “justice and validity” – a necessity for all modern, as opposed to traditional despotisms – they have lost – which does not of course mean that they automatically cease to exist.⁸

As it stands, it is not clear precisely to which ‘context-transcendent, moral idealizations’ Wolin is referring, or why the existence of such idealizations would or should bother the torturer, or indeed the practitioner of any other ‘particularistic worldview’. The very fact that a norm is universalizable does not in itself negate the claims made by torturers, for one can readily universalize a norm saying that torture is permitted in certain cases. The norm Wolin has in mind is, I take it, something like the norm of fundamental equality of human beings. The torturers may violate that norm, but presumably they would be aware of this. This issue is rather why this should strike them as a problem, and why it would mean that they would ‘have lost’. Why should such people be bothered by the language-game of ‘justice and validity’, or concern themselves to partake in it, and why should they be concerned that they ‘lose’ if they are judged by a standard that they do not share? Wolin claims that it is ‘a necessity’ for them to do so, but does not say why this is so; his claim seems to suggest logical, historical *and* moral necessity. In short, Wolin’s reason for thinking the justification of the torturers to be self-negating stems from pointing out that

⁸ Richard Wolin, *The Terms of Cultural Criticism: The Frankfurt School, Existentialism, Poststructuralism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 156, emphasis in original.

the values and norms they call upon in justifying themselves are inconsistent with an alternative standard of value that they do not hold, and that Wolin has not demonstrated that, on pain of self-contradiction, they must.

Jürgen Habermas and others however believe that it is possible to demonstrate that the torturers would be guilty of what he calls 'performative self-contradiction',⁹ because he thinks it possible to demonstrate that the torturers presuppose, and necessarily rely upon, norms that they claim to be denying. As he puts it, 'One cannot reduce all universals to particulars, all kinds of transcendence to immanence, the unconditional to the conditional, and so on, without presupposing these same distinctions and tacitly making use of them'.¹⁰ This claim assumes what Descartes termed the 'order of reasons', a notion that has recently been defended, with reference to Descartes, by Thomas Nagel.¹¹ Nagel adheres to the representationalist view that different areas of inquiry 'mirror' reality more and less accurately. In his discussion of the different levels of objectivity that typically obtain in questions of morality, logic and arithmetic, Nagel notes that in contrast to arithmetic, morality usually fails to produce certainty, because ethical matters are 'easily subject to distortion by morally irrelevant factors, social and personal, as well as outright error'.¹² This claim depends upon the existence of an independent order of reasons which determines what is and what is not to *count* as distortion or an irrelevance in ethical matters.

⁹ Jürgen Habermas, 'Richard Rorty's Pragmatic Turn', in Robert B. Brandom (ed.) *Rorty and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 31 – 55 at 39.

¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, 'Coping With Contingencies – The Return of Historicism', in Joseph Niznik and John T. Sanders (eds.), *Debating the State of Philosophy: Habermas, Rorty, and Kolakowski* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996), pp. 1 – 24 at 5.

¹¹ Nagel, *The Last Word*. For the reference to Descartes, see pp. 18 – 19.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 101.

There is, Nagel claims, a standard of validity that is independent of the beliefs and practices of any particular community. He writes that, 'if we think at all, we must think of ourselves, individually and collectively, as submitting to the order of reasons rather than creating it'.¹³ If fully rational agents pursued their disagreements as far as they could, they would, in his view, come to agree on the resolution. The order of reasons is independent and universally valid because all thoughts, regardless of their substance, depend upon it: there are, Nagel writes, 'some thoughts which we cannot get *outside* of'.¹⁴ Reason is required for any thoughts at all, even those which claim to deny the existence of reason, and all of our thoughts, even 'relativist' or 'subjectivist' ones, are made using reason; Nagel thus endorses David Wiggins's claim that for some thoughts, 'there is nothing else to think'.¹⁵

From this Nagel concludes that relativism is self-refuting, because it relies on an objective standard of the sort it claims to deny. Rorty's position is held to be incoherent because, in order to make the sort of claim that he does, Rorty presupposes the very capacity for human reason of the sort he claims to deny. He could not voice the objections to rationality without using that same standard of rationality which, in the very act of denying, he necessarily affirms. His views, Nagel writes,

[...] turn out to be inconsistent with the very consensus on which they propose to "ground" objectivity. What human beings who form scientific or mathematical beliefs agree on is that these things are true, full stop,

¹³ Ibid., p. 143.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 19, emphasis in original.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 69n.

and would be true whether we agreed on them or not – and furthermore that what makes *that* true is not just that we agree to say it!¹⁶

In commenting on this type of claim, Rorty writes that it assumes that any truly rational agent could consider all possibilities and reason out the correct solution: ‘Universalists talk as if any rational agent, in any epoch, could somehow have envisaged all the possible morally relevant differences’.¹⁷ This might appear to be an instance of what Charles Taylor diagnoses as ‘Raving Platonism’, Rorty’s caricatured characterisation of his philosophical opponents.¹⁸ It is however precisely what Nagel means: he writes that rationality ‘should enable anyone else also to see what is the right thing for you to do against that background’.¹⁹ Nagel thus supplies what is lacking in Wolin’s account, a reason why the torturers are logically committed to the norms of which Wolin speaks. As Nagel puts it, the ‘[r]eal character of reason is not found in belief in a set of “foundational” propositions, nor even in a set of procedures or rules for drawing inferences, but rather in any form of thought to which there is no alternative.’²⁰

Nagel articulates and defends his position in his polemical book *The Last Word*, a work which throws up many ambiguities. Regarding the claim that rationality should ‘enable anyone else also to see what is the right thing for you to do against that background’, much depends on the meaning of the word ‘should’. Most people *do* not hold for example liberal views, so if Nagel’s were an empirical claim he would be

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 29, emphasis in original.

¹⁷ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 205.

¹⁸ Taylor, ‘Rorty in the Epistemological Tradition’, p. 269.

¹⁹ Nagel, *The Last Word*, p. 110. A similar account is developed by Andrew Jason Cohen. Cohen, who describes himself as a ‘liberal metaphysician’, argues in favour of ‘universal judgements – judgements that would be made by any person faced with the same question if they consider it impartially’. Cohen, ‘On Universalism: Communitarians, Rorty and (“Objectivist”) “Liberal Metaphysicians”’, *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 38 (2000), pp. 38 – 75 at 49.

²⁰ Nagel, *The Last Word*, pp. 68 – 69.

straightforwardly wrong. However, he clearly means ‘should’ in a stronger sense, where ‘should’ means people who are fully rational, and who reason according to the standards of the ‘order of reasons’.

This is a very strong claim, and considering its importance for his position, Nagel tells us remarkably little of what he means by the order of reasons upon which it depends. Insofar as he examines it, he does so by reference to what it is not: it is something that does not in any way depend upon peculiar perspectives, practices, or histories. But apart from ruling out ‘relativism’ – for (as we will see below) the same reasons as Rorty – Nagel gives no positive content to those forms of thought to which there is ‘no alternative’. Such arguments as he gives to adduce their existence are circular: the universality and inescapability of reason depends upon the order of reasons, but the existence of that order is demonstrated only by the universality and inescapability of reason. There is no independent test for either of these things, and the only evidence Nagel provides to support it is his being convinced of its existence himself. As Rorty puts it, somewhat caustically, positing such a notion ‘seems merely a way of telling ourselves that a nonexistent God would, if he did exist, be pleased with us.’²¹ It is however pragmatically useless, since asserting validity does not give those unconvinced of its validity a reason to come to view it as valid.

The circularity of his demonstration of the order of reasons means that Nagel is open to the charge that his claims to universality are themselves ethnocentric. If Nagel asserts the existence of what Rorty calls a ‘metaphysical substrate’ which ‘grounds’ for example universal human rights and affords them priority over cultural peculiarities and biases, how can we know whether or not the belief in that substrate is itself not a cultural

²¹ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 27.

peculiarity?²² That is, might Nagel's claims to universality and objectivity merely be the sort of thing we happen to do around here? To give a specific instance, as John Gray notes,²³ it is not sufficient to refute Rorty's view to point out, as Norman Geras and Jean Bethke Elshtain do, that those who rescued Jews from the Nazis during the Holocaust claim to have acted out of a shared sense of a universal, common humanity.²⁴ For it could just be that this sense was itself the moral expression of particular cultures and traditions. When Rorty writes that 'there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society – *ours* – uses in one or another area of inquiry',²⁵ this is for Nagel quintessentially relativistic, but simply asserting that his own views are universal does not explain why they themselves escape ethnocentrism.

Nagel also runs together the claim that the universality of reason provides the framework within which humans necessarily think and act, with the claim that it also provides a test of an individual's capacity to think at all: this latter idea captured in his remark that 'To reason is to think systematically in ways anyone looking over my shoulder ought to be able to recognize as correct'.²⁶ It is not clear to me how this claim fits together with the 'inescapability' of reason: if reason is inescapable, in what sense can it provide such a corrective? Nagel thus exemplifies what Rorty calls 'the ambiguity of rationality', whereby 'rationality' is used both as a cognitive capacity and as a moral virtue.²⁷ These two meanings are conflated when we say that someone is rational when they draw the same

²² Ibid., p. 207. As I discuss in chapter 5, Rorty's point is that it is, but that it is none the worse for that.

²³ John Gray, *Endgames: Questions in Late Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Polity, 1997), p. 58.

²⁴ Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Mankind*; Jean Bethke Elshtain, 'Don't Be Cruel: Reflections on Rortyian Liberalism', in Daniel W. Conway and John E. Seery (eds.) *The Politics of Irony: Essays in Self-Betrayal* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pp. 199 – 217 at 211 – 214.

²⁵ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 23, emphasis in original. I will consider how broadly the notion of a society, or an *ethnos*, should be interpreted in chapter 7.

²⁶ Nagel, *The Last Word*, p. 5.

²⁷ Richard Rorty, 'The Ambiguity of "Rationality"', *Constellations* 3 (1996), pp. 73 – 82.

conclusions as us. On the one hand, Nagel uses ‘rational’ to indicate those people who reach a particular conclusion if they are reasoning correctly. But he also clearly intends ‘should’ in a commanding way, as though this is what it would be *good* for people to believe. That is, he moves backwards and forwards between ‘rationality’ as a cognitive faculty that we either possess or not, and ‘reasonable’, what it would be good for us to do in a certain situation.

In the absence of any further evidence, Nagel’s claim that ‘to think of reason as an abstraction from the contingent psychological phenomena of human reasoning is to get things backwards’²⁸ is merely an unsupported assertion. One can go on to suggest that it is in fact Nagel who has got things backwards, reifying practices of reasoning by abstracting them from the context in which they emerge, and then proclaiming their objectivity and universal status by ignoring their particular origin. Thus, although he takes Rorty’s account to be animated by a central failing, namely the rejection of the philosophical attempt to seek to transcend human peculiarities and attain a view of the world uncoloured by such things – to attain as he famously puts it, the view from nowhere, the view of ‘the world as it is in itself’²⁹ – it is unclear that Nagel has managed to get closer to this goal than Rorty.

7.3 Validity and the contingency of language

Following Willard van Orman Quine, Rorty denies that the notion of ‘validity’ is any less conditional than other notions. We can illustrate this point with an example raised by

²⁸ Nagel, *The Last Word*, pp. 56 – 57.

²⁹ Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, p. 5.

Nagel of the rules of grammar. Nagel points out that people can use a word wrongly, and thus invalidly: the examples he gives are that people often use the words 'disinterested' when they mean 'uninterested' and 'enormity' when they should say 'enormous size'. In answer to the question of at what point does an invalid use become, because of its repeated use, a valid one, Nagel writes that instances such as these 'will probably continue to strike me as objectively wrong even if I live to an age when almost no one any longer recognizes them as errors'.³⁰ In so doing, he draws a firm distinction between 'use' with 'validity', between what people happen to think and what is correct.

Nagel's example is a good one of invalid use of language, though there are of course an infinite number of others. The rules of the English language exist independently of any single speaker of that language. At the same time however, words and the rules of grammar have no interests and concerns of their own, but get their meaning through use. This point is made by Quine who, of the example of defining 'bachelor' as 'unmarried man' asks simply enough, 'Who defined it thus, and when?'³¹ If we appeal to the dictionary, this only replicates the question, for the lexicographer has recorded the antecedent fact that 'bachelor' and 'unmarried man' are used synonymously. Quine concludes that the distinction between analytic truths and synthetic truths, although a philosophical article of faith, is not one that can be specified. There is no way to distinguish between these two kinds of truth, and show where empirical truths (truths 'made true' by features of the world) stop, and logical truths, as relations between ideas, start. To make his point, Quine notes that an outside observer, or someone learning a new language, cannot specify whether the particular use of the word 'true' by members of the observed community or speakers of the learned language points to an analytic or a

³⁰ Nagel, *The Last Word*, p. 40.

³¹ W. V. O. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View: 9 Logico-Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980, second edition), p. 24.

synthetic truth. For Quine, any difference between truths is merely ‘the degree of stubbornness which [a] person exhibits toward giving up [a] belief’.³²

People and communities come to speak one language rather than another as a consequence of a multitude of contingent historical circumstances rather than the conscious decision of any individual or group. At some point, as the use of such words changes, so does the valid use of those words. Nagel writes of the use of ‘disinterested’ that it will probably seem wrong to him even if ‘almost no one recognizes’ it as an error. But what if no one apart from Nagel himself came to believe it to be an error? Would it still be meaningful to describe it as an error? Nagel’s use of the word ‘recognize’ is significant, because it is again suggestive of representationalism, that there is a correct set of rules of grammar that exists independently of human beings and which people either recognise or not. At a certain point however, certainly when no one any longer recognizes them as errors and the use of the word has become common, earning a place in the dictionary, Nagel himself would be mistaken to describe them as errors.

Nagel concedes that, in cases such of these which concern ‘usage, as opposed to validity’, objectivity ‘can’t really outstrip community practice’.³³ What then is the distinction between ‘usage’ and ‘validity’? Nagel thinks it a firm one, but for Quine, it is a difference of degree, not of kind. There is, he argues, a continuum running between beliefs that we cannot easily imagine giving up, through to beliefs that we would readily renounce if evidence pointed towards their contradiction. One way to explain this point is to make a distinction between what Gary Gutting calls a social practice and group consensus.³⁴ Group consensus is whatever a group of people think, whereas a social practice is

³² Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 120.

³³ Nagel, *The Last Word*, p. 40. I discuss ‘objectivity’ in chapter 7.

³⁴ Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity*, pp. 21 – 22.

something that, though changeable, is recognisable independently of what anyone thinks. Consequently, we can appeal in the name of a community's social practice, for example equality, again the current consensus of that community.³⁵ Applying Gutting's terms to Nagel's example, we can say that the rules of the English language are a social practice, not merely a group consensus: it is meaningful to speak of mistakes of grammar by both individuals and groups. We know we have spelled a word incorrectly because we recognise that we were trying to spell a specific word; if we did not recognise this, we would not be able to say that we had misspelled it. A social practice will be recognisable as such because it has become the practice of a community, whereas group consensus might merely refer to the views of (sections of) the community at a specific time. At the same time however, the one leads to the other, and no sense can be given to the idea of social practices, or anything else, claiming 'validity' entirely independently of the particular practices of a community.

The notion of validity is further weakened if, as Rorty argues, languages are contingent. If languages are not attempts to represent reality but are attempts to cope with it, then there are a potentially limitless number of ways in which this might be done. Rorty follows Quine by arguing that there is no meaning lying behind words. Rather, the meaning of a word is, as Wittgenstein put it, simply the use of a word in a language: 'the "meaning" of typographical inscriptions is not an extra "immaterial" property they have, but just their place in a context of surrounding events in a language-game, in a form of life'.³⁶ For this reason, there can be no analytic truths, because there can be no truths by virtue of meaning. Quine argues that the evidence of this is seen in translations. When translators

³⁵ As I will discuss in chapter 6, this is precisely what Rorty thinks political theorists ought to do.

³⁶ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 25.

attempt to render the terms of one language into that of another, there is no single correct way to do so, with the result that different translations can all be acceptable.

Rorty develops this point in his discussion of metaphor, or ‘unfamiliar noises’. A metaphor comes from outside the ‘order of reasons’. The metaphorical or surprising use of language, for example in a claim like ‘love is the only law’ or ‘the earth whirls round the sun’, were surprising when first they were uttered.³⁷ The attempt to make sense of the surprise will require us to alter our theories or vocabularies in order to take account of it. Metaphors do not fit into the pre-existent or antecedent order of reasons, but have rather the potential to extend the frontiers of knowledge and of logical space; they are, as we saw in chapter 2, causes, but not reasons, for changing beliefs.³⁸ They are thus not cognitive, though they have the potential to become cognitive and are therefore the engine for moral change and progress: Rorty writes of the ‘genius who [by creating a metaphor] transcends the predictable thereby transcends the cognitive and the meaningful’.³⁹ But there is no way to tell who is a genius and who an eccentric except retrospectively, by seeing which metaphors happened to catch on and be literalised, and which did not. In the absence of an order of reasons, there is no way to make this kind of judgement in advance of posterity. As Rorty puts it, the “‘irrational’ intrusions of beliefs which ‘make no sense’ (i.e., cannot be justified by exhibiting their coherence with the rest of what we believe) are just those events which intellectual historians look back upon as ‘conceptual revolutions’.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 170. Rorty goes on to discuss the different intentions behind metaphors, between for example the use of language for poetic effect, or self-conscious political effect. Such differences, though interesting and important, are not my concern here.

³⁸ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 50.

³⁹ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativity, and Truth*, p. 169.

⁴⁰ Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 15. Rorty also approvingly quotes Davidson’s claim that “the irrational” is essential to human progress’. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

This for Rorty explains why philosophers are hostile to metaphors, since they entail that inquiry is not, as foundationalists believe, converging, but proliferating. Nagel for instance claims that intellectual and cultural change can only come from within the order of reasons, writing that '[c]hallenges to the objectivity of science can be met only by further scientific reasoning, challenges to the objectivity of history by history, and so forth.'⁴¹ This is however simply not the case. It is quite possible for an idea which is internally consistent nevertheless to be false. Sometimes the stimulus for change comes not from within a vocabulary, but from external factors. Changes within philosophy as an intellectual discipline for example have occurred because of broader cultural changes, notably the growth of the natural sciences, a fact which explains for example why Descartes both founded modern philosophy, and why he did not think of himself as doing so.

7.4 Truth and truthfulness

In opposing the universal validity of truth claims, it is important to be clear that Rorty is not denying the existence of truth. Many critical accounts of Rorty claim that he is giving up on truth, either consciously or as a result of his philosophical position. For Cheryl Misak, 'Rorty thinks that the philosopher should happily jettison the notion of truth altogether'.⁴² Others think that Rorty allows for truth, but that he defines truth in terms of justification or warrant; truth is what, for Rorty, we are allowed to get away with in

⁴¹ Nagel, *The Last Word*, p. 21.

⁴² Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 12 – 13. Charles Taylor makes a similar claim in 'Rorty in the Epistemological Tradition'. For Tom Rockmore, Rorty 'has discarded the idea of truth'. He continues by asserting that Rorty maintains 'that knowledge is impossible, and there is finally only fiction'. Rockmore, 'Philosophy, Literature, and Intellectual Responsibility', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1993), pp. 109 – 121 at 112, 115.

conversation. Hilary Putnam for example takes Rorty to be offering an ‘emotivist’ view of truth, where truth as simply a compliment that we pay to beliefs we approve of.⁴³

Neither claim is, I suggest, accurate. Rorty’s point is, rather, that truth is forever unattainable. Habermas speaks of what he calls an ‘orientation toward unconditional truth’,⁴⁴ but for Rorty, such an orientation is impossible. Truth cannot serve as a goal of inquiry since there is no test of truth other than justification to a community of inquirers. We have no way to grasp it, and, centrally, no way of knowing when we are moving towards or away from it. Words such as ‘good’ and ‘truth’ are meaningful and useful, but indefinable, because there is no way to give necessary and sufficient conditions of their application,⁴⁵ and no way to recognise them even if we had secured them. In inquiry, although we might claim that we are seeking the truth, what is in fact aimed at is agreement from our community of inquirers. What is often called the pursuit of truth entails meeting standards of evidence, but these are themselves socially determined. If we have these things, we are content to call our findings true. This is however an *indication* of truth, not a *definition* of truth. Rorty does not define truth in terms of agreement, since what is agreed upon, he readily accepts, may not be true, even though we have no other test of truth than agreement. Justification is all that we need, or indeed are able, to concern ourselves with since we possess no ‘criterion for achieving truth different from our criterion for achieving justification’.⁴⁶

My claim that if we take care of freedom truth will take care of itself
implies that if people can say that they believe without fear, then, ... the

⁴³ Putnam, *Realism With A Human Face*, p. 24. See also Cora Diamond, ‘Truth: Defenders, Debunkers, Despisers’, in Leona Toker (ed.) *Commitment in Reflection: Essays in Literature and Moral Philosophy* (New York: Garland, 1994), pp. 195 – 222.

⁴⁴ Habermas, ‘Richard Rorty’s Pragmatic Turn’, p. 48.

⁴⁵ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 307.

⁴⁶ Rorty, ‘Response to Susan Haack’, p. 148.

task of justifying themselves to others and the task of getting things right will coincide. My argument is that since we can test whether we have performed the first task, and have no further test to apply to determine whether we have performed the second, Truth as end-in-itself drops out.⁴⁷

This seems to commit Rorty to saying that truth is whatever we think around here, and he has said things that support such an interpretation. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, although he distinguished between truth and warranted assertability, saying that the existence of a difference is ‘unquestionable’,⁴⁸ he also claimed that truth is ‘justified true belief’. This tied together justification and truth in a way that is unsustainable, as one of Rorty’s own examples illustrates. He writes: ‘even when we have justified true belief about everything we want to know, we may have no more than conformity to the norms of the day’.⁴⁹ In saying this, Rorty is committed to the incoherent position of saying that if something is justified it is true, but also that what is justified may turn out not to be true.

In subsequent writings, Rorty has come to recognise an important difference between justification and truth, which he terms the ‘cautionary’ use of truth, captured in the phrase ‘justified, but maybe not true’.⁵⁰ The term ‘justified true belief’ is mistaken, for if what is justified turns out to have been untrue, it never was true.⁵¹ The cautionary view of

⁴⁷ Richard Rorty, ‘Response to James Conant’, in Robert B. Brandom (ed.) *Rorty and His Critics*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 342 – 350 at 347.

⁴⁸ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 281.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

⁵⁰ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 127 – 8. He also allows for an ‘endorsing’ and ‘disquotational’ meaning.

⁵¹ Even Rorty’s most sympathetic critics repeat this error. Ghiraldelli writes that for Rorty, something being justified means that it is, at least temporally, true: ‘true, of course, but *here and now*’. Paulo Ghiraldelli Jr., ‘Truth, Trust, and Metaphor: Rorty’s Davidsonian Philosophy of

truth functions in the same way as the notion of context-transcendence spoken of by Habermas: both notions ensure the possibility of reforming our current standards.⁵²

Some writers clearly want a more robust notion of truth. Susan Haack follows Peirce in believing that truth is what would be agreed upon by all inquirers if they were fully informed and concerned only with securing the truth: truth is as she puts it ‘the Final Representation that would be agreed in the light of the fullest possible logical scrutiny of all possible evidence’.⁵³ To make good her claim against those who like Rorty who doubt that inquiry can aim at truth, Haack seeks to show that something significant is lost if we drop claims for the pursuit of truth. For Haack, what is lost is intellectual integrity. The difference between writers who do aim at truth and those like Rorty who do not stems from their respective motives:

The distinguishing feature of genuine inquiry is that what the inquirer wants is *to find the truth of some question*. ... The distinguishing feature of pseudo-inquiry is that what the “inquirer” wants is not to discover the truth of some question but *to make a case for some proposition determined in advance*.⁵⁴

The characteristic of not caring about the truth of the proposition one is advancing Haack calls ‘fake reasoning’.⁵⁵ The fake reasoner is concerned with style, and with the

⁵² Education’, in Michael A. Peters and Paulo Ghiraldelli Jr. (eds.) *Richard Rorty: Education, Philosophy, and Politics* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), pp. 67 – 78 at 70, emphasis in original. This is an accurate summary of Rorty’s view in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, but it is not the position he holds now.

⁵³ This issue is developed in chapter 7.

⁵⁴ Susan Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 26.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8, emphasis in original.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

fame that arguing in a certain manner will bring, rather than the truth of what it is they seek to assert.

This is unconvincing. There may well be people who self-consciously assert ‘fashionable’ views, not out of any belief in their truth but in expectation of the fame (or infamy) this will bring. But much of the time, people who hold seemingly outlandish beliefs do not promote them whilst simultaneously believing them untrue. Moreover, history abounds with ideas which were thought strange, disgusting or evil, but which for all that turned out to be true. Often, calling a view strange or outlandish, or an instance of sham reasoning, indicates simply a desire not to engage with the other position. Haack is quite correct when she says that inquirers should consider the evidence: ‘If you are shamming or faking, … you will evade, obfuscate, fudge, to avoid admitting the force of awkward evidence’.⁵⁶ But the relevance, and therefore the force, of a particular piece of evidence is something that is not given by the evidence itself. Rorty agrees with Haack by distinguishing ‘background beliefs’ from ‘standards of evidence’.⁵⁷ He agrees that the latter is fixed across epistemic communities, if it is understood in the way that Haack shares with Rorty, of assessing its fit to one’s experiences and other beliefs. However, the interesting question, and the one that epistemology has not been able to answer, is to explain relevance – to specify exactly what should be taken as relevant and what disregarded. Unless Haack can show why the ‘Myth of the Given’ is not mythical, and that ‘evidence’ is somehow ‘given’ by the structure of the world or by the nature the human brain, she begs the question by appealing to evidence, since what counts as evidence, as well as its relevance, is open to interpretation.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵⁷ Richard Rorty, ‘Response to Susan Haack’, in Herman J. Saatkamp Jr. (ed.) *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics* (London: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995), pp. 148 – 153 at 151.

Haack gives what I think of as convincing instances of pseudo-inquiry, citing for example the efforts of those who seek to combine evolutionary theory with the literal truth of the Bible. Although claiming to be scientific, these ‘scientists’ do not hold the belief which is taken to be central to science, preparedness to give up beliefs in the face of insubstantial evidence. Their concern is not disinterestedly to examine the claims of evolution and of the Bible, but to show that the former must cohere with the latter. This is however to adopt a particular view of the nature of inquiry. Should scientists count the Bible as evidence to counter their claims that the world is more than six thousand years old? I think not, but many think this is proof positive that it is, and Haack gives no non-question-begging means to resolve this matter.

8. Ethnocentrism, irrationality, and relativism

I now turn to address the charge that, by depriving us of an extra-societal standard of validity, Rorty cannot allow for any difference between competing moral positions, or that at most any difference is ‘morally arbitrary’.

8.1 Philosophical and political freedom

Habermas thinks it possible to settle moral controversies by deferring to what he calls ‘the force of the better argument’.⁵⁸ This claim is developed in relation to Rorty by Thomas McCarthy. McCarthy writes that the arguments for Nazism, Stalinism and the Inquisition are not as ‘strong as the arguments against them’, and that, if Rorty thinks

⁵⁸ Habermas, ‘Richard Rorty’s Pragmatic Turn’, p. 46.

they are, then he is ‘obviously wrong’.⁵⁹ However, both terms ‘most convincing’ and ‘better argument’ need to be given content. It is not clear that there is any content to these notions other than ‘persuasion’ and ‘conversation’, the standard that Rorty uses but that both McCarthy and Shane O’Neill are at pains to distinguish from ‘validity’. McCarthy assumes such a contrast, but does not say what it is. After quoting Rorty’s objection on this point, namely what to do if ‘Hitler rejoins that to interpret truth as a product of free and open encounters rather than as what emerges from the genius of a destined leader begs the question against him’⁶⁰, McCarthy simply notes that there are ‘enormous social consequences attached to the different methods of fixing belief’,⁶¹ and that for this reason Rorty is wrong to reject the importance of attending to general conceptions of truth. As I have said, Rorty rejects the latter claim, but, as I will now examine, he agrees with the former.

Rorty views Habermas’s ‘communicative rationality’ and corresponding notion of the ideal speech situation as an uncomfortable half-way house between traditional subject-centred rationality, and the pragmatist view that freedom and equality will remove the need for notions of ahistoric rationality or universal validity.⁶² It agrees with pragmatism that ‘objectivity’ is a consequence not of a single human being reasoning but rather that reason is what emerges in conversation, but at the same time it suggests there is a natural terminus for that conversation, and that given ideal epistemic conditions everyone can be brought to recognise it. As such, for Rorty it falls short of the need to embrace the full consequences of anti-foundationalism, namely that there is nothing to respect apart from our fellows.

⁵⁹ Thomas McCarthy, ‘Ironist Theory as a Vocation: A Response to Rorty’s Reply’, *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Spring 1990), pp. 644 – 655 at 647.

⁶⁰ Richard Rorty, ‘Truth and Freedom: A Reply to Thomas McCarthy’, *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Spring 1990), pp. 633 – 643 at 636.

⁶¹ McCarthy, ‘Ironist Theory as a Vocation: A Response to Rorty’s Reply’, p. 647.

⁶² See Rorty, ‘The Ambiguity of “Rationality”’, pp. 74 – 75.

Rorty however thinks the differences between Habermas and himself unimportant. He writes that they 'do not disagree about the worth of traditional democratic institutions, or about the sorts of improvements these institutions need, or about what counts as "freedom from domination".'⁶³ Rather, their differences are, as he puts it, 'merely philosophical'. Habermas in contrast regards them as very important. He proposes a distinction between acceptance and validity, claiming that the latter would be secured in what he calls the 'ideal speech situation'. By providing ideally perspicuous epistemic conditions by excluding the distorting influences of power relations and ideology, truth will emerge through free encounter. Habermas summarises these conditions as follows: 'openness to the public, inclusiveness, equal rights to participation, immunization against external or inherent compulsion, as well as the participants' orientation toward reaching understanding (that is, the sincere expression of utterances).'⁶⁴

Writers such as Andrzej Szahaj believe that Rorty cannot endorse Habermas's view that communication should take place free from distorting influences if he abandons the metaphysics upon which Habermas grounds his position.⁶⁵ I suggest however that, when understood in political terms, Rorty can readily share all but one of these conditions that Habermas specifies as constituting the ideal speech situation. Openness, inclusiveness, the equal right of participation and immunization against external compulsion are things Rorty thinks liberal democracies provide better than any alternative, both with respect for equalizing freedoms and opportunities under the law by removing barriers to participation based on race or gender, and by economic egalitarianism to create the freedom and ability to make use of those opportunities. With regard to 'immunization

⁶³ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 67.

⁶⁴ Habermas, 'Richard Rorty's Pragmatic Turn', p. 46.

⁶⁵ Andrzej Szahaj, 'The Task of Philosophy', *History of European Ideas* 20 (1995), pp. 559 – 566 at 565.

against internal compulsion', I suspect that he would gloss this as whatever results from the free discussion of humans enjoying in the political social and economic freedoms and opportunities that are, ideally, provided in liberal democracies. So on each of these points, Rorty can agree with Habermas, but understands his points in political rather than philosophical terms.

The one condition that characterises the 'ideal speech situation' which is not open to being 'politicised' in this manner is Habermas's notion of 'orientation toward understanding'. Habermas glosses this as 'the sincere expression of utterances'. If that means simply that people be open and truthful in their relations with each other, then Rorty certainly agrees with him about its importance. However, 'orientation toward understanding' must, on Rorty's ethnocentric account, be made in reference to some particular goal or understanding, and it seems that Habermas would disagree. Habermas argues that 'What we hold to be true has to be defendable on the basis of good reasons, not merely in a different context but in all possible contexts, that is, at any time and against anybody'.⁶⁶ Drawing on Habermas, O'Neill seeks to give content to notions of 'good reasons' and 'the better argument' by distinguishing those who seek to persuade others of the truth of their own position from those who are committed to a reasoned agreement. This distinction is, he claims, unavailable to Rorty: 'It is not clear how Rorty could distinguish between a process of rational deliberation and a ruthlessly instrumental quest for political victory'.⁶⁷ Similarly, Steven E. Cole thinks that Rorty's position reduces politics and morality to manipulation and power play. He writes that anti-foundationalists think that:

⁶⁶ Habermas, 'Richard Rorty's Pragmatic Turn', p. 46.

⁶⁷ O'Neill, 'Private Irony and the Public Hope of Richard Rorty's Liberalism', p. 54.

[...] discourse should itself be motivated by strategic interests and should thus frame its discussions in terms of pragmatic questions about the local effectiveness of particular kinds of arguments. Analysis of the logical coherence of an argument is accordingly a discarded relic of the “quest for epistemic certitude”, and what remains is finally gossip writ large.⁶⁸

For Rorty, there is no such thing as an understanding that does not make reference to some standard, and that is not directed towards some concrete goal. Conversation, like everything else, is goal-orientated. Cole misrepresents this position, since Rorty is not *commending* anti-foundationalism in the sense of claiming that discourse *should* proceed in this manner. The point rather is that this is what happens in discourse, and that there is no possibility of distinguishing at the level of theory between discourse that seeks truth, and that which seeks effectiveness.

Most of the time, the difference between strategic and non-strategic uses of language is one that cannot in practice be specified. We want to be open enough to listen to cases in which we might learn something, but when engaged in persuasion, we are also seeking to press for the truth of our view over others; there would be no reason for engagement if that were not the case. In terms of O'Neill distinction between ‘rational deliberation’ and a ‘ruthlessly instrumental quest for political victory’, for the most part people seem to be somewhere in the middle. Rational deliberation is undertaken precisely in the quest for ‘political victory’ in the sense of demonstrating that our view is that which should carry the day. It is only by employing a combination of a negative adjective (“instrumental”) and adverb (“ruthlessly”) that O'Neill makes this appear something sinister, or, in the case of

⁶⁸ Steven E. Cole, ‘The Poverty of Contingency Theory’, in Alan Malachowski (ed.) *Rorty: Sage Masters of Modern Social Thought, volume 3* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), pp. 267 – 284 at 267. The term ‘quest for epistemic certitude’ is Christopher Norris’s.

Cole's word 'gossip', something petty and inconsequential. Without these qualifiers, we would probably accept that there is nothing wrong with a quest for 'political victory' when this is understood as a process of communication and persuasion through free discussion. Clearly there is a distinction between dogmatism and fanaticism on the one hand, and open-mindedness and tolerance on the other. But this difference is for Rorty explicated in social and political terms, not at the level of theory.

That inquiry is goal-orientated is, I suspect, part of the reason why Rorty has no time for the notion of convergence at the 'end of inquiry', since there are no norms that specify when we might have reached it. Rorty recognises that the ideal speech situation is a regulative ideal, one unlikely ever to be achieved, but queries whether it can thereby make any difference to our practices of inquiry. For him, '[n]othing can have critical or regulative force – can serve to change our beliefs – except a concrete contribution to an argument'.⁶⁹ We can tell when, for example, we have better understood a particular issue or object, but we cannot tell when we have reached something as unspecified and unspecifiable as 'the end of inquiry'. Rorty makes this point when he notes that we could never know when we had reached that point, rather than having simply secured agreement: '[h]ow would we know that we were at the end of inquiry, as opposed to merely having gotten tired or unimaginative?'⁷⁰ McCarthy provides no test for such a goal other than the agreement of inquirers, but this is no different to the 'wide acceptance' that O'Neill wants to contrast validity against. In either case, there is no reason to claim

⁶⁹ Richard Rorty, 'Response to Simon Thompson', in Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (eds.) *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), pp. 51 – 54 at 52. I suspect that Rorty would agree with Simon Thompson's claim that 'if these ideal standards have not yet been spelt out, then the belief now that such standards will enable us to determine the truth in the future is no more than an act of faith'. Thompson, 'Richard Rorty on Truth, Justification and Justice', p. 44.

⁷⁰ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 131.

that whatever is agreed upon is true. As Rorty points out, looking to history, we see that our current superstitions were the last century's 'triumph of reason'.⁷¹

8.2 Irrationality and moral relativism

For Rorty, claims such as McCarthy's stem from a form of 'faculty psychology', the view that humans divide up into different faculties – reason, desire, passion, will,⁷² and that fully rational humans are able to rise above their passions in order to see which options are fully rational. Faculty psychology lies behind McCarthy and Habermas when they complain that Rorty collapses validity into persuasion; that as Habermas puts it, there are 'intuitive distinctions between convincing and persuading, between motivation through reasons and casual exertion of influence, between learning and indoctrination'.⁷³ As we have seen, Rorty certainly agrees that there is a difference between learning and indoctrination, but it is one of degree, not of kind, one that is explicable in terms of the methods of teaching used and the result that was desired, rather than in terms of a philosophical distinction. For Rorty, the manner in which Habermas and McCarthy draw the distinction relies on the notion that the rational part of the human mind can, if unclouded by passion, recognise the truth. Against this, he adopts a view of humans holding a plurality of beliefs and desires. There is thus no firm distinction between what people happen to think, and what, if they are being rational, they should think.

⁷¹ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 367.

⁷² Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 150, n. 10.

⁷³ Habermas, 'Richard Rorty's Pragmatic Turn', p. 52; McCarthy, 'Ironist Theory as a Vocation', p. 647.

Rorty develops this point by agreeing with Alasdair MacIntyre that modern moral and political philosophy is a confused mixture of notions.⁷⁴ On the one hand, it utilises terms such as ‘reason’ and ‘human nature’ that make sense only on an Aristotelian worldview, one which had at its core a teleological account of humankind in which man’s essence defines his ends. On the other, it endorses a Baconian, mechanistic, view which explicitly contradicts that account. In the absence of such a teleology, MacIntyre argues that these terms have come to be used merely as incoherent expressions of individual preference: as he puts it, ‘moral judgements are linguistic survivals from the practices of classical theism which have lost the context provided by these practices’.⁷⁵ Unlike MacIntyre, Rorty thinks we should drop the last vestiges of Aristotelianism, including Aristotelian moral psychology, in which the human faculties break down into categories such as reason, will, and desire, and adopt instead a Humean view of a plurality of beliefs and judgements. If we do, the charge of emotivism, and the contrast with ‘universal validity’ vanishes, because there is nothing else that judgements could possibly be.

It also follows that ethnocentrism is inescapable. Humans create value, and the values that we create reflect specific needs and interests, not an independent order of reasons. Rorty believes that as a consequence, the world divides into those with whom we share enough beliefs to make conversation fruitful, and those with whom we do not. It is in this sense that he believes notions of rationality and irrationality should be thought of. As he puts it,

To conclude that someone is irredeemably *irrational* is not to realize that she is not making proper use of her God-given faculties. It is rather to

⁷⁴ Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 159.

⁷⁵ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 60.

realize that she does not seem to share enough relevant beliefs and desires with us to make possible fruitful conversation about the issue in dispute.⁷⁶

Some values are, as Bernard Williams puts it, not 'real options'⁷⁷ for us. A real option is an encounter where we are able to take other beliefs seriously, and where failure to convince others of the worth of our beliefs would be of concern to us. Liberals cannot for example take seriously the claims of Nazis, or religious fundamentalists, in the sense that their values are not ones that liberals could ever conceive of themselves coming to adopt. In some cases, 'we would rather die than share the beliefs which we assume are central to their self-identities. Some people think of Jews and atheists in these terms. Others think this way about Nazis and religious fundamentalists'.⁷⁸ Liberals are not worried by the failure of Nazis to accept liberalism. But they would be worried if they could not justify some of their beliefs to people they take to be reasonable.⁷⁹

It has seemed to many however that ethnocentrism is synonymous with, or at the least entails, relativism.⁸⁰ Rorty is widely regarded as the quintessential relativist, but it is clear that there is no consensus on Rorty's position with respect to relativism. Some argue that Rorty regards himself as a relativist. Wolin writes of the kind of 'thoroughgoing relativism – which Rorty (and here, one can only admire his consistency) freely

⁷⁶ Rorty, 'Justice as a Larger Loyalty', p. 234.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 31, n. 13.

⁷⁸ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 203.

⁷⁹ This claim is partially, but not wholly, circular. We define reasonable as those who hold similar beliefs to ours. However, we do not think that every disagreement is a symptom of unreasonableness.

⁸⁰ For an example of the former, see Jonathan G. Allen, 'Rationality, Relativism, and Rorty', *South African Journal of Philosophy* 11 (1992) pp. 52 – 61. Of the latter, see Andrew R. Smith and Leonard Shyles, 'On Ethnocentric Truth and Pragmatic Justice', in Lenore Langsdorf and Andrew Smith (eds.) *Recovering Pragmatism's Voice: The Classical Tradition, Rorty, and the Philosophy of Communication* (Albany: State University of New York, 1995), pp. 71 – 96.

embraces'.⁸¹ In stark contrast, and consistent with the fact that Rorty never claims to embrace relativism (freely or otherwise), Bernard Williams notes that 'Rorty is not a relativist'.⁸² Others, aware that Rorty would not accept their account of him, think that, irrespective of his own claims, he is logically committed to holding that position because of his broader philosophical position. For Martin Hollis, 'there is no mistaking a relativism in Rorty's undermining of the search after truth'.⁸³

Once Rorty is identified as a relativist, the issue becomes one of specifying of what that relativism consists. Some writers seem hard pressed to do this. Whilst Hilary Putnam agrees with Rorty that there is no trans-historical standard of reason, and that humans cannot break out of their standards of justification to the view from nowhere in order to compare their particular standards to naked reality, he continues to speak of 'a Rortian relativism with respect to ethics'.⁸⁴ In another place, Putnam is more equivocal and, after confessing himself confused as to exactly what Rorty's position is, switches his discussion of relativism from Rorty to focus on a nameless but supposedly 'typical relativist'.⁸⁵ And Steven Best and Douglas Kellner write that Rorty 'is not a "relativist" in the sense of someone who thinks all claims are equally good or viable', and yet, on the very same page, go on to tell us that for him, 'ultimately, one description is as good as any other'.⁸⁶

⁸¹ Wolin, *The Terms of Cultural Criticism*, p. 152.

⁸² Bernard Williams, 'Auto-da-Fé: Consequences of Pragmatism', in Alan R. Malachowski (ed.) *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (and Beyond)* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1991), pp. 26 – 37 at 28.

⁸³ Martin Hollis, 'The Poetics of Personhood', in Alan R. Malachowski (ed.) *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (and Beyond)* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1991), pp. 245 – 256 at 248.

⁸⁴ Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (London: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 92.

⁸⁵ Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, p. 69.

⁸⁶ Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, 'Richard Rorty and Postmodern Theory', in Michael A. Peters and Paulo Ghiraldelli Jr. (eds.) *Richard Rorty: Education, Philosophy, and Politics* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), pp. 101 – 110 at 103.

This variety of views reflects the fact that ‘relativism’ does not name a single, readily grasped issue. In part, this is because relativism is not confined to morality, but includes cultural, moral, cognitive, and epistemic relativism. With regard to morality, relativists are typically held to endorse one or (inconsistently) both of the following positions: that one value or practice is as good as any other another; and that it is impossible to form and make judgements about the worth of different values or practices. The central difficulty with describing Rorty as a relativist however is that he endorses neither position. Indeed, in a discussion of moral relativism he joins Nagel in claiming that that relativism is incoherent,⁸⁷ though he does so whilst claiming that *no one* is a relativist, and that relativism is merely a philosopher’s fiction: ‘If there *were* any relativists, they would, of course, be easy to refute. One would merely use some variant of the self-referential arguments Socrates used against Protagoras. But such neat little dialectical strategies only work against lightly-sketched fictional characters’.⁸⁸

Relativism, conceived of as the claim that any belief about a subject is as good as any other, is said by Rorty to be held by no one. The real issue as he sees it concerns the ground upon which it is possible to stand in order to decide between different beliefs and practices. In casting doubt on the availability of neutral ground, philosophers like himself are attacked for denying the very possibility of making that choice at all:

“Relativism” is the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about *any* topic, is as good as any other. No one holds this view. Except for the occasional cooperative freshman, one cannot find anybody who

⁸⁷ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 202.

⁸⁸ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 167, emphasis in original.

says that two incompatible opinions on an important topic are equally good. The philosophers who get *called* “relativists” are those who say that the grounds for choosing between such opinions are less algorithmic than had been thought.⁸⁹

The algorithm that is relied upon, be it ‘universal validity’, ‘objectivity’, or ‘correspondence to reality’, is taken to be central to the distinction between things conditioned by human needs and peculiarities, and the way they are apart from that conditioning. Rorty is clear that there is no neutral ground upon which one can stand to make judgements about the worth of cultures, or anything else. In his view, there is as we have seen no basis for ethical judgements outside of the standards of some human community or vocabulary. Any concern that the awareness of the contingency of beliefs brings with it is moreover, irresolvable, since there is no way to check that one’s beliefs are any more accurate than any other’s because the only test for accuracy is that provided by the language game in which one’s beliefs are situated, and no way to stand between vocabularies and the world to see how well the former represents the latter. The ground on which we stand is always that of a particular community, or *ethnos*, and it is for this reason that Rorty, though just as committed to liberalism as say John Rawls, is often held to endorse cultural and moral relativism. The question is whether it is legitimate to use a standard of value if no neutral, perspective-free standard is available. For Rorty, there is no way the world is apart from the different ways that human beings describe it. Yet for this very reason, the issue of relativism does not arise, because there is no way things are in themselves and therefore no standard to which moral judgements can be said to be relative *to*. ‘Only the assumption that there is some such standpoint to which we might rise gives sense to the question, “If one’s convictions are only relatively valid, why stand

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 166, emphasis in original.

for them unflinchingly?”⁹⁰ Only the idea of a view from nowhere can give sense to the idea that there are better and worse representations of that viewpoint. In the absence of such a perspective, we are left with different human views, and arguments about which should prevail.

8.3 Ethnocentrism and moral arbitrariness

Rorty seeks to scrape off the label ‘ethical relativist’ by turning away from epistemology and metaphysics towards ethics:

We *do* care about alternative, concrete, detailed cosmologies, or alternative, concrete, detailed proposals for political change. When such an alternative is proposed, we debate it, not in terms of categories or principles but in terms of the various concrete advantages and disadvantages it has.⁹¹

However, in denying the possibility of appealing to ahistoric standards, categories or principles, this still implies that the standards of ‘advantage’ and ‘disadvantage’ are dependent upon what different groups of people take to be concrete advantages or disadvantages. We are still left with what many see as a problem, namely that there is no good reason for choosing one position over another, other than it simply being what we happen to like – or prefer, or believe to be ‘true’ – around here.

⁹⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 50.

⁹¹ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 168. See also Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 57.

Rorty denies that this is relativism because, in the absence of such a standpoint, what remains are humans in a web of social and moral relations. From within this context, we make judgements. Another way of putting this is the suggestion that ethnocentrism occupies the middle ground between rationalism and nihilism. It affirms values, but recognises that the values held at any given time are a function of socialisation and circumstance.

Many critics, either explicitly or by implication, maintain that for Rorty there is no meaningful standard by which comparisons can be made, and that it is therefore morally arbitrary to value one position over another. This claim has been spelt out in a variety of ways. For Geras the absence of ‘universal neutral values’ itself that means that for Rorty ranking beliefs is only ‘an arbitrary, unarguable preference’.⁹² Robert Heineman writes that Rorty ‘is simply unable to distinguish between good and evil within his philosophical terms’.⁹³ Eric Gander concurs, writing that Rorty’s account leaves us ‘in a conversation with our *exact* conversational equal’,⁹⁴ and that as a result it is simply a matter of ‘chance’ whether our opponent or we ourselves prevail. For Richard J. Bernstein, ‘[d]ebates about our basic values and norms are not [on Rorty’s account] rational. They are only rhetorical strategies for getting others to adopt our attitudes’.⁹⁵ Similarly, J. Judd Owen understands Rorty to be saying that ‘There is no answer to the question why liberal *should be* liberals ... liberals *are* liberals simply by chance ... Liberalism is not something we came to accept, or can come to accept, rationally’.⁹⁶ And for Rachel Haliburton, ‘the liberal ironist

⁹² Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind*, p. 120.

⁹³ Robert Heineman, *Authority and the Liberal Tradition: From Hobbes to Rorty* (London: Transaction Publishers, 1994), p. 187.

⁹⁴ Gander, *The Last Conceptual Revolution*, p. 168, emphasis in original.

⁹⁵ Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, p. 278.

⁹⁶ Owen, *Religion and the Demise of Liberal Rationalism*, p. 78, emphasis in original.

... can only say that we should avoid "humiliating" others as much as possible, but he can give no reasons *why* this ought to be the case'.⁹⁷

In contrast, others recognise that Rorty *can* give reasons, but that, in the absence of any higher order standard of value to which we can appeal, that there is no final way to judge between them, and that as a consequence reason-giving is reduced to mere assertion. Cheryl Misak allows that Rorty believes that there are reasons for belief, but that these are 'merely historically conditioned reasons, not different in status or worth from the neo-Nazi's reasons based on inequality and hatred of those who are foreign'.⁹⁸ Henry Veatch believes that Rorty's pragmatism confirms 'the utter arbitrariness and permissiveness of those category choices: we choose them and then repudiate them, because now they appeal to us, and now they do not'.⁹⁹ He goes on to suggest that if (as he believes Rorty to be claiming) we cannot make 'rational choice', then our choices must be some 'sort of sheer Nietzschean Will-to-Power'. Morality seems to be, as Matthew Festenstein puts it, at best 'anarchic'.¹⁰⁰

In summary, there seem to be two interrelated causes of concern: first, that Rorty reduces belief to a matter of pure chance or luck; second, that insofar as there are reasons for us to hold our beliefs, in the absence of philosophical notions such as ahistorical reason and universal validity, those beliefs are of equal status to any other, of value simply because we have come to value them. Both understandings of Rorty are I

⁹⁷ Rachel Halburton, 'Richard Rorty and the Problem of Cruelty', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 23 (1997), pp. 49 – 69 at 65, emphasis in original. Here Halburton uses 'ironist' as a synonym for 'anti-foundationalist'. As I will discuss in chapter 4, they are not synonyms.

⁹⁸ Misak, *Morality, Politics, Truth*, p. 16.

⁹⁹ Henry B. Veatch, 'Deconstruction in Philosophy: Has Rorty Made It the Denouement for Contemporary Analytic Philosophy?' *Review of Metaphysics* 39 (1985), pp. 303 – 320 at 319.

¹⁰⁰ Festenstein, *Pragmatism and Political Theory*, p. 129.

will now argue mistaken, both in terms of what they think of Rorty's stated position to be, and in terms of what they think follows (either by design or by default) from it.

Rorty argues that it is a mistake to infer that the absence of a privileged perspective such as the 'view from nowhere' leaves us, as Gander claims, in a conversation with our exact conversational equal. Holders of two different sets of belief will not regard themselves as equal. If one disagrees with someone else, one will have reasons why one's view is superior to that of one's interlocutor. The reason for the disagreement in the first place is that something is at stake, some difference that has led the parties to converse with each other; as I suggested above, this is why there is no firm distinction between strategic and non-strategic usage of language. One will not be able to say that one's position is justified because it accords with reason, or the world as it is in itself, but will say that it is fairer, more just, etc. Liberals for example do not see liberty as just one more value. It cannot be held to contrast with for example love of God, or nationalism, as a value; these are not 'real options' from the liberal's point of view.

This distinction is captured in the following way:

It is one thing to say, falsely, that there is nothing to choose between us and the Nazis. It is another thing to say, correctly, that there is no neutral, common ground to which an experienced Nazi philosopher and I can repair in order to argue out our differences. That Nazi and I will always strike one another as begging all the crucial questions, arguing in circles.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 15. See also Rorty, 'Truth and Freedom: A Reply to Thomas McCarthy', p. 636.

It is because many fail to grasp this distinction, taking Rorty to be denying any form of reason-giving, that they draw conclusions such as Misak's, who claims that for Rorty '[e]mancipatory movements must reject argument and rational persuasion and then they are left with two choices – violence or prophecy'.¹⁰² However, Rorty nowhere denies the need for rational persuasion in the sense of freely and sincerely offering reasons with a view to seeking agreement. The unspoken assumption lurking behind Misak's claim is again that without some grounding in Reality as It Is in Itself, we are left *merely* with what people think. She continues by saying that 'to think that we just *happen* to believe that he [the committed neo-Nazi] is wrong seems a rather pitiful reason to give ourselves to justify our anti-Nazi stance'.¹⁰³ It certainly would be, but Rorty does not suggest that we 'just happen' to believe anything in this sense; *a fortiori*, this is not a reason to give, either to ourselves or to the Nazi. No one would ever say of their *own* beliefs that they 'just happen' to hold them, or describe one's own attachments as being 'merely' historically conditioned.¹⁰⁴ Misak seems to believe that ethnocentric webs of beliefs are *merely* contingent. She writes: 'how, we will want to ask, can he [Rorty] assert that democracy, liberalism, and unforced agreement are best, if what is best is simply what is taken by some group to be best?'¹⁰⁵ But again, what is the force of the word 'simply'? To be sure, they are contingent in the sense that we could equally have been born into a different web of relations, but since we were born into this particular web, they take on substance.

¹⁰² Misak, *Morality, Politics, Truth*, p. 16.

¹⁰³ Ibid., emphasis in original. Geras makes the same claim, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind*, pp. 87 – 88.

¹⁰⁴ Admittedly, David Miller claims to. Writing of support for the National Health Service in Britain, he writes that 'I may not know these reasons myself, and may simply take it for granted that supporting a national health service is part of what we believe in round here; none the less, the point remains that the obligations have a grounding in something more than mere tradition.' David Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 70. I suspect that this is not really the case, and that he (and everyone else) clearly has reasons for that support, reasons that, as he says, extend beyond brute appeals to tradition.

¹⁰⁵ Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*, p. 13.

They provide the context of value in which we make moral choices. To take seriously an alternative, it will have to be shown to be superior by our own lights.¹⁰⁶

It is then clearly not, as Gander believes, a matter of pure chance whether we are converted to Nazism, because there will be disagreements about the worth of different practices, debated not at the level of philosophical principles but in terms of the felt virtues and evils of both. Owen is correct to say that for Rorty, most people are liberals because of contingent chance. However, to say as he does that liberalism cannot be accepted rationally is ambiguous as to what rationality means in this context. If Owen means that one cannot be persuaded to see the virtues of liberalism compared to alternatives, then (as I argue in chapter 5) he is wrong. If he means that liberalism can be justified by reference to the natural order of reasons, the burden is on him to show how liberalism is more rational in this additional way.

For some though, this is not sufficient. For them it is not 'enough just to *prefer* democratic societies',¹⁰⁷ but necessary to claim that there must be objectively good reasons for that preference (which, for them, is therefore not adequately described as a preference); this is what underpins the distinction O'Neill and others draw between

¹⁰⁶ In one sense this is of course to make Misak's point: some people think of their beliefs as true in this stronger sense that Rorty denies, and in suggesting otherwise he could be said to have failed to account for the phenomenology of belief. But although this is what people might think, it does not alter the fact that no sense can be given to this stronger notion. There is a desire, which Rorty acknowledges, for more than to be able to show that for example the Nazis were not only morally inferior to us by our standards but were 'absolutely wrong'; and that if they cannot, then one cannot make any judgments of any sort. The problem here though is, as Gary Gutting notes, that the requirement that we have objective grounding opens the door to moral scepticism, since we do not have such grounding for many of our most cherished beliefs. Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity*, p. 53.

¹⁰⁷ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 4, emphasis in original. Elsewhere, Rorty claims that 'it is misleading to speak of a "preference" for liberal democracy', because that word does not capture the importance of that attachment. Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 187. In the former case however, 'preference' is to be compared to something 'Objectively Good', whereas in the latter, it contrasts with terms like 'commitment' and 'loyalty'.

‘validity’ and ‘attractiveness’. For Rorty as we have seen, this account rests on faculty psychology, but he goes on to turn the charge of relativism around on this point, criticising those who make what he describes as ‘the bad inference from “no epistemological difference” to “no objective criterion of choice”’ as being guilty of ‘silly relativism’.¹⁰⁸ It is one thing to accept that we cannot refute or ‘answer’ for example the Nazis by appealing to first principles, quite another to accept that we cannot argue with them, attempting to convert them by for instance ‘comparing our culture invidiously with others by reference to our own standards’.¹⁰⁹ It is not possible to show that they are acting irrationally (when rationality is held as a ‘bare notion’) or caught in a self-contraction. And to confirm the fears of commentators like Gander¹¹⁰, it is possible in the process of arguing out our differences that the Nazi may convert us; although extraordinarily unlikely, what could serve as an absolute guarantee against this?

This is to accept, as we will see in chapter 5, that there can be no ultimately non-circular demonstrating of our beliefs and claims. But accepting this is different to saying, as Haliburton does, that one ‘can give no reasons’ at all. Georgina Warnke asks, paraphrasing Rorty, whether we have anything ‘non-Fascist to suggest which meets our ... fascist purposes better?’¹¹¹ In contrast to the negative answer she believes Rorty must give, he can perfectly consistently return an affirmative reply, in the manner of offering up alternatives, suggesting for example to the fascist that they might prefer things in a liberal democracy. Depending on our purpose, we can rank the better options available.¹¹² If our purpose is human freedom, then liberalism is better than fascism. The

¹⁰⁸ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 89.

¹⁰⁹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 57.

¹¹⁰ Gander, *The Last Conceptual Revolution*, p. 168.

¹¹¹ Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*, p. 154.

¹¹² For Rorty, ‘if the other guys have different beliefs from ours, and if we are trying to accomplish the same goals, then one of us just *has* to be inferior to the other. Pragmatists like me think that beliefs are habits of action. So insofar as projects are identical and habits of action

standards that we use to make this judgement are ours. Liberal values are better than non-liberal ones, not by reference to an absolute, ahistoric standard, but by our standards. Following Hilary Putnam, Rorty asks rhetorically: 'we should use someone else's conceptual scheme? A *worm's?*'¹¹³

To conclude, the argument in this chapter is that there can be no force to the claim that Rorty reduces notions of goodness or rightness to what we 'happen to think around here', because no sense can be given to those notions that does not make reference to particular communities of human inquiry and standards of value. There is no natural order of reasons against which historically contingent beliefs can be said 'merely' to be held. There are no beliefs that swing free of acculturation, of historical and sociological influences and conditions – including our belief in universal standards of validity and views of the particular standards that constitute ideal speech situations. Some writers assume that, in the absence of a philosophical perspective which could guarantee the superiority of our convictions, they have no defence, an assumption that Rorty feels betrays the immature fear that, without a backup outside of our beliefs, all may be lost. This does not mean however that we 'just happen' to hold those beliefs in the sense that we fail to think or reflect about them, or accept them solely by virtue of being born into a community that values them, for many people come to hold them after serious and considered reflection. The question of moral commitment will be examined in chapter 4 by considering Rorty's account of the 'ironist'. The issue of ironism is, I argue, different to that of 'anti-foundationalism', since ironism leaves ironists with doubts that they are unable to remove. It is therefore widely thought that ironists are incapable of moral

differ, somebody is doing something wrong'. Rorty, 'Reply to Simon Thompson', p. 54, emphasis in original.

¹¹³ Richard Rorty, 'We Anti-representationalist', *Radical Philosophy* 60 (Spring 1992), pp. 40 – 42 at 41, emphasis in original. In subsequent chapters, I will take up in greater detail Rorty's emphasis on the nature and importance of such comparisons.

conviction, and that they are therefore badly suited to membership of democratic communities.

Chapter Four

Ironism, liberalism, and conviction

It was argued in chapter 3 that Rorty, whilst rejecting the notion of ‘universal validity’, can readily claim that moral beliefs are not relativistic or arbitrary. He goes on to propose what he calls ‘ironism’, which he takes to follow from the absence of philosophical foundations. Ironists accept that, in the absence of foundations, there is no way finally to resolve the anxiety that their absence brings with it. Rorty’s view here has been criticised at a number of levels. Stanley Fish has argued that Rorty is mistaken in thinking that anything at all follows from anti-foundationalism. However, many others are concerned about the consequences of ironism. Alasdair MacIntyre and John Horton for example believe that ironism removes any basis for moral belief or conviction. If the ironist ‘spends her time worrying about the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game,’¹ it is argued that this weakens the possibility of moral commitment. Although the awareness of contingency will, Rorty believes, be a desirable and decisive step in human progress, it will leave us with fears that we will be unable to dispel and will thereby, it is said, compromise our commitments as members of communities. I will consider this objection, arguing that once it is recognised that ironists cannot be sceptical of their *entire* vocabulary, there is no reason to think ironism weakens moral belief. Moreover, against the view of those critics like Eric Gander who see ironism as incompatible with liberalism, it will be seen that they are not merely compatible but are in fact (contrary to Fish’s claim) intricately interrelated, the

¹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 75.

liberal desire to avoid cruelty being intimately related to the ironist's concern with other vocabularies.

9. Ironism and the possibility of moral commitment

9.1 *Anti-foundationalism and ironism*

The central consequence of anti-foundationalism is that there is no standard of value other than the historically contingent values of specific human communities. Although as we have seen many critics think this leads to relativism and subjectivism, I have argued that Rorty can properly deny this. For Stanley Fish, however, that entire debate is misplaced, because precisely nothing follows from the recognition of contingency. Since there are, and can be, no beliefs other than contingent, historically conditioned ones, there is no reason to fear the consequences of recognising that this is so. Fish writes:

It is *because* all arguments owe their force to contingent historical factors that no meta-argument can make contingency a matter either of suspicion or of celebration; contingency is a given and can count neither for nor against an argument; any argument must still make its way by the same routes that were available before contingency was recognized as a general condition ... a strong historicism leaves our practices precisely where it found them, resting on the bottom of their own histories.²

² Stanley Fish, *There's No Such Thing As Free Speech, and It's a Good Thing Too* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 20, 21, emphasis in original.

The view that we can have, and need, firmer grounding than that which is provided by the practices within which we live our lives is, Fish argues, philosophical fiction, and fears of relativism, nihilism, etc., that are said to follow from the absence of such a perspective is only a concern to those philosophers who have convinced themselves that something more is needed. For the same reason, Fish argues that Rorty is mistaken to think there are *consequences* of pragmatism, consequences that he suggests include greater tolerance and sensitivity: as I examine below, Rorty thinks that anti-foundationalism ‘helps makes the world’s inhabitants more pragmatic, more tolerant, more liberal, more receptive to the appeal of instrumental rationality’.³ Fish argues that both Rorty and his critics are caught up in the same error, of elevating the recognition of contingency into significance rather than recognising it as a truism of no consequence. Insofar as anti-foundationalism has relevance, it is limited only within philosophy as an academic discipline and has no consequences for what happens beyond the confines of Anglo-American philosophy departments. In the real world, people talk of truth and objectivity without giving any thought to defining those terms, without for example any reference to realist theories of truth.

It might be thought that Fish, presenting himself as having more successfully set aside the philosophical problematic than Rorty, is truer to the later Wittgenstein whom Rorty, and those developments in analytic philosophy that he most values, take as one of their points of departure. Be that as it may, Fish’s discussion overlooks the difference implicit in Rorty’s writings between ‘anti-foundationalism’ and ‘ironism’. The exact relation between the two words sometimes leads, I suggest, to indistinctness on own Rorty’s part regarding the consequences of the awareness of contingency. Sometimes, he appears to agree with Fish that nothing much turns on the awareness of contingency. He writes that

³ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 193.

'the fundamental premise' of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* 'is that a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance'.⁴

At other times, there seems rather more to it. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty captures what he takes to follow from the account he has developed by describing what he calls 'ironism'. Ironists stand in a very specific relationship with their beliefs and values:

(1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her final vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself.⁵

In part, this is a re-statement of the anti-foundationalism that Rorty shares with others such as Fish. Point (3) is clearly a formulation of anti-foundationalism, and if that were all it was, then for the reasons Fish gives, it might be the case that, as was argued in chapter 3, there is no reason why we could not combine this with moral and political commitment. One could accept that one's 'final vocabulary' is no closer to 'reality as it is in itself' than any other whilst taking it to be better than any alternative. Anti-foundationalism is however not a synonym for ironism, but is only one aspect of it. The

⁴ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 189.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

first (1) and second (2) elements go beyond this, and suggest that anti-foundationalism (point 3) has consequences for belief.

This distinction between anti-foundationalists and ironists is exhibited if we consider who ironists are. There is, I suggest, a tension in Rorty's account concerning precisely who the ironists in the ideal liberal society will be. At one point, he writes that

[...] the citizens of my liberal utopia would be people who had a sense of the contingency of their language of moral deliberation, and thus of their consciences, and thus of their community. They would be liberal ironists ... people who combined commitment with a sense of the contingency of their own commitment.⁶

Later on, he says:

In the ideal liberal society, the intellectuals would still be ironists, although the nonintellectuals would not. The latter would, however, be commonsensically nominalist and historicist. So they would see themselves as contingent through and through, without feeling any particular doubts about the contingencies they happened to be.⁷

In the first passage, Rorty claims that all citizens of the liberal utopia would be ironists; one might infer that it will be the mark of such a society that all of its members are such. In the second, a distinction is drawn between intellectuals and non-intellectual members

⁶ Ibid., p. 61.

⁷ Ibid., p. 87.

of that society, and, although ‘commonsensically nonmetaphysical’, the non-intellectuals will not be ironists. One can be commonsensically non-metaphysical (point (3) in Rorty’s summary of ironism) without experiencing the sort of doubts that the ironist feels (points (1) and (2)).

This second passage coheres better with Rorty’s general account of ironism, for example, his claim that whilst the public culture of liberal societies is anti-foundationalist, it cannot be ironist:

But even if I am right in thinking that a liberal culture whose public rhetoric is nominalist and historicist is both possible and desirable, I cannot go on to claim that there could or ought to be a culture whose public rhetoric is *ironist*. I cannot imagine a culture which socialized its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization.⁸

There is on this second account a limit on the number of people in a liberal society with ‘radical and continuing doubts’ about their final vocabularies. This distinction, which Rorty characterises as one between intellectuals and the non-intellectuals, has been criticised for elitism. Rorty writes that the purpose of liberal society is to ‘make life easier for poets and revolutionaries’.⁹ Roy Bhaskar suggests ‘that Rorty provides an ideology for a leisured elite – intellectual yuppies – neither racked by pain nor immersed in toil – whose lives may be devoted to the practice of aesthetic enhancement’.¹⁰ Some critics go further, inferring from the claim that only a few people will become ironists to the claim

⁸ Ibid., emphasis in original.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 60 – 61.

¹⁰ Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*, pp. 134 – 135.

that the rest of society must dutifully follow the dictates of these would-be philosopher-kings. Honi Haber claims that the ironist is the ‘intellectual spokesperson of the non-ironist’, and that as such, ironism serves ‘as a means of oppression’.¹¹ However, I can see no textual or logical reason for the inference. Rorty’s point seems to be, straightforwardly, that we all have private lives, in which Rorty romantically proposes that we be ‘poets’, people ‘who makes things new’.¹² Robert E. Foelber quotes Rorty’s claim that ‘the heroes of liberal society are the strong poet and the utopian revolutionary’,¹³ and claims that this it is significant that the heroes are ‘not the bourgeois poet, intellectual, entrepreneur, educator, political reformer, or statesman’.¹⁴ But of course, any of these people could be a strong poet or a utopian revolutionary in Rorty’s sense of these terms. ‘Revolutionaries’ have a social function, of trying to get liberal societies to be more true to themselves.¹⁵ Similarly, ‘poet’ is conceived of in the broad sense of someone who wants to make their life their own. For Rorty, anyone is a poet who wants to break free from his or her inherited vocabulary, and any of the character types Foelber mentions could fit this description. Rorty does not urge that everyone should be a poet in this sense, but that they should be safe to be if they so wish. He does not mean that the non-intellectuals should never be allowed to become intellectuals and thus ironists, but rather than non-intellectuals will not be interested in such things: his is the empirical claim that they are not bookish, not the proposal that they be banned from libraries, bookshops and institutions of higher education. It is certainly the case that ironism requires the time and resources that most people in the world lack. But Rorty’s

¹¹ Haber, *Beyond Postmodern Politics*, pp. 70, 54.

¹² Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁴ Robert E. Foelber, ‘Can an Historicism Sustain a Diehard Commitment to Liberal Democracy? The Case of Rorty’s Liberal Ironist’, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* XXXII (1994), pp. 19 – 48 at 34.

¹⁵ This point will be considered in chapter 6.

point is that as egalitarians, we should be concerned to extend these opportunities as widely as possible, both within our own societies and (as we will see in chapter 8) abroad.

It is important to see however that if we follow this understanding of what ironism is, it is clear that it is something distinct from anti-foundationalism. The non-intellectuals in Rorty's ideal liberal society will be anti-foundationalists: historicists aware that their commitments are to historical contingencies. The ironist, exemplified by Rorty's comparison of ironism with common sense, is all of this and more. Ironism opposes common sense, the assumption that the vocabulary one speaks is the 'correct' one. So whereas the non-intellectuals in Rorty's ideal liberal society will be *commonsense*ally nominalist and historicist, the intellectuals will be *ironically* nominalist and historicist.

9.2 The impact of ironism on conviction

The non-intellectuals in Rorty's liberal utopia share with the ironist point (3), but not points (1) and (2) which go beyond anti-foundationalism and concern one's attitude towards one's beliefs once one has become anti-foundationalist. Rorty claims that ironism entails a radical, continuing, and irresolvable doubt about all of our beliefs stemming from the recognition of consequences of anti-foundationalism. This doubt cannot be dispelled by further inquiry, since that will at most dispel the doubts that occur within that vocabulary, not those that arise from the interest taken in a different vocabulary. It is for this reason that there is something troubling about ironism, which is why, even if we are anti-foundationalists, we might recoil fearing, as John Horton

suggests, that ironism ‘distances the ironist from the beliefs and values she holds’.¹⁶ For the ironist, it is said, is likely to be detached and even alienated from the non-metaphysical but nonetheless largely unquestioned ‘commonsensical’ beliefs of her community.

Ironism encapsulates the alarm that Charles Taylor has expressed about what he calls the modern ‘culture of narcissism’. Taylor describes this culture to be marked by a ‘subjectivation’ that holds self-fulfilment as the end of moral life without substantial reference to external moral standards, and by a resultant ‘fragmentation’, the inability to identify with and thus see oneself as a participant in a shared way of life.¹⁷ Similarly, for Alasdair MacIntyre, there is a connection between the possibility of moral reasoning and what he calls tradition-bearing communities. He argues that only a community of shared beliefs and practices can be a moral community, one that has standards of justification and reason-giving which are enduring and which can be passed through successive generations. By fragmenting such a community and its shared beliefs, MacIntyre claims that Rorty cannot make sense of moral reasoning or commitment:

Ironic detachment involves a withdrawal from our common language and our shared judgements and thereby from the social relationships which presuppose the use of that language in making those judgements. But it is in and through those relationships ... that we acquire and sustain not only our knowledge of others, but also that self-knowledge which depends on the confirmatory judgements of others.¹⁸

¹⁶ Horton, ‘Irony and Commitment’, p. 19.

¹⁷ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 55.

¹⁸ MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, p. 152.

Irony is, he claims, ‘morally evasive’, since it avoids this requirement, and leads to a withdrawal from human relationships.¹⁹ For Horton, irony weakens the possibility of moral belief by undermining the reasons we have for holding our beliefs. He writes: ‘being told that we should value those commitments simply as the result of some mixture of causes (such as socialization) and choices seems to undermine the claim they have on us’.²⁰ Foelber claims that ironists believe their values ‘to be purely fictional’.²¹ It is thus, he writes, ‘extremely unlikely’ that a society of ironists could sustain liberal democracy.²² He goes on to claim that ‘the idea that all values are just personal or social creations can be horribly destabilizing and can lead to cynicism, despair, wilful fanaticism, mindless pleasure-seeking, or other nihilistic “ethics”’.²³ Thus, although Rorty thinks that irony will in fact comport well with solidarity, critics have charged that this is merely an assumption, and have gone on to point out why it might well be an unfounded one. Charles B. Guignon and David R. Hiley claim to demonstrate that ironism leads to increased cynicism and lack of public commitment by drawing on the results of psychotherapy.²⁴ I suspect therefore that MacIntyre would wholeheartedly agree with Horton’s suggestion that ironism tells us something about the contemporary condition, and that what he takes to be Rorty’s inability to give a satisfactory account of the dilemma of ironism and commitment reflects a more general contemporary malaise.²⁵

¹⁹ Similarly, for Simon Blackburn, irony amounts to a form of ‘indifference to the events around one’. Blackburn, ‘Postmodernist Relativism’, in Alan Malachowski (ed.) *Rorty: Sage Masters of Modern Social Thought, volume 4* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), pp. 269 – 276 at 275.

²⁰ Horton, ‘Irony and Commitment’, p. 27.

²¹ Foelber, ‘Can an Historicist Sustain a Diehard Commitment to Liberal Democracy?’, p. 25.

²² *Ibid.*, 34 – 35.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁴ Charles B. Guignon and David R. Hiley, ‘Biting the Bullet: Rorty on Private and Public Morality’, in Alan R. Malachowski (ed.), *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (and Beyond)* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1991), pp. 339 – 365 at 358.

²⁵ Horton, ‘Irony and Commitment’, p. 18.

In response to the perceived dangers of ironism, commentators have suggested that ironists must hide their ironism, both from themselves, and from their fellows. Foelber believes that a 'historicism' can maintain a commitment to liberalism only if hers is not an ironic historicism; that is, only if she does not experiment 'too vigorously with new vocabularies',²⁶ and Daniel Conway writes that ironists must 'voluntarily harmoniz[e] their ironist insights with the reigning ideals of their liberal society',²⁷ or else risk subverting those public ideals. Others have gone on to argue that Rorty himself calls for a form of deception to protect public life from the corrosive effects of ironism. Peter Lawler claims that 'Rorty's defense of solidarity is ... acknowledged as a comfortable lie',²⁸ because Rorty is said to accept that we may never eradicate the sort of non-ironic hope provided by religion, of a hope over and above that provided by a secular nominalist culture.

In saying this, Lawler is mistaken. Rorty accepts that religion may well always be with us, and that belief in God is one way to avoid feelings of isolation,²⁹ but he does not think that the state should go around deliberately trying to inculcate religious sensibilities.³⁰ More generally, responding to Conway's call for, in effect, a 'noble lie', Rorty claims to have no time for this suggestion:

This idea, familiar from the work of Leo Strauss and his followers, is one for which I have no sympathy. It presupposes that the masses are still

²⁶ Foelber, 'Can an Historicism Sustain a Diehard Commitment to Liberal Democracy?', p. 41.

²⁷ Conway, 'Irony, State, and Utopia', p. 80.

²⁸ Peter Augustine Lawler, 'Bloom's Ineffectual Response to Rorty: Pragmatism, Existentialism, and American Political Thought', in Peter Augustine Lawler and Dale McConkey (eds.) *Community and Political Thought Today* (London: Praeger, 1998), pp. 147 – 173 at 162.

²⁹ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 70.

³⁰ Indeed, he thinks that a genuine solidarity will be achieved when people are concerned first and foremost with cruelty towards other human beings.

unable to kick their metaphysical habit, and that we ironical types must therefore be prudently sneaky in our dealings with them.³¹

There is, he argues, no reason to think that 'the masses' will be unable to live in a historicist nominalist culture. He also, I take it, has no time for the sort of self-deception proposed by Foelber; indeed, although Conway's suggestion is at least workable, it seems bizarre even to suggest that one self-consciously limit one's historicism in the manner that Foelber suggests.

However, if we recognise that Rorty does not propose a form of 'noble lie' to protect the public culture of liberal democracies, how is he able to guard against the apparently negative effects of ironism upon that culture? There remains of problem that ironists seem unable to participate in public life, because their ironism breeds scepticism, perhaps even removing their liberal democratic convictions in their entirety.

9.3 Two suggestions in support of ironic conviction

Rorty's response to this concern is, firstly, to recourse to 'a firm distinction'³² between the public and the private worlds.³³ He thinks that one can get around the inevitability and irreconcilability of doubt – points (1) and (2) in his definition of ironism – by

³¹ Richard Rorty, 'Response to Daniel Conway', in Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (eds.) *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), pp. 89 – 92 at 92.

³² Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 83

³³ Nancy Fraser believes that Rorty only comes to endorse what she calls 'the partition position' because his earlier claims – first, that irony (Romanticism) enhances solidarity, and second, that it subverts it – were both untenable. Nancy Fraser, 'Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty between Romanticism and Technocracy', in Alan R. Malachowski (ed.), *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (and Beyond)* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1991), pp. 303 – 321.

privatising ironism and its attendant uncertainties. This distinction that has attracted a lot of criticism, notably from feminists who have pointed out the various ways in which the personal is political.³⁴ I will not dwell on these criticisms, as Rorty is clear that he does not mean the tradition division between the domestic hearth and the public forum.³⁵ His is rather a distinction between one's concern for oneself, and one's concerns for others. Understood in this way, Rorty believes ironism can escape the problem of conviction in shared forms of life, since if ironism is contained in the private sphere, of concern only to individuals, ironists can still participate with conviction in public matters.

However, if one has doubts, it is hard to see how they avoid being doubts that affect one's life as a citizen. Rorty's 'firm distinction' seems to imply the need to quarantine ironic doubts, but it is hard to see how this might be done, which perhaps explains why he has wavered on precise status of ironism with regard to the public-private division. He notes that irony 'seems inherently a private matter'.³⁶ However, later in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* he qualifies the firm distinction, writing that 'irony is of *little* public use'.³⁷ In subsequent works he allows for public irony, for example the re-description of political leaders, which he thinks better done by satirists and cartoonists than philosophers: he writes that 'when public irony is what is wanted, philosophers and social theorists (except for the occasional Veblen) are usually not the best people to turn to'.³⁸ Clearly then, for Rorty ironism may have *some* public impact. This I suggest simply must be true. Irrespective of how the individual ironist conceives of the distinction

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 312 – 313. See also Dianne Rothleider, *The Work of Friendship*.

³⁵ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 308, n. 2.

³⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 87.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 120, emphasis added.

³⁸ Richard Rorty, 'Response to Simon Critchley', in Chantal Mouffe (ed.) *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 41 – 46 at 45. Admittedly, this comments was made as a response to Simon Critchley, who wrote that Rorty refuses the critical potential of writers like Nietzsche and Foucault as public ironists, and so it might be that Rorty replied to Critchley's question in its own terms.

between public and private, the consequences of their ironism follow on without regard to this understanding. Conway suggests a ‘friendly amendment’ to the distinction, allowing some interaction between private and public.³⁹ Although in his response to Conway, Rorty says that he is happy to accept this amendment,⁴⁰ I wonder how far it is an amendment at all, rather than recognition of the inevitable.

Rorty also defends the claim that ironists can be good citizens committed to participation in a shared form of life by drawing out the parallel between the growth of ironism and that of secularism. Moral conviction survived the decline of religious faith, and he expresses his hope that the sort of warnings ironism attracts will one day seem as quaint as the concerns expressed about the decline of the strength of religious devotion.

Rorty thus responds to the question of whether it is psychologically possible to be an ironist and be morally committed by focusing on the anti-metaphysical element of ironism.⁴¹ This does not however fully address the concerns thrown up by ironism, because it does not address parts (1) and (2) in Rorty’s definition. One can, in the manner of Fish, reject the claims of metaphysics, and still think that one’s beliefs are true; for him, conviction remains unaltered by the realization that our convictions are grounded in nothing more than the practices in which they are embedded. Fish however is not an ironist; he holds only to point (3) of Rorty’s definition of ironism. Ironism in contrast is not solely a matter of the absence of metaphysics, because it goes on to say that there is an ineliminable element of doubt that Fish for example does not share. It is, I will now suggest, elsewhere that evidence is found to support the compatibility of ironism and conviction.

³⁹ Conway, ‘Irony, State and Utopia’, pp. 79 – 80.

⁴⁰ Rorty, ‘Response to Daniel Conway’, p. 92.

⁴¹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 85.

9.4 The nature of ironic doubt

It is difficult to say what would count as conclusive evidence of the effect of ironism on moral conviction. One possible way is to see if there are any examples of ironists who are committed to their beliefs. An example is Rorty himself, but we should obviously look for examples beyond this. An interesting recent account with parallels to Rorty is that of G. A. Cohen. In a discussion of what he calls the ‘paradoxes of conviction’, Cohen worries about the question of grounds we have for holding beliefs.⁴² We all of us hold many beliefs very deeply, but at the same time, Cohen argues, we know that if we had been brought up differently, notably in a different family environment, we would hold different beliefs. Cohen gives the example of his meeting his previously unknown identical twin brother who held different beliefs to his own. This he says would disturb him, not because that twin could produce new and winning arguments he had previously not considered, but because he would recognise, in a very powerful way, that simply because of a different upbringing, one could come to have very different values.

Cohen writes that this should make us pause and think, to ‘recognise that we would not have beliefs that are central to our lives – beliefs, for example, about important matters of politics and religion – if we had not been brought up as we in fact were’.⁴³ He realises that there is nothing within his specific beliefs, about justice, equality, or anything else, that can stop his doubts about the contingent origin of those beliefs. He is aware that his beliefs are the result of accidental historical influences, and says that this in itself makes

⁴² G. A. Cohen, *If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?* (London: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 7 – 19.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

him pause, not because the realisation has brought with it a damaging challenge to his specific beliefs, but because of the way that realisation affects *all* beliefs, whatever they are. Cohen then is not just making Fish's point about anti-foundationalism (point (3) in Rorty's definition), but also point (2) concerning the impossibility of removing doubts by recourse to the terms of one's own vocabulary: his doubts about his imaginary twin brother are not answerable by reference to the terms of his own vocabulary.

However, despite his being unsettled by the 'paradoxes of conviction' that he illustrates, Cohen gives no sign that he is preparing to give up his beliefs. He is not about to abandon his particular commitments, even though he knows that his reasons for holding them go back to his childhood and in particular the influences of his communist parents. That is, Cohen does not exhibit point (1) of ironism: he does not exhibit 'radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary [he] currently uses'. He differs from the ironist not on whether one would die for one's contingent beliefs, but on the different question of whether one would be prepared to die for a contingent belief about which one had *inescapable doubts*. Can Rorty address this point?

I think so. David Owen has suggested that rather than seek recourse in the objective as the source of confidence in one's beliefs, confidence is secured because the ironist has held her views open to criticism.⁴⁴ The ironist recognises the contingency of her beliefs and the impossibility of resolving every possible doubt, but this does not mean that she has failed to resolve every doubt that she has confronted. She will have engaged with other beliefs, and will have 'selected' her beliefs over others. So although there is no way of finally assuring herself of the truth of those beliefs and convictions, she has at least no better truth candidates on hand at the moment. Ironists, that is, may have doubts and

⁴⁴ Owen, 'The Avoidance of Cruelty', p. 99.

might even be somewhat detached from their vocabulary, but they will still think that the vocabulary they speak is true (or at least, more likely to be true than any alternative).

A problem with Owen's suggestion as it stands, however, is that it does not fully address the issue thrown up by ironism, since it serves only to move the issue back one stage. Certainly, one can say that one has tested one's beliefs in this manner against all alternatives, and found the others wanting. However, the ironist's doubts would seem to extend to doubts about the process of socialisation that produced one's standards of judgement themselves. An ironist may think that *p* is true, better, or whatever, than not-*p*. However, she will equally be aware that the reasons for thinking this, the standard of value that she is employing to make this judgement, is itself the result of contingent circumstances. So it is not clear how far the sort of test Owen proposes will underwrite the doubts that the ironist, if she is being truly ironic, experiences.

I suggest that the reason why Rorty can account for the ironist's moral concerns about her final vocabulary is because final vocabularies are not fixed, self-contained things. Rorty's mistake, which carries over into Owen's commentary, is to define the ironist as someone who is sceptical of her *entire* vocabulary. This brings with it ideas of vocabularies matching up to Reality as It Is in Itself, implying that the ironist can stand back from her vocabulary as a whole, something that Rorty, as we have seen, has denied is possible. Moreover, such a process of standing back depends on a notion of a self that exists prior to its ends, and which can potentially cast each of them into doubt. For Rorty however, the self is not something that sits back and scrutinizes one's web of beliefs, but *is* that web, a network of beliefs and desires that is continually rewoven throughout our

lives.⁴⁵ To think of the self as something that *has* beliefs is to adopt an implausible Cartesian view of the self. Michael Sandel has recently attributed this view to John Rawls in his account of the ‘unencumbered self’, a self that is prior to its end, needs, purposes, and views of the good, and can choose these things unencumbered by social attachments. Rorty argues that not only does such a notion have no place in *A Theory of Justice*, but that it could not, since it is incoherent.⁴⁶ For the same reason however, he is himself mistaken to suggest that the ironist can be worried about her entire vocabulary, rather than particular elements within it.

If my claim is correct, we can see that J. Judd Owen is mistaken when he writes that the ironist ‘is not enthralled by any final vocabulary – they all seem equally remote from the truth. One is tempted to say that the ironist partakes of the “god’s eye view,” detached from or somehow beyond all final vocabularies’.⁴⁷ One should resist this temptation, because the ironist is and could not be *beyond* all final vocabularies. It is the mark of the metaphysician to think they can move beyond the contingencies of particular vocabularies to the God’s-eye view. The ironist is defined as someone who recognizes the impossibility of such a position. By the same token, we cannot doubt our entire vocabulary at once, for there is no perspective from which we can do this; as Rorty puts it elsewhere, all of our beliefs can be called into question, but not all at the same time.⁴⁸ That is, there is no possibility of the sort of radical detachment, scepticism, or cynicism that critics like MacIntyre, Horton, Haack, and Foelber think Rorty proposes, and no reason then to think that ironic doubts entail that the ironist cannot wholeheartedly (that

⁴⁵ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 32.

⁴⁶ In his essay ‘Postmodern Bourgeois Liberalism’ (in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 197 – 202), Rorty himself ascribed Sandel’s account of the self to Rawls (p. 199). As I will argue in chapter 6, he subsequently argued that his view of Rawls was mistaken. See Rorty’s criticisms of Sandal in Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 184 – 189.

⁴⁷ Owen, *Religion and the Decline of Liberal Rationalism*, p. 83.

⁴⁸ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 180 – 181.

is, non-cynically) participate in the public life of her community. Once this is recognised, David Owen's point that the ironist's beliefs have been reflectively endorsed follows on and, I think, supports the view that ironists can be morally committed.

10. Liberalism and ironism

10.1 *The liberal ironist?*

Recalling the distinction between anti-foundationalism and ironism, we can accept that it is possible to be anti-metaphysical and committed to liberalism. However, whilst this provides an affirmative answer to whether it is possible to be a liberal and a nominalist and historicist, it is not to answer the question of whether it is possible to be a liberal *ironist*. Ironists experience not just doubts about metaphysics, but doubts about all forms of belief. How then is it possible, not merely as a nominalist and historicist, but as an ironist, to be committed to Rorty's view of liberalism in which cruelty is the worst thing that we do?

There is indeed a further problem concerning the coherence of *liberal* ironism. This is not merely an instance of the general question of whether one can combine commitment with ironism, but a further important one, since on Rorty's definition of those terms, liberalism appears to be particularly incompatible with ironism. Ironism does not commit one to any particular substantive values, which is why Rorty can legitimately remain untroubled by the fact that none of the ironists that he mentions – Nietzsche, Heidegger

and Foucault – were liberals.⁴⁹ However, precisely because ironism does not endorse any particular substantive values, it seems potentially very cruel, entailing openness to alternative vocabularies and of re-description, and thus violating the liberal view that cruelty is the worst thing we can do. As Rorty puts it,

Ironism, as I have defined it, results from the awareness of the power of redescription. But most people do not want to be redescribed. They want to be taken on their own terms – taken seriously just as they are and just as they talk. The ironist tells them that the language they speak is up for grabs by her and her kind. There is something potentially very cruel about that claim. For the 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.⁵⁰

Rorty then seems to be proposing two mutually incompatible positions. He advocates ironism, which is centrally concerned with re-description. He thereby opposes the feature common to most people, of not wanting their beliefs questioned, by saying that these beliefs can and should be questioned, and thus appears to contradict the liberal desire to avoid cruelty above all else.

Some are clear that liberal ironism is a clear-cut contradiction in terms. For Eric Gander,

⁴⁹ With regard to Foucault, Rorty says: 'In presenting Foucault's Nietzschean attitude I am not commanding it. I have no wish to do so, especially since much of Foucault's so-called "anarchism" seems to me self-indulgent radical chic.' Richard Rorty, 'Foucault and Epistemology' in David Hoy (ed.) *Foucault: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) pp. 41 – 49 at 47.

⁵⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 89.

Rorty's vision of liberalism and his vision of irony are fundamentally incompatible. ... [T]he liberal wishes the desire to avoid acts of cruelty (in particular acts of humiliation) to be an invariant part of everyone's final vocabulary, while the ironist rebels against the suggestion that any part of anyone's final vocabulary should be seen as invariant.⁵¹

Timothy Cleveland makes a similar claim, reasoning that since (as he claims) ironists give up on rational argument and focus instead on 'rhetoric' and 'propaganda', all that remains is a struggle for power.⁵² He writes that although ironism is itself a coherent position, 'it will be a totalitarian, Fascist, or Machiavellian ironist, not a liberal one'.⁵³

I suggest however that there is a rather more nuanced connection between ironism and liberalism than such comments allow. To explain, what Rorty calls a post-metaphysical 'poeticized culture' should, he argues, be committed to the creation of what he calls new 'cultural artifacts' in an effort to construct a richer public life.⁵⁴ Gary Gutting objects to this view of that culture.⁵⁵ It is he writes one thing to strive for culture that is aware that it is a product of history; that is, one that is 'commonsensically nominalist and historicist'. It is however quite another to assert (Gutting thinks that it is merely an assertion) that such a culture ought to engage in the creation of 'ever more various and multicolored artifacts'. Gutting argues that Rorty allows his own somewhat Nietzschean preferences for what an ironist's life ought to consist in to dictate the moral goal of society as a whole. On Rorty's own account however, once culture has been historicized, there is nothing about ironism that leads to a preference for a life of self-creation over a life of

⁵¹ Gander, *The Last Conceptual Revolution*, p. 114.

⁵² Timothy Cleveland, 'The Irony of Contingency and Solidarity', *Philosophy* 70 (1995), pp. 217 – 241 at 227, 235.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁵⁴ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, pp. 53 – 54.

⁵⁵ Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity*, p. 64.

conformity. Thus when Rorty argues that human fulfilment requires individual self-creation, for '[t]o fail as a human being is to accept somebody else's description of oneself, to execute a previously prepared program,'⁵⁶ this may be his own view, but he cannot enforce it on everyone else if he claims to be a liberal, for then he would be violating liberal neutrality between views of the good life. Conway suggests that Rorty is merely following Mill in his view that there is public utility in 'experiments in living',⁵⁷ but that there is in fact no reason for the citizens of liberal democracies to seek a life of self-creation – to make this a requirement for all citizens would be, as Gutting says, to universalise Rorty's own view of the good. Rorty is thus said to be guilty of extending the private concerns and interests of the ironist, who, if they truly are solely the 'intellectuals' will be a minority of any culture, into the public culture of liberal societies.⁵⁸

Against this understanding, I suggest that it is an error to view Rorty as crudely projecting his private interests into the public culture of liberal democracies. His claim is that a liberal culture, one committed to eradicating cruelty, will be required to create 'cultural artifacts' if it is to be truly liberal. If the point of liberalism is the avoidance of cruelty, this concern coheres with those fears of the ironist that stem from doubts about the limitations of their current vocabulary. This point can be seen if we turn again to Judith Shklar's account of cruelty. She writes that 'To hate cruelty more than any other evil involves a radical rejection of both religious and political conventions. It dooms one to a life of skepticism, indecision, disgust, and often misanthropy'.⁵⁹ This seems to support the view of those such as MacIntyre who take ironism to weaken political

⁵⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 28.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁵⁸ Cf Richard Shusterman's comments about Rorty's 'aesthetic programme'. Shusterman, 'Reason and Aesthetics between Modernity and Postmodernity: Habermas and Rorty', in Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson, *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), pp. 134 – 152 at 148.

⁵⁹ Shklar, *Ordinary Vices*, p. 8.

convention and thus moral life. However, I think that it is precisely because of the awareness of cruelty that one will become sceptical, indecisive, as well as disgusted and (on occasion) even misanthropic towards some current practices. Liberals who are also ironists are doubly committed to the public creation of ever-more ‘public artefacts’ in an effort to guard against cruelty; as David Owen puts it, ‘the liberal ironist *as both ironist and liberal* is unconditionally committed to dialogue, directly or via trusted representatives, with non-liberals and non-ironists conducted in terms of recognition of, and respect for, the other.’⁶⁰ Rorty writes,

[A]s I am a liberal, the part of my final vocabulary which is relevant to [public] actions requires me to become aware of all the various ways in which other human beings whom I might act upon can be humiliated. So the liberal ironist needs as much imaginative acquaintance with alternative final vocabularies as possible, not just for her own edification, but in order to understand the actual and possible humiliation of the people who use these alternative final vocabularies.⁶¹

The liberal ironist, as anti-foundationalist and one who seeks to avoid cruelty, is committed to creating the public space to enable others self-creation, even though the non-ironic but nominalist citizens of liberal democracies are not. Liberalism provides the opportunities for people to formulate and pursue their visions of the human life, and the creation of ‘multicolored artifacts’ affords them the greatest opportunity to do so by reducing the instances of cruelty they may be subjected to, or visit on others. It would, as

⁶⁰ Owen, ‘The Avoidance of Cruelty’, p. 103, my emphasis. For this reason, Jonathan G. Allen is mistaken to say that the ability of the ironist to die for her beliefs ‘is sheer stubborn attachment and an implacable deafness to new and unexpected claims and experiences’. Allen, ‘The Situated Critic or the Loyal Critic? Rorty and Walzer on Social Criticism’, *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 24 (1998), pp. 25 – 46 at 33.

⁶¹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, pp. 91 – 92.

Gutting says, be inconsistent for Rorty to require his own view of the good to be inculcated into those who do not share or welcome it. The link between ironism and freedom, however, is that ironism, which will not allow for the absolute privileging of any vocabulary, in concert with the anti-authoritarian denial of obligation to anything above human beings, combines with liberalism to allow space for 'experiments in living'. Terry Eagleton is mistaken when he characterises what he dismissively calls 'American voluntarism' as the view that 'You may ... reinvent yourself whenever you want, an agreeable fantasy which Richard Rorty has raised to the dignity of a philosophy'⁶², since it is precisely because of the enormous difficulties confronting people who seek to 'reinvent themselves' that liberalism fits so well with ironism, providing the social and economic conditions that are necessary to enable people to do so.⁶³

This also serves as a further response to the objection that ironism is antithetical to public commitment, for on the view suggested here, it might well be increased. If the ironist is also a liberal, the implication is that the experiments in living have public utility. Rorty can avoid Gutting's complaint that he illegitimately universalises his personal view of what makes for a good private life by saying that this view is a precondition of *liberalism* once we live in a non-metaphysical society.⁶⁴

⁶² Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p. 91. Jane Heal makes the same point in greater detail in Heal, 'Pragmatism and Choosing to Believe', in Alan R. Malachowski (ed.), *Reading Rorty: Critical Responses to Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (and Beyond)* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1991), pp. 101 – 114.

⁶³ At the same time, it is not as difficult to be an ironist as some have claimed. Noting that the ironist creates herself, Gander argues that because one cannot use another's vocabulary to invent oneself that it is very difficult ever to be an ironist. Gander, *The Last Conceptual Revolution*, p. 56. Gander is utterly mistaken here; Rorty's claim is that ultimately one creates one's own finally vocabulary through engagement with others. Indeed, Gander himself mentions Rorty's exemplar of self-creation, Harold Bloom, for whom meaning occurs with one's struggle with a previous meaning (Gander, p. 60).

⁶⁴ If he does so, he will need to abandon claims for a firm distinction between the public and the private. I think however that he can do so without it impacting upon his broader position.

Returning to Gander's account (quoted above) it is a mistake to argue as he does that the inconsistency of liberalism and ironism stems from the fact that liberals are committed to holding certain parts of their final vocabulary 'invariant'. The desire to avoid cruelty, like the desire to frame and revise a view of the good life, does not name a substantive end, but summarises an aspiration that captures very different substantive goals for different people. Just as the whole point of *A Theory of Justice* is to leave people with the space to frame, pursue and revise their own particular conceptions of the good within principles of justice that are held to be fair, the point of saying that liberals seek to avoid cruelty is to leave open what is and is not cruel. As I argued in chapter 2, 'cruelty' is a category, one that is necessarily open-ended to take account of instances of cruelty that we have not yet encountered, or recognised as cruel.

Liberalism as the avoidance of cruelty, it should be noticed, is only one of the ways that Rorty defines liberalism. He speaks of liberal hope, by which he means 'the sort of social hope which characterises modern liberal societies – the hope that life will eventually be freer, less cruel, more leisured, richer in goods and experiences, not just for our descendants but for everybody's descendants'.⁶⁵ This sort of hope will, he thinks, be increased by the movement towards a post-metaphysical, ironic, culture, one in which it is an open question as to what counts as cruelty. Michael Williams notes that 'Rorty himself is aware of anti-liberal political views but is certainly not impressed by them'.⁶⁶ As argued above however, it is not possible to be sceptical about *all* of our beliefs, and I suggest further that for that very reason, liberalism is peculiarly suited to ironism, providing the framework that allows us to be sceptical about our substantial beliefs.

⁶⁵ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 86.

⁶⁶ Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 365.

10.2 Re-description and the avoidance of cruelty

In order to justify this interpretation of the relationship between ironism and liberalism, I need to show that it is not inconsistent for a liberal who is concerned primarily with cruelty to re-describe others in a way that is, potentially, cruel. Rorty's concern to avoid cruelty is sometimes held to commit him to deny the legitimacy of any form of activity that challenges or re-describes the self-understandings of individuals or communities. As a consequence, Rorty's account appears empty and thus useless when it comes to addressing moral and political dilemmas. To take up an example given by Horton, what are we to do when confronted by a white supremacist?⁶⁷ Do we want to say that criticizing such a person is cruel? And if so, does that mean that we may not do it? As Rorty presents it, the compatibility of liberalism and ironism consists in dividing ironism and liberalism into different spheres, answering the apparent contradiction of affirming that liberals want to avoid cruelty whilst acknowledging the inherent cruelty of ironism by making re-description a matter for individuals, who refrain from making public pronouncements that might humiliate. Matthew Festenstein sums this up by writing that 'in public at least, she [the liberal ironist] will refrain from humiliating redescription of her fellow citizens; in private, of course, she may describe them as she pleases'.⁶⁸ Stuart Rennie believes that what he calls Rorty's 'wet liberal' position entails that 'the practices of her [the liberal's own] group are no more moral or rational than any other group, and that she is thereby in no position to pass judgment on foreign practices of beliefs'.⁶⁹ These understandings not only seem consistent with Rorty's view that the liberal is

⁶⁷ Horton, 'Ironism and Commitment', p. 25.

⁶⁸ Matthew Festenstein, 'Richard Rorty: Pragmatism, Irony and Liberalism', in Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (eds.) *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), pp. 1 – 14 at 10.

⁶⁹ Stuart Rennie, 'Elegant Variations: Remarks on Rorty's Liberal Utopia', *South African Journal of Philosophy* 17 (1998), pp. 313 – 342 at 315.

concerned to avoid cruelty, but also bring liberalism coherently together with ironism: it is clear from Rennie's summary that the 'wet liberal' has been impressed enough by other cultures to be unprepared to judge them as inferior to her own.

However, as we saw in chapter 3, it is a mistake to think that Rorty's view commits him to claiming that two different views are of equal value. It is also, I have argued, difficult to maintain the 'firm distinction' between the public and the private. In addition to these two points, Rorty is clear that no description can serve as a foundational one, immune to challenges concerning its value. It is a *reductio ad absurdum* to say that if one seeks to avoid cruelty that one must avoid criticism of others, because to do so would itself be to sometimes acquiesce in practices which are themselves cruel.⁷⁰ In response to Charles Taylor, who privileges the self-understanding of individuals and communities and who expresses opposition to attempts to understand and criticize them from alternative viewpoints, Rorty writes that this is to conflate epistemological and moral concerns.⁷¹ It is, he writes, a 'mistake to think of somebody's own account of his behaviour or culture as epistemically privileged. He might have a good account of what he's doing or he might not'.⁷² We do not, for example, think that a mass murderer's account of his actions is the one that we need take very seriously as an explanation for his actions, and we turn

⁷⁰ This absurdity has not deterred Phillip E. Young from declaring that Rorty contradicts himself by allowing ironists, in re-describing the philosophical commitments of metaphysicians, to humiliate them. Young, 'The Irony of Ironic Liberalism', *International Studies in Philosophy* 29 (1997), pp. 121 – 130.

⁷¹ I think that, although in 1980 Rorty was prepared to make this distinction in these terms, he would probably now eschew reference to epistemology. However, he would still maintain the importance of the distinction, and would probably now talk about it in terms of different moral concerns.

⁷² Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 202. Rorty has been criticised for not allowing greater significance to individual's reports of their own behaviour. Letson argues that Rorty's failure to treat 'first-person internal reports' with the seriousness they deserve has morally unacceptable consequences. Ben H. Letson, 'Richard Rorty and the Meaning of the Social Sciences', *International Social Science Review* 70 (1995), pp. 43 – 52.

instead to psychiatrists. Rorty's point is that it is for moral, not epistemological, purposes we should listen to what a person, or a culture, thinks of itself. Rorty continues:

We have a duty to listen to his account, not because he has privileged access to his own motives but because he is a human being like ourselves.

Taylor's claim that we need to look for *internal* explanations of people or cultures or texts takes civility as a methodological strategy. But civility is not a method, it is simply a virtue. The reason why we invite the moronic psychopath to address the court before being sentenced is not that we hope for better explanations than expert psychiatric testimony has offered. We do so because he is, after all, one of us. By asking for his own account in his own words, we hope to decrease our chances of acting badly.⁷³

The case of a mass murderer is one where no one would seriously maintain that that person's understanding of their actions was necessarily the correct one. In this case we are likely to defer to psychiatrists. In order to see how far Rorty is prepared to challenge self-understandings, it is illuminating to compare two examples he considers in a discussion of exploitation, the subjugation of women and the exploitation of the poor. In the past, the poor were led to believe that they were singled out, for example by God, as deserving their fate. Today, at least in much of the world, arguments along these lines are seen as a sham. In contrast, Rorty believes that regarding the exploitation of woman, very many women today are not aware of the nature of their situation. 'So, though I think that women still are in the process of working out a new set of practices, the weak and the poor are *already* enmeshed in a practice of calculating who gets what out of their labor

⁷³ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 202, emphasis in original.

and suffering.⁷⁴ Whereas the poor and the weak are still exploited, by recognising that this is so, they have been able to start figuring out ways of dealing with this; in contrast, many women do not even see themselves in this way. In his discussion of these two cases, Rorty makes no distinction between what should happen based upon the understandings of women or the poor themselves. He is perfectly prepared to call into question self-understandings, writing for example in support of feminists trying to enfranchise women.⁷⁵

Rorty believes people can be mistaken in their own self-understandings, not in the representationalist sense that that understanding fails to reflect their real interests (as for example ‘feminist standpoint’ theorists believe), but in the sense that re-shaping self-understanding would increase happiness. He writes: ‘Sometimes subordinated groups *are* clay – happy slaves whom we try to make unhappy as a step toward helping them become even happier than they were before.⁷⁶ There is indeed no way that Rorty *could* consistently claim that a person’s understanding of themselves is always correct and closed to challenge and revision. His anti-foundationalism denies the possibility of any description being intrinsically correct. There is no description that is correct in its own terms, only a description that is useful for a given purpose (with no purpose being any more intrinsically valuable or important than any other).

Rorty then does not say that we, even if we are liberals, may never re-describe or publicly humiliate, because not to do so can itself lead to, or perpetuate, humiliation. The point is rather the concern that, as a liberal, one must be aware of the potential harm that humiliation causes to the person who is re-described. The liberal ironist, worrying first

⁷⁴ Richard Rorty, ‘Letter 6’, in Anindita Niyogi Balslev, *Cultural Otherness: Correspondence with Richard Rorty* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), pp. 89 – 101 at 100, emphasis in original.

⁷⁵ Rorty, ‘We Anti-representationalists’, p. 42.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

and foremost about avoiding cruelty, will necessarily be concerned about potential blindness to instances of cruelty going on around her: she is required 'to become aware of all the various ways in which other human beings whom I might act upon can be humiliated'. It does not however require Rorty, or any other liberal ironist, to refrain from re-description.

10.3 Ironism and scepticism

Liberal ironism combines two desirable things: it encourages us to criticise, to not take beliefs as given just because people or cultures happen to hold them. At the same time, it cautions us to recognise that so doing may entail questioning and trying to overturn beliefs that many hold dearly. Thus I agree with Alan Malachowski when he argues that irony need not lead to the sort of radical detachment of a Nietzsche, but may rather entail a form of what he calls 'social reserve'.⁷⁷ Irony, Malachowski goes on to say, 'is closer to "impartiality" than cynical withdrawal'. It is even closer though to sensitivity, to concern that we may be missing something important, and with the moral commitment to seek to overcome this ignorance and insensitivity. Following on from a discussion of the Albert Camus's story about a German officer who asks a Greek mother to choose one of her sons for him to shoot, Rorty goes on to speak in favour of what he calls a 'totally decosmologized ethics', the ethics he takes to be highlighted by ironism:

It is not the smallest advantage of such an ethics that it helps a child realize that, had Lady Luck given him or her the wrong parents in the wrong country at the wrong time, he or she might have been that

⁷⁷ Alan Malachowski, *Richard Rorty* (Chesham: Acumen Publishing, 2002), p. 149.

German officer. Making such ironies vivid, it seems to me, important for the inculcation of tolerance and sensitivity'.⁷⁸

Rorty's hope is that if one alters or enlarges one's vocabulary, this is likely to increase one's concern for others, and lead to one's greater awareness of pain and humiliation. It is this, I take it, that Rorty meant when he spoke of 'freedom as the recognition of contingency'.⁷⁹

Rorty suggests that ironism has a constructive role to play: it makes one more sensitive to what is going on around one. This makes ironism a political project; in particular, David Owen's account, with which I am very sympathetic, sees ironism and liberalism as intimately related because ironism makes one particularly sensitive to cruelty. In so doing, it combines descriptive and normative concerns in a way of which not everyone approves. For Fish, a genuine pragmatism has no consequences of any kind. The anti-foundationalist enterprise that Rorty and others undertake, in presenting its conclusions as if they had significance itself becomes as mistaken as that which they seek to overcome: 'once pragmatism becomes a program', Fish writes, 'it turns into the essentialism it challenges';⁸⁰ the sense of alienation that the ironists experience stem, he suggests, from the same source that led metaphysicians to seek a vantage point separate from that of their community. Pragmatism (a term which like Rorty, Fish uses as a synonym for anti-foundationalism) ought, Fish believes, to have no consequences of any kind. To make this point, he distinguishes what he calls a 'pragmatist account' from a

⁷⁸ Richard Rorty, 'Robustness: A Reply to Jean Bethke Elshtain', in Daniel W. Conway and John E. Seery (eds.) *The Politics of Irony: Essays in Self-Betrayal* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pp. 219 – 223 at 223.

⁷⁹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 46.

⁸⁰ Fish, *There's No Such Thing As Free Speech*, p. 215.

'pragmatist program'.⁸¹ A pragmatist account is an account that dispenses with comprehensive (typically metaphysical) theories, whereas a pragmatist program is what is said to follow from this, often, Fish suggests, resulting in a further (for him) misconceived comprehensive program.

Fish's criticism is the converse of those presented by commentators who think pragmatism does not have enough to offer.⁸² But I suggest that both sets of criticism miss the point. Pragmatism is not a program. One cannot straightforwardly increase sentimentality by for example encouraging ironism. Indeed, the assumption lying behind this view seems to be that Rorty thinks there will be a direct and inevitable correlation between the growth of ironism and the strength of moral sentiment. But of course to think that is to think along the lines of philosophers who thought that all that was required to understand the nature of reality, and the moral demands it makes upon us, was to think about the nature of that reality with greater care, to think for example that anyone looking over one's shoulder ought to reach the same conclusion. It is moreover a mistake to think that ironism *always* comports well with liberalism. Foelber writes: 'It seems impossible in any case to imagine how an ironist could be both a Dahmerian torturer (rabid anti-Semite, racist) and a good liberal democrat.'⁸³ It does not just *seem* impossible, it is *in fact* impossible. There is no guarantee that the ironism may result in a person whose interests are antithetical to the demands of liberal democracy. But nothing can guarantee that. Torturers and anti-Semites are not exclusively ironist, so all Foelber

⁸¹ Stanley Fish, 'Truth and Toilets: Pragmatism and the Practices of Life', in Morris Dickstein (ed) *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture* (London: Duke University Press, 1998), pp. 418 – 433 at 420.

⁸² Ronald A. Kuipers believes that 'Our times call for a more robust ethics than merely the contingent desire to alleviate suffering when it is brought to our attention'. Kuipers, *Solidarity and the Stranger: Themes in the Social Philosophy of Richard Rorty* (Oxford: University Press of America, 1997), p. 88. See also Richard Rumana's glib comment that Rorty seeks to create 'a sense of justice based on nothing more than a good story'. Rumana, *On Rorty* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2000), p. 69.

⁸³ Foelber, 'Can an Historicist Sustain a Diehard Commitment to Liberal Democracy?', p. 34.

succeeds in doing is point out that some people are not good liberal democrats. There is no absolutely compelling reason for ironists to be liberals, for they may value diversity without being troubled by the cruelty that results from their actions. For Foelber's point to take on weight, however, he would need to show that there is something about ironism that makes it especially liable to cruelty; for example, why ironists any more than metaphysicians tend towards cruel re-descriptions. For, as Rorty, notes, 'Redescription is a genetic trait of the intellectual, not a specific mark of the ironist'.⁸⁴

But although not all ironists are liberals, Rorty gives reasons for thinking liberals particularly suited to ironism because of the ironist's inability to take herself seriously.⁸⁵ Doubts about our final vocabulary mean that we are less likely to seek to impose it on others, and be more concerned to create as many 'cultural artifacts' as possible. Rorty's account, I suggest, therefore informs one of the more pressing questions in political theory, the problem of how to resist the imposition of a particular form of the good on those who do not share it. It is an answer which has some parallels with an account given by Brian Barry who, in *Justice as Impartiality*, defends the claim that 'no conception of the good can justifiably be held with a degree of certainty that warrants its imposition on those who reject it'.⁸⁶ In making this claim, Barry opposes Thomas Nagel's 'epistemological restraint', which holds that a higher standard of objectivity operates in the public than in the private sphere. Nagel uses this to argue that we can believe our own beliefs are justified for ourselves, but, because of the different level of objectivity that obtains, not be sure enough, and therefore not justified, to promote them with the use of the power of the state. Barry accepts that if we are unsure of the truth of our beliefs, we have no right to impose them on others, but he defends this claim not

⁸⁴ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 90.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 73.

⁸⁶ Barry, *Justice as Impartiality*, p. 169.

because privately held beliefs require a lower level of objectivity than public ones, but because of the doubt that *all* beliefs carry with them. Even beliefs with we typically take to be incorrigible, for example reports of physical pain, Barry points out are sometimes mistaken. He argues that no belief can be held beyond all possible doubt, and, consequently, no view of the good life can fairly be imposed on others who deny it.

Barry is quite correct to say that epistemological restraint is incoherent. There is no different level of assurance prevalent in the public sphere than in the private, and Nagel's talk of different levels of objectivity obtaining in those different spheres adds nothing to persuade us otherwise.⁸⁷ For Barry, if we are unable to persuade others of the truth of our beliefs, this must impact upon our own views of them: 'If I concede that I have no way of convincing others', he asks, 'should that not also lead to a dent in my own certainty?'.⁸⁸ The strength of Barry's scepticism is that it grows out of the need to limit personal conviction in political decision-making. Susan Mendus claims that Barry's approach is misconceived and that the important issue, addressed by epistemological restraint, is to sever the connection between certainty and the use of state power.⁸⁹ Epistemological restraint however gives no reason for such separation, since it merely asserts that objectivity means different things in the public and private spheres. Suggesting that inability to persuade others ought to limit certainty at least offers a reason to pause and reflect. I suggest that we see the worries that Rorty takes to be integral to ironism in the same way. That is, ironism will bring with it critical reflection in the face of

⁸⁷ Nagel, as Barry notes, later gave up on epistemological restraint. Mendus however continues to endorse it. Susan Mendus, 'Pluralism and Scepticism in a Disenchanted World', in Maria Baghramian and Attracta Ingram (eds.), *Pluralism: the Philosophy and Politics of Diversity* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 103 – 119.

⁸⁸ Barry, *Justice as Impartiality*, p. 179. It must be said that Barry does not seem particularly convinced by his own argument on this point, seemingly deducing scepticism as the answer to the question of why we ought not impose our view of the good on others in lieu of anything better.

⁸⁹ Mendus, 'Pluralism and Scepticism in a Disenchanted World', p. 114.

contingency, what Cohen described as the need to ‘pause’, and Barry ‘the need for scepticism’.⁹⁰

In sum, in this chapter I have argued that ironism, which includes but goes beyond anti-foundationalism in respect of the doubts ironists have about their current vocabularies and about the possibility of resolving those doubts, is compatible with moral conviction. If we realise that the sort of doubts the ironist experiences apply not to all of her beliefs, then the ironist should be viewed as someone committed to most of her beliefs whilst fully aware of their contingency and thus the possibility that they may need to be revised. For this reason I suggest that ironism is particularly compatible with liberalism. Once it is appreciated that ‘cruelty’ is a category, one which is forever changing to reflect new instances of cruelty, the ironist interest in alternative vocabularies fits very well with this need for awareness. In the next chapter, I examine how liberalism can be defended on Rorty’s anti-foundationalist, ironist, account.

⁹⁰ This interpretation has been resisted. Susan Haack writes that the claim that ironist are less dogmatic than non-ironists is ‘thoroughly misleading; Rorty’s ironist is no fallibilist, he is cynic hiding behind a euphemism’. Haack, ‘Vulgar Pragmatism: An Unedifying Prospect’, p. 138. Her reason for thinking the ironist ‘cynical’ is that the ironist cannot make sense of the idea that practices of justification are an indication of the truth. Ironists engage in social practices in this ‘cautious way’ not because of awareness that standards might need revision, but because they think it makes no sense to ask whether those practices of justification point towards the truth. In saying this however, Haack as we have seen begs the question of whether truth can serve as a recognisable and achievable goal of inquiry.

Chapter Five

Context and the justification of liberalism

Although the compatibility of ironism and liberalism was argued for in chapter 4, it is said by many that Rorty's anti-foundationalism and ironism do not allow for the justification or defence of liberalism, or of anything else. Critics such as Ian Shapiro claim that, in the absence of foundations, what we think is *merely* what we think, and there is no scope for justifying those beliefs. In this chapter, it is argued that in Rorty's view, justification is an important moral requirement, but in the absence of foundations is necessarily relative to communities. It is further argued that, although justification must inevitably be made by reference to particular standards, it does not, as Brian Barry has suggested, become a crudely 'anthropological' matter. I then go on to examine how Rorty seeks to justify liberalism. For writers like Stanley Fish, despite its claim neutrally to bring together holders of different views of the good, liberalism is illegitimate because it is in fact a partial, value laden, form of life. Against these commentators, Rorty's account of political liberalism is examined, illustrating how he thinks it justifiable because it succeeds in bringing together holders of different views of the good with a degree of fairness. I then consider an account which takes itself to follow up on Rorty's historicist account of liberalism more fully than Rorty himself, John Gray's account of liberalism as the pursuit of a *modus vivendi* between different forms of life. I suggest, however, that Rorty rightly regards political liberalism, with its emphasis on individual liberty, to be an important aspect of any form of life which contains people who belong to a plurality of such forms, and that Gray and Rorty's accounts are rather closer than perhaps either thinker would acknowledge.

11. Pragmatism and justification

11.1 Rorty's 'abandonment' of justification

For some writers, justification is important as they see it as an indicator of truth.¹ Others, claiming to set aside questions of truth, focus on the moral requirement to respond to reasonable requests to explain and defend our actions and beliefs.² Many commentators have argued that Rorty rules out justification.³ Although he claims otherwise, writing for example that 'Philosophers, like everybody else, should seek to justify their beliefs',⁴ many think that he is guilty of what Cheryl Misak calls 'the abandonment of justification'.⁵ The reason critics think this is, I suggest, because they believe that by confining justification to the standards of particular communities and by denying any sense to values such as 'rationality' independently of their use by those communities, Rorty drains justification of any substance. They equivocate however between arguing that Rorty rejects justification in its entirety, and that he offers what they regard as an inadequate account of justification, in which the beliefs and practices of a particular community are justified simply insofar as they are held and practiced by the members of that community. Misak for example criticizes Rorty both for 'the abandonment of justification' and for claiming that 'justification [is] relative to one group of inquirers or

¹ Nagel, *The Last Word*; Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*.

² Larmore, *The Morals of Modernity*.

³ Shapiro, *Political Criticism*; Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*; Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*; Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason*; Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind*; Gander, *The Last Conceptual Revolution*; J. Judd Owen, *Religion and the Demise of Liberal Rationalism*.

⁴ Richard Rorty, 'Response to Molly Cochran', in Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (eds.) *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), pp. 200 – 202 at 201.

⁵ Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality*, p. 12.

another'.⁶ Similarly, Ian Shapiro moves between arguing that Rorty gives up on justification by reference to universally valid standards, and that he thinks 'we should not be interested in justification at all'.⁷ Justin Cruickshank, in contrast, although he recognises that Rorty does not claim to give up on justification, thinks that he nevertheless removes the possibility of justification by his rejection of traditional philosophical notions.⁸ Such commentators make a common inference from the claim that justification is inevitably tied to particular standards to the claim that those standards are self-justifying. In their view, we respond, if at all, to calls to justify our practices by describing how they are in fact here and now.

This is however to misrepresent Rorty's reasoning. It is true that, for him, justification takes place against a particular background of values, and that the reasons people offer to justify their behaviour will be formed by the same contingent historical circumstances that framed the background conditions against which the would-be justifier offers her justification. It is a mistake however to infer, from the fact that knowledge claims are constrained by, and only by, the sociologically conditioned rules of a community, that we cannot justify our beliefs to others, including those of other communities.

Most people would agree that a belief can be said to be justified if we can say that there are good reasons for believing it. Controversy arises however once we ask what the basis is for thinking those reasons good ones, for we then have to cite further beliefs, which in turn have to be justified. When we ask on what basis these further beliefs are justified, we begin to become aware of a problem of infinite regress; we can always ask of a belief, 'What justifies *that*?' Writing of the need for moral justification, Christine Korsgaard recognises

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁷ Shapiro, *Political Criticism*, p. 43.

⁸ Justin Cruickshank, 'Ethnocentrism, Social Contrast Liberalism and Positivistic-Conservatism: Rorty's Three Theses on Politics', *Res Publica* 6 (2000), pp. 1 – 23.

that one will inevitably be confronted by a dilemma concerning the authority of morality. She writes: '[e]ither its authority comes from morality, in which case we have argued in a circle, or it comes from something else, in which case the question arises again, and we are faced with an infinite regress.'⁹ We can, she notes, always ask of a proposed standard of justification whether *that* standard is itself justified. As Michael Williams points out, we ultimately confront three, seemingly equally undesirable, situations. We are left with an infinite regress, must decide arbitrarily to rest our beliefs in unfounded assertion, or argue around in a circle.¹⁰

What Rorty, Williams and others call representationalism is a response to this 'trilemma', the claim that there are intrinsically credible representations of the world which do not rest on further beliefs but are self-justifying; they are what Rorty calls 'privileged representations' and Williams 'epistemically basic beliefs', beliefs that as he says are 'intrinsically credible', justified without inference. One way to view *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is as the history of the evolution of different proposals for such beliefs, notably forms of thought that humans cannot get outside of, such as those that express analytic truths or which rest on empirical sense-data. The reason representationalism fails is, as we have seen, that there is no way the world is apart from the various descriptions we give of it and thus there are no beliefs that can serve as basic beliefs in this way.

This does not, as his critics tend to believe, commit Rorty to denying that justification is impossible or unimportant. If we accept that justification is sought by reference to particular standards and to a particular human community, the regress of justification is arrested once that community accepts the justification. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of*

⁹ Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 30.

¹⁰ Michael Williams, *Groundless Belief: An Essay on the Possibility of Epistemology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, second edition).

Nature Rorty sketches what he calls ‘epistemological behaviorism,’ the claim that rationality and epistemic authority are explained by reference to what one’s community allows to be said, rather than the latter by the former. Statements and beliefs are justified not because they tally with reality, but because they secure ‘warranted assertability’, namely ‘what our peers will, *ceteris paribus*, let us get away with saying’.¹¹ As we have seen in chapter 3, Rorty argues that the factors influencing what is discussed and believed are determined sociologically. Thomas Kuhn challenged the view of physical science as the paradigm of pure disinterested inquiry with his claim that science develops by the integration of new facts into an already existing network of beliefs. Rorty generalises Kuhn’s point by claiming that it is the way *all* knowledge is acquired. Justification is inferential and coherentist, and takes place within the context of a particular vocabulary. In justifying a belief, it must cohere with other beliefs from which the proposed justification can be inferred. As Rorty puts it, ‘nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, ... there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence’.¹² Although in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* Rorty declined to call this position pragmatism, fearing that term ‘a bit overladen’¹³, it is the term, and the philosophical tradition, with which he has subsequently allied himself. Rorty’s preferred characterisation of pragmatism is, ‘the doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones.’¹⁴ There is nothing about the nature of truth, or the structure of the world, or of language, that constrain the outcome of inquiry. The only limitations on what we think and say are those of our fellow inquirers. Justification is influenced by the particular sociological and historical factors that influence communities, and what counts as a justification depends on human peculiarities, and these vary according to time and place.

¹¹ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 176.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

¹⁴ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 165.

Rorty adopts Kuhn's distinction between normal and abnormal discourse in place of the division between 'hard' versus 'soft' intellectual disciplines. Normal discourse exists where there is widespread agreement about what is sought from an inquiry – for example, to predict and control the environment, and where there exist agreed upon criteria for evaluating competing claims. Abnormal discourse exists when there is no such agreement either about what is sought from inquiry, or the manner in which it is sought. Even with normal discourse, however, criteria do not reflect the natural order of reasons but rather the standards of a particular community of inquirers that are currently unchallenged.¹⁵ It is a process of using some beliefs currently not in doubt in order to support those claims for which justification is sought. The notion of Reality as It Is in Itself is without content, but as soon as it is given content, we are able to engage in justification. Once one has adopted a vocabulary – of Newtonian physics for example, or of liberal egalitarianism – one adopts norms against which justification can take place.¹⁶

Insofar as Rorty denies justification, he means justification of the sort exemplified by Socratic questions, such as 'Why are you a liberal? Why do you care about the humiliation of strangers?'¹⁷ His point is that there is no possibility of offering a justification that will finally answer such questions. There is no way to justify a belief that does not beg certain important questions for other people, since what counts as a justification depends upon the practices and norms against which a justification is offered, and how far one can accept challenges to those standards. This point is reached

¹⁵ Gutting puts it well when he writes: 'Normal discourse is not supported by any privileged representations, but the deep agreement of the interlocutors allows them to proceed as if it were.' Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critic of Modernity*, p. 19.

¹⁶ This is not to say, as I argued in chapter 3, that the choice of standard is arbitrary.

¹⁷ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 87.

when we are called upon to justify the terms that constitute what Rorty terms our ‘final vocabulary’:

All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. I shall call these words a person’s “final vocabulary”.¹⁸

A final vocabulary is final because the words of which it consists are the standards that one cannot move beyond when justifying one’s values and beliefs. They cannot be backed up with non-circular argument, and are grounded in nothing deeper than themselves. If we are asked to specify for example why we think a certain action is/is not cruel, we are not able to give reasons that are not themselves ultimately circular, that is, which do not repeat (though perhaps rephrase) our original claim. When asked to explain why slavery is wrong or why one cares about the humiliation of strangers, one is likely to say things like ‘It offends against the equality and dignity of human beings’ and ‘It leads to great unhappiness for those held as slaves’. If somebody (Augustine for example) replies by asking why we should care about human happiness, or (Nietzsche) why humans should be treated equally, one can only talk about the pain and misery that people treated in certain ways feel, ask the questioner to put themselves in the position of a slave, etc. These responses still beg questions, for example why we should be

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 73. A person’s final vocabulary contains thin flexible words like ‘good’ ‘true’ and ‘beautiful’, and thicker, more parochial words like ‘kindness’, ‘progressive’, and ‘creative’. The latter, more parochial words are the ones which as Rorty says ‘do most of the work’ in conversation.

concerned about pain, whether and in what ways humans really are equal, etc. That is, if someone continues to press us, and ask us why something we believe to be wrong is wrong, eventually we will have to appeal to other beliefs whose justification at least partly depends on the belief being questioned.

As discussed in chapter 3, Rorty distinguishes 'background beliefs' from 'standards of evidence'.¹⁹ Standards of evidence remain constant: justification is a coherentist/inferentialist matter in which the justification of a belief is necessarily a function of the other beliefs a person has. However, those beliefs vary enormously, and different background beliefs will lead to different views of whether a particular proposition is justified or not. It follows that we cannot justify a belief to all possible audiences, because of the diversity of background beliefs, or truth-candidates, which might emerge in the future. Even if we could justify a belief to all *current* audiences, that is no guarantee that it would be accepted as a justification to all *future* audiences, as new beliefs and 'final vocabularies' emerge. To claim otherwise would, Rorty writes 'be like the village champion, swollen with victory, predicting that he can defeat any challenger, anytime, anywhere. Maybe he can, but he has no good reason to think so, and it would be pointless for him to make such a claim'.²⁰ It would only be possible to justify a belief to all audiences were 'background beliefs' or criteria of justification set in advance and remained fixed. However, in most cases the criteria are not set down in advance, and even where they are, there is no reason to believe, in the absence of a natural order of reasons, that everyone in the future will continue to follow these criteria rather than reforming them or inventing their own.

¹⁹ Rorty, 'Response to Susan Haack', p. 151.

²⁰ Rorty, 'Response to Jürgen Habermas', p. 56.

11.2 The need for justification

Against the kind of global need for justification implied by Korsgaard, Rorty separates ‘justifying’ with ‘being justified’. For pragmatists, the need to justify something arises only when something is questioned and thrown into doubt. For most of our beliefs, we may have good grounds (be justified) when we do not doubt or question (without any attempt at justifying). In a claim with which I am sure Rorty would agree, Michael Williams suggests that the correct response to the question ‘What justifies all of your beliefs?’ is ‘Why should we want to?’²¹ His point is that justification is a contextual matter, made in response to a specific request to account for a particular actions or belief. Modern philosophy’s concern to answer, rather than ignore, the Cartesian sceptic has led philosophers to think that justification is required for things that we do not doubt. It has, as Rorty writes of Habermas, sought to scratch where it does not itch.²²

The felt-need for global justification is addressed by Bernard Williams. He is sceptical about the possibility of justification that will satisfy anyone irrespective of their particular beliefs, a justification that, in being independent of all human peculiarities, must command the assent of all rational people. He argues however that there is no way to convince the ethical sceptic that they ought to act morally, but that, although this question has exercised many philosophers, it is not in fact at issue:

[...] it is a mistake ... to think that there is some objective presumption in favor of the nonethical life, that ethical scepticism is the natural state,

²¹ Williams, *Groundless Belief*, p. 99.

²² Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 167.

and that the person we have been imagining [the amoralist] is what we all would want to be if there were no justification for the ethical life and we had discovered that there was none.²³

The focus should rather be on those who are already in some way moral. For him, the justification that the philosopher has sought to give to the sceptic is ‘in fact designed for the people who are largely within the ethical world, and the aim of the discourse is not to deal with someone who probably will not listen to it, but to reassure, strengthen, and give insight to those who will.²⁴ That is, the justification is addressed to people and communities that are already ethical.

Rorty is similarly sceptical about the need for a justification that will satisfy everyone, irrespective of their beliefs. He takes philosophers who have sought justification from first principles as having been concerned with what follows – typically amoralism or relativism – if such justification cannot be given. Fear of such things has led philosophers to misdiagnose what is at issue with justification; as he puts it, ‘Plato set things up so that moral philosophers think they have failed unless they convince the rational egoist that he should not be an egoist’.²⁵ However, the fact that there can be no non-question-begging justification does not alter the importance of offering justification for people who already possess what Bernard Williams calls a ‘moral sense’, which they exhibit in their relations with certain other people. The task of philosophy should he suggests be to seek to extend the frontiers of this moral sense, that is, attend to those who are already, in Williams’ phrase, ‘largely within the ethical world’. As Rorty writes, we should ignore ‘the rather rare figure of the psychopath, the person who has no

²³ Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 26.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 177.

concern for any human being other than himself' and concern ourselves with, for example, the otherwise 'gallant and honorable Serb who sees Muslims as circumcised dogs'.²⁶

11.3 Justification as anthropology?

Rorty thus joins many other philosophers in viewing justification as a contextual practice, made in particular circumstances to specific audiences with reference to specific values. Unlike most of these, however, he is frequently said to oppose the practice of justification and to hold that insofar as reasons are offered for actions, this amounts to asserting that 'that's the way we do things around here'. I suggest that the reason he is said to oppose the practice of justification is because critics erroneously conflate his rejection of justification by reference to standards that should persuade all rational people – for example, his rejection of Nagel's claim that reason 'should enable anyone else also to see what is the right thing for you to do against that background'²⁷ – with a rejection of justification *tout court*. There remains, however, the question of whether what Rorty calls a 'sociological' form of justification – justification to particular communities of human beings rather than by reference to universally valid standards – is morally satisfactory. For some it is not since it reduces, they claim, the normative task of moral justification to a description of what it is that counts as justification in particular communities.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Nagel, *The Last Word*, p. 110.

Although he does not discuss Rorty, it is helpful to consider a distinction made by Brian Barry. Barry distinguishes the sorts of justification that a person will give for his or her action from the explanation an ‘outside observer’, such as an anthropologist, would give of that person’s justification.²⁸ Outside observers explain the reasons given by showing how people use ideas and draw on values that they were brought up with and that are shared by other members of their community. An anthropological or sociological account of justification is, Barry claims, not a form of justification at all. If one makes the brute appeal to one’s culture or to the norms of a community by saying ‘that’s the way we do things around here’, he argues that one has conflated these two things: when asked for a justification, one has responded with a sociological or anthropological *account of* justification. In so doing, Barry claims that one has taken oneself outside of the realm of moral discourse and become an anthropologist.

Barry regards the claim ‘that’s the way we do things around here’ to be the form of justification standardly offered by multiculturalists who, in his view, seek to justify the practices of communities not on the basis of any standard of worth, but simply because they are currently practices. He makes his point in a commentary on Charles Taylor’s essay ‘The Politics of Recognition’. Writing of reasons why the British government does not allow the murder of Salman Rushdie, Taylor writes that in ‘increasingly multicultural’ societies,

[...] there is something awkward about replying simply, “This is the way we do things here.” ... The awkwardness arises from the fact that there

²⁸ Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 253.

are substantial numbers of people who are citizens and also belong to the culture that calls into question our philosophical boundaries.²⁹

In his discussion of this passage, Barry argues that not handing Rushdie over to be murdered is the right thing to do not because 'this is how we do things here', but because not doing so would be the right thing to do *everywhere*:

[T]he correct defence of the British government's not punishing Rushdie or handing him over to others for punishment (whether within some legal process or outside it) is not 'This is the way we do things here.' It is, rather, that this is the way things ought to be done everywhere: we do things that way here not because it is part of our culture but because it is the right thing to do.³⁰

However, this does not address Taylor's concern, which is the phenomenology of justification. Taylor does not endorse the crudely anthropological account ascribed to him by Barry, whereby something is justified simply because it is a cultural practice. Rather, Taylor is concerned, like Rorty, to point out the sociological nature of justification. The increase of multiculturalism (or, less pointedly, pluralism) brings with it an increasing need for justification. With the increase in moral perspectives brought about by ethnic and religious diversity, previously unquestioned beliefs and assumptions begin to be challenged. Taylor's concern is that with this newfound questioning, it would be insensitive and contemptuous simply to continue to justify our beliefs and practices by saying 'This is the way we do things here'.

²⁹ Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition', in Amy Gutmann (ed.) *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Multiculturalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 25 – 73 at 63.

³⁰ Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 284.

Barry is critical of ever making that claim. He asks, 'How could anybody seriously imagine that citing the mere fact of a tradition or custom could ever function as a self-contained justificatory move?'³¹ However, he then contradicts himself by arguing that in some circumstances, 'that's the way we do things here' *can* serve as a justification. He writes for example that states cannot be neutral about languages, and that it is quite acceptable to appeal to convention and culture when justifying policy on language: 'This is one case involving cultural attributes in which "This is how we do things here" – the appeal to local convention – is a self-sufficient response to pleas for the public recognition of diversity'.³² In this case, he seems in fact more prepared to rely on a crudely anthropological justification than Taylor, who is concerned by the possible inadequacy of such a response, and how one should deal with those who do not agree that 'it is the right thing to do'.

Contrary to what he claims with respect of government policy on languages, Barry's real point is I suggest that *nothing* can serve as a self-sufficient or self-contained justification, but rather that justification is made by reference to liberal principles. Those things that fall within liberal rights are 'indifferent' and can be decided on through discussion, so long as it remains within liberal constraints. If that is the case however, why should the appeal to what is thought or done 'around here' enter into the picture at all? If Barry were to say that something is justified insofar as it is consistent with liberalism, this would eliminate the contradiction presented by his example of languages, and therefore the paradox of his making the same move that he decries when made by

³¹ Ibid., p. 253.

³² Ibid., p. 107.

multiculturalists, namely insulating cultural practices from scrutiny.³³ It would however also be seen to beg the sort of question about which Taylor is concerned, which is what to do in increasingly pluralistic societies where liberal values are themselves questioned.

This helps to illustrate that Rorty's concern is not the multiculturalist point that something is justified because it is held to be part of a practice.³⁴ One justifies one's beliefs and actions from where one is, and by reference to certain standards: 'justification is relative to an audience'.³⁵ Particular historical and sociological factors mean that in some communities, justifications for certain practices are required, and asked for, whereas in others they are not.

12. Justifying liberalism

12.1 *The impossibility of a non-question-begging justification*

Far from being a lone denier of justification, Rorty is in fact no more vulnerable than other liberals who, like Barry, assume the value of equality and liberty that, if pressed, would take them back to a position similar to his, or which would entail them making other, metaphysically problematic, claims. Rorty does not give up on the practices of justification and reason-giving, but recognizes that they are required in specific contexts, and made in respect to specific requests. When he writes that the citizens of the ideal

³³ As it stands, it is ironic that it falls to James Tully to point out why this might not fairly be a self-sufficient justification at all. Tully, 'The Illiberal Liberal: Brian Barry's Polemical Attack on Multiculturalism', in Paul Kelly (ed.) *Multiculturalism Reconsidered: Culture and Equality and its Critics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), pp. 102 – 113.

³⁴ Though even that does not function as a *self-sufficient* justification, since it relies upon claims about the significance of group identity and its relation to 'culture'.

³⁵ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 22.

liberal society ‘would not need a justification for her sense of human solidarity, for she was not raised to play the language game in which one asks for and gets justifications for that sort of belief’.³⁶ Eric Gander misrepresents the reasoning behind this claim, erroneously summarising it as: ‘It would be a culture whose citizens refused even to attempt to justify their practices to themselves or to nonliberals’.³⁷ In the ideal liberal society, liberalism will not *need* to be justified since everyone accepts liberal values. Rorty does not, as Gander claims, rule out justification by edict, but argues that, in this context, it has become superfluous; in the ideal liberal society, justification will simply not be needed for those convictions. Gander provides a more accurate account when he takes Rorty to be seeking to ‘bring about a culture in which we do not need to be prepared to explain on what grounds we defend the First Amendment’.³⁸ That we do not need to do so is because, in an ideal liberal society, no one will ask us to do so. If pressed, one could undertake to justify it, but the call to do so would reflect the fact that one was not living in such a society.

It is clearly the case however that legitimate questions about the justification of liberalism have been asked and deserve a response. Some think that Rorty has nothing to say to these objections. Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift for example assert that since Rorty is opposed ‘to any attempt to provide rational foundations for systems of values and concepts’,³⁹ the only justification of liberalism that he thinks available is to say that it is part of our tradition to be liberals.

To be sure, Rorty accepts that he is unable to offer a non-question-begging justification of liberalism. He writes that his account:

³⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 87.

³⁷ Gander, *The Last Conceptual Revolution*, p. 16, emphasis suppressed.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 138, emphasis suppressed.

³⁹ Mulhall and Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians*, p. 259.

[...] would mean giving up on the idea that liberalism could be justified, and Nazi or Marxist enemies of liberalism refuted, by driving the latter up against an argumentative wall – forcing them to admit that liberal freedom has a “moral privilege” which their own values lacked. From the point of view I have been commending, any attempt to drive one’s opponents up against a wall in this way fails when the wall against which he is driven comes to be seen as one more vocabulary, one more way of describing things.⁴⁰

It is however a mistake to claim that Rorty thinks that liberalism cannot and need never be justified. His point is, once again, that there is no possibility of providing a general justification of liberalism that will persuade any rational inquirer. He writes: ‘I do not know how to “justify” or “defend” social democracy … in a large philosophical way (as opposed to going over the nitty-gritty advantages and disadvantages of the alternatives these people propose).’⁴¹ The caveat contained in parentheses is important. Although justification by reference to an absolute standard is impossible, one can seek to justify a proposal by comparing it with another. He writes that the best way to justify liberalism is to make comparisons with non-liberal regimes. In his ideal liberal polity, ‘the justification of liberal society [would be regarded] simply as a matter of historical comparisons with other attempts at social organization – those of the past and those envisaged by utopians.’⁴² It is by making such comparisons with non-liberal regimes that Rorty believes that liberalism can be justified.

⁴⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 53.

⁴¹ Rorty, ‘Thugs and Theorists’, pp. 577 – 578, n. 20.

⁴² Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 53.

Rorty suggests that there is no fairer or more just alternative to liberalism, given the circumstances of modern plural societies. Liberalism deals with conflict fairly by providing for the maximum degree of freedom of belief and action consistent with the enjoyment of those freedoms by others who have a different view of the good. Rorty proposes:

[...] a story of increasing willingness to live with plurality and to stop asking for universal validity. I want to see freely arrived at agreement as agreement on how to accomplish common purposes (e.g., prediction and control of the behavior of atoms or people, equalizing life-chances, decreasing cruelty), but I want to see these common purposes against the background of an increasing sense of the radical diversity of private purposes, of the radically poetic character of individual lives, and of the merely poetic foundations of the “we-consciousness” which lies behind our social institutions.⁴³

Although he variously describes it as ‘pragmatic liberalism’ and ‘minimalist liberalism’, Rorty’s position is what John Rawls has called political liberalism, which holds that one should set aside attempts to answer questions about the ultimate significance of human life when seeking to settle political questions about the way to live. This view stems from two premises: first, a belief in the equality of human beings and the right of every individual to choose her own ends, and secondly, a belief in the unavailability of any means to determine a uniquely rational way to judge or adjudicate between different ends. This point unites Rorty with Rawls: for them both, liberalism addresses those differences by providing for the maximum degree of freedom of belief and action

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 67 – 68.

consistent with the enjoyment of those freedoms by people who adhere to different views of the good. Liberalism is mandated not by ahistoric facts, but simply because it has proven successful. Liberals, he suggests, ought to claim 'only an experimental success: we have come up with a way of bringing people into some degree of comity, and of increasing human happiness, which looks far more promising than any other way which has been proposed so far'.⁴⁴

Rorty's pragmatic justification of liberalism stems from a view about its fairness. He is not alone in making this claim. The same defence has been advanced by Barry, who disclaims what he calls 'grandiose designs' which purport to ground liberalism on a foundation such as that provided by God or Nature.⁴⁵ In their place, he urges that 'liberal principles are the fairest way of adjudicating the disputes that inevitably arise as a result of conflicting interests and incompatible beliefs about the social conditions of the good life'.⁴⁶ Barry is not a Kantian, and it is not open to him to claim for example that liberalism is underwritten by pure practical reason; rather, such controversy is a reason to set these issues aside and focus on fairness. Unlike Rorty however, Barry shies away from the full consequences of this position. When he writes that liberalism is the fairest way of adjudicating disputes, he leaves open the context of 'fairness'. For 'fairness', like 'reasonableness' but unlike traditional 'grandiose' foundations like God and Nature, is an inherently contextual notion. 'Fairest' is an adjective, and adjectives must be modified by a noun (that is, a context). To say simply 'Liberalism is fairest' makes no sense, unless it is stated in a specific context. That context is clearly what Rawls calls the facts of pluralism.

⁴⁴ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 273.

⁴⁵ Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 122.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

When it comes to liberal principles, it would seem that Barry has reached the limits of his ‘final vocabulary’. He takes it as axiomatic that liberal principles are the fairest means to adjudicate conflicts between different interests and views of the good, and thinks it sufficient to justify things, such as government policy on language, that he takes to be consistent with liberal principles by saying ‘that’s the way we do things around here’. In the same way, when arguing against multiculturalist criticisms, he asserts that a ‘rudimentary sense of humanity is quite enough’⁴⁷ to see what is wrong with denying that groups should be publicly accountable for what goes on inside them. But although we might wish that he were right about this – that saying ‘that’s the way we do things around here’ is enough to end the matter when it comes to practices that are consistent with liberal principles, and that a basic sense of humanity should be sufficient to justify some practices and rule others out – clearly it is not, or else the need to address the issues thrown up by increasingly pluralist societies would not have arisen in the first place. What Barry thinks of as ‘the right thing to do’ reflects, as Taylor points out, a particular Western liberal disposition. It is open to someone to ask for example why not handing Rushdie over is the right thing to do. The only answer that is available to Barry is to give reasons, such as it is immoral for people to be punished for writing books, or that it is wrong for the British authorities to defer their authority to external sources, the importance of rights such as freedom of speech and expression, etc. Some will agree with Barry, others sadly will not. But this claim is no less ‘anthropological’ than the claim that something is justified because it has formed part of a culture for a long time. Both depend upon background conditions specifying whether they count as a justification.

In other places, Barry himself recognises that his claims for the truth of liberalism are contextual and ethnocentric, and therefore ultimately question-begging. He writes that,

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 146.

‘[L]ike any creed it [liberalism] can be neither justified nor condemned in terms of anything beyond it’,⁴⁸ and that ‘there can be no completely general justification of liberal institutions that does not itself invoke liberal values’.⁴⁹ In saying this, he is logically committed to agree with Rorty that liberalism cannot be given an epistemological justification, one that will necessarily silence the sort of doubt about which Taylor is concerned, or stop the infinite regression feared by Korsgaard. Particular historical and sociological factors mean that in some communities justification for certain practices is required and asked for, whereas in others it is not. Sometimes it will be sufficient to respond by saying ‘that’s the way we do things around here’, whereas sometimes it will not.

12.2 Reasons for supporting liberal institutions

For Rorty, political liberalism is not premised on views about the ultimate source of value, and therefore contrasts with, for example, religious orthodoxies in that it requires and imposes no comprehensive doctrine on its citizens. It values freedom and equality not for doctrinal reasons, but in order to give everyone a chance of framing their own view of the good, and the opportunity to follow and alter it. Rawls has argued that political philosophy should not concern itself with truth⁵⁰, should avoid controversies between realist and subjectivist claims about the status of moral and political values, and focus rather on the pursuit of ‘free agreement, reconciliation through public reason’.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Brian Barry, *The Liberal Theory of Justice: A Critical Examination of the Principal Doctrines in A Theory of Justice* by John Rawls (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 127.

⁴⁹ Barry, *Liberty and Justice*, p. 2.

⁵⁰ Rawls: ‘the political conception does without the concept of truth’. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 94.

⁵¹ John Rawls, ‘Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical’, in Samuel Freeman (ed.) *John Rawls: Collected Papers* (London: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 388 – 414 at 395.

Rorty agrees, believing public debate should not focus on comprehensive doctrines but on seeking free agreement between individuals.

In earlier writings such as *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty seemed unconcerned with the reasons people have for supporting liberal institutions. He writes: 'We should see allegiance to social institutions as no more matters for justification by reference to familiar, commonly accepted premises – but also as no more arbitrary – than choices of friends or heroes'.⁵² Here it seems that Rorty believes that the reasons for allegiance to social institutions do not matter so long as enough people have such allegiance, there being no single commonly accepted premise or set of premises that everyone has to accept. However, from the fact that there is no possibility of a final, non-question-begging justification, it does not necessarily follow that, within a particular context, there should not be justification by familiar, commonly accepted premises. That Rorty thinks such commonly accepted premises irrelevant makes his account sound like the Hobbesian project of securing a *modus vivendi*, where all that matters is agreement on common institutions, irrespective of motivation. This idea has been criticised because it places too much weight on whether or not a particular conception of the good happens in fact to endorse common institutions, since this leaves unanswered the issue of what happens if it does not.⁵³ This point emerges clearly in Rorty's account when he writes that non-liberals like Nietzsche can still be good liberals for 'pragmatic rather than moral reasons'.⁵⁴ This may be so, but we can question whether such pragmatic reasons will lead to lasting stability. He writes that such people may 'regret' that their private moral identity is not the interest of the state but, it might be asked, what if that regret, tempered as it may be by the calculation that this situation is better than the loss of their political

⁵² Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 54.

⁵³ Barry, *Justice as Impartiality*, pp. 31 – 39.

⁵⁴ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 192.

freedom, nevertheless leads them to support measures to destroy liberal institutions? What happens then if their loyalty to liberalism exists only because they do not happen to have the power currently to enable them to coerce their view of the good on others?

Perhaps in order to take account of such objections, more recently Rorty has come to offer reasons for why people should support the principles of justice that stand over and above Hobbesian appeals for peace. He appeals to what Rawls has called people's 'sense of justice', discussed in Chapter 8 of *A Theory of Justice*, in which Rawls writes that people who are properly brought up do not act out of narrow self-interest, but out of a feeling that this is the right thing to do. Rorty summarises this position in the following way:

The only notion of rationality we need, at least in moral and social philosophy, is that of a situation in which people do not say "your own current interests dictate that you agree to our proposal", but rather "your own central beliefs, the ones which are central to your own moral identity, suggest that you should agree to our proposal".⁵⁵

Rorty's response to the question of why we are able to affirm the priority of the right over the good is that *we* are able to put the right over the good, because we are correctly brought up, and have become pragmatic and tolerant enough to do so. This follows Rawls's notion of a 'sense of justice', which is to say that it is an indication of being well brought up that one will be prepared to put aside one's comprehensive views in favour of the right. People will support the principles of justice because, whatever else they disagree about, they recognize that they are right, a position which Rorty glosses by writing that '[t]o urge that the right be made prior to the good is, among other things, to

⁵⁵ Rorty, 'Justice as a Larger Loyalty', p. 232.

suggest that trust in people wishy-washy enough to make tactful, unprincipled, political compromises is often, ironically enough, preferable to trust in one's initial moral and religious convictions.⁵⁶ Failure to do so is what Rorty calls irrationality, which for him is not a failure of abstract human reason, but the inability to put aside one's particular interests in this way.

In Rawlsian terms, Rorty here distinguishes an 'overlapping consensus' from a *modus vivendi*. Political liberalism seeks an accommodation between people who differ in their conceptions of the good life. This accommodation is characterised by two features. It claims not to assume any comprehensive account of the good, but at the same time it seeks accommodation which does not simply reflect the narrow interests of individuals and groups. Accommodation will not in itself necessarily be a desirable or a reasonable one, but is reasonable if it accords with basic liberal freedoms. In an overlapping consensus, the different parties to the consensus accept the rightness of the framework over and above its practical expediency. A *modus vivendi* in contrast is said by Rawls and Rorty to be merely a pragmatic calculation that one's interests are best served by living under the conditions of a particular framework of law. For Rorty, it may be the case that if people cannot be brought to compromise their views of the good in search of an acceptable public polity (view of the right), we will have to settle for a *modus vivendi*: in his words, 'we have to give up on the attempt to get her to enlarge her moral identity, and settle for working out a *modus vivendi* – one which may involve the threat, or even the use, of force'.⁵⁷ But ideally, it will be possible to go beyond a *modus vivendi* to what Rorty thinks of as a fair constitutional settlement.

⁵⁶ Rorty, 'A Defense of Minimalist Liberalism', p. 122.

⁵⁷ Rorty, 'Justice as a Larger Loyalty', p. 234.

12.3 Challenges to political liberalism

Like Rawls, Rorty has been criticised for smuggling peculiarly liberal notions into a supposedly neutral account of justice. This presents an ambiguity in his account which parallels that exhibited by Rawls, between on the one hand claiming that political liberalism aims at free agreement whilst on the other claiming that such agreement amounts to more than a *modus vivendi*. It has frequently been objected to this view that it fails to do justice to the importance of people's views of the good, given its concern to bring about the circumstances in which people are prepared to compromise rather than insist upon their convictions. Rorty sums up Jefferson's view of liberal democracy ('the Jeffersonian compromise') by writing that citizens 'must abandon or modify opinions on matters of ultimate importance, the opinions that may hitherto have given sense and point to their lives, if these opinions entail public actions that cannot be justified to most of their fellow citizens'.⁵⁸ However, for those required to abandon or modify their beliefs, those beliefs are not merely 'opinions' but central to their identity. Why, we can imagine many theists saying, should I worry about my mistaken (and possibly hell-bound) fellows? That is, why should one grant the right priority over the good?

It is claimed therefore that liberalism entails a false neutrality about the right, since it embodies a view that compromise and consensus is good, and that in so doing it trivialises alternative views of the good life, particularly religious ones. This argument has been made very forcefully by Stanley Fish, who is interesting for my discussion because his meta-philosophical position is very similar to that of Rorty. Fish argues that liberals cannot make good the claim that liberalism is more reasonable because it is impartial or

⁵⁸ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 175.

neutral, because this stems from its own, partial, perspective. The liberal approach, of privatising comprehensive doctrines, especially religious doctrines, itself rests upon a comprehensive doctrine. Despite its professed aim of seeking tolerance and accommodation of as many different views as possible, he notes that liberalism excludes many views that it considers unreasonable. Fish writes that liberals claim that their 'reasons come from nowhere, that they reflect the structure of the universe or at least of the human brain', but that this is false; whatever liberals may claim, 'in fact reasons always come from somewhere, and the somewhere they come from is precisely the realm to which they are (rhetorically) opposed, the realm of particular (angled, partisan, biased) assumptions and agendas'.⁵⁹

Fish considers the grounds on which people are supposed to put aside their interests and come together in search of agreement; that is, why they should be prepared to put the right over the good. He concludes there are only two reasons for them to do so: a pragmatic or prudential calculation that one will benefit from such an arrangement, or because one holds it to be of moral value. Fish notes that prudential calculations are anathema to most liberals. He argues that the only alternative is that one should put aside one's interests because one believes that it is the right thing to do. He concludes that in this case, one is clearly acting out one's own view of the good: if one did not believe it was good to put aside one's interests in this way, why would one do it? To assert that in doing so one is not advancing a particular understanding of the good is therefore false.

As Fish puts it,

It makes no sense to set aside some of your beliefs unless in doing so you are affirming another of your beliefs as higher. Deferring to a higher

⁵⁹ Fish, *There's no such thing as free speech*, p. 135.

order impartiality is not to constrain or bracket “your own beliefs” but to enact them; it is to testify to the truth, as you see it.⁶⁰

Fish continues that liberals overlook the significance of setting aside particular views of the good (the exception, of course, being their own) by trivialising those views. Religious beliefs are, he says, pushed – quarantined – to the private sphere, and are treated as a matter of private concern, and certainly not something that ought to impact upon political decision-making. In this way religious beliefs are held to be ‘partial’ or ‘special’, in contrast to the ‘generality’ that is required by liberalism. But in so doing, it misrepresents the seriousness of those beliefs, the holders of which do not treat them as partial or special, but as true.

Rorty’s most sustained discussion of leaving comprehensive views outside of public debate is his discussion of religion, in a consideration of Stephen L. Carter’s book *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion*.⁶¹ As its title indicates, Carter’s argument is that what Rorty calls the Jeffersonian compromise of privatising religious belief leads, as Fish argues, to the trivialization of those beliefs. Rorty’s response is to deny the central claim of this argument, namely that privatisation entails trivialization, by denying that the non-political is necessarily trivial. ‘The search for private perfection, pursued by theists and atheists alike, is neither trivial nor, in a pluralistic democracy, relevant to public policy’.⁶² This is itself however highly controversial. For many theists, Rorty’s proposal to make it a matter of private perfection

⁶⁰ Fish, *The Trouble With Principle*, p. 182.

⁶¹ Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993). Interestingly, Fish discusses this book, concluding that in the end, Carter shows himself to be a liberal by accepting the partitioning of the public and private, and thus acquiesces in the trivialisation of religion. Fish, *The Trouble With Principle*, pp. 254 – 257.

⁶² Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 170.

is most emphatically to trivialize it.⁶³ Rorty's response, that privatisation is not the same as trivialization, may be correct for some Christians, but not all; and indeed for this very reason it becomes doubly controversial since it reflects a particular vision of Christianity.⁶⁴ Rorty writes that the Jeffersonian comprise is a reasonable one 'to atheists like me',⁶⁵ responding to the picture Carter paints of the bias against theism in American legal and political discussion by noting that in fact it is atheists who are discriminated against, evidenced for example by the fact that atheists cannot stand for public office without being disingenuous about their religious views. That is however because Rorty regards reasonableness in this pragmatic, tolerant, pluralistic, manner.

Is it reasonable though to impose such measures upon those whom think them unreasonable? In a discussion of *Roe v. Wade*, Rorty argues that the U.S. Supreme Court acted wisely and took a suitably pragmatic and consensus-orientated approach to abortion. This may be so, but it says nothing to those who oppose abortion, for many of whom social justification and compromise are irrelevant. For them there is a moral absolute which is not negotiable, and Rorty's view as it stands is insufficiently sensitive to such absolutes. Thus, in contrast to the objection that Rawls's notion of an 'overlapping consensus' mistakenly focused on reasonable doctrines rather than reasonable people,⁶⁶ it might be said that Rorty goes too far in the other direction, assuming that people, whatever their religion faith, will be willing and able to put aside their views in pursuit of compromise with those who do not share their faith.

⁶³ See Scott Roulier, 'Beyond Richard Rorty's Public: Relegitimizing the Quest for Transcendence', *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 9 (1997), pp. 19 – 38.

⁶⁴ Ian Shapiro believes that Rorty's is a Lutheran view of the relationship between man and God. Shapiro, *Political Criticism*, p. 39.

⁶⁵ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 169.

⁶⁶ It is, Barry rightly responds, people, not doctrines, that go around endorsing things. Barry, 'John Rawls and the Search for Stability', p. 898.

Fish concludes from this that 'liberalism doesn't exist', because what distinguishes liberalism, 'its not being the program of any particular group or party',⁶⁷ is not in fact the case. This is perhaps a needlessly paradoxical way of saying that the liberal task of finding a way for people to give up their view of the good fails if it rests, explicitly or implicitly, on the belief that the reason to do so is itself not a part of one's view of the good.

Together with many critics of liberalism, Fish makes great play out of exposing the inconsistency of liberal rhetoric as the search for accommodation and tolerance, and liberal practice of excluding non-liberal forms of life, concluding that liberalism in fact reflects a particular form of life. It is unclear however whether this really marks out an inconsistency in the case of Rorty. He agrees with Carter's criticisms of those liberals who claim that they alone are entitled to base their views on controversial premises. He writes that: 'The claim that [in basing our views on Enlightenment philosophy] ... we are appealing to reason, whereas the religious are being irrational, is hokum. Carter is quite right to debunk it'.⁶⁸ However, as a political liberal, he seeks to settle political questions not by reference to notions such as reason, but by securing consensus. As such he does not claim to be neutral between every view of the good. What Shapiro takes to be 'Rorty's Lutheran view' would only be a problem were Rorty claiming to be offering a neutral account of the good. This he does not do. Rather, he argues, again following Rawls, that there are good reasons for keeping religion out of politics, and that the tolerance of different beliefs should be enough motivation for religious groups to accept this. The Jeffersonian compromise, he thinks, remains fair, and a reasonable price for religious liberty. Moreover, such controversy is itself a reason to set these issues aside and focus on fairness. Explicitly accepting this point strengthens, I think, the pragmatic .

⁶⁷ Fish, *There's no such thing as free speech*, p. 138.

⁶⁸ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 172.

point about the Jeffersonian compromise. The point of privatising religion is that religious arguments, together with many others, are what Rorty calls conversation-stoppers. There is nothing to be said to the person who claims that their views on a particular issue follow on from their understanding of the dictates of their faith. It is not clear why the origin of one's convictions is relevant to public policy, and it for this reason that Rorty, following Rawls, suggests putting aside whatever comprehensive doctrines gave rise to that viewpoint, and focus instead on what common ground (if any) is available to construct a compromise.

It is perhaps misleading to express this point by reference to Rawls's distinction between the right and the good, because clearly the right will be informed by notions of what counts as good. Better to distinguish, as Rorty does, between one's view of one's own good, and one's capacity to be concerned with the public good. As was argued in chapter 4, this cannot be a 'firm distinction', but these two concerns are clearly separate. If we accept this point, then we can respond to Fish by claiming that he fails to distinguish between reasonable views and reasonable people. Although one's beliefs will sometimes mean that we will not be able to put aside one's personal convictions in favour of the public good, sometimes we will, a possibility that Fish does not seriously consider. His discussion focuses exclusively on religious fundamentalists and how liberalism cannot deal with any degree of tolerance with them, but by focusing on this extreme case he ignores the greater number of religious people who are able to come together with those who hold different beliefs in an attempt to construct fair institutions and laws.

In addition, following Rorty's view of justification as a matter of invidious comparison, it is interesting to note that although political liberalism is widely criticised, those criticisms typically are not matched by well worked out alternatives. Carter, though he goes into

detail about the unfairness of the exclusion of religious conviction from public debate, gives no alternative; he does not, importantly, say what it would mean to afford religious convictions a greater status by virtue of their status *as* religious convictions. Neither does Fish and, as Rorty points out, Fish's own convictions seem entirely liberal.⁶⁹ Fish says that the partiality of liberalism is hidden behind its claims to neutrality, justified by reason, but that in fact, since these reasons are partial, liberalism is just another ideology. However, he himself identifies significant differences between liberalism and some of its critics, namely the way it treats those opponents, and how far the bounds of its toleration can extend. These latter, as Fish sometimes accepts, are far wider than in most non-liberal states. The core of Rorty's position, the one that I take to be the point of Barry's claim that liberalism is 'fair', is that there is no fairer or more just alternative, given the circumstances of modern plural societies, characterised by a plurality of individual and collective goods and ways of life.

12.4 Modus vivendi as the successor to political liberalism

Such a defence of liberalism has led to Rorty being rebuked for 'liberal self-satisfaction'.⁷⁰ This can in turn been seen as criticism of liberalism more generally: the claim that liberalism is fairest given the facts of pluralism, and the failure of any apparent alternatives, has meant that liberalism has been criticized for what Ronald Beiner regards as 'liberal complacency'.⁷¹ Rorty's response to such claims would, I take it, be to ask such critics to offer a better alternative to address the pluralism of modern societies. As I have suggested, Fish and others fail to offer alternatives to the liberalism they criticise.

⁶⁹ Richard Rorty, 'Aristotle Had it Right', *The New Leader*, December 13 – 27, 1999, pp. 5 – 6 at 6.

⁷⁰ Billig, 'National and Richard Rorty', p. 70.

⁷¹ Ronald, Beiner, 'Richard Rorty's Liberalism', *Critical Review* 7 (1993), pp. 15 – 31 at 20.

However, an important alternative has been suggested, which is not only responsive to the facts of pluralism but which seeks to take them more seriously. This is John Gray's proposal for a return to the original form (or 'face') of liberalism, the pursuit of 'terms of coexistence among different ways of life'.⁷²

Gray would, I think, agree with many of Fish's points, but he takes up the view that liberalism proposes a false neutrality in a different way by focusing on the idea of value pluralism. For him, liberals assume the value of individual liberty, ignoring or downplaying important alternatives. Although political liberalism claims to take as its starting point the fact of pluralism, it fails to take that fact seriously. To do so would, Gray argues, be to address the needs and concerns not of individuals but the plurality of communities and ways of life. He writes: 'The variety of value-pluralism that is most salient in the context of the world today is not of this diluted and individualistic variety, but arises from the plurality of whole ways of life, with their associated moralities and often exclusionary allegiances'.⁷³ Genuinely to recognise and accept this plurality is to accept that the 'liberal project',⁷⁴ of seeking a universal consensus on values, fails. Liberal principles reflect a way of life which affords priority to individuals to form and pursue their own ends, but Gray argues that sometimes other interests, such as the preservation of social stability, must be allowed to take priority.

Liberals are said to mistakenly elevate their own notion of the good (re-describing it as the right) which was born of a particular time and place, and illegitimately claim that it is valid for all forms of life. The liberal view that individual rights stand over any particular form of life is however a chimera, since they are as much the product of, and bound up

⁷² John Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), p. 33.

⁷³ Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake*, p. 136.

⁷⁴ Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, p. 25; Fish uses the same term in *The Trouble With Principle*, p. 175.

with, forms of life as any other value, and make sense only within those forms. If liberal rights are not valued by a particular community, or if they are held to be of less value than some other competing value, then liberals cannot legitimately object to their being set aside to make way for alternatives. Liberals should, Gray argues, renounce the pretension of liberalism as containing any historical or moral privileges at all. The task for those who appreciate this is 'to go further along the path that Rorty has opened up' by examining the conditions required for a *modus vivendi* between different forms of life, one in which liberalism is but one among many other equally legitimate forms.⁷⁵

Gray thinks that liberalism misrepresents the fact of pluralism by focusing on pluralism of individual human projects rather than between forms of life. The notion of a 'form of life' is however ambiguous. If we are to take with appropriate seriousness the idea that, as Gray points out, many people today belong to more than one form of life,⁷⁶ a case can be made for individual freedoms of the sort that liberals favour. He writes that the truth of strong value pluralism 'subverts liberal moralities that accord a unique primacy to some good, such as negative liberty or personal autonomy'.⁷⁷ Negative liberty is however not merely a good, but is also the means of choosing between goods. Thus, we can agree that ways of life give meaning to individual lives, whilst recognising that in a world of plural ways of life, liberty is not just another value, but is one that is necessary to allow for a degree of freedom to choose between different forms.

⁷⁵ Gray, *Endgames*, p. 60.

⁷⁶ Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, p. 1.

⁷⁷ John Gray, 'Where Pluralists and Liberals Part Company', in Maria Baghramian and Attracta Ingram (eds.) *Pluralism: the Philosophy and Politics of Diversity* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 85 – 102 at 87.

Despite erroneous criticisms to the contrary⁷⁸, Gray does not claim that ways of life cannot be compared; his point is rather that there is no uniquely rational way of so doing: 'They can be compared endlessly – but they cannot be compared with one another in overall value'.⁷⁹ Thus we can, for example, 'judge the life of a crack addict to be a poorer human life than that of either a carer in a leprosarium or judicious *bon viveur* without being able to rank the carer's against the hedonist's'.⁸⁰ If this is so, then a degree of individual liberty becomes a pre-requisite for any human life in which such choices are available. This is I think especially the case if, like Gray, we hold strong value pluralism to be true. Rorty has recently argued for a form of strong value pluralism in a defence of what he calls 'polytheism', the view that 'there is no actual or possible object of knowledge that would permit you to commensurate and rank all human needs'.⁸¹ If he and Gray are correct, and there is no uniquely rational or best way to choose between, for example, the life of carer and that of the *bon viveur*, then it can be argued that it should fall to individuals to make such choices for themselves.

We might then say that only if people are wedded to a single way of life is it legitimate to claim that individual liberty is of lesser importance than for example social stability. But there is a further point, which is that individuals ought to have the freedom to express (or withhold) such identification. As Rorty puts it in respect to the call for the preservation of 'cultural identity',

The value of free discussion of possible changes by participants in a culture should always take precedence over the value of preserving

⁷⁸ Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 265.

⁷⁹ Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, pp. 41 – 42.

⁸⁰ Gray, 'Where Pluralists and Liberals Part Company', p. 94.

⁸¹ Rorty, 'Pragmatism and Romantic Polytheism', p. 23. Elsewhere, he calls this position 'philosophical pluralism'. Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 268. I will take up Rorty's discussion of incommensurability in chapter 7.

cultural identity. Without such discussion, nobody will ever know which cultural traditions are excuses for the strong to oppress the weak and which are traditions that even the weak would, given the option, prefer to preserve.⁸²

To support his claim for the importance of individual liberties, Rorty suggests that people prefer such liberties whenever they are given the choice in the matter. He argues that countries that have experienced liberal rights and freedoms have liked them and sought to maintain them. 'No country has tried them and willingly given them up, any more than any patient whose headaches have been relieved by aspirin has ever decided to cease using it'.⁸³ Given free choice, people like, among other things, freedom of speech, to worship (or not) the religion of one's choice, and freedom of participation in the social and political activities of one's own choosing.

Gray argues that values, and therefore principles, are the product of particular forms of life, and cannot claim validity beyond the cultures that have come to value them. This applies centrally to the liberal notion of individual rights. Gray objects for example to the classical liberal notion of negative liberty that 'its content is radically indeterminate'.⁸⁴ Liberal rights, like any other value, only make sense within the context of a particular set of practices. Communities have definite views about the good life, and will by definition, and contrary to the claims of liberal theory, not be neutral with respect to the good.

⁸² Richard Rorty, 'The Communitarian Impulse', *Colorado College Studies* 32 (1999), pp. 55 – 61 at 60.

⁸³ Richard Rorty, 'Response to Randall Peerenboom', *Philosophy East and West* 50.1 (2000), pp. 90 – 91 at 90.

⁸⁴ John Gray, *Beyond the New Right: Markets, Government and the Common Environment* (London: Routledge. 1993), p. 78.

Thus, as he writes: 'The right can never be prior to the good. Without the content that can be given it only by a conception of the good, the right is empty.'⁸⁵

With all of this, I think Rorty can agree. As we have seen, he certainly dismisses the idea that values exist independently of human practices; like principles, they are summaries of contingent practices, and take on substance against a background of such practices. So he would agree with Gray's view that values are 'radically indeterminate', insofar as this means they take on substance only in the context of practice. In asserting the priority of democracy to philosophy, and the need for a political liberalism which recognises nothing over and above free agreement, he would object to the idea that principles, even liberal principles, stand apart from practice. This is to say that he does not hold to the view that rights, in Ronald Dworkin's term, 'trump' every other consideration, since rights are not free standing, existing outside of public debate; he writes for example that in the ideal liberal society, one of the questions of discussion in public affairs will concern 'how to balance the needs for peace, wealth, and freedom when conditions require that one of these goals be sacrificed to one of the others'.⁸⁶ This however requires that public discussion be free and open, something that is secured not by reading off a determinate list of liberal freedoms that somehow stands apart from practice (a view which Gray criticizes as 'legalism'), but by the sort of concrete freedoms and opportunities that Rorty takes to be provided by liberal polities: freedom of the press, free universities, etc.

If there is a single form of life that liberals are said to value above all others, it is the autonomous life, which is further said to be held to be of universal value. Liberalism is

⁸⁵ Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*, p. 19.

⁸⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 85.

thus held to inflate one particular virtue, that of the self-chosen, autonomous life, to the level of the universal condition; it might for example be objected to my claim (on page 167) that liberalism is not premised on a view of the ultimate source of value that this is contradicted by the liberal belief in free and equal human beings. This point is taken up in reference to Rorty by Jonny Steinberg, who argues that Rorty's account contains its own, very thick, view of the good.⁸⁷ Rorty's liberalism depends, he says, on a view that all human life should be one of self-creation, a view which Steinberg counters by asserting that there is no reason to think this is so.

This criticism rests, I suggest, on running together the notion of the autonomous life as one that is universally valuable, and the concern to provide space for those who wish to turn away from the precepts and practices of the form of life to which they belong. For Rorty, the liberal polity can help make people autonomous by providing the material conditions (peace, education, security, leisure) to enable more and more people to strive for it. But autonomy is not a condition that he thinks the state should enforce. 'The desire to be autonomous is', he writes, 'not relevant to the liberal's desire to avoid cruelty and pain'.⁸⁸ He thus distinguishes between making people autonomous, and providing the conditions in which they can become autonomous if they so wish, arguing that while only a few will ever seek an autonomous life, the option should be available. Writing of Alasdair MacIntyre's dismissive view of the character-types brought about by liberal democracy, Rorty responds by saying:

I would welcome a culture dominated by [in MacIntyre's phrase] "the Rich Aesthete, the Manager, and the Therapist" so long as *everybody* who

⁸⁷ Steinberg writes that 'There is a thick, value-laden anthropology at the bottom of Rorty's liberalism'. Steinberg, *Post-Enlightenment Philosophy and Liberal Universalism*, p. 193.

⁸⁸ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 65.

wants to get to be an aesthete (and, if not rich, as comfortably off as most – as rich as the Managers can manage, guided by Rawls's Difference Principle).⁸⁹

This is however not to say that the autonomous life is one which each individual *should* want. Rorty writes that one of the aims of the ideal liberal society is to 'equalize opportunities for self-creation and then leave people alone to use, *or neglect*, their opportunities'.⁹⁰ Clearly, liberal institutions help foster the conditions which afford people the freedoms and opportunities to seek autonomy, but it is not part of the state's role to make them autonomous, for example by compulsory inculcation of autonomy.⁹¹

Steinberg gives his claim an interesting twist, first because unlike most commentators he thinks Rorty a 'liberal universalist',⁹² but also because he thinks the liberal commitment to autonomy depends upon an Aristotelian functionalist account of human capacities. Steinberg writes that Rorty's 'commitment to liberal forms of life is animated – despite his claims to the contrary – by a revised conception of Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, combined with a Romantic thesis on [sic] the irreducibility of each human individual'.⁹³ However, he does not specify in detail what he means by describing Rorty's view as an Aristotelian one. The idea that there are ends for humans *qua* human that are determined by reason or nature are, for reasons given throughout the present thesis, ones that Rorty emphatically rejects. The point of liberal institutions is that they assume that individual

⁸⁹ Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 159, emphasis in original.

⁹⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 85, emphasis added.

⁹¹ An idea that Brian Barry notes is strange to the point of contradiction. Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 120. Barry is clear that 'liberals are not committed to the attempt to eradicate all traditional ways of life in order to further some ideal of free-floating personal autonomy'. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁹² See chapter 8.

⁹³ Steinberg, *Post-Enlightenment Philosophy and Liberal Universalism*, p. 3.

purposes are multifarious, and thus seek to allow for co-existence between holders of different views of the good.

Returning to Gray, he presents his proposal for a *modus vivendi* as continuing down the path that Rorty has opened up. In his paper 'Where Pluralists and Liberals Part Company', he argues that 'The fact of reasonable divergencies in judgements of the relative importance of the various ingredients of the human good undermines all liberal moralities'.⁹⁴ But, as he says in the more recent *Two Faces of Liberalism*, this is not always the case. If individuals belong to many different ways of life, and if there is indeed no uniquely rational way to choose between them, then individual liberty in this non-perfectionist sense is, I suggest, something that Gray is in fact as committed to as Rorty. Gray should, I think, be happy with this similarity if it is seen, further, that liberalism does not entail autonomy, and that it is, as Rorty accepts, 'merely one form of life among others'.⁹⁵ Rorty also claims that it is nevertheless 'the best form of political life yet invented'. Gray would probably object to the 'American chauvinism'⁹⁶ exhibited in this claim but, given that liberalism allows for the importance of individual choice in a world marked by people who belong, as he says, to many different forms of life, many of which are in turn incommensurable, he should not, I suggest, demure from the substance of Rorty's claim.

In sum, in this chapter I have sought to explain and defend Rorty's view of political liberalism. I argued first against the widespread view that Rorty abandons any notion of justification. This view is a mistaken inference from two premises that Rorty does hold, first that justification is necessarily relative to an audience, and second that active

⁹⁴ Gray, 'Where Pluralists and Liberals Part Company', p. 98.

⁹⁵ Rorty, *Truth, Politics, and 'Post-Modernism'*, p. 49; quoting Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake*, p. 177.

⁹⁶ Rorty, *Truth, Politics, and 'Post-Modernism'*, p. 48.

justification is only required when our beliefs and practices are called into question through reasonable challenge. These have seemed to many to mean that Rorty either abandons justification in its entirety, or reduces it to a matter of asserting 'that's the way we do things around here'. Both claims are mistaken. Far from abandoning justification, the practices of reason-giving and seeking justification amongst one's peers are central for Rorty, but it is, as is consistent with his 'anti-authoritarianism', solely a matter of securing the consensus of a community of inquirers. The chapter then argued that Rorty's defence of political liberalism is similarly contextual. Liberalism provides a way of adjudicating between and accommodating holders of different conceptions of the good in a way that can be said to be fair. Liberalism can be defended by invidious comparison, by pointing out that liberalism has so far been better at such accommodation than any other form of life. In this way, Rorty joins with other liberals, and his position differs from theirs only to the extent that he is prepared to recognise the particular, ethnocentric, origin of liberalism. This last claim impacts, as we will see in chapter 6, on Rorty's view of the role and purpose of political theory.

Chapter Six

Interpretation and political theory

It was argued in chapter 5 that justification is important for Rorty, but in particular contexts in response to particular challenges and by reference to particular needs and values. It was then argued that Rorty thinks that liberalism can be justified pragmatically, by showing that it is the fairest way to bring people together who hold diverse views of the good life. In this chapter, political liberalism is taken up in a discussion of the task of the political theorist. For Rorty, political theorists ought to be concerned not with justifying liberal democracy, but rather with an articulation of the practice of liberal societies. The task for the theorist is an interpretive one, in which the theorist draws attention to the ways in which the practices of those societies fail to live up to their self-image. In this chapter this approach is defended against two objections. The first is that it is ineffective. Richard J. Bernstein for example argues that Rorty's account cannot help us choose between two incompatible but consistent interpretations of liberal principles. It is argued that this view is mistaken, showing how for Rorty, political theory is inescapably creative. The second objection is that it does not allow for meaningful criticism of current practices. Rorty claims that an ironic culture could be 'every bit as self critical and every bit as devoted to human equality as our own familiar, and still metaphysical, liberal culture – if not more so'.¹ Christopher Norris however denies this will be the case, writing of 'Rorty's conservative liberalism' which has ruled out any

¹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 87.

possibility of rationalist, or radical, critique of the self-image of the day.² Against this view, it is argued that Rorty's anti-foundationalism does not, as has been suggested in previous chapters, entail uncritical or unreflective endorsement of current values and practices. Finally, Rorty's view of political theory is compared with Michael Walzer's account of 'internal social criticism'. Walzer's account suggests that social critics should draw on the 'shared understandings' of their societies in order to suggest reform and improvement, a position which is very similar to Rorty's view. Walzer however presents his account as an alternative to liberal political thought. Against this understanding, I argue that Rorty is correct to see this account as similar to that of, amongst others, John Rawls, and that Walzer's approach is not an alternative to Rawls's but is substantially the same.

13. Liberalism, interpretivism, and creativity

13.1 Interpretation and creation

Justification for Rorty is not a matter of justifying ourselves from first principles, but rather one of reason giving amongst people who already inhabit what Bernard Williams calls the 'moral world'. Consistent with this position, Rorty sees the task of political theorists in liberal societies as not to justify liberalism from the ground up, but to draw attention to failures of liberal societies to live up to liberal ideals. Liberals should protest 'in the name of

² Christopher Norris, *The Contest of Faculties: Philosophy and Theory After Deconstruction* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 153.

society itself against those aspects of the society which are unfaithful to its own self-image'.³

Liberal philosophers can do this by, for example, summarizing intuitions about the right thing to do as general principles, and then applying these principles to criticise the practice of liberal societies. What they cannot do is show that these generalisations can be shown to be true independently of our particular intuitions.

Although Rorty's principal philosophical heroes are John Dewey and Donald Davidson, John Rawls is a significant influence on his political writings. Rorty views *A Theory of Justice*, with its emphasis on the importance of 'reflective equilibrium', as marking a major break away from the epistemological concerns of moral philosophy. For Rorty, 'Rawls's willingness to adopt "reflective equilibrium" rather than "conceptual analysis" as a methodological watchword sets him apart from the epistemologically orientated moral philosophy that was dominant prior to the appearance of *A Theory of Justice*'.⁴ Reflective equilibrium is holist. There is no 'natural order or reasons' for conversation to follow, necessary truths to be identified or respected, or intrinsic nature of the self or human nature to be taken into account in decision-making. It makes no reference to epistemological notions such as necessary truths or privileged representations, emphasising instead the views of individuals.

Like Rorty, Rawls rejects the idea of deriving principles of justice from self-evident principles. As he puts it, a 'conception of justice cannot be deduced from self-evident premises or conditions on principles; instead, its justification is a matter of the mutual

³ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 60. See also Richard Rorty, 'Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality', in Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, pp. 167 – 185.

⁴ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 186 n. 29.

support of many considerations, of everything fitting together into one coherent view'.⁵ This process of securing coherence is obtained through reflective equilibrium, in which different moral beliefs are tested against each other, intuitions tested against principles and conversely, revising them in order to secure coherence. Rawls speaks of 'going back and forth, sometimes altering the conditions of the contractual circumstances, at others withdrawing our judgements and conforming them to principle'.⁶ Those intuitions are themselves open to challenge and revision, but not by reference to necessary principles that stand behind particular intuitions.⁷ The task for the liberal theorist is to show up the difference between professed belief and practice, and to draw on the one to reform the other. Similarly, for Rorty, 'political theory should view itself as suggestions for future action emerging out of recent historical experience'.⁸ Progress is secured by playing parts of a tradition off against other parts, not seeking to overcome that traditional as a whole.

There is however an ambiguity as to exactly what liberal convictions and intuitions are, and questions to be asked about the claim that they are central to Western culture. Standards of worth are provided by our, liberal, standards, but what happens if two incompatible but equally consistent interpretations of those standards can be given? For Richard Bernstein, Rorty 'ignores the *historical fact* that we are confronted with conflicting and incompatible

⁵ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁷ David Owen has distinguished Rorty's political liberalism, which Owen believes grows out of the shared understandings of a particular community, from that of Rawls, which is said to be a response to pluralism. Owen, *Nietzsche, Politics and Modernity: A Critique of Liberal Reason* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), p. 7. Although Owen takes these to be two separate accounts of political liberalism, I will suggest below that they both grow out of same concern, namely to articulate a notion of freedom and toleration that grows out of, and can deal fairly with, the fact of pluralism.

⁸ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 272.

practices – even in so-called liberal democracy'.⁹ Rorty is further held to pass over important differences between liberal theorists. Bernstein goes on to argue that Rorty is concerned exclusively with the foundations of liberalism, and passes over the many diverse and sometimes incompatible liberal positions on specific substantive issues: 'Rorty simply speaks globally about "liberal democracy" without ever unpacking what it involves or doing justice to the enormous historical controversy about what liberal democracy is or ought to be'.¹⁰ Given this blind spot, Rorty's approach is, Bernstein claims, ineffective since it does not point in any particular direction. This point is given specific content by Ian Shapiro, who chides Rorty for his claim that America betrayed its highest ideals by fighting the Vietnam war, since, he argues, a plausible case could be made in Rorty's own terms for saying those ideals required the war to be fought and won.¹¹ By denying that any description is any truer than any other, Rorty seems to offer nothing but an endless series of accounts, with no way to judge their respective value.

There is however a potentially more fundamental difficulty for Rorty, for not only is there a question of the form of liberalism to which Rorty subscribes, but there is also the question of whether his account leads to liberalism at all. This point has been urged against liberals in general by John Gray, who draws attention to the difference between the hegemony liberalism has secured within academia, and its irrelevance beyond.¹² Matthew Festenstein concurs, to the extent that he believes that 'it is not clear what values or principles constitute

⁹ Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, p. 241, emphasis in original.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 238.

¹¹ Shapiro, *Political Criticism*, p. 45.

¹² See in particular Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake*.

the liberalism he [Rorty] wishes to defend, or why any particular set of values should be seen as an appropriate interpretation of “North Atlantic” intuitions'.¹³

This latter point can, I think, be addressed fairly briefly. Rorty is clear that the values and principles that he takes to characterise the public culture of the liberal democracies are contested, and is emphatic that he is engaging in a creative enterprise when drawing on the ideals latent in modern society. He writes:

Stories about what a nation has been and should try to be are not attempts at accurate representation, but rather attempts to forge a moral identity. The argument between Left and Right about which episodes in our history we Americans should pride ourselves on will never be a contest between a true and a false account of our country's history and its identity. It is better described as an argument about which hopes to allow ourselves and which to forgo.¹⁴

He recognises that ‘shared understandings’ do not exclusively underwrite liberalism, and that different and conflicting stories can be told using the resources provided by tradition. He is also clear that values and practices form the background to our lives, but that they do not do so in any deterministic way. Konstantin Kolenda is somewhat misleading when he writes that

¹³ Festenstein, *Pragmatism and Political Theory*, pp. 128 – 129. See also Glen Newey, *After Politics: the rejection of politics in contemporary liberal philosophy* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), p. 191. Critics have similarly suggested that Walzer uses Western liberal shared understandings rather than as he claims North American ones. See Joseph Carens, ‘Complex Justice, Cultural Difference, and Political Community’, in David Miller and Michael Walzer (eds.) *Pluralism, Justice, and Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 45 – 66.

¹⁴ Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, pp. 13 – 14.

for Rorty, 'attempts to decide what one ought to do must start with the awareness of the beliefs, ideals and guidelines embedded in [one's] tradition',¹⁵ for awareness of the beliefs, ideals and guidelines embedded in one's tradition is not for many people a conscious process.¹⁶ Kolenda's implicit assumption, that there is an exhaustive, agreed upon set of such things which is readily and fully articulated, is one that Rorty regards as false: he writes that a 'perfected society will not live up to a pre-existent standard, but will be an artistic achievement, produced by the same long and difficult process of trial and error as is required by any other creative effort'.¹⁷ He can therefore agree with Shapiro that it is consistent with American values to claim that America should have fought the Vietnam War, and that that is why there needs to be a creative, interpretive enterprise that seek to use these traditions in order to make the best of them. A similar response can be offered to Festenstein: there is no clear and unambiguous set of values or principles that constitute American liberalism, and the purpose of writing is to commend some of them over others.

13.2 Contested interpretations: liberalism versus multiculturalism

Turning to the issue of divergent traditions *within* liberalism, if we follow Rorty and view the task of the political theorist to be to make the practice of liberal society cohere better with its principles, one might say that he has nothing much to tell us, since current debates about

¹⁵ Konstantin Kolenda, *Rorty's Humanistic Pragmatism: Philosophy Democratized*. (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1990), p. 45.

¹⁶ In saying this, Rorty makes a different claim to both Michael Oakeshott and Alasdair MacIntyre, both of who write of the need to learn morality in a form of apprenticeship. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (London: Duckworth, 1990), pp. 60 – 66; in the essay 'Political education' Oakeshott argues that we have to be acculturated and educated into a tradition. Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and other essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), pp. 43 – 69.

¹⁷ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 270.

multiculturalism demonstrate that at least two very different interpretations can plausibly be given of liberal principles. Will Kymlicka and James Tully are both interesting in this regard because, unlike for example Iris Marion Young, they both claim to be liberals. If they are correct to say this, it means that on Rorty's own account there is a plurality of interpretations of a community, and therefore an important – and, insofar as Rorty's discussion focuses at the level of 'we liberals', unanswered – question of how it is possible to decide between these competing conceptions of liberalism.

Several commentators have asked Rorty to provide greater substance to his own understanding of liberalism, in particular as to what counts as the cruelty to which liberals are opposed. Rorty is reluctant to do so because, as I have suggested in chapter 2, his concern is to leave open what counts as cruelty. However, we might suggest that he could give a thicker or richer description of liberalism if he drew on the values that he takes to characterise Western societies. In so doing, he might be able to go on to say, with for example Brian Barry, that multiculturalists like Tully and Kymlicka, despite their claims, are not in fact liberals.¹⁸

However, this approach would be unsatisfactory. For not only do both Kymlicka and Tully claim to be liberals, but claim that by seeking legal recognition for cultural identity, they are being true to liberalism in a world marked by cultural diversity. In Tully's words, their arguments are premised on 'a third-generation norm of legitimacy, respect for reasonable cultural diversity, which needs to be considered on a par with the norms of freedom and

¹⁸ Barry declares that Kymlicka, like Walzer, 'is quite clearly not a liberal'. Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 137.

equality, and so to modify policies of “free and equal treatment” accordingly.¹⁹ Kymlicka believes that multiculturalism is now central to liberal discourse, and that what he calls ‘liberal culturalism’ has become so dominant in the field that ‘most debates are about how to develop and refine the liberal culturalist position, rather than to accept it in the first place’.²⁰ If true, he could go on to claim, with some justification, that he, not Barry, has the stronger claim to be a liberal.

Against the sometimes acrimonious exchange between liberals and multiculturalists, Rorty’s catholic view of who qualifies as a liberal is I think refreshing. I suspect that he would accept that liberal egalitarianism and liberal multiculturalism can both fairly be seen as two aspects of a single tradition.²¹ He would I think further claim that the difference between them is a matter of degree, not of kind.

One way to support this view is to consider a distinction drawn by Stanley Fish between what he calls ‘strong multiculturalism’ and ‘boutique multiculturalism’. Boutique multiculturalists value cultural diversity at a superficial level. They may like rap music or ethnic cuisine, and accept the strength of opinion on both sides of the abortion debate. But they will oppose affirmative action, an Afro-centrist university curriculum, and anti-abortionists who seek to block the entrance to clinics. That is, ‘the boutique multiculturalist

¹⁹ Tully, ‘The Illiberal Liberal’, p. 102.

²⁰ Quoted in Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 6.

²¹ If he did that, he would not be alone, but would be in agreement with, amongst others, Gray, for whom the controversy about multiculturalism is a ‘trifling local debate on American national identity that has occupied many in the USA’. John Gray, ‘Pluralism and Toleration in Contemporary Political Philosophy’, in Rodney Barker (ed.), *Political Ideas and Political Action* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), pp. 101 – 111 at 103. One does not have to accept this dismissive view of the debate to agree with Gray that the debate can seem unimportant, and that the differences between the two sides is not as great as it may appear in Anglophone politics departments.

resists the force of the culture he appreciates at precisely the point at which it matters most to its strongly committed members'.²² This is because at bottom, the boutique multiculturalist thinks that cultural identity is superficial, and secondary to the equal value of human beings as human beings. In contrast, strong multiculturalism, of which Charles Taylor's 'politics of difference' is said by Fish to be an instance, is multiculturalism that 'values difference in and for itself rather than as a manifestation of something more basically constitutive'.²³

However, when faced with a culture that is itself intolerant, such as one whose members would kill Salman Rushdie if they got the chance, the strong multiculturalist faces a dilemma: either he tolerates the intolerance of that culture, in which case he negates tolerance, or he condemns it whereupon, like the boutique multiculturalist, he fails to accord it respect at the point where it matters most. Fish concludes from this that the difference between these forms of multiculturalism is simply one of degree, because at some point all multiculturalists will concede the need to stamp out the distinctiveness of some culture since the alternative, of going all the way with one culture and allowing all of its intolerances, is similarly to endorse intolerance. Characteristically, he concludes that multiculturalism doesn't exist: as the attempt to recognise and tolerate all cultures, 'no one could possibly *be* a multiculturalist in any interesting and coherent sense'.²⁴

Fish's discussion is helpful, because it illustrates that the liberal-multiculturalist debate should be seen within a broader (though specific) debate about the direction of public policy in the

²² Fish, *The Trouble With Principle*, p. 57.

²³ Ibid., p. 60.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 63, emphasis in original.

ethnically and culturally diverse liberal democracies. In the sense of recognising multiculturalism as a demographic fact, everyone is a multiculturalist. At some point moreover, everyone stops being a multiculturalist. Taylor for example is emphatic that Rushdie should be protected against his would-be killers, and even when, as in the writings of Chandran Kukathas, multiculturalism is taken to what are for many absurd limits, those limits exist. Thus whilst Kukathas accepts that his position 'leaves many vulnerable people, including children, at the mercy of their groups' and that 'a liberal order' must also tolerate female genital mutilation and ritual scarring, he denies that 'parents are entitled to kill their children'.²⁵

Correspondingly, it is not the case that liberal egalitarians oppose all manifestations of multiculturalism. For all his criticisms, Barry allows for a degree of multiculturalism in a way that violates his own claims for universalism. His position is that '[l]iberal tolerance ... extends to the internal affairs of illiberal groups, provided that they stay within the framework of liberal laws. What is not up for grabs, however, is that framework itself'.²⁶ However, he also allows for what he calls 'a pragmatic case for exemptions', permitting Sikhs exemption from motorcycle helmet regulations, and Jewish and Muslim butchers from humane slaughter requirements. In response to the call for consistency in the law by abolishing these anomalies, Barry responds that 'surely ... it is preferable to give up on consistency than abandon the advantages of the present legislation'.²⁷ In allowing for

²⁵ Chandran Kukathas, 'The Life of Brian, or Now for Something Completely Difference-Blind', in Paul Kelly (ed.) *Multiculturalism Reconsidered: Culture and Equality and its Critics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), pp. 184 – 203 at 197.

²⁶ Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 131.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 51. Barry takes the principled liberal position to be that motorcycle helmet laws 'mean that devout Sikhs have to find an alternative means of transport'. Brian Barry, 'Political Theory, Old and

pragmatic exemptions, he tacitly concedes Fish's point that the real issue is at bottom not to provide a formula that will reconcile all culturalist claims, but what Taylor calls 'inspired adhoccery', which Fish glosses as the need 'to figure out a way for *these* differences to occupy the civic and political space of *this* community without coming to blows'.²⁸ Barry thinks such pragmatic solutions to be the exception that proves the rule, assuring his readers that they mark 'not the thick end of the wedge – they are the wedge itself'.²⁹ However, there is no reason to think this, especially if, as he says, the test of the law is that 'rescinding the existing exemptions would over all do more harm than good'.³⁰ For what if granting more exemptions does more good than harm? More generally, it is clear that liberalism does not point unambiguously in any one direction. Although Barry sees liberalism and multiculturalism as antithetical, other liberals take a different view. Samuel Freeman for example sees liberalism as compatible with certain multiculturalist proposals. In contrast, Clare Chambers thinks that by granting tolerance to the internal practices of illiberal groups, Barry in fact concedes too much to the multiculturalists.³¹

13.3 The necessity of argument

New', in Robert E. Goodin and Hans-Dieter Klingemann (eds.) *A New Handbook of Political Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) pp. 531 – 548 at 540.

²⁸ Fish, *The Trouble With Principle*, p. 63, emphasis in original.

²⁹ Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 51.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Samuel Freeman, 'Liberalism and the Accommodation of Group Claims' (pp.18 – 30); Clare Chambers, 'All Must Have Prizes: The Liberal Case for Interference in Cultural Practices (pp. 151 – 173), in Paul Kelly (ed.) *Multiculturalism Reconsidered: Culture and Equality and its Critics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002).

This is to say that Rorty's claim is not that liberal principles point unambiguously in one direction. Both liberals and multiculturalists can be seen legitimately to appeal to the values and needs of their societies. Rorty can therefore agree with Barry when he says that the point is 'not who can claim *most* of the tradition but who can claim the *best* of it'.³² For him as much as for Barry, arguments have to be had about how to reform and extend its practices, and about how to commend one interpretation over another. Political theory in Rorty's formulation is not the crude attempt simply to articulate the 'reality' of a tradition but, as I have said, an interpretive, constructive activity, one which involves argument and debate. He writes that 'there is no answer to a redescription save a re-re-redescription. Since there is nothing beyond vocabularies which serves as a criterion of choice between them, criticism is a matter of looking on this picture and on that, not of comparing both pictures with the original'.³³

Indeed, it is only if one held that, by articulating a tradition, one could produce a single interpretation would one think otherwise. Thus, Rorty would not regard the following claim, made by Michel Rosenfeld, as a criticism. Rosenfeld writes: 'Assuming that different interpretations of the same law would lead to different practical consequences, can recourse to pragmatism determine which of the available alternatives ought to be pursued?'.³⁴ Rorty's response would be to say that of course it cannot. Pragmatism does not 'determine' anything; the pursuit of an algorithm that can be used to resolve such disputes is precisely what pragmatism rejects. (Indeed, this latter type of question is the only one to which Rorty

³² Barry, *Liberty and Justice*, p.18, emphasis in original.

³³ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 80.

³⁴ Michel Rosenfeld, 'Pragmatism, Pluralism and Legal Interpretation: Posner's and Rorty's Justice without Metaphysics Meets Hate Speech', in Alan Malachowski (ed.) *Rorty: Sage Masters of Modern Social Thought, volume 4* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), pp. 277 – 294 at 278.

believes pragmatism has anything to contribute: he writes that 'On my view, pragmatism bites other philosophies, but not social problems as such.³⁵')

Rorty writes that pragmatists such as himself 'claim no authority for our premises save the assent we hope they will gain from our audience'.³⁶ The way to oppose multiculturalism, and the way that he adopts, is argument, to show that it is of no help in securing those goals that liberals think important. Stuart E. Rosenbaum seeks to defend Rorty by arguing, in response to Bernstein's claim that we need some way to sort out better and worse arguments, that 'There is no way to "hammer out" a better or a worse'.³⁷ This is however a mistake. Hammering out, through argument, is precisely what Rorty thinks should be done. In the case of multiculturalism, it is an argument in which Rorty's views are moreover very similar to Barry's. Rorty thinks of multiculturalism as 'a morality of live-and-let-live, a politics of side-by-side development in which members of distinct cultures preserve and protect their own culture against the incursions of other cultures'.³⁸ By way of alternative, Rorty supports Mill's view of liberalism as one of 'richest diversity', and claims to follow Walt Whitman in seeking competition and argument between different ways of life. He denies that liberals need concern themselves with 'identity' in order to give meaning to individual freedom, and rejects the need for a 'third-generation norm of legitimacy of respect for cultural diversity' by claiming, against writers like Tully, that cultural questions are quite separate from economic questions.³⁹ Liberals should, Rorty argues, be concerned with human similarities, not cultural differences. They should attend to the factors that remain the same cross-culturally, such as

³⁵ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 213.

³⁶ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 173.

³⁷ Stuart E. Rosenbaum, 'Rortian Rationality', *Metaphilosophy* 17 (1986), pp. 93 – 101 at 98.

³⁸ Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, p. 24.

³⁹ Richard Rorty, Derek Nystrom and Kent Puckett, *Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies: A Conversation with Richard Rorty* (Charlottesville, Va.: Prickly Pear Pamphlets, 1998), p. 44.

the concern to avoid pain and humiliation, concern for the one's family, and hopes for the future:

These ways of emphasising commonality rather than difference have little to do with "cultural recognition." They have to do with experiences shared by members of all cultures and all historically epochs, and which remain pretty much the same despite cultural change.⁴⁰

He believes that multiculturalists conflate 'ethnicity' and 'stigma', thinking that the way to overcome stigma is to 'recognise' the cultural identity of stigmatised groups.⁴¹ This he rejects, thinking it sufficient to pursue a politics of difference-blind individualism, which treats others not as members of a particular culture but as fellow human beings. Farid Abdel-Nour has criticised Rorty on this point, for what he thinks of as his failure to engage with 'the other's alterity' and his 'propensity towards other-disregard'.⁴² As an observation rather than a criticism this is correct, for Rorty believes that liberals need pay no heed to the sources of identity. The question though is whether this is a failing. Rorty joins Barry in thinking that not only is concern with the recognition of identity something that has no significance for liberal politics, but that it stands in the way of pursuing social and economic egalitarianism, both by diverting attention away from that concern and by destroying the conditions of solidarity necessary to support it.⁴³ Rorty also suggests that the Right benefits by having the

⁴⁰ Richard Rorty, 'Is "Cultural Recognition" a Useful Concept for Leftist Politics?'. *Critical Horizons* 1.1 (2000), pp. 7 – 20 at 11.

⁴¹ Rorty et al, *Against Bosses, Against Oligarchs*, p. 24.

⁴² Farid Abdel-Nour, 'Liberalism and Ethnocentrism', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 8 (2000), pp. 207 – 226 at 221, 224.

⁴³ Barry, *Culture and Equality*, pp. 71 – 88, 325.

Left talk about culture rather than money, since this would detract from the concern with egalitarianism.⁴⁴

It is then quite consistent with the Rorty's position to recognise that the debate between multiculturalists like Tully and Kymlicka and liberal egalitarians like Barry cannot be finally resolved, and to accept further that arguments such as Barry's (and his own) against multiculturalism are not decisive. Political theory, he insists, 'should view itself as suggestions for future action emerging out of recent historical experience, rather than attempting to legitimate the outcome of that experience by reference to something ahistorical'.⁴⁵ Writers like Tully can plausibly claim to be accommodating pluralism in a more consistent way than difference-blind liberal individualism, and pull up both Barry and Rorty on this point. When Rorty writes that 'the only homogenization which the liberal tradition requires is an agreement among groups to cooperate with one another in support of institutions which are dedicated to providing room for as much pluralism as possible',⁴⁶ this is in substance the same as Barry's claim (discussed in chapter 5) that liberalism is the fairest way to adjudicate conflicts. Both deny that we need to see people as engaged in any common substantive endeavour, or as united in any goal beyond mutual respect for potentially very different projects. Tully can respond though that 'respect' in this sense fails to accord proper respect to individuals, and Honi Haber that this position is incompatible with pluralism because it requires an 'assimilation of otherness'.⁴⁷ Conversely, Barry's central point is his conviction that the policies of the multiculturalists, both proposed and

⁴⁴ Rorty et al, *Against Bosses, Against Oligarchs*, pp. 31 – 32, 45.

⁴⁵ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 272.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

⁴⁷ Haber, *Beyond Postmodern Politics*, p. 69.

intimated, are ‘on balance, more likely to do harm than good’.⁴⁸ But, as Rorty readily accepts, such claims cannot be conclusive, and pointing to our shared traditions and practices is not in itself a way to resolve the conflicts that occur within them.

14. Rorty and radicalism

14.1 *The relationship between philosophy and politics*

Although one might concede that Rorty’s approach to political theory is not vacuous, it might be maintained that it is inherently conservative, and that it rules out the possibility of *radicalism*. Many see this view as supported by Rorty’s claim that in his ideal liberal society, the distinction between reformer and revolutionary is abolished,⁴⁹ and his view that theorists cannot appeal over the heads of the beliefs and practices of human beings to reality or to ‘the facts’. His view of political theory is furthermore one that does not satisfy those who are critical of liberal societies *as* liberal societies since, it is said, it can only draw on the standards internal to a particular society, and cannot throw those standards into question altogether.

Rorty’s influence is such that he is widely discussed outside of philosophy departments. Thus his political views have been commented on by those with no knowledge of, or interest in, his philosophical views. Some find his views congenial.⁵⁰ Equally, since Rorty’s politics are

⁴⁸ Brian Barry, ‘Second Thoughts – and Some First Thoughts Revived’, in Paul Kelly (ed.) *Multiculturalism Reconsidered* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2002), pp. 204 – 238 at 205.

⁴⁹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 60.

⁵⁰ See for example Jack Nichols’s review of *Achieving Our Country*, at <http://gaytoday.badpuppy.com/garchive/reviews/010499re.htm> (viewed 29 July 2003).

'pretty much those of Hubert Humphrey',⁵¹ those to his left will certainly not find him radical enough.⁵² At this level, discussion is for the most part political, as to the worth or otherwise of a specific proposal or policy.

I will not dwell on these differences because, important as they are, my concern is rather the connection (if any) between his political and philosophical views. Rorty suggests that there are two main differences dividing him from his radical critics.⁵³ These are first, that the evils of capitalism are not amenable to reform but are integral to liberal societies. Those societies are held to be structurally defective, rather than contingently so, and thus are not open to piecemeal reform. Secondly, that philosophy/theory can reveal these defects, with radicals tending to think of Marxist terminology as an especially useful tool in this process. Criticisms of Rorty, though many, can be said to be variations on these two themes: that he supports what he calls 'bourgeois liberalism' rather than seeking to replace it with something else, and that he denies the critical potential of theory, advocating instead the reformist interpretivist approach discussed above.

Some critics seem to think that there is a one-way causal connection between Rorty's philosophical views and his bourgeois liberal views, and that the one determines the other. The burden of much criticism is correspondingly that his philosophy commits him to conservatism in politics. For some, the rejection of metaphysics in itself means that Rorty is incapable of offering up meaningful social criticism. Justin Cruickshank writes that Rorty's account 'divinises the status quo', since (he claims) issues of social justice necessarily require 'some form of

⁵¹ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 18.

⁵² Frank Lentricchia, 'Rorty's Cultural Conversation', in Alan Malachowski (ed.) *Rorty: Sage Masters of Modern Social Thought, volume 3* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), pp. 363 – 366.

⁵³ Rorty, 'Thugs and Theorists', p. 568.

metaphysical speculation⁵⁴ about the good life and the good society. Some accept Rorty's protestations that he is not a conservative, but think that irrespective of his personal convictions, his philosophical views commit him conservatism in politics. Ronald Lee Jackson argues that what he calls Rorty's cultural relativism is inherently conservative: it 'terminates in a fake objectivity, a set of beliefs indifferent, even hostile, to the possibility of their own improvement (for they do not approximate but *define* rationality, and it is contingent matter whether they do this well or ill)'.⁵⁵ Others believe there is a deliberate link between the two. Cornel West writes that 'Rorty's neopragmatism is, in part, a self-conscious post-philosophical ideological project to promote the basic practices of bourgeois capitalist societies while discouraging philosophical defenses of them'.⁵⁶ For West and others, there is a straight line leading from Rorty's philosophical views to an endorsement of the status quo.

There seem to be three specific and interrelated reasons why this might be the case. First, Rorty is criticised for offering a liberal individualistic account, one which cannot take account of those structural factors that create injustice. This point has been made by Thomas McCarthy, who criticises Rorty's failure to consider anything other than freedom in terms of relations between individual human beings. He writes that Rorty 'nowhere provides a satisfactory analysis of free *encounters* or *political* freedom, for the simple reason that his account of freedom moves almost exclusively at the level of the isolated individual and scarcely thematizes structures of intersubjectivity or institutional arrangements'.⁵⁷ On this account, Rorty lays himself open to the

⁵⁴ Justin Cruickshank, 'From Metaphysics to Pragmatism', pp. 124, 125.

⁵⁵ Ronald Lee Jackson, 'Cultural Imperialism or Benign Relativism? A Putnam – Rorty Debate', *International Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (1988), pp. 383 – 392 at 392, emphasis in original.

⁵⁶ Cornel West, 'The Politics of American Neo-Pragmatism', in John Rajchman and Cornel West (eds.) *Post Analytic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 259 – 275 at 267.

⁵⁷ McCarthy, 'Ironist Theory as a Vocation', p. 648, emphasis in original. The same point is made by Terence Ball, 'Review Symposium on Richard Rorty', *History of the Human Sciences* 3 (1990), p. 103.

charge, made for example by Cruickshank, that he cannot allow for the existence of social and structural inequities such as patriarchy.⁵⁸ Like McCarthy, Cruickshank believes this to be the case because Rorty theorises at the level of individuals, and can allow for no social role in assigning gender roles. In a similar claim, Gideon Calder writes that on Rorty's account:

[...] it simply *cannot* be the case that, say, certain economic interests within society might seek to promulgate self-serving mendacious accounts of the utility of certain commodities, or the effects on the environment of certain factory emissions, or the conditions under which their overseas workforce are employed.⁵⁹

This leads to a second criticism, that Rorty's denial of any extra-societal standard reduces truth and objectivity to 'what we happen to think around here', where what that 'happens' to be is in fact in the interests of the rich and powerful. Rorty accepts that he cannot give content to free and unfree communication. Indeed, insofar as he defines freedom from the distorting effects of power or influence, it is (again) made by reference to our own standards: 'I do not think there is much to be said about what counts as "undistorted" except "the sort you get when you have democratic political institutions and the conditions for making these institutions function'.⁶⁰

It has further been objected that in respect of the claim 'a liberal society is one which is content to call 'true' whatever the upshot of [free and open] encounters turns out to be',⁶¹ Rorty nowhere gives an account of what a free encounter is like, or how it can be distinguished from

⁵⁸ Cruickshank, 'Ethnocentrism, Social Contrast Liberalism and Positivistic-Conservatism', p. 16.

⁵⁹ Calder, *Rorty and Redescription*, pp. 53 – 54, emphasis in original.

⁶⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 84.

⁶¹ Rorty, *Ibid.*, p. 52, emphasis suppressed.

one distorted by wealth or privilege. Many, including some of Rorty's fellow liberals, think that theory can play a much greater role than he will allow in such matters. They argue that it is not sufficient to say that liberal societies ought to live up to their own standards, because this cannot address the issue of how those standards are themselves be influenced by power relations, through for example wealth or political influence.⁶² Some, notably Jürgen Habermas, have sought to address this concern by showing how liberalism would ideally provide the forum for 'domination-free' communication, preserving the distinction between what he calls distorted and undistorted (or ideology-free) communication. Rorty however refuses to join Habermas in this attempt to define the conditions of such communication and, if all that remains is 'conversation' (the word itself taken by some critics to be suggestive of a polite cosy chat) then it can be asked of him whether we can guard against factors such as economic and gender roles that have routinely caused people to be marginalized and excluded from having their voices heard.⁶³ This is exacerbated by Rorty's view that nothing exists prior to its recognition. He accepts that this means that an injustice does not exist until it is recognised as an injustice, and some have inferred that Rorty cannot allow for problems like gender and race, because not only is he concerned only with individuals, but cannot allow for a 'voice of the oppressed' or the 'fact' of oppression.⁶⁴

14.2 The separation of philosophy and politics

⁶² Rebecca Comay, 'Interrupting the Conversation: Notes on Rorty', *Telos* 69 (1986), pp. 119 – 130; Ron Bontekoe, 'Rorty's Pragmatism and the Pursuit of Truth', *International Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1990), pp. 119 – 130.

⁶³ This criticism has been levelled by Henry B. Veatch, 'Deconstruction in Philosophy'.

⁶⁴ Rorty, 'We Antirepresentationalists', p. 41.

In response, I suggest that there is no necessary connection between Rorty's philosophical views and his political views. It is quite consistent to endorse the former whilst rejecting the latter. Rorty himself agrees that there is no firm relationship between his philosophy and his politics; as we have seen, the priority of democracy to philosophy is central to his position. Writers like Bernstein and McCarthy are themselves pragmatists, or are at least sympathetic to pragmatism, and think they can adopt pragmatism without it entailing what they take to be Rorty's conservatism. This point has been advanced by Bjørn Ramberg, who suggests that, although Rorty's personal views are not radical, his pragmatism does not preclude radicalism.⁶⁵ Ramberg constructs an alternative, which he labels 'Radical Rorty', a philosopher with exactly the same metaphysical views as Rorty, but who differs on political questions by retaining 'faith in the possibility of subjecting the roots of our social institutions (radix) to systematic critical scrutiny'.⁶⁶

Ramberg is I think quite correct to say that there is no necessary connection between Rorty's philosophical and political positions. As I have argued throughout this thesis, the philosophical views that he rejects are superfluous to political and moral debate. However, a further point is that it is not the case that Rorty's political views are as conservative as Ramberg and others think. He does not think all is well in contemporary liberal societies, and is highly critical of the practice of American liberalism. At the institutional level, he proposes what he variously calls 'a list of First Projects for the left'⁶⁷ and a 'People's

⁶⁵ Bjørn T. Ramberg, 'Strategies for Radical Rorty ("...but is it progress?")', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* (1993) supplementary volume 19, pp. 223 – 246.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 239.

⁶⁷ Richard Rorty, 'First Projects, Then Principles', in Victor Navasky and Katrina Vanden Heuvel (eds.) *The Best of the Nation* (New York: Nation Books, 2000), pp. 469 – 474.

Charter'.⁶⁸ Top of this list should be 'truly radical reform of campaign financing'⁶⁹ to stop what he calls the 'bribes' paid by the rich to politicians to keep socio-economic redistribution off the political agenda. He further proposes universal health insurance, the financing of primary and secondary education, and dramatically increasing rates of income tax to pay for them.⁷⁰ Thus, Shapiro's claim that 'Rorty does not need to posit any "ideal speech situation" (as Habermas does) because his benign view assumes it exists here and now in contemporary America – a heaven on earth',⁷¹ is doubly mistaken, assuming a strong relation between Rorty's philosophical and political views whilst simultaneously misrepresenting the latter.

Rorty is fully aware of the restrictions that factors such as economics or gender can place upon people attempting to participate in public discourse. Regarding the claim that he cannot even recognise the distortions caused by structural inequalities, Rorty would certainly respond by pointing out that *of course* we are able to recognise such things. Notions like 'distortion' cannot be measured from a view from nowhere, but we can still recognise them when we see them. 'We do this by starting with such obvious differences as that between Socratic dialogue and hypnotic suggestion. We then try to firm up the distinction by dealing with messier cases: brainwashing, media hype, and what Marxists call "false consciousness"'.⁷²

⁶⁸ Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, p. 99.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 149, n. 14.

⁷⁰ see also his endorsement of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* in Rorty, 'We Anti-Representationalists', p. 42, and Richard Rorty, 'Our Increasing Willingness To Let The Rich Take More And More From The Poor', *New York Times*, March 6, 2000.

⁷¹ Shapiro, *Political Criticism*, p. 40.

⁷² Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 48.

His point though is to doubt whether theory has anything special to tell us in pointing up such distinctions. Philosophy certainly has a role to play. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* he writes that philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Dewey should be used to edify, ‘to help their readers, or society as a whole, break free from outworn vocabularies and attitudes, rather than to provide “grounding” for the intuitions and customs of the present’.⁷³ It is not however a privileged role and is, he argues, a role that tends to played more effectively by novelists, journalists, anthropologists and historians.⁷⁴ What matters are political notions, notably freedom of speech, and associated economic and social freedoms. As he puts it, when it comes to politics, the only significant distinction is ‘that between the use of force and the use of persuasion’.⁷⁵ For him, the solution is a practical matter of increasing the status and participation of those individuals and groups who suffer such discrimination, and his view is that at their best, egalitarian liberal democracies provide the means to achieve this. One cannot, as discussed in chapter 3, appeal over the head of politics to for example the truth, because there is no test of truth other than justification to a community of inquirers. What is often called the pursuit of truth entails meeting standards of evidence, but these are themselves socially determined. If we have these things, we are content to call our findings true. His claim that ‘a liberal society is one which is content to call ‘true’ whatever the upshot of [free and open] encounters turns out to be’ is, as I have already argued, not a definition of truth, but an account of what passes for truth in a liberal society. The issue then is to provide the conditions for freedom, such as a free press, an independent judiciary and free universities.

⁷³ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 12.

⁷⁴ Rorty, ‘Truth and Freedom: A Reply to Thomas McCarthy’, p. 642.

⁷⁵ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 84.

Although many critics address what they take to be Rorty's blindness to 'structural' factors that give rise to such inequalities, precisely what is meant by 'structure' is typically left unspecified. 'Structural', like 'radical', does not name a natural kind. Critics like Calder and Ramberg use these terms freely, but fail to specify what they take them to mean. If 'structural' is used as a way of noting that there are recognisable patterns that cause and sustain inequalities, then Rorty can happily allow that there are 'structural' elements to, for example, racism. Rorty's holism, his view of the necessity of context and situation, suggests that he could hardly be blind to the interrelations between human beings and, insofar as this produces recognisable patterns, this could be called a form of structural oppression. Rorty does not, as McCarthy implies, view racism as the consequence of individuals happening to adopt racist attitudes, nor does he view it as caused by sheer inequality.⁷⁶ Further, he is certainly not blind to the conditions that give rise to equality, and that lead to the support of fascism or religious fundamentalism. He believes for example that Europe is better placed to ward off the rise of fascism since the European welfare states provide a security against the sort of hopelessness that produces support for the far Right.⁷⁷

But if by 'radicalism' is meant throwing over the institutions of liberal democracy such as free elections and the welfare state, it is clear that he would not support it. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner write that for Rorty, 'The "theorist" should abandon all attempts to radically criticize social institutions'.⁷⁸ This is correct insofar as Rorty believes that liberal societies do not *need* radical criticism, for example a Foucauldian critique of liberal individualism. As he puts it, in his ideal liberal community, 'there would be continual social

⁷⁶ See for example Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, p. 76.

⁷⁷ Richard Rorty, '11 September', *London Review of Books*, vol. 23, n. 19, cover date 4 October 2001.

⁷⁸ Best and Kellner, 'Richard Rorty and Postmodern Theory', p. 103.

criticism, but no *radical social theory*, if ‘radical’ means appealing to something beyond inherited principles and reactions to new developments’.⁷⁹ Thus I think William Buscemi goes too far in the other direction by claiming that Rorty wants a ‘total transformation’ of liberal institutions. He writes that Rorty’s ‘seemingly conservative embrace of contemporary institutions is seen, upon analysis, to be not an embrace but a strategy for total transformation of those institutions’.⁸⁰ This is clearly not what Rorty thinks, and he would strongly deny the need for *total* transformation. He differs from radicals by claiming that liberal societies are unique in containing the means by which they can reform themselves in order to be truer to their own self-image. This is however not a process of radical criticism, but of piecemeal social reform. Indeed, he urges that those who claim to offer radical critiques are playing a role *within* liberal societies, seeking for example to assimilate Foucault’s books into ‘a liberal, reformist political culture’,⁸¹ even though he recognises Foucault would have hated the suggestion.⁸²

All of this is to say that Rorty, though not a radical, is clearly not an uncritical supporter of the status quo. As we have seen, he speaks of the importance of the creative, imaginative, aspect of political theorising, rather than appealing to foundations or ‘the facts’. To illustrate how far he is prepared to challenge received understandings and practices, it is helpful to examine

⁷⁹ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 322, emphasis in original.

⁸⁰ William I. Buscemi, ‘The Ironic Politics of Richard Rorty’, *Review of Politics* 55 (1993), pp. 141 – 157 at 157.

⁸¹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 64. In part this is because liberal reformers can use Foucault’s criticisms of for example bureaucracies, and partly because much of Foucault can be privatised, and used for person edification rather than political transformation.

⁸² Thus I think Alison Julia Kelly is mistaken when she takes Rorty’s public-private distinction to mean that challenges to the current status quo should be confined to the private sphere. Kelly, *The Postmodern Debate and the Search for Emancipation: Rationality, the Self and Politics in the Thought of Foucault, Derrida, Rorty and MacIntyre* (PhD thesis, University of Hull, 1996), p. 142. See also Sheldon Wolin, ‘Democracy in the Discourse of Postmodernism’, *Social Research* 57 (1990), pp. 5 – 30.

a discussion from contemporary jurisprudence. Ronald Dworkin advocates what he calls a ‘charity principle’ to interpretation, in which the language of the law is interpreted to secure congruence with the values of community. Interpretation is sought in order to extend current practice; for Dworkin, to extend rights to previously marginalized groups like homosexuals is a matter of ‘taking rights seriously’, of applying them correctly given their meaning in order to yield the ‘right answer’.⁸³ Against this, Rorty of course rejects the notion that one can find, and appeal to, general principles which underpin practice and which, if understood, can correctly guide that practice. With reference to homosexual rights, he claims that, should the Supreme Court come to reverse the decision of *Bowers v. Hardwick* in which the justices found there was no constitutional protection for sodomy, ‘it will not be because a hitherto invisible right to sodomy has become manifest to the justices’ but because of the greater willingness of the heterosexual majority to stop tormenting homosexuals.⁸⁴ In cases where the Supreme Court makes such decisions, there are clearly prudential reasons for presenting the matter in the way Dworkin proposes, namely as applying a pre-existent law. For Rorty this is however a time-honoured means to disguise the fact that sometimes courts, and not legislatures, make significant and desirable changes. He writes that: ‘to suddenly notice previously existing but hitherto invisible constitutional rights is just the quaint way in which our courts are required to express a conviction that the political waters badly need roiling’,⁸⁵ and he further endorses Richard Posner’s claim for the importance of judicial rule-making.⁸⁶

⁸³ Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (London: Duckworth, 1977).

⁸⁴ Richard Rorty, ‘What’s Wrong With “Rights”’, *Harpers Magazine* (June 1996), pp. 15 – 18 at 16.

⁸⁵ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, pp. 98 – 99.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

Thus, although there is no 'voice of the oppressed', Rorty certainly supports those who seek to *give* voice to their oppression. Just as he disagrees with Dworkin's view that extending the law to protect homosexuals would be a matter of applying the law correctly, he rejects as pointless the claim that human rights existed prior to their being recognised as such. The important contrast for Rorty is not the temporal and the eternal, or the partial and the absolute, but the present with the future. Responding to the charge of conservatism and critical impotence, he admits that pragmatists such as himself cannot be radical, but urges that they can be utopian. He urges for example that:

[...] if you find yourself a slave, do not accept your masters' descriptions of the real; do not work within the boundaries of their moral universe. Instead, try to invent a reality of your own by selecting aspects of the world that lend themselves to the support of *your* judgement of the worthwhile life.⁸⁷

He is explicit about the need sometimes to ignore traditions when there is no hope of using them to foster the sort of change that is needed. Feminists should for example refuse to work within the boundaries of that moral world, and should seek instead to create their own.

15. Political philosophy versus internal social criticism?

15.1 Michael Walzer's account of 'internal social criticism'

⁸⁷ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 216, emphasis in original.

Rorty's account of the task for political theorists is very similar to Michael Walzer's proposed form of 'internal social criticism'. Like Rorty, Walzer proposes that the social critic should draw on the values, or 'shared understandings', of her society to propose reform.⁸⁸ Jonathan G. Allen has discussed Walzer alongside Rorty with respect to social criticism.⁸⁹ He treats them as putting forward the same view of social criticism, and disparages them both for what he takes to be their inability to offer genuine or meaningful criticism. I have argued that this last point is in fact not entailed by Rorty's approach, and believe it to be equally untrue of Walzer. My concern in the final section of this chapter is, however, to argue that on one issue, Rorty and Walzer are importantly different.

Unlike Rorty, who sees himself as suggesting a view of the nature of political theory, Walzer sets up his account as an alternative to political theory. Walzer contrasts his approach with the 'bad utopianism'⁹⁰ of philosophers who ignore the particular historical circumstances that led to the development of different values, and who try simply to pick and choose the 'nicest'⁹¹ without regard for context. His analysis has in turn led to his being heavily criticised by political theorists. Prominent among them is Brian Barry, who regards 'the core' of Walzer's interpretivism to be 'profoundly and dangerously wrong'.⁹² Against this view, I will suggest that in fact Walzer's view is essentially the same enterprise as Rorty's and Barry's own. Paul Kelly has written that 'Walzer is concerned ... to recast political theory as internal criticism',⁹³

⁸⁸ Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (London: Harvard University Press, 1987).

⁸⁹ Jonathan G. Allen, '"The Situated Critic or the Loyal Critic?" Rorty and Walzer on Social Criticism', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 24 (1998), pp. 25 – 46.

⁹⁰ Michael Walzer, *On Toleration* (London: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 5.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Barry, *Liberty and Justice*, p. 9.

⁹³ Paul Kelly, 'Contractarian social justice: an overview of some contemporary debates', in David Boucher and Paul Kelly (eds.) *Social Justice from Hume to Walzer* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 181 – 199 at 188.

but although this may be his stated intention, just how far internal criticism departs from current forms of political theorising is, I will show, unclear.

Walzer's account of internal social criticism takes as its point of departure a rejection of Thomas Nagel's 'view from nowhere'. Like Rorty, Walzer argues that standards of rationality and of morality are internal to a world-view, morality being the contingent background of assumptions and beliefs that constitute the shared moral life of particular communities. Morality is not consciously structured, but is the result of the actions of people over centuries. Walzer goes on to argue that the reality of moral life is very different from the single monistic world which he thinks lies at the heart of much modern philosophy. That philosophy he takes to divide broadly into two types, 'discovery' and 'invention'. Discovery, which can be religious or secular, is the task of finding a pre-existent morality. It involves standing back from one's own perspective, abandoning one's particular interests and looking at the world from 'no particular point of view'.⁹⁴ Invented morality, said to be symptomatic of a secular world that rejects the idea of a discoverable divine 'blueprint', is more radical than discovery, entailing not merely the reporting on, but the creation of, a new moral world. Both are however united in their purported detachment from any given cultural perspective. It is this detachment that Walzer takes to be the failing of most modern philosophy, for it is fuelled by the mistaken belief in the existence of, and at least the possibility of attaining, the view from nowhere.

Having set up the contrast, there is a persistent tension in Walzer's account between the view that discovery and invention are distinct activities, and the view that they are themselves

⁹⁴ Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, p. 5.

forms of social criticism. Walzer asserts that discovery and invention will require interpretation, and that interpretation, as we have seen in Rorty's account, will necessarily be influenced by what Walzer calls the 'shared understandings' of a community. Contrary to their aspirations, discoveries and inventions will not in fact be any more radical than internal criticism, because the interpretation required to give them effect will necessarily be made in the light of existing views of morality. For example, an 'invented' account of equality will remain just as contested as an internal critic's interpretation, and will be implicitly informed by indigenous societal standards. Walzer gives the example of Bentham who claimed to have discovered the foundation of morality through the discovery of a new psychology, and who argued that this led to unexpected moral principles. However, '[f]rightened by the strangeness of their own arguments, most utilitarian philosophers fiddle with the felicific calculus so that it yields results closer to what we all think.⁹⁵ It therefore seems that, far from recasting political theory as social criticism, social criticism is already essentially the same thing.

However this may be, Walzer is more generally committed to the claim that discovery and invention are something different from interpretive social criticism. Discovery, he says, 'always'⁹⁶ stands in sharp contrast to old ideas and practices (although whether this is meant as an empirical observation or as a definition is unclear). But beyond his claim that discovery and invention are something different, he tells us little. He pays little attention to spelling out the features of the political philosopher, and largely defines them as the opposite of the social critic. What he does say verges on caricature. In response to the sort of claim made by Judith Shklar, that Walzer's critical interpreter cannot be held accountable because there is no way

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 4.

of 'checking up on him'⁹⁷ by reference to standards other than his own, Walzer complains that political philosophers are in effect anti-democratic, since they ignore the opinions of their fellow citizens and present something whole which they seek to impose on society. Similarly, responding to Ronald Dworkin's claim that an external standard is needed, Walzer glosses this by suggesting that it could mean that '[a]ll the local critics could be replaced by a universal Office of Social Criticism.'⁹⁸

The ambiguity between political philosophy as a *form* of social criticism and as an *alternative to* it marks Walzer's entire enterprise. He expresses no doubt about the value of stepping back from current circumstances in order to gain a critical vantage point. His point is rather that of to where it is possible to step back: 'I doubt that we can ever step all the way to nowhere. Even when we look at the world from *somewhere else*, however, we are still looking at the world ... at a particular world.'⁹⁹ The question though is whether anyone denies this. Very few political theorists take themselves to be offering us a view from nowhere. Walzer's target of choice is John Rawls, who is said to have invented a world we would supposedly all impartially create and willingly inhabit. Walzer believes that accounts such as that of Rawls cannot respond to his question, for they do not address the particular concerns of specific societies. They are, for Walzer, empty formalism, providing 'a way of living' but 'not a way of life.' However, since Walzer himself claims to draw on shared understandings selectively, he is, I will argue below, in the same line of business as philosophers like Rawls.

⁹⁷ Judith N. Shklar, *Political Thought and Political Thinkers* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), edited by Stanley Hoffmann, p. 378. See also Charles Jones, *Global Justice*, pp. 191 – 192.

⁹⁸ Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), p. 48.

⁹⁹ Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, pp. 6 – 7, emphasis in original.

Walzer is very keen to deny that association, and at this point, despite the similarities of their own approaches, a significant contrast emerges between himself and Rorty. As we have seen, Rorty is widely though wrongly regarded as calling for an end of philosophy, and so it might be felt he would agree both with Walzer's general account of philosophy, and his specific view of Rawls as one of its most notable recent practitioners. However, despite their similarities with regard to criticism and interpretation, Rorty views liberal political thought to be a form of social criticism rather than an alternative to it.

Rorty makes very similar claims to Walzer concerning the alienation of intellectuals. Paralleling Walzer's account of Sartre as a thinker so alienated from French society that he was of little use as a social critic,¹⁰⁰ Rorty argues that most of the Left in America today has effectively put itself in the same position. It has become increasingly academic and concerned with theory, and has no suggestions for which laws need to be passed, or which political candidates to support. Defining the Left as the party of hope, for Rorty it ceases to be a Left if it is not an active, engaged movement seeking social justice. It is a central defect of the Left that it has exaggerated the 'importance of philosophy for politics'.¹⁰¹ In expressing his hope that the Left will 'kick its philosophy habit'¹⁰² ignoring both religion and philosophy in public discussion and 'just get on with trying to solve what Dewey called the "problems of men"',¹⁰³ he means that the Left should give up metaphysical speculation and return to 'real politics'.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., pp 57 – 59.

¹⁰¹ Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, p. 37.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 91.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 97.

¹⁰⁴ For this reason, I can make no sense of McLaren et al's. claim that 'Rorty wishes to quarantine political movements outside the campus lest they infect academia'. Peter McLaren, Ramin Farahmandpur and Juha Suoranta, 'Richard Rorty's Self-Help Liberalism: A Marxist Critique of

Presented in this manner, it is clear how Rorty has attracted the criticism that he is an ‘anti-philosopher.’ Some subtlety is however in order. When Rorty discusses the Left’s turn to irrelevant philosophy, he is talking mainly of Continental philosophy, and his targets include Foucault, Heidegger and Derrida, thinkers who, although important, have he thinks little or no political relevance. When attacking ‘theory’, Rorty refers mainly to the Left’s interest in Marx and Foucault, and specifically metaphysics. The Left has come to adopt an understanding of America that he diagnoses as metaphysical, the desire to see ourselves in relation to an absolute: ‘in committing itself to what it calls theory [the] Left has gotten something which is entirely too much like religion. For the cultural Left has come to believe that we must place our country within a theoretical frame of reference, situate it within a vast quasi-cosmological perspective.’¹⁰⁵ In so doing, it has divorced itself from engaging with what ought to be the real object of its concern, the problems caused by economic inequality.¹⁰⁶

However, non-metaphysical philosophy has a role to play in addressing these problems. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* Rorty distinguished thinkers like Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida whom he sees as private intellectuals, useful for personal edification but at best useless for politics, from theorists such as Mill and Rawls who have public utility. These latter thinkers remind us ‘of the failure of our institutions and practices to live up to the

‘America’s Most Wanted Ironist’, in Michael A. Peters and Paulo Ghiraldelli Jr. (eds.), *Richard Rorty: Education, Philosophy, and Politics* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), pp. 139 – 162 at 145.

¹⁰⁵ Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, p. 95.

¹⁰⁶ In particular, Rorty writes that the Left needs to talk much more about money. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

convictions to which we are already committed by the public, shared vocabulary we use in daily life'.¹⁰⁷

15.2 On Rawls

The difference between Walzer and Rorty's views of political theory emerge in their respective discussions of Rawls. For Walzer as we have seen, Rawls is a kind of Platonist. Rorty's view is rather more nuanced. He writes that, together with many other people, he initially interpreted Rawls to be offering a transcendental deduction of the principles of justice, but that this was a misunderstanding, stemming in part from assuming that by 'reasonable' Rawls meant an ahistorical criteria, rather than by what particular communities take to be reasonable, specifically 'the moral sentiments characteristic of the heirs of the Enlightenment'.¹⁰⁸ Rorty has subsequently given what he calls a historicist and Deweyan reading of Rawls, urging that Rawls is seeking to articulate the principles and intuitions 'typical of American liberals'.¹⁰⁹ Rawls's theorising is valuable, but 'from below,'¹¹⁰ responding to the needs of a specific time and place.

If Rorty is right, then the distinction, accepted by both liberals and their 'communitarian' critics, that there is something at issue concerning methodology between Rawls and writers like Walzer, largely dissolves. However, although Walzer's view of Rawls as a Platonist is

¹⁰⁷ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. xiv.

¹⁰⁸ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 183, n. 21.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

¹¹⁰ Richard Rorty, 'Response to Ernesto Laclau', in Chantal Mouffe (ed.) *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 69 – 76 at 75.

clearly mistaken, for many Rorty's account of him as a pragmatist seems equally off target.

Shapiro has attacked Rorty's interpretation for this reason, writing that 'Illuminating as this account is of Rorty's views, it is not remotely plausible as a reading of Rawls, early or late'.¹¹¹

Shapiro quickly moves over a catalogue of mistakes that he finds in Rorty's account, all of which stem from Rorty's ignorance or wilful misreading of *A Theory of Justice*. He points out for example that Rawls's theory is 'strictly deductive', and that he seeks to 'strive for a kind of moral geometry with all the rigor which this name implies'. Rorty is further said to have ignored the fact that the principles of justice apply wherever 'the circumstances of justice' obtain, and that they are neutral between capitalist and socialist forms of economic organisation.

Shapiro thinks it possible to reject Rorty's account of Rawls in one paragraph by the simple expediency of quoting Rawls's words at him. But there is reason to think Rorty's interpretation deserves more careful attention than this perfunctory dismissal. Consider the following account of Rawls's position, addressed to Walzer's understanding:

Walzer imagines that the function of the original position in Rawls's theory is to launch a system of morality *de novo*. But the construction has never been intended to be self-subsistent in this way. Rawls starts from a number of basic ideas that he believes his readers will share ... If Rawls is correct, we shall find, when we examine our moral commitments, that they drive us towards impartiality. We simply cannot justify to ourselves or to others putting our family, religion, or ethnic group in a specially favoured position.

¹¹¹ Shapiro, *Political Criticism*, p. 29.

If we pull back from our partial interests, we do so not as an arbitrary act of will, but because we recognize, on the strength of some very commonplace moral ideas, that we cannot otherwise be true to our deepest beliefs.

This might appear to be a further misconceived attempt by Rorty to contextualize Rawls of the sort Shapiro decries. The words are however Barry's.¹¹² Like Rorty, Barry argues persuasively for the importance of interpretation in Rawlsian political theory. He stresses the situatedness of Rawls's theory, for example that it draws upon moral ideas and intuitions that Rawls expects his readers to hold. Shapiro might object that this merely tells us that Barry is as guilty as Rorty in his misreading of Rawls. But unlike Shapiro, Barry spends some time justifying his interpretation. He quotes many of the same passages as Shapiro, for example the claim about 'moral geometry', but he stresses the need to observe their context.¹¹³ In this case Rawls's point is only, Barry argues, to deduce what proposals would follow from the original position. Rawls that is 'makes no claim that he could demonstrate the correctness of his theory to anyone in the world, irrespective of that person's existing beliefs'.¹¹⁴

There still might be thought a difference however between Rorty (and Barry's) view of Rawls, and what Rawls himself intended. Paul Kelly has sought to distinguish Rawls's view from that of Rorty's own. For Kelly, the difference concerns the scope of reason. He writes that on Rawls' account, reason is important, albeit reason which has 'a conditional

¹¹² Barry, *Liberty and Justice*, p. 20, emphasis in original.

¹¹³ Barry, *Justice as Impartiality*, p. 53.

¹¹⁴ Barry, *Liberty and Justice*, p. 120. Barry commends Rawls as a contemporary social critic, suitable for a place in Walzer's *The Company of Critics*. Barry, *Liberty and Justice*, pp. 21 – 22.

character'.¹¹⁵ For Rorty in contrast, what philosophers have held to be the dictates of reason are, writes Kelly, 'merely what we happen to think around here'.¹¹⁶

There certainly is evidence that would support this distinction. In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls writes that:

[...] the two principles of justice are not contingent upon existing desires or social conditions ... In order to find an Archimedean point it is not necessary to appeal to a priori or perfectionist principles. By assuming certain general desires, such as the desire for primary social goods, and by taking as a basis the agreement that would be made in a suitably defined initial situation, we can achieve the requisite independence from existing circumstances.¹¹⁷

For Rawls, the principles of justice transcend existing conditions and desires. This transcendence, whilst not aspiring to the view from nowhere, constitutes the difference between what Kelly calls 'a conditional character' and what he describes as 'merely what we happen to think around here'. But how far does this distinction point to a genuine difference between Rawls and Rorty? Given that there is a difference, as was argued above, between uncritical immersion in a status quo and selectively drawing on the values of one's time, it is not clear from Kelly's essay precisely what the difference between Rawls and Rorty is

¹¹⁵ Kelly, 'Political theory in retreat?', p. 238.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

¹¹⁷ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 263.

supposed to be; whether for example it is a difference in degree or of kind, or whether it is a philosophical difference or a political one.

To examine this issue, let us consider how Rawls goes about seeking to attain independence from existing conditions. That independence is to be secured by positing what would be agreed upon by persons in a 'suitably defined initial situation'. The suitably defined initial situation is of course the original position. Since it deprives agents of knowledge of their social and economic status, natural endowments, and views of the good, commentators have inferred that these factors are for Rawls wholly irrelevant for the deduction of the principles of justice.

In one way these factors certainly are irrelevant. The point of the original position is to deprive people of the knowledge that Rawls believes is not appropriate to calculations of the principles of justice. However, it is important to ask *why* we make these restrictions on ourselves when making those calculations, why we think it appropriate to deprive ourselves of this information. It turns out that for Rawls, this is not because they are required by any transcendental or ahistorical demands of reason, but because *we* think that it reasonable to exclude them:

One should not be misled, then, by the somewhat unusual conditions which characterise the original position. The idea here is simply to make vivid to ourselves the restrictions that it seems reasonable to impose on arguments for principles of justice, and therefore on these principles themselves.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, p. 18; see also pp. 547 – 548.

That is, Rawls seeks to secure independence from current circumstances by drawing on ideas current within those circumstances about what constitutes morally relevant and irrelevant factors in calculating the principles of justice.¹¹⁹ For this reason, I think that Andrew Jason Cohen fails in his efforts to distinguish this view from Rorty's. Cohen writes that 'we are able – despite communitarian and Rortyan claims to the contrary – to distance ourselves fully from our ends to imagine a bare moral agent within us'.¹²⁰ As was discussed in chapter 4 however, the notion of a self existing prior to its ends is one that is unsustainable.¹²¹ It is moreover a view of the self that is not entailed by Rawls's position. This point is perhaps made clearer by Rawls's reference to 'certain general desires'. If we pause to ask exactly whose desires these are, they can only be the desires that Rawls – rightly or wrongly – attributes to citizens of twentieth century liberal democracies. If we press the question of for whom 'it seems reasonable and generally accepted' that natural fortune and social circumstances should not lead to advantage or disadvantage, it is clear that it is certainly not the vast majority of the human race. In this context, Barry writes that Rawls, together with other liberals like Dworkin, assume the New Deal settlement.¹²² Similarly, Rorty writes: 'On my view, the frequent remark that Rawls' rational choosers look remarkably like twentieth-century American liberals is perfectly just, but not a criticism of Rawls. It is merely a frank ethnocentrism which is essential to serious,

¹¹⁹ Rawls seeks to distance himself from 'intuitionism'. But for a discussion of Rawls's similarities with intuitionism, see Joel Feinberg, 'Rawls and Intuitionism', in Norman Daniels (ed.) *Reading Rawls: Critical Studies on Rawls' 'A Theory of Justice'* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), pp. 108 – 124. On the view I am proposing, intuitions mean our particular, ethnocentric, un-theorised understandings. cf Walzer: '[W]e are to correct our intuitions by reference to the model we construct out of those same intuitions'. Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, p. 17.

¹²⁰ Cohen, 'On Universalism', p. 55.

¹²¹ In chapter 7 it will be argued that we are moral agents precisely because we, embodied historical agents, act in this way.

¹²² Barry, *Liberty and Justice*, p. 119. To be sure, this is itself a controversial interpretation. John R. Wallach writes that Rawls's position does not depend upon any particular political settlement, and he cites the New Deal as one such settlement. Wallach, 'Liberals, Communitarians, and the Task of Political Theory', pp. 584 – 585.

nonfantastical, thought'.¹²³ I therefore suggest, contrary to what Walzer claims, that his (and by extension Rorty's) approach is not an alternative to liberal political theory but is itself, as the case of Rawls illustrates, what a non-metaphysical form of political theorising amounts to. This view of political theory is, furthermore, the one engaged in by philosophers like Rawls.

In sum, in this chapter it has been argued that the concern to articulate liberal values is, contrary to the claims of both Walzer and his critics, not an alternative to political theory but a form of it. Rawls, Walzer and Rorty are all concerned to articulate and defend a view of liberalism by drawing on the understandings to be found in liberal societies. This does not lead to incoherence if it is appreciated that the interpretivist social critic is concerned not with making the most of the shared understandings but with making the best of them. Pragmatism does not lead to any substantial political position, either by design or by default. It does not, as I have argued in previous chapters, reduce notions of truth and objectivity in politics to 'what we do around here'. Nor does it entail that political theorists are necessarily and thoughtlessly committed to the standards current in any particular society. Finally, it was argued that Rorty is correct to see his account of the role of the political theorist as the same as that of Rawls. There remains, however, the scope of liberal claims. Rorty's defence of liberalism is frequently criticised for what many take to be its parochialism. Although he thinks liberalism can be justified, he is said to illegitimately circumscribe the number of people for whom we owe a justification such a justification. This issue is taken up in chapter 7.

¹²³ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 30, n. 12.

Chapter Seven

Liberal ethnocentrism and the boundaries of community

In the previous chapter, Rorty's view that political theory ought to be concerned with articulating the values latent in liberal society was examined. In this chapter, consideration is given to the question of what it is that constitutes a society, or community. For Rorty, there is no standard of value other than that of human communities. One cannot appeal to the notion of objectivity, because that notion, understood as it must be in terms of what he calls 'solidarity', is necessarily informed by human standards of value. Hilary Putnam and others believe that it is at this point that Rorty becomes relativist, taking him to regard as 'warranted', or 'justified', whatever it is that a particular community thinks of as such. I argue that this view of Rorty is mistaken, and that he seeks to guard against warrant or justification being unacceptably parochial by political means. Specifically, by urging that no standard of value is beyond challenge, and by seeking to increase the range of challenges and interpretations of those values as much as possible. Rorty captures both of these concerns in the notion of what John Rawls calls *wide* reflective equilibrium. Against the charge that 'we' must be narrowly constituted because different communities and standards of value are incommensurable, I argue that Rorty, following Donald Davidson, has successfully shown that this notion, when understood as untranslatability, is incoherent. For Rorty, there is no logical or moral reason why the boundaries of the liberal ethnos cannot be (as I will go on to argue in chapter 8) potentially global.

16. Community as foundation?

16.1 Objectivity as solidarity

The most serious challenge to Rorty's view of justification is not, I think, that he rules it out, but that for him the standards of one's community serve as the last word. One of Rorty's responses to the charge of relativism is to say that, far from viewing truth or goodness as relative to a community, the pragmatist can only be criticised for taking his community too seriously and for ignoring the standards of other communities; that is, he or she can be criticised not for claiming that moral values are relative across communities, but for saying that the standards of their community are the only standards.¹ Problems seem to emerge with the political consequences which follow from what Rorty accepts as the fact that 'we must, in practice, privilege our own group'.² William E. Connolly turns the charge of foundationalism back against Rorty on this point, arguing that in abandoning epistemology, he has come instead to privilege the traditions of a community, advancing 'a species of social foundationalism',³ that allows no sense to the idea that a community which is in unanimous agreement can nevertheless be in error.

It is important to be clear that in the same way that, properly understood, Rorty retains a notion of truth, he also has use for the term 'objectivity'. He writes: 'I think you can have knowledge – objective knowledge – without representation, realism, or correspondence'.⁴

¹ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 30.

² *Ibid.*, p. 29.

³ William E. Connolly, 'Mirror of America', in Alan Malachowski (ed.) *Rorty: Sage Masters of Modern Social Thought, volume 4* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), pp. 221 – 229 at 229.

⁴ Richard Rorty, 'Response to Thelma Lavine', in Herman J. Saatkamp (ed.) *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics* (London: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995), pp. 50 – 53 at 50.

Rorty cannot of course allow for objectivity to mean connection with Reality as It Is in Itself, having denied any sense can be made of that notion. Rather, objectivity stems from agreement among inquirers, an idea that he terms ‘solidarity’. Solidarity is our current best idea of how to explain what is going on, not an attempt accurately to represent reality.

This has however led to the criticism that Rorty refuses a distinction between fact and opinion, and that he denies what Jürgen Habermas calls ‘everyday realist intuitions’,⁵ that is, the difference between a belief that is justified by a community of inquirers, and a belief that is justified because it is true. Writing of Rorty’s discussion of Orwell’s *1984*, James Conant writes that Rorty allows no distinction between the questions ‘Who invented the airplane?’ and ‘Who does practically everyone *say* invented the airplane?’⁶

In response, Rorty argues that there is no way to separate these two formulations. Facts *are* linguistic, formulated in sentences. He endorses Wilfred Sellars’s ‘psychological nominalism’, which holds that all knowledge is linguistic. Against the obvious objection that, for example, knowledge of the sensation of pain is non-linguistic, Sellars distinguished between ‘awareness – as – discriminate – behavior’, the ability to respond to stimuli, from what he called being ‘in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says’⁷. Sensations may *cause* beliefs, but do not by themselves *justify* belief. Justification, as was discussed in chapter 5, depends on the social practice of reason giving. Language enables us to ‘enter a community whose members exchange justifications of assertions, and other actions, with one another’.⁸ That is,

⁵ Habermas, ‘Richard Rorty’s Pragmatic Turn’, p. 32.

⁶ Conant, ‘Freedom, Cruelty, and Truth: Rorty versus Orwell’, p. 307. Conant concludes that ‘Not even the Party goes quite as far as Rorty’!

⁷ Cited in Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 182.

⁸ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 185.

justification involves citing reasons for a belief, and this involves language, there being no non-linguistic facts. There is no such thing as a justified belief that is non-propositional, and no such thing as justification that is not a relation between propositions.

This seems to make one's relation to the world (or reality) subordinate to one's relation to a community.⁹ Rorty denies that this is the case, because it is impossible to drive a wedge between what a community thinks, and the world. Languages and beliefs are necessarily connected both to a human community *and* the world:

You would not know what you believed, nor have any beliefs, unless your belief has a place in a network of beliefs and desires. But that network would not exist unless you and others could pair off features of your non-human environment with your assent to your utterances by other language-users, utterances caused (as are yours) by those very features.¹⁰

There is no way to contrast 'being in touch with a human community' with 'being in touch with reality', since to ascribe a belief is both to have contact with the world *and* with the human community that provides the language with which to give content and meaning to that world. One cannot turn from seeking agreement with a community of inquirers to 'the facts', because these are only given content within human practices. For this reason, however, I suggest that in his paper 'Solidarity or Objectivity?' Rorty himself

⁹ This explains, I think, Putnam's remark that Rorty's view is just solipsism with a "we" instead of an "I". Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face*, p. ix.

¹⁰ Rorty, 'Universality and Truth', pp. 15 – 16.

set up an unhelpful contrast, one between solidarity and objectivity.¹¹ In that paper he wrote that pragmatists seek to ‘reduce’¹² objectivity to solidarity, and spoke of his desire for us to concern ourselves ‘solely’ with securing solidarity by ‘setting aside’ the desire for objectivity.¹³ Both claims are misleading since they imply that solidarity is something less than objectivity, which cannot be the case. For Rorty, the only possible meaning of objectivity is solidarity, which is his word for Donald Davidson’s notion of ‘triangulation’ – the relationship between speaker, audience and world. It is in fact realist accounts of objectivity that are reductionist since they cut off one corner of the triangle, thinking truth to be correspondence to a pre-linguistic ‘given’. This notion is incoherent, as was discussed in chapter 2, because there is no content to the world other than that provided by human descriptions. Triangulation, as Davidson puts it, ‘gives us the only account of how experience gives a specific content to our thoughts. Without other people with whom to share responses to a mutual environment, there is no answer to the question what it is in the world to which we are responding’.¹⁴ For this reason, I would respond to critics like Thomas Nagel and suggest that Rorty’s account of solidarity, far from ‘contradict[ing] the categorical statements it purports to be about’¹⁵ is, by combining speaker, audience and world, the conclusion for which Nagel is himself grasping for in his view that the subjective is part of the objective.¹⁶

16.2 What can we say to ‘them’?

¹¹ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 21 – 34.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 27 – 28. In his ‘Response to John McDowell’, Rorty writes of ‘replacing’ objectivity with solidarity, which, though technically accurate, is perhaps also misleading, since on his account objectivity cannot be anything other than solidarity. Richard Rorty, ‘Response to John McDowell’, in Robert B. Brandom (ed.) *Rorty and His Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 123 – 128 at 124.

¹⁴ Donald Davidson, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 129.

¹⁵ Nagel, *The Last Word*, p. 30.

What then happens to those who are not thought of, or who do not think of themselves, as part of our *ethnos*, or part of *our* community? What for example can be said to non-liberals? The critic of our liberal society is, in Rorty's words, forced to confront the ethnocentric question, 'Do you have anything non-European to suggest which meets our European purposes better?'¹⁷ Rorty is clearly not alone in accepting that one cannot and should not bracket out some of one's views when considering what is good or right. But does that entail that we must construe 'reasonableness' in the narrow, ethnocentric, terms that Rorty appears to? It is here that Rorty's use of the word 'we' starts to raise serious questions. For Rorty, 'we' means 'the group to which we think it necessary to justify ourselves'.¹⁸ Many commentators find it easy to present Rorty as unconcerned with justification beyond a very narrowly constituted number of 'us'. One can see why this is the case. For example, he writes:

I hope ... to suggest how ... liberals might convince our society that loyalty to itself is morality enough, and that such loyalty no longer needs an ahistorical backup. I think they should try to clear themselves of charges of irresponsibility by convincing our society that it need be responsible only to its own traditions, and not to the moral law as well'.¹⁹

The problem here is twofold. First that the focus on a society and its traditions, with nothing outside, might be taken to mean that Rorty is untroubled by what goes on beyond our society, and is oblivious to those members who are not considered to be part of its traditions. Secondly, that it assumes homogeneity within forms of life. Nancy

¹⁶ Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, pp. 25 – 27.

¹⁷ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 174.

¹⁸ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 177.

Fraser thinks this the case, writing that: 'there is no place in Rorty's framework for genuinely radical political discourses rooted in *oppositional solidarities*'.²⁰ Similarly, for Steven Hendley, 'Rorty's strategy effectively draws a boundary around the democratic arena, claiming it for people like *us* as opposed to people like *them*'.²¹ Thus although Rorty is concerned in the passage quoted above to show that, *pace* ironism, he is committed to what Alasdair MacIntyre calls a shared way of life, convincing people of his own moral probity is paid at the cost of appearing parochial.

There is however more to be said. To illustrate, I will examine Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift's examination of what they understand to be Rorty's attitude to non-liberals. They take him to be saying that liberals do not have to worry about past or future challenges to liberalism from non-liberals, and that for him, 'liberals need only justify themselves to liberals'.²² Responding to Rorty's view that anti-liberals like Nietzsche and Loyola are 'mad', Mulhall and Swift criticise Rorty for (they say) claiming that we ought simply to dismiss such critics, and go on to say that we must engage with them. They write that although an Aristotelian or Samurai moral vocabulary is no longer a 'real option' for us, this is far from the end of the story, and that this alone 'does not allow us to ignore or dismiss *in advance* any attempts to reconstruct or reinterpret such moral codes in ways more adapted to the present time', as for example MacIntyre has attempted with Aristotle.²³

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 199.

²⁰ Fraser, 'Solidarity or Singularity?', p. 316.

²¹ Hendley, 'Putting Ourselves Up For Question: A Postmodern Critique of Richard Rorty's Postmodern Bourgeois Liberalism', *Journal of Value Inquiry* 29 (1995), pp. 241 – 253 at 249, emphasis in original.

²² Mulhall and Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians*, p. 265. Similarly, for Fraser, 'Political discourse in fact is restricted by Rorty to those who speak the language of bourgeois liberalism'. Fraser, 'Solidarity or Singularity?', p. 316.

²³ Mulhall and Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians*, p. 273, emphasis in original.

Theirs is however an inadequate summary of what Rorty's position entails, both in its stated intent and in its logic. They think it important to engage with non-liberals, but are mistaken to think that Rorty disagrees with them on this point. Curiously, they themselves quote the passage from Rorty in which he states his actual position on the question of addressing non-liberals like Nietzsche and Loyola:

We do not conclude that Nietzsche and Loyola are crazy because they hold unusual views of certain "fundamental" topics; rather, we conclude this only after extensive attempts at an exchange of political views have made us realize that we are not going to get anywhere.²⁴

It is clear from this passage that we come to the conclusion that such people are 'crazy' not, as Mulhall and Swift claim, because of the views they hold, nor do we reach that conclusion 'in advance' of the attempt to converse with them. We do so only after 'extensive efforts at an exchange', one which demonstrates their lack of conversability.

That liberal democracies cannot tolerate every conceivable viewpoint is necessarily true, since to do so would mean tolerating values that are themselves intolerant. It is by exploiting this truth that some critics claim that liberals are intolerant, as for example Honi Haber does when he writes that Rorty is aiding 'the construction of the domination of normalizing and disciplinary regimes',²⁵ something that he claims is 'terroristic'.²⁶ By privileging liberal values, Rorty is held to be denying a voice, and a place in the conversation, to critics of those values. Rorty's account of liberalism does not however

²⁴ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 191. Quoted by Mulhall and Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians*, p. 265.

²⁵ Haber, *Beyond Postmodern Politics*, p. 54. The same point is made by Jo Burrows, 'Conversational Politics', p. 331 – 334.

²⁶ Haber, *Beyond Postmodern Politics*, p. 63.

rule out non-liberal theorising, but only practices that cannot be fitted into the practice of liberal democracies. It does not rule out Marxist or fundamentalist religious belief, but only behaviour that, as a consequence of those beliefs, the liberal democracies cannot accept. By using the word 'terror' to describe the point that some practices cannot be tolerated, Haber drains the word of any meaning. However, to address the substantive issue of how liberals can justify excluding the practices that they do, liberals can, I have suggested, only say that those practices are unreasonable, and explain why they think this by reference to widely held beliefs about the importance of liberty, equality, etc. The most noteworthy feature of Rorty's view is, as I suggested in chapter 5, that he faces up to the circularity of this position more readily than most other liberals.

16.3 Incommensurability and incomparability

One can see why Mulhall and Swift are led to their erroneous conclusion. They take Rorty to be committed to the view that liberals and non-liberals are each locked into their own particular language game, with the result that in some cases, two different vocabularies are incommensurable and therefore mutually unintelligible.²⁷ Although he is sometimes thought to endorse incommensurability as unintelligibility,²⁸ Rorty in fact joins Donald Davidson in rejecting it. As Davidson puts it, '[d]ifferent points of view make sense, but only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability'.²⁹ Rorty agrees, although, in a rare criticism, censures Davidson for running together

²⁷ Mulhall and Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians*, p. 264.

²⁸ McLaren et al, 'Richard Rorty's Self-Help Liberalism', p. 147. The consequence of this is held to be, as Jonathan G. Allen says, that for Rorty people in different 'forms of life' cannot understand each other. Allen, 'The Situated Critic or the Loyal Critic?', p. 35.

‘incommensurability’ with ‘untranslatability’.³⁰ Whilst it is true that there is no ‘meta-vocabulary’ into which all vocabularies can be fixed, ‘no permanent ahistorical metaphysical framework into which everything can be fitted’³¹, this does not entail that different vocabularies are mutually incomprehensible and thus that they cannot be compared. Rorty argues that it is self-refuting to say this, for the very ability to recognise a language *as a language* in order to make a judgement about translatability already means that one has ascribed it meaning. As he puts it, ‘I do not see how we could tell when we had come against a human practice which we knew to be linguistic and also knew to be so foreign that we must give up hope of knowing what it would be like to engage in it.’³² One can compare different practices or values or forms of life, not against the God’s Eye View, but with respect to some particular standard or value.

For Davidson, incommensurability is a consequence of what he calls the ‘third dogma of empiricism’, the scheme-content distinction. This dogma holds that there is a separation between the world as it exists ‘out there’, and the ‘conceptual scheme’ we bring to bear in order to constitute it. The ensuing talk of ‘conceptual relativism’ is, he thinks, empty, since there is no way to specify when one conceptual scheme ends and another begins. Following Davidson, Rorty regards the scheme-content distinction as resting upon a form of faculty psychology, in which the *a priori* categories of the mind organise the unconceptualised experience with which it is presented. He writes that: ‘Since Kant, we find it almost impossible not to think of the mind as divided into active and passive faculties, the former using concepts to “interpret” what “the world” imposes on the

²⁹ Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 184.

³⁰ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 302, n. 35.

³¹ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 215.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 215, emphasis in original.

latter.³³ There is however no noumenal self that sits back and, guided solely by pure practical reason, organises experience. There is no sense in which unconceptualised empirical input provides the evidence of our beliefs; there is, in short, no ‘given’. As Rorty concludes, ‘without the notions of “the given” and of “the a priori” there can be no notion of “the constitution of experience”. Thus there can be no notion of alternative experiences, or alternative worlds, to be constituted by the adoption of new a priori concepts.³⁴ No sense can be given to the idea of alternative conceptual schemes dividing the world up in different ways. Thus there are ‘no such things as “conceptual schemes” but only slightly different sets of beliefs and desires’.³⁵ Incommensurability is at most ‘a temporary inconvenience’.³⁶

It must be said that Rorty sometimes seems to imply that the difference *is* one that stems from conceptual relativism. This is seen for example when he distinguishes different vocabularies by following Kuhn’s distinction between normal and abnormal discourses, and in his suggestion (rejected in chapter 4) that ironists can entertain doubts about their *entire* vocabulary. Hilary Putnam criticises Rorty’s account on this point for treating the standards of justification within a language game as if they were algorithms, of the sort computers follow when making calculations.³⁷ Putnam’s discussion focuses on *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, and this criticism does not, I think, apply to Rorty’s subsequent

³³ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 3.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 5. Indeed, it is this claim that leads to relativism, for if one accepts with Kant that there is a distinction between scheme and content, then truth will indeed be relative to the scheme used. Rorty is, however, not a relativist, as he does not believe that there are different schemes for truth to be relative to. On this point, Rorty’s account parallels that of Nagel who, like Davidson, argues that Kant opened the door to relativism and subjectivism. In contrast to Davidson however, Nagel, as I mentioned in chapter 3, thinks this a reason to return to a Cartesian view of human reason.

³⁵ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 217.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 216.

³⁷ Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, pp. 67 – 69. The same point has been made by Magnus Reitberger, *Consequences of Contingency: the pragmatism and politics of Richard Rorty* (Thesis (Ph.D.) - University of Stockholm, 2000), p. 180.

writings, where he is clear that the frontiers of language games are always temporary, and that social norms are, by their nature, only partially expressed in explicit criteria.³⁸

This point emerges clearly in Rorty's view of incommensurability when it is applied to culture. For Rorty, this relies on a mistakenly conceptualised (or as Brian Barry calls it, 'essentialized'³⁹) view of culture. Steven Lukes believes that what he calls 'anti-universalist' accounts such as Rorty's rest 'upon a thoroughly misconceived and indeed inapplicable notion of culture, the product of what Seyla Benhabib calls a "poor man's sociology".'⁴⁰ That is, it is a sociology that views cultures as unified and homogeneous, rather than recognising them as sites of heterogeneity and contestation. Rorty's account however, as we saw in chapter 6, assumes nothing of the kind. He is clear that cultures are not structures that constrain human thought and behaviour, but are rather fluid patterns of thought and behaviour. As that behaviour changes, so do cultures. 'To think otherwise is', he puts it, is 'the Cartesian fallacy of seeing axioms where there are only shared habits, of viewing statements which summarize such practices as if they reported constraints enforcing such practices'.⁴¹ Like languages, cultures are not homogeneous, and they are not governed by sets of criteria. Rather, they are constantly changing practices. To hold that cultures are incommensurable is to view them as having a specific design, to which their members cannot but adhere, something which is clearly not the case. The difference between cultures is not different in kind to the differences within them: there is no reason to think that any two members of the same culture will have anything more in common with each other than two people from different cultures. As he puts it, 'The Tasmanian aborigines and the British colonists had trouble

³⁸ See for example Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 164.

³⁹ Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 11.

⁴⁰ Lukes, *Liberals and Cannibals*, p. 19.

⁴¹ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p 26.

communicating, but this trouble was different only in extent from the difficulties in communication experienced by Gladstone and Disraeli'.⁴²

Thus, to return to the criticism levelled by Mulhall and Swift, Rorty's point is not that no understanding is possible between different value systems, but rather that we understand enough to know that no compromise is achievable between them. This, however, is a conclusion that we reach after 'extensive efforts' to seek such a compromise. Rorty would be guilty of flouting what he calls 'the spirit of accommodation and toleration'⁴³ were he to refuse in advance any attempt to converse with such people, but this is not the case. The craziness of Nietzsche and Loyola stems not from the beliefs they hold, but because those views mean, after we have tried, that we cannot get anywhere. That is, we reach that conclusion not because of the beliefs they hold, but because they are held dogmatically.⁴⁴ We might decide that Loyola and Nietzsche are mad after attempting to converse with them as individuals, but we do not rule out in advance as 'mad' that category of people we have defined as 'non-liberal'. Thus, although Rorty calls Nietzsche 'mad', he treats Nietzscheans as people who potentially have a role to play in liberal democracies.⁴⁵ There is in other words a difference between mad beliefs and mad people, but it is a distinction that Mulhall and Swift miss by moving backwards and forwards between presenting Rorty's account as, on the one hand, concerning liberals and non-liberals, whilst on the other presenting it as between liberals and Nietzsche and Loyola. In the latter case Rorty does conclude that they are mad, but for the reasons just discussed this does not mean he views all non-liberals in the same way.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 190.

⁴⁴ The content of some beliefs, for example of the religious fundamentalist, are likely to mean that they are not conversable. But Rorty is clear that we should try. On this point, Rorty might perhaps agree with Barry that a dogmatist can be thought of not as 'someone who adheres to a dogma, but someone who adheres to it dogmatically.' Barry, *Liberty and Justice*, p. 38.

⁴⁵ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, pp. 15 – 16.

16.4 Two attempts to overcome ethnocentric parochialism

Many who, like Rorty, reject foundationalism nevertheless think that Rorty's ethnocentrism commits him to what Connolly calls 'social foundationalism', arguing that the standards upon which argument and justification take place are too narrow (excessively ethnocentric). I will consider this concern, and how Rorty might respond to it, in a discussion of two suggestions that have been made, respectively, by Matthew Festenstein and Hilary Putnam.

16.4.1 Matthew Festenstein: general versus 'substantive' ethnocentrism

Festenstein seeks to defend an ethnocentric account by showing that ethnocentrism needs not be parochial. He distinguishes three separate senses of the term: first, that vocabularies do not require foundations in a metaphysical conception of human nature; secondly, that there are no criteria external to all vocabularies that can adjudicate disputes between them; and thirdly, as a consequence political argument should be conducted by appeals to local standards rather than 'general principles'.⁴⁶ If we keep these distinctions in mind, Festenstein believes that it will be seen that Rorty wrongly infers from the rejection of philosophical foundations that all we can do is seek justification by appealing to localised standards. In Festenstein's terms, we can accept ethnocentrism without being committed to a 'substantive ethnocentrism' (the third element he identifies) which is excessively narrow, and privileges 'what we do around here'. One can, he writes, accept

⁴⁶ Festenstein, *Pragmatism and Political Theory*, pp. 113, 117.

the ethnocentric account of justification Rorty offers without requiring it ‘should take a substantively ethnocentric form, appealing only to local convention rather than to more general principles or truths’.⁴⁷

It is clear why Festenstein seeks to separate different elements of ethnocentrism, for he is rightly concerned to distinguish the inescapable fact that views come (so to speak) from somewhere from the potentially unpalatable consequences of privileging the standards of one particular group. However, his distinction between local convention and general principles cannot be made as firmly as he believes. No firm distinction can be sustained if we accept the implications of the second sense of ethnocentrism – the absence of criteria external to all vocabularies. To illustrate, Festenstein writes that despite what he takes to be its failings, ‘substantive ethnocentrism’ might still be thought to offer ‘a more persuasive way to argue on behalf of liberalism than arguments couched in terms of principles’.⁴⁸ For Rorty however, principles are summaries of the moral practices of particular communities: he agrees with Michael Oakeshott that ‘At best, they are pedagogical aids to the acquisition of such practices’.⁴⁹ They can be used to adjudicate between local conflicts, but they themselves emerged from local practices, and so there is no clear distinction between appealing to principle and appealing to ‘what we do around here’. Rorty accepts that an individual’s beliefs are not the last word: like Rawls’s appeal to an Archimedean point, Rorty advocates abstracting away from the subjective for purposes of public policy. But this is not to invoke a standard that is different to ‘local convention’, but is to turn to a particular common ground:

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 126, emphasis in original.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 127.

⁴⁹ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 59.

The idea that moral and political controversies should always be “brought back to first principles” is reasonable if it means merely that we should seek common ground in the hope of attaining agreement. But it is misleading if it is taken as the claim that there is a natural order of premises from which moral and political conclusions are to be inferred.⁵⁰

The reasons why communities appeal to one set of principles rather than another, and the specific interpretations we give of those principles, are themselves ‘substantially ethnocentric’. The distinction then between Festenstein’s second and third sense of ethnocentrism (inescapable contextualism and substantive ethnocentrism) breaks down, because they are both elements of the same thing.

For Festenstein, the concern is that on a ‘substantively ethnocentric’ account such as Rorty’s, non-liberals are required to meet liberalism on its own narrow ground. Unless those challenges appeal to ‘local anecdote and protocol’⁵¹ that are acceptable to liberals, they are ruled out. In saying this, Festenstein seems to reproduce the error of Mulhall and Swift, since he implies that critics of liberalism are ruled out *a priori*. But unlike them, Festenstein recognises that this is not the case, and that Rorty would conclude that someone is ‘crazy’ only after having made genuine and strenuous efforts to reach understanding with them. I suggest moreover that Rorty’s account is no less open than Festenstein’s own view. To explain, Festenstein suggest that ‘what liberals find wrong with “Loyola” is that he possesses an excessively rigid and hierarchical view of human capabilities. This then is what makes him “crazy” for liberals ... , not [as Festenstein takes

⁵⁰ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 190.

⁵¹ Festenstein, *Pragmatism and Political Theory*, p. 117. Festenstein accepts Rorty’s view that ethnocentrism is very far from relativism since, if anything, ethnocentrism commits one too strongly to the values of one’s ethnos. He describes this refusal to meet non-liberals on anything

to be Rorty's position] the bare failure to agree'.⁵² But what is the difference here? The failure to agree is for Rorty not just a 'bare' one, but results from an insurmountable disagreement about substantive beliefs, of which the nature of human capabilities is likely, in the example of someone like Loyola, to be one. Such disagreement does not itself escape what Festenstein calls 'substantive ethnocentrism', since the liberal egalitarian view that humans are fundamentally equal is itself substantively ethnocentric: it emerges from a particular context, and, although it can be articulated in terms of principles, those principles are themselves, from the point of view of someone like Loyola, peculiar to what Rorty calls the rich North Atlantic democracies.

16.4.2. Hilary Putnam on 'warranted assertability'

Hilary Putnam agrees with Rorty that reason and justification are historically conditioned. He writes that: 'Our norms and standards of warranted assertability are historical products; they evolve in time'.⁵³ He also accepts the corollary that what counts as a justified belief is influenced by contingent human interests. At the same time, Putnam worries that Rorty endorses a form of complacent majoritarianism, whereby what counts as 'better' is whatever a community (or its majority) takes to be 'better'. He thus thinks Rorty would deny a proposition that he himself holds, namely that 'Whether a statement is warranted or not is independent of whether the majority of one's cultural peers would say it is warranted or unwarranted'.⁵⁴ This distinction grows out of his prior distinction between better and worse 'epistemic situations', a distinction which enables him to say

other than liberal ground as 'an unlimited anti-relativism'. p. 123, There is for Rorty only one standard, the liberal one, which is legitimate.

⁵² Ibid., p. 127.

⁵³ Putnam, *Realism With A Human Face*, p. 21.

⁵⁴ Ibid., emphasis in original.

that some audiences are better informed, and more thoughtful, than others. As Putnam understands him, Rorty is in contrast committed to saying that whatever a particular audience thinks or values is necessarily of value; there are no other criteria to judge the standards of that community. Morally, this means that whatever a community happens to think of as morally good or progressive *is* morally good or progressive, even if this means the rise of fascism, since the standards by which morality and moral progress is measured can only be that of the people who employ them – Nazis will by definition find Nazism a morally superior form of life to liberalism.⁵⁵

Putnam argues that although standards of warrant are historically conditioned, that they are not simply whatever comes about. Moral improvement is judged:

From within *our* picture of the world, of course. But from within that picture itself, *we* say that “better” isn’t the same as “*we* think it’s better.” And if my “cultural peers” don’t agree with me, sometimes I *still* say “better” (or “worse”). There are times when, as Stanley Cavell puts it, I “rest on myself as my foundation.”⁵⁶

We must be clear what Putnam means here. He denies that to hold ‘warranted assertability’ to be different from, and often opposed to, majority opinion, reflects the nature of a transcendent reality or ‘God’s-Eye View’. His point is that it is a ‘property’ of the notion of warranted assertability that it is independent of, and can therefore be different to, majority opinion.⁵⁷ In giving content to warranted assertability, Putnam believes that he can say that fascism would not count as progress, even if a majority held

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 23 – 24.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 26, emphasis in original. The same point is made by Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity*, p. 22.

it to be so. Armed with this notion of warranted assertability, he opposes what he takes to be Rorty's relativism in which that truth or goodness or justice is whatever we happen to think around here.

It certainly seems as if there is a difference between Putnam and Rorty with regard to how far warrant is different from what a community takes to be warranted. Unlike Putnam, Rorty seems to say that warrant *does* depend upon a (at least a sizeable) majority:

[...] maybe a *majority* can be wrong. But suppose everybody in the community ... thinks S must be a bit crazy [to assert *p*]. They think this even after patiently listening to S's defence of *p*, and after making sustained attempts to talk him out of it. Might S still be *warranted* in asserting *p*?⁵⁸

Rorty is however writing here of warrant, not truth. He goes on to say that *p* might be *true*, because truth is independent of what anyone thinks. Warrant is in contrast necessarily tied to the standards and norms of a particular community, since warrant and justification can, as has been argued for in chapter 5, only be a sociological matter, made by reference to the standards of the community S is addressing. For Rorty, in proposing the 'God-Eye View', Putnam is committed to agreeing with him on this point, and he thinks it is only Putnam's fear of relativism that stops him from so doing.⁵⁹ The only alternative sense by which S might be warranted is if there were a natural order of reasons that supplied criteria of warrant independent of any such community. No sense can however be made of that notion. In the absence of the natural order of reasons,

⁵⁷ Putnam, *Realism With A Human Face*, p. 22.

⁵⁸ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 50, emphasis in original.

⁵⁹ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, pp. 24 – 27.

rational acceptability cannot mean anything other than acceptance of a particular human community. Susan Mendus, thinking Rorty must provide some sort of substantive criterion to the notion of better and worse standards of ‘warrant’ and ‘justification’, argues that he uses the stability of communities as the criterion to judge their worth.⁶⁰ Were that the criterion, she would of course be correct to go on to criticise Rorty by pointing out that stable societies have often been oppressive. Rorty however never cites this as the criterion, and in fact claims to give no substantive account of ‘bitterness’. He writes that ‘maybe somebody will come along with a better idea, a better epistemic community, a better form of life’.⁶¹ But since he cannot resort to a transcendental account of ‘reason’, ‘free’, ‘open’, etc., he can only mean that ‘better’ means ‘better to us’ (and he takes it, given everything Putnam has said about the impossibility and incoherence of the God’s-Eye View, that he cannot consistently mean anything other than this).

17. Extending boundaries

17.1 Justification through wide reflective equilibrium

The way to avoid the dangers of ethnocentrism is, I will now argue, not to seek to draw distinctions within ethnocentrism as a concept, or to think of ‘warrant’ as a property which floats free of current practice, but rather to seek to extend the frontiers of ‘we’, to consider more and more people in an effort to make the process of reflective equilibrium as wide as possible.

⁶⁰ Mendus, “What of soul was left, I wonder?”, p. 58.

⁶¹ Rorty, “Response to Susan Haack,” p. 150.

For Rorty, justification entails a process of reflective equilibrium, in which we seek coherence and consistency between our principles and our intuitions. As we have seen, Rorty values John Rawls's writings in part because of Rawls's concern with reflective equilibrium, in which justification is a matter of weighing intuitions with general principles. This leaves open the question of precisely whose intuitions these are. A problem for Rorty, as it is for Rawls, is that consistency and coherence are fairly easy to secure if one is prepared to ignore or eliminate problematic data. If coherence is the only mark of justification, there is no reason why difficult or unwelcome viewpoints may not simply be sidelined or excluded. This concern is exacerbated once it is appreciated that reflective equilibrium is the method not only by which we test our principles, but in which we decide what principles to test, and to whom to test them; that is, we use it to decide who does and does not deserve a justification: 'questions about whom we need to justify ourselves to – questions about who counts as a fanatic and who deserves an answer – can be treated as just further matters to be sorted out in the course of attaining reflective equilibrium'.⁶²

Thus although Rorty believes that Rawls does not fall into an empty-headed relativism but stakes out a middle ground between relativism and ahistorical notions of reason and humanity, others have suggested otherwise. Gerald Gaus believes that reflective equilibrium is *merely* inferentialist, and that unless there is some reason to suppose the beliefs with which one begins with are in his word 'credible', making one's beliefs cohere does nothing to produce credibility.⁶³ The problem with what he calls 'political justification' is that people often ignore good reasons for belief. Gaus seeks to provide a theory of justification that specifies whether a principle is justified or not, even if it is not

⁶² Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 193.

⁶³ Gerald F. Gaus, *Justificatory Liberalism: An Essay on Epistemology and Political Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

thought of as such. This he does by specifying, by reference to his ‘moral epistemology’, what counts as a justified principle, which shows that some principles are justified even if they remain contested.

Gaus bases his account of justification on a form of what he calls ‘weak foundationalism’, which holds that some principles are self-justifying. Reflective equilibrium rejects the possibility of self-justification, but Gaus suggests that in fact coherence theories of justification such as reflective equilibrium are themselves foundationalists, treating some beliefs as self-justifying. As such, reflective equilibrium is more foundationalist than his own proposal which ‘restricts the principle of self-justification to a smaller set of beliefs’.⁶⁴

In saying this he is however in error. Reflective equilibrium rejects the possibility of self-justification. Rawls is clear that there are no beliefs that cannot be challenged: there are ‘no judgements on any level of generality that are in principle immune to revision. Even the totality of particular judgements are not assigned a decisive role’.⁶⁵ Rawls thus makes the anti-foundationalist point that there are no epistemically basic beliefs; rather, as Rorty makes clear, all of our beliefs can be called into question, but not all at the same time.⁶⁶ Gaus’s position, which is that ‘self-justified’ beliefs have only minimal credibility, is thus very similar to the object of his criticism. Both Gaus and Rawls think that every belief, including what Gaus thinks of as ‘self-justified’ ones, can be challenged and rejected. This does not, as Connolly believes, make community foundational, though it does provide the background against which justification takes place. In the practice of justification however, no single communal standard is inviolate or immune to challenge.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 94.

⁶⁵ John Rawls, “The Independence of Moral Theory,” in Samuel Freeman (ed.) *John Rawls: Collected Papers* (London: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 286 – 302 at 289.

This idea is captured, as I discussed in chapter 1, in Rorty's idea of conversation replacing confrontation and argumentation. Critics such as James Risser associate conversation with superficiality, contrasting it with the rigour and rationality of argument.⁶⁷ However, by conversation Rorty means openness to other beliefs and opinions, even those that are not currently taken to be rational. It is therefore the ideal form of inquiry, contrasting with what he regards as the closed-mindedness of argumentation.⁶⁸ Rorty accepts the point that Gaus makes, that coherence does not guarantee worth. Given the right premises, *anything* can be made to appear rational: 'any fool thing can be made to seem rational by being set in an appropriate context, surrounded by a set of beliefs and desires with which it coheres'.⁶⁹ He sees the way to avoid such dangers is to adopt what Rawls calls *wide* reflective equilibrium. Rawls argues against the idea that reflective equilibrium is merely a matter of securing coherence between our parochial beliefs, whatever they may be, by drawing a distinction between wide and narrow reflective equilibrium.⁷⁰ Wide reflective equilibrium is more than mere coherence amongst beliefs, since it entails that we consider different conceptions of justice, notably other views of justice contained in the history of philosophy. Similarly, Rorty suggests that the quality of justification increases with the greater the number of people we take into account:

Justification gets better as the community to which justification is offered becomes more sophisticated and complex, more aware of possible sources of evidence and more capable of dreaming up imaginative new

⁶⁶ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 180 – 181.

⁶⁷ James Risser, "Rortyan Pragmatism as Hermeneutics Praxis".

⁶⁸ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* p. 171.

⁶⁹ Rorty, "Truth and Freedom: A Reply To Thomas McCarthy", p. 640.

⁷⁰ Rawls, "The Independence of Moral Theory," p. 289.

hypotheses and proposals. So pragmatists place the capacity to create at the centre of their image of humanity, superseding the ability to know.⁷¹

In saying this, Rorty is referring to justification for *liberal* societies, those which value open-mindedness, creativity and pluralism. That is, it is an account of justification for the liberal pragmatist, not justification *qua* justification; justification as a concept is itself neutral between the size and quality of the interlocutors, there being many societies that do not think there is any necessity for that community to be imaginative or sophisticated.

It is one thing to claim, correctly, that truth is tested by reference to current standards, since propositions only make sense within a language game: ‘Uttering a sentence without a fixed place in a language game is … to utter something with is neither true nor false’.⁷² It is another to say, wrongly, that those standards are all we will ever have; Rorty continues by saying that ‘this is not to say that it may not, in time, *become* a truth-value candidate’. He writes that ‘many (praiseworthy and blameworthy) social movements and intellectual revolutions get started by people making *unwarranted assertions*’,⁷³ that is, assertions that were not justified by the standards and norms of the time. In such cases, the point of such movements is to change such standards. Rorty’s commanding to us ‘abnormal discourse,’ to value new and currently (literally) meaningless statements as a way to further our efforts at ‘coping,’ indicates his strong desire for us to go beyond existing norms.

17.2 ‘Ideal rational acceptability’ as an epistemological and as a political notion

⁷¹ Richard Rorty, “Pragmatism,” in Edward Craig (ed.) *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 633 – 640 at 637.

⁷² Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 18.

For this reason, Rorty's account is rather closer to Putnam's than the latter will allow. Putnam holds on to the idea of 'ideal rational acceptability' but, unlike for example Jürgen Habermas, rejects the idea of convergence at the end of inquiry. By 'ideal rational acceptability' he is concerned to show that he means something very modest, rejecting Peirce's view of a single ideal community that could justify every true statement and the view (which he attributes to Bernard Williams) that the concept of knowledge itself leads to convergence.⁷⁴ In its place, he proposes what he thinks of as the much more modest notion of an 'ideal audience', by which he means that, for any given case, there are better and worse epistemic situations. He gives the example 'There is a chair in my study', and writes that in this case, the ideal epistemic situation to verify the truth of this statement would be one with the lights on or daylight entering the room, with good eyesight, with a mind unconfused by drugs or hypnosis, etc.⁷⁵ Rorty can, as we saw in chapter 3, agree with the idea of better and worse epistemic situations if these notions are construed politically; that is, if they are viewed as matters such as freedom of speech, access to educational opportunities, etc. In response to the claim that he cannot allow for what is true and what virtually everyone takes to be true, Rorty as we have seen denies that truth is an attainable goal. What matters, rather, is truthfulness:

[...] it does not matter whether "two plus two is four" is true, much less whether this truth is "subjective" or "corresponds to external reality". All that matters is that if you do believe it, you can say it without getting hurt. In other words, what matters is your ability to talk to other people

⁷³ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 50.

⁷⁴ Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, p. 171.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

about what seems to you true, not what is in fact true. If we take care of freedom, truth can take care of itself.⁷⁶

Putnam however, although he clearly values truthfulness and the political conditions which it requires as greatly as Rorty, seems in his example to think that there is something more to be said, since he views ‘ideal conditions’ not in political but in epistemic terms. This suggests that betterness is a matter of clarity; that is, it is suggestive of representationalism. Against this, Rorty suggests that the only content that Putnam can give to the notion of an ‘ideal epistemic situation’ is by reference to our, liberal egalitarian standards. He writes that, without truth at the end of inquiry, ‘the terms “warranted,” “rationally acceptable,” and so on will always invite the question “to whom?” This question will always lead us back, it seems to me, to the answer “*us*, at our best”’.⁷⁷ When Rorty writes of ‘*us*, at our best’, however, he claims not to mean us as those who share the same substantive views as we do. He means rather those ‘who come to hold beliefs that are different from ours by a process that we, by *our present* notions of the difference between rational persuasion and force, count as rational persuasion’.⁷⁸ Our putative future betters do not necessarily hold the same substantive beliefs that we do, but hold to a belief in the importance of freedom, that is, how it is good beliefs come to be held.

In his most recent commentary on Rorty, Putnam takes up this idea of moral progress as what *we* think of as moral progress, arguing that the idea of appealing to our future selves is ‘meaningless’. As far as I can see, Putnam’s reason for thinking it meaningless is that, simply enough, we will not be around in the future to see whatever the outcome of time

⁷⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 176.

⁷⁷ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 53, emphasis in original.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

has brought about, let alone be able to voice a judgement about it. Does ‘it make any sense’, he writes, ‘to ask whether our present construes of the American constitution are the result of arguments that the Founding Fathers would have recognised as appealing to “better versions of themselves”?⁷⁹ Rorty’s response is that yes, it does make sense. ‘It seems to me that the better sort of judges and politicians ask themselves this sort of question all the time’.⁸⁰ It makes sense because, if we give up the idea of ahistoric rational criteria, we have nothing else:

Once we give up the idea that rationality is a matter of applying ahistorical criteria (as we have to in order to deal with the fact that criteria of choice between theories and policies are as mutable as the theories and practices themselves), we have nowhere to turn except to such stories.⁸¹

Richard Eldridge concludes that for Rorty, ‘the criterion of choice among existing practices is: when they conflict, by and large choose the more recent one’.⁸² Together with writers such as Mendus who thinks that the criterion of ‘betterness’ is stability, Daniel Conway who wants a thicker description of ‘cruelty’, and (correspondingly) John Horton’s request for a thicker description of ‘liberal’, Eldridge seeks a criterion of value in Rorty’s account where one does not exist. That something is a recent development does not mean that it counts as moral progress; it is obvious for example that Rorty would agree with Putnam that a Nazi future would not be a sign of progress. Insofar as

⁷⁹ Hilary Putnam, ‘Richard Rorty on Reality and Justification’, in Robert B. Brandom (ed.) *Rorty and his Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 81 – 87 at 85.

⁸⁰ Richard Rorty, ‘Response to Hilary Putnam’, in Robert B. Brandom (ed.) *Rorty and his Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 87 – 90 at 89.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Rorty provides a criterion of choice, it is 'that which results in a free and open encounter'. However, he resists giving content to this notion in terms of principles, or in terms of epistemic conditions, criticising for example Habermas for his reliance on metaphysics to ground this principle. Rorty in contrast can only offer examples, which are, once again, ethnocentric. It is 'more like the twentieth century than the twelfth, more like the Prussian Academy in 1925 than in 1935.'⁸³

This however raises an ambiguity. This is that Rorty sometimes runs together two separate points, an account of what counts as progress for anti-foundationalism, and what counts as progress for particular human beings. In the first case, progress is whatever a community of inquirers take to be progress. Fascism is, trivially but terribly, progress for fascists. Rorty is however primarily concerned with what counts as progress on his liberal ironist view. This is what results from free and open inquiry. However, why should *that* be seen as the way to achieve progress? Clearly *we* think of it in these terms, but what if our future selves came to hold that whatever results from a different method, such as listening to religious leaders, as progress? Rorty would probably reply that *we* would not recognise it as progress. In that case however, Rorty clearly imposes limits on our better, future, selves. They are in effect only our better future selves if they continue to hold at least some of our own views, notably about fundamental equality; even if our future selves concluded that women were inferior to men, or blacks to whites, we would not regard that as a moral improvement, no matter how free or open the conversation that produced it. Because he specifies this condition, I think that he gets even closer to

⁸² Richard Eldridge, 'Philosophy and the Achievement of Community: Rorty, Cavell, and Criticism', in Alan Malachowski (ed.) *Rorty: Sage Masters of Modern Social Thought, volume 4* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), pp. 5 – 23 at 11.

⁸³ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, p. 173.

Habermas than he already thinks; that is, he ‘goes transcendental and offers principles’.⁸⁴ Clearly they are not metaphysical principles, but are rather (as Rorty notes they are in fact for Habermas) summaries of liberal views of the good.

17.3 Degrees of parochialism

Many think that Rorty’s account of ethnocentrism entails that communities need only be concerned with themselves. Criticisms of ethnocentrism are however often crucially ambiguous on important points. Richard J. Bernstein for example understands Rorty to be presenting us with a simplistic choice: ‘the only alternatives open to us are either appealing to what is local and ethnocentric or appealing to fixed permanent ahistorical foundations’.⁸⁵ Similarly, Terry Eagleton writes that for anti-foundationalists, ‘the view from nowhere is inevitably countered by the view from us alone’.⁸⁶ These comments are imprecise about what is meant by ‘local’ and ‘us alone’ respectively. ‘Local’ contrasts with ‘general’, and implies restriction and confinement. However, all that ethnocentrism entails is that standards are the standards of *some* group. This does not mean that that group has to be small, or exclusivist.

Rorty has encouraged such an understanding by focusing in some of his writings upon a particular *ethnos*, the United States of America. Taken together with his view that the notion of a universal ‘human nature’ is empty (see chapter 8), this has led to charges of conservatism and communitarianism, that he is only concerned with America and

⁸⁴ Ibid. There is I think some truth to Ronald Beiner’s observation that whenever Rorty confronts a real postmodernist, he starts to sound like Habermas and talks in terms of ‘universal consensus’, ‘cosmopolitanism’, etc. Beiner, ‘Richard Rorty’s Liberalism’, p. 30.

⁸⁵ Bernstein, *The New Constellation*, p. 242.

Americans. Interpreting Rorty in this way, Norman Geras writes that '[i]t is just not credible that the significant threshold in this matter, where compassion and solicitude will go no further, lies somewhere beyond several hundred million people'.⁸⁷ Eagleton agrees, suggesting that a consistent ethnocentrism could not sustain moral identity and solidarity even at level Rorty proposes. To be consistent, should Rorty not

[...] base his fellow-feeling on some genuine localism, say the city block?

On second thoughts, however, this is still a little on the homogenizing side, since your average city block does of course contain a fair sprinkling of different sorts of people; but it would surely be a more manageable basis for social justice than some universal abstraction like America.⁸⁸

Geras and Eagleton both fail to distinguish two quite separate ideas: the inevitable connection we have to *some* community, and loyalty we feel to a *specific* community. As a political theorist, Rorty is concerned with the former. We are all tied to some particular standards. We can certainly alter those ties, but this is to adopt some other ties, not to climb above them to the view from nowhere. In contrast, as a political commentator, Rorty is concerned about a particular *ethnos*, America.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent: Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, Žižek and Others* (London: Verso, 2003), p. 177.

⁸⁷ Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind*, p. 78.

⁸⁸ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), p. 114.

⁸⁹ Even there though, his concern is not that Americans are not somehow of greater value than non-Americans, but is rather the practical one that starting with a real community is a more productive identity to build upon than an abstraction such as 'humankind'. Geras asks whether it is more offensive if an American suffers than a non-American. Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind*, p. 72. Rorty would surely answer that of course it is not, but that his concern in writings such as *Achieving Our Country* is to speak of the political circumstances in one particular country.

In the absence of any non-ethnocentric standard of value, and by commanding the ‘we-consciousness’ that lies behind liberal democratic institutions,⁹⁰ Rorty has attracted the further criticism that his position is a form of communitarianism. Jean Hampton thinks this necessarily follows because of his denial of any ‘extrasocietal’ perspective standing over that of the shared understandings of a particular community.⁹¹ Mendus takes Rorty’s discussion of we consciousness and ‘we intentions’ to indicate a substantive and therefore potentially exclusionary form of moral identification, arguing that Rorty fails to do justice to moral and cultural plurality by imposing a homogeneous ‘we’ that threatens to substitute one form of essentialism with another: ‘an essentialism which consists in the belief that we must come to see others as like ourselves if we are to have any chance of behaving decently in the world’.⁹² The point is developed by Will Kymlicka, who criticises Rorty’s account of ‘we intentions’ for misrepresenting the nature of morality. Kymlicka believes that on Rorty’s account, ‘When we say things like “Slavery is wrong”, ... we mean “We don’t do that around here”’.⁹³ But as Kymlicka notes, when for example a Muslim woman objects that sexual discrimination is wrong, she does not mean ‘We don’t do that around here’. Far from it: she means that, *despite* its being done around here, that it is wrong. By appealing simply to communal standards, Rorty has no way of standing apart from or of criticising those standards.

Kymlicka can criticise Rorty for holding this position, I suggest, only after he has tacitly inserted three un-stated premises: that ‘we intentions’ specify, first, a geographical constituency; secondly, a substantive or ‘thick’ identification with that constituency; and third, a constituency with which one must necessarily identify. Rorty does not endorse any of these positions. With respect to the first point, he never addresses what it is that

⁹⁰ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 68.

⁹¹ Hampton, ‘Should Political Philosophy Be Done without Metaphysics?’, p. 811.

⁹² Mendus, ‘“What of soul was left, I wonder?”, p 66.

constitutes an *ethnos* at a general, abstract level, and it is clear from his various uses of that term that he does not use it to denote any particular form of community. Although he is widely criticised for his seemingly thoughtless invocation of terms such as ‘us liberals’ and ‘us democrats’, such terms show at least that ethnocentrism can equally mean geographical and moral constituencies. At other times, membership of an *ethnos* seems to be construed in extremely broad terms, as the speakers of natural languages. He writes that, on his Davidsonian view which treats language not as a medium of representation but as a tool to cope with the world, there is ‘nothing to reply to “How do you know that that’s called ‘red?’” save Wittgenstein’s: “I know English”’.⁹⁴ I suggest then that Rorty does not intend to limit ethnocentrism to a geographical notion, and there is moreover no reason to think his claims commit him to so doing. Seyla Benhabib is doubly mistaken when she writes, in a criticism of Rorty, that ‘[t]he lines between us and them do not necessarily correspond to the lines between members of our culture and those of another ... communities of solidarity may or may not be ethnically established’.⁹⁵ This comment is not only mistaken in the assumption that Rorty either defines, or is committed to defining, ‘us’ or ‘we’ geographically, but it also, in speaking of *lines* between cultures, falls back into the ‘poor man’s sociology’ that Benhabib identifies and criticises in others like Rorty.

In terms of the exact nature of ethnocentric identification, the identification of ‘we’ is, I suggest, very thin. It means primarily the ability to sympathise with those in pain and

⁹³ Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 65.

⁹⁴ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 144.

⁹⁵ Seyla Benhabib, “‘Nous’ et ‘les Autres’: The Politics of Complex Cultural Dialogue in a Global Civilization”, in Christian Joppke and Steven Lukes (eds.) *Multicultural Questions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 44 – 62 at 49.

suffering humiliation.⁹⁶ Rorty does not believe that 'we' must see others as people engaged in a common substantive endeavour, or as united in any goal beyond mutual respect for potentially very different projects. Thus I think he would readily agree with Mendus about the dangers of positing a thicker, 'essential', identity (for example being a male or a believer). He speaks of the importance of separating the question 'Do you believe and desire what we believe and desire?' from the question 'Are you suffering?'⁹⁷ This is, *pace* Mendus, clearly a very thin and therefore non-exclusivist sense of seeing others 'like ourselves'. It leaves substantive projects like pursuing one's view of the good entirely to the individual, and claims to be blind to cultural identity.⁹⁸

The standards of a particular *ethnos* are the semi-articulated, contested starting point to begin to judge the worth of things, including that community itself. It is a starting point that we accept by virtue of birth, but is not one to which we necessarily owe allegiance or respect. Critics sometimes claim the contrary, and that Rorty endorses values simply because they are *ours*; Robert Heineman writes that for Rorty, Western liberal democratic 'values are the best because they are our values'.⁹⁹ However, although nationalists such as David Miller claim to endorse such a position¹⁰⁰, it is not one that Rorty shares. He writes for example that the tunnellers under the Berlin Wall cannot be said to have been

⁹⁶ something that, as I discussed in chapter 6, he takes to be relatively fixed across cultures and historical epochs and which he thinks is a reason for the political irrelevance of multiculturalist accounts such as Kymlicka's.

⁹⁷ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 198. He has recently accepted that the account he gave in that book of the motives of those who helped Jews escaping the Gestapo was 'misguided. I think I overstated my case in those pages, and now regret them'. Richard Rorty, 'Response to Norman Geras' in Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson (eds.) *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), pp. 171 – 175 at 174.

⁹⁸ For my purposes, I will leave aside the multiculturalist concern of whether it truly is blind.

⁹⁹ Heineman, *Authority and the Liberal Tradition*, p. 190.

¹⁰⁰ For Miller, the very fact that we are born into a nation confers obligations upon us. He writes: 'The historic national community is a community of obligation. Because our forebears have toiled and spilt their blood to build and defend the nation, we who are born into it inherit an obligation to continue their work ... [it is] a community which, because it stretches back and forward across the generations, is not one that the present generation can renounce'. David Miller, *Citizenship and National Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 29.

irresponsible, because responsibility requires identification, which in this case was absent.¹⁰¹ For him, communities are of value solely insofar as they increase human happiness, and the sort of conservatism that Heineman ascribes to Rorty he in fact takes to be ‘perverse because it seems to rely upon an inference from the uncontroversial premise, every culture affords a means to human happiness, to the obviously false conclusion that human happiness can never require the modification or the extinction of a culture’.¹⁰²

We must, Rorty insists, be equally free of the idea that we should subscribe to or accept a universal human nature, and of societies that offer a comprehensive universal vision. That we are all members of many different communities – including imaginary communities¹⁰³ – and because these will inevitably create conflicting moral obligations, means that as individuals we have to choose to which communities we feel loyalty. He writes that ‘*We* have to start from where *we* are’¹⁰⁴, but he might also have written this stressing the word ‘start’: there is a crucial difference between, on one hand, starting from where we are, and, on the other, viewing this position to be the last word. Moral progress is for him a process of identification with other people, of coming to see the ‘other’ as one of us; extending ‘our sense of “we” to people whom we have previously thought of as “they”’.¹⁰⁵ Rorty’s ambiguity about the exact nature of an *ethnos* is thus I think quite deliberate, and is part of his quest to broaden the ‘we’ as far as possible. Against Eagleton’s complaint that for anti-foundationalists, ‘the view from nowhere is inevitably countered by the view from us alone’, we can agree that, in the absence of any absolute metaphysical perspective such as the view from nowhere or the ‘God’s-eye view’, we are

¹⁰¹ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 197.

¹⁰² Rorty, ‘The Communitarian Impulse’, p. 58.

¹⁰³ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 21, and Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.

¹⁰⁴ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 198.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

left with humans and human views, but note that he is mistaken for assuming that ‘us’ necessarily refers to a narrowly circumscribed number of people.

I have argued that there is no reason why communities need be politically exclusivist. Equally, there is no necessary reason why they should not be. Habermas is correct to say that there is no reason for an ethnos to be open, ‘no rational motive for expanding the circle of members’.¹⁰⁶ But again, Rorty’s point is that no sense can be given to the notion of rationality when it is conceived of as a capacity that exists separately to beliefs and desires. His hope is that with increasing leisure and security, more liberal societies will emerge which take the concern to pursue an ever-widening ‘we’ to be central to their self-image. To view Rorty as deliberately parochial is to leave out this side of his argument. One of the reasons he privileges liberalism is that he takes it to be part of liberal ethnocentrism to be suspicious of ethnocentrism.¹⁰⁷ Rorty notes that ‘the principal source of conflict’¹⁰⁸ between human beings and human communities is the belief that different people and communities have nothing to say to each other, and no need to justify their beliefs to the other. This is usually because these other people are not regarded as people to whom one should be concerned to justifying one’s beliefs; for many, the idea that one should even consider justifying beliefs to women, or atheists, is ludicrous. Against this, he writes that we should seek to justify ourselves to what he calls a ‘*competent audience*’.¹⁰⁹ This claim is coupled with the need to broaden the category of ‘competent’, so that includes people – notably women – who have typically been taken not to be competent in the relevant sense.

¹⁰⁶ Habermas, ‘Richard Rorty’s Pragmatic Turn’, p. 51.

¹⁰⁷ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 198.

¹⁰⁸ Rorty, ‘Universality and Truth’, p. 15.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9. He continues by saying that this ‘project is not only relevant to democratic politics, it pretty much *is* democratic politics’ (emphasis in original).

Rorty thus presents not a view from nowhere and immersion in the status quo, but rather commends the political option of increasing openness to new experiences, to enable us to come to see 'them' as 'us'.

[This is] not a process of setting aside our old vocabularies, beliefs, and desires but rather of gradually adding to and modifying them by playing them off against each other ... [An] alternative image [to that of "climbing out of our own minds"] is that of our minds gradually growing larger and stronger and more interesting by the addition of new options – new candidates for belief and desire, phrases in new vocabularies.¹¹⁰

Much of the confusion surrounding Rorty's account of ethnocentrism and justification stems from a misunderstanding of the meaning of ethnocentrism. It does not indicate a deliberate or conscious effort to circumscribe the number of people or the size of the community to which we seek to justify beliefs, but rather the recognition that, as beings who are acculturated into specific values, there is a limit to how far we can seek to justify those beliefs. However, once it is seen that ethnocentrism as Rorty describes it should be as open as possible, and that Rorty's preferred *ethnos*, liberalism, is characterised by him as being open and pluralistic, the negative connotations I think disappear. What D. Vaden House takes to be the conscious limitation of ethnocentrism is false.¹¹¹ Rorty's point is not that we *do not* seek to justify ourselves to other because we are ethnocentric but rather, because we are inescapably ethnocentric, encountering the world from a particular viewpoint, there are others to whom we *cannot* justify ourselves, because there is not enough overlap of belief: 'to say that we must work by our own lights, that we

¹¹⁰ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 14.

must be ethnocentric, is merely to say that beliefs suggested by another culture must be tested by trying to weave them together with beliefs we already have'.¹¹² Clearly for many views, such weaving is simply not possible.

In conclusion, it was argued in this chapter that Rorty does not make the standards of community 'foundational', when that is understood as 'final' and 'unchallengeable'. It is not possible to appeal over particular standards to a notion of objectivity, since that notion must itself be understood as a form of human solidarity, but this does not mean that those standards cannot be challenged and reformed. For him, this can be secured by securing wide reflective equilibrium. Ethnocentrism does not circumscribe the number of people to whom we owe a justification of liberalism. It does not entail a strong distinction between 'them' and 'us', but rather a continuum of variation of beliefs and desires; parochialism, that is to say, is a matter of degree. Rorty's point is not that we ought not concern ourselves with those from other communities (either geographical or ideological), but that there is a limit to how far we can do so, given the beliefs and values that constitute our final vocabulary. Nevertheless, his political concern is to hold that vocabulary open, and to commend the task of increasing solidarity, to make those currently thought of 'them' as one of 'us'. In chapter 8, I will take up the issue of how far Rorty thinks we should seek to extend the 'we', arguing that in one important sense, Rorty is a liberal universalist.

¹¹¹ D. Vaden House writes that Rorty's view of truth and rejection of metanarratives 'leads him to adopt a form of ethnocentrism'. House, *Without God or His Doubts: Realism, Relativism and Rorty* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1994), p. 7.

¹¹² Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 26.

Chapter Eight

Liberal universalism

In this chapter it is argued that, despite Rorty's hostility to universalism and his view that distinctions between relativism, absolutism and universalism are the remnants of a vocabulary that is better set aside, that he is a universalist in the sense that he believes in the desirability of extending the scope of liberal values and institutions. That is, he is critical of universalism in the Kantian sense of a pure philosophy of right, not in the aspiration to extend liberal freedoms as widely as possible, ideally globally. This point will be developed by comparing Rorty's views of the scope of liberalism with those of Brian Barry, who for many is the archetypal liberal universalist. Despite the apparent differences between Rorty and Barry concerning 'reason' and 'human nature', I will show that there is no substantive difference between their views. The view that Rorty's philosophical position debars him from being able to support measures to extend liberalism abroad is then considered and rejected. It has further been argued that Rorty presses for the extension of liberalism by tacitly relying on a metanarrative or, as John Gray puts it, a philosophy of history in which the world is fated to culminate in Western (or more specifically, North American) values and institutions. I argue against this claim, showing that whilst Rorty's account is certainly presented as a narrative, it is not teleological, and is rather an expression of his own hopes for the future. Finally, consideration is given to how Rorty thinks we might press for the extension of liberalism.

18. The ‘universal validity’ of liberalism

Brian Barry is often taken to present one of the most uncompromising statements of liberal universalism. He writes that ‘I continue to believe in the possibility of putting forward a universally valid case in favour of liberal egalitarian principles’¹ and despite his failure to persuade everyone of this validity, he continues to defend this aspiration against assorted moral and cultural relativists, for him a single category that is rapidly coming to include pretty much everyone except Barry himself. His concern to stress that universality is such that he believes that ‘[t]he point of liberalism is that it is universalistic’.² Rorty in contrast writes of his desire to ‘reformulate the hopes of liberal society in a nonrationalist and nonuniversalist way – one which furthers their realization better than older descriptions of them did’.³ By talking of ‘[a]bandoning universalism’⁴ Rorty, insofar as Barry is correct in identifying the point of liberalism to be its universality, has excluded himself from counting as a liberal.

However, Barry and Rorty use the term ‘universalism’ in different ways. For Barry, it has two aspects. First, that within a polity everyone should face an equal set of laws with no exceptions either for individuals or for groups, a position which is perhaps more accurately described by the term he employs elsewhere, impartiality. Secondly, that liberal laws should apply to everyone in the world, where ‘should’ entails the political task of commanding liberal ideals and practices, challenging and attempting to override indigenous values where these do not meet the standard. On the former point, I argued in chapter 6 that Rorty, in his opposition to multiculturalism, is in agreement with Barry. I will discuss the latter point below, but note here that Rorty’s hostility to universalism

¹ Barry, *Justice as Impartiality*, p. 3.

² Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 138.

³ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, pp. 44 – 45.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

stems from a rejection of the different, Kantian, notion of universal validity, in which unconditional obligations follow from the deliverance of pure practical reason.

18.1 Liberalism and reason

Today the idea of universal validity is endorsed by, amongst others, Thomas Nagel. Nagel argues that when one considers what one ought to do, one should adopt not merely the ‘first personal’ perspective, but the perspective such that anyone else in that situation should reach the same conclusion. For him, reason ‘should enable anyone else also to see what is the right thing for you to do against that background’.⁵ For Rorty however, reason cannot yield substantive conclusions. It is not something that structures human behaviour, but is rather an abstraction from human practices, a summary of the contingent patterns of behaviour exhibited by humans when moving around and coping with the world. There is nothing more to rationality than the practices of reasoning exhibited by human beings in specific situations: ‘we would do well’, he writes, ‘to abandon the notion of certain values (“rationality”, “disinterestedness”) floating free of the educational and institutional patterns of the day’.⁶ Liberalism is no more rational than any other form of human social organisation. There is no final demonstration of the rationality of liberalism, any more than there is of, for example, its Marxist or fascist opponents. Indeed, Rorty suggests that there is no reason to think that ‘reason’ favours liberalism at all:

⁵ Nagel, *The Last Word*, p. 110.

⁶ Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 331.

One of the best examples of a truly intercultural universal seems to be the subordination of women; this seems to be one conviction which emanates, if any conviction does, from what philosophers like to call “human reason,” rather than from any particular historical tradition or cultural background.⁷

In its place, Rorty suggests that we focus on reasonableness. Unlike reason, reasonableness is, he argues, an explicitly contextual notion, one that is necessarily informed by particular beliefs and intuitions, and is to be understood in political terms, notably of tolerance and open mindedness. There is, as he also accepts, no non-question-begging way to demonstrate the virtue of these notions.

In contrast, Barry sometimes makes claims which indicate that he thinks reason plays a substantial role in justifying liberal principles. He writes for example that liberal views of ‘consistency of treatment, according to intelligible criteria, could be not unaptly described as a demand of Reason’.⁸ Individuals equally situated should, he says, face equal tax liabilities, and their not doing so is, he continues, ‘revolting to Reason in this sense’. Whilst Rorty would certainly agree that this is *unreasonable* (in his ethnocentric understanding of the term), the capitalisation of ‘Reason’ suggests that Barry intends to make a stronger claim, that reason itself dictates the necessity of consistency of treatment. That is, he intimates something that Rorty thinks impossible, namely that reason alone could demand anything.

⁷ Richard Rorty, ‘Letter 4’, in Anindita Niyogi Balslev, *Cultural Otherness: Correspondence with Richard Rorty* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), pp. 67 – 74 at 71 – 72.

⁸ Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 16.

The double negative ‘not unaptly’ however suggests equivocation in Barry’s mind. This claim is, I suggest, an aberration in Barry’s writings, and that more generally he is clear that we cannot ask too much of the notion of reason or rationality. In response to Richard Arneson’s suggestion that states should seek to justify their policies by reference to neutral reasons, ‘reasons that all citizens can share in so far as they are rational’,⁹ Barry responds that ‘[t]his rules out either virtually nothing or virtually everything’.¹⁰ It rules out virtually nothing if it means that a person’s actions can be understood, and that others can grasp the reasoning that led to that course of action. Accepting this does not however mean that it is irrational to fail to agree that course of action to be the right one.

For Barry then, reason alone cannot yield specific moral conclusions. In his discussion of the application of his theory of justice in *Justice and Impartiality*, he writes that ‘my pretensions fall short of universality. This arises because my argument presupposes the existence of [a] certain desire: the desire to live in a society whose members all freely accept its rules of justice and its major institutions’.¹¹ He does not claim that everyone has such a desire, nor does he suggest that they are *irrational* not to possess it. His claim is rather that if people possess such a desire, then he believes he can show why they should be liberal egalitarians, and he cashes this out not in terms of rationality, but of reasonableness. And, like Rorty, he accepts that reasonableness is informed by specific notions. When he uses the Scanlonian device of reasonable rejectability, Barry is clear that the notion of reasonableness must be given content. As he says, ‘[c]learly, I have introduced substantive moral ideas in the course of talking about what could reasonably

⁹ Richard Arneson, ‘The Priority of the Right Over the Good Rides Again’, in Paul Kelly (ed.) *Impartiality, Neutrality and Justice: Re-reading Brian Barry’s Justice as Impartiality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 60 – 86 at 67.

¹⁰ Brian Barry, ‘Something in the Disputation not Unpleasant’, in Paul Kelly (ed.) *Impartiality, Neutrality and Justice: Re-reading Brian Barry’s Justice as Impartiality* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 186 – 257 at 239.

¹¹ Barry, *Justice as Impartiality*, p. 164.

be rejected. Since ... nothing can be expected from the bare notion of rationality itself, I am not in the least embarrassed by recognizing that this is so'.¹² It can be said therefore that he makes a frank admission of Rorty's point about the necessity of giving some specific content and context to universalist claims: 'I think that you have to smuggle some provinciality into your universals before they do you any good'.¹³ Indeed, in making his claim about reasonableness, Barry does not smuggle it in but is explicit about it.

18.2 Liberalism and human nature

A potential difference between Barry and Rorty remains. In arguing against multiculturalism, Barry sometimes seeks to support his claims by drawing upon a notion of human nature. This is seen in his comments about James Tully's book *Strange Multiplicity*. One of Tully's arguments in favour of multiculturalism trades on an analogy with different animals: just as different animal species need different conditions, different constitutional arrangements are held to be suitable for different human communities. In response, Barry argues that the analogy fails because humans are members of the same species. He goes on to claim that the biological similarity of human beings has moral significance, writing that:

[...] precisely because human beings are virtually identical as they come from the hand of nature – at any rate at the level of groups – there is nothing straightforwardly absurd about the idea that there is a single best

¹² Ibid., p. 8.

¹³ Rorty 'Universality and Truth', p. 23.

way for human beings to live, allowing whatever adjustments are necessary for different physical environments.¹⁴

In saying this he appears to have a means to defend the universal validity of liberalism that is not open to Rorty, for whom ‘socialisation … goes all the way down … [T]here is nothing “beneath” socialisation or prior to history which is definatory of the human’.¹⁵ Rorty has been widely criticised for this claim. Norman Geras takes it to mean that Rorty denies any sense to human nature, and criticizes him for ignoring attributes that are shared by human beings cross-culturally and trans-historically.¹⁶ For Geras, universality is premised not on a notion of reason, but on anthropology and physiology, on the existence of cross-cultural, biological and psychological characteristics that humans possess as a species. Against his interpretation of Rorty’s claim that socialisation goes all the way down, Geras observes that there is a limit to human adaptability. We cannot, for example, be socialized so as to not feel pain or hunger. Traits such as these can, he argues, be used to build up a morality that is said to be potentially universal, in contrast to Rorty’s ethnocentric project of increasing human solidarity.

It is however unclear, in pointing out that there are traits and characteristics shared by all human beings, how far Geras (and Barry) propose something that Rorty would not accept. The only content that Geras gives to human nature is that all humans are susceptible to pain and humiliation, and that our biology means that we require, amongst other things, food and shelter. With all of this, Rorty agrees. Regarding pain, he writes that :

¹⁴ Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 262.

¹⁵ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. xiii.

¹⁶ Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind*.

[...] our relation to the world, to brute power and to naked pain, is not the sort of relation we have to persons. Faced with the nonhuman, the nonlinguistic, we no longer have the ability to overcome contingency and pain by appropriation and transformation, but only the ability to *recognize* contingency and pain.¹⁷

Geras takes this to represent a contradiction in Rorty's argument: '[i]t turns out, in other words, that there *is* a human nature'.¹⁸ But since Rorty has never denied the physical inescapability of pain, this merely demonstrates that Geras's criticisms are misplaced, since he is pointing out something that Rorty has never claimed to deny.

Rorty has never denied human nature in a biological sense.¹⁹ His point is rather whether it can be given moral sense; that is, whether biological needs are sufficient to derive substantive moral commitments. This he doubts, writing that 'we have a biology, a morphology, and a neurophysiology "definatory of 'the human'." The trouble is that such a physiological definition isn't much use to us'.²⁰ This is because such a definition is consistent with different moralities. Many societies do not take the capacity to meet basic physical needs to be the important feature of a political regime. Many treat other features, such as 'male' or 'believer', as the morally significant ones, and there is nothing in the notion human nature in itself that makes the requirement for food and shelter the morally relevant category for appraising political regimes, rather than some other. One might say with Barry that an excellent test of regimes is how well they meet basic human needs, but there is no reason to think this would or should convince, for example, theists that they should use this, rather than strength of religious devotion, as the test.

¹⁷ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 40, emphasis in original.

¹⁸ Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind*, p. 109, emphasis in original.

¹⁹ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, p. 197.

²⁰ Rorty: 'Robustness: A Reply to Jean Bethke Elshtain', p. 208.

In making naturalist claims, Barry is clearer than Geras that he is simply pointing out that which is obviously true, that all humans need certain basic things. There remains the question of how this translates into laws and institutions. His phrase 'single best way for human beings to live' suggests, even allowing for the qualification of differences in the physical environment, a very specific content to the idea of what is good for human beings. This is a strong and perhaps odd claim for a liberal to make, and Barry immediately qualifies it by saying that disagreements are inevitable because of the inevitability of different views about the true religion and the absence of a satisfactory way of resolving these disagreements.²¹ Given these qualifications, it is not clear that he is able to show this is enough either to mandate liberalism, or that it rules out (amongst others) a multiculturalist approach.

It might be said that naturalism rules out certain forms of life, but that at best it is underdetermined, and can point equally towards liberal and (some) non-liberal regimes.²² However, if too much weight is placed on naturalism, it is subject to the Hobbesian rejoinder that human nature is antithetical to liberalism. Historically, claims about human nature have been used to justify all manner of inequalities and injustices. Thus, in answer to Geras's question of how setting aside notions of a common human nature could help to secure justice and freedom – 'one may be allowed to wonder how setting aside the universalist claim of a common human nature, as Rorty with currently so many others from this rather detached milieu would have us do, could conceivably help'²³ – a plausible response is that there are all manner of abhorrent beliefs that, by virtue of their regular appearance in cultures throughout history, would seem to arise from human

²¹ Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 263.

²² See Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism*.

²³ Geras, *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind*, p. 4.

nature. An example Rorty gives is the view that 'it would be better to have no son than to have one who is homosexual'.²⁴ One might seek to defend homosexuality by pointing to its 'naturalness', noting for example that homosexuality has occurred in every society across history. But it is difficult to see how this could convince the homophobe, and indeed the appearance of homosexuality in different cultures and throughout history has not meant that homosexuals have been treated equitably. Similar examples can, obviously, be given of the supposed naturalness of denying political, civil and economic rights to women.

Thus, when Barry writes of 'the possibility of putting forward a universally valid case in favour of liberal egalitarian principles', I take it that he uses the term 'universal validity' not in the Kantian sense, but is rather concerned with the task of articulating and commanding the fairness of liberalism to as many people as possible, ideally to humanity as a whole, and of justifying the legitimacy of such an enterprise in the face of criticisms from those he thinks moral and cultural relativists. His claim about human nature (and Reason) indicate, I suspect, that he sometimes thinks it insufficient simply to make claims for the political and moral advantages of liberalism. For Rorty, this is at best misleading:

The idea of a universally shared source of truth called "reason" or "human nature" is, for us pragmatists, just the idea that such discussion [of the relative advantages of different moralities] *ought* to be capable of being made conclusive. We see this idea as a misleading way of expressing the hope, which we share, that the human race as a whole should gradually come together in a global community, a community

²⁴ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. xxx.

which incorporates most of the thick morality of the European industrialized democracies.²⁵

I suggest that, given the 'thinness' of his view of human nature, together with his acknowledgement of the need to specify the content of reason, that Barry would lose nothing by agreeing with Rorty and stick to asserting the moral and political advantages of liberalism.

19. 'Universal validity' verses 'universal reach'

In various places, Rorty hints at his desire for a global polity,²⁶ but his most explicit exposition is in his essay 'Philosophy and the Future'. There he writes of the need for:

[...] a clear image of a specific kind of cosmopolitan human future: the image of a planetwide democracy, a society in which torture, or the closing down of a university or a newspaper, on the other side of the world is as much a cause for outrage as when it happens at home. This cosmopolis may be, in non-political matters, as multicultural and heterogeneous as ever. But in this utopian future cultural traditions will have ceased to have an influence on political decisions. In politics there will be only one tradition: that of constant vigilance against the predictable attempts by the rich and strong to take advantages of the poor and weak. Cultural tradition will never be permitted to override

²⁵ Ibid., p. xxxii, emphasis in original.

²⁶ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 212, Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, p. 3.

Rawl's "difference principle," never permitted to excuse inequality of opportunity.²⁷

This would, I suggest, serve as an accurate summary of Barry's ideal liberal polity too. It is universal in the relevant sense in which rights are held irrespective of the state or community in which one happens to live. It allows for diversity among ways of life, but does not allow this diversity to erode the notion of equality before the law. What matters are the limits of toleration, and these for both Barry and Rorty are laid down in a liberal framework of law.

Despite this, it is frequently argued that Rorty cannot or will not press for the extension of those advantages to countries that are not presently liberal. Those who make this criticism seem to think this because of his view that liberalism is not grounded in reason but is, rather, something that particular communities have come to adopt. From there, commentators seem to infer that commanding one form of life to another is for Rorty impossible and/or illegitimate. For explain, Richard Rumana claims that on Rorty's account, non-democratic countries may 'stumble by accident upon democracy' but cannot be persuaded into democracy by an 'outside source'.²⁸ Rumana takes Rorty to be denying any form of cross-cultural dialogue, philosophical or political, but it is unclear whether he believes this is for Rorty *impossible*, because we cannot understand other cultures enough to communicate with them, or *illegitimate*, perhaps as a form of what is called 'Western cultural imperialism'. These are, it should be noted, two different – though not necessarily inconsistent – claims: it is one thing to claim that it is impossible because there are no universally valid standards grounded in reason or human nature;

²⁷ Rorty, 'Philosophy and the Future', pp. 203 – 204.

²⁸ Rumana, *On Rorty*, p. 88, n. 29.

another to urge that it is illegitimate, the imposition of the standards of one society on to another.

19.1 The possibility of extending the scope of liberalism

There seem to be two reasons why it is felt that Rorty thinks it *impossible* to seek to extend liberal values to currently non-liberal societies. These are, first, that cultures are incommensurable and so no possibility exists of understanding between them, and secondly, that his anti-foundationalist position rules out the philosophical task of commanding liberalism abroad. Regarding the first point, I showed in chapter 7 that Rorty does not think that incommensurability entails incomprehension, nor does he endorse an ‘essentialized’ view of culture. Indeed, insofar as he makes any claims for culture, it is his view that cultures provide the raw material upon which to draw to create an ever more inclusive community; he writes that: ‘Every culture, no matter how parochial, contains material which can be woven into utopian images of a planetwide democratic political community.’²⁹

However, without endorsing value or cultural incommensurability, Rorty might still be said to deny the possibility of cross-cultural dialogue because of his rejection of a universal standard of validity. This point is argued by Paul Kelly, who claims that Rorty is unable to press for the truth or goodness of liberalism in societies other than those where it is already taken to be true or good; liberalism on his account ‘has no philosophical warrant, and cannot be the basis for a philosophical imperialism of the true

²⁹ Rorty, ‘Philosophy and the Future’, p. 204.

and the good'.³⁰ Criticising Rorty, Harvey Siegel argues that 'the contingency of a culture's beliefs, values and ideals does not entail that those beliefs, values and ideals have no legitimacy or force beyond the bounds of that culture'.³¹ Some ideals, he continues, 'are legitimately applicable, and have force, ... beyond all such cultural boundaries'.

Siegel however gives us no clear idea what he means by the terms 'legitimacy', 'applicability', and 'have force'. He gives no indication of whether he means that a standard of legitimacy or applicability exists independently of what anyone takes to be legitimate or applicable, or whether he simply thinks it morally acceptable to seek to export ideas. Similarly, Kelly's use of the term 'philosophical imperialism' is ambiguous. Philosophy can be viewed as a part of culture, much as one would identify drama as an aesthetic part; writers like John Gray regard philosophy as an aspect of culture, hence his complaint that liberalism is a manifestation of Western *cultural* imperialism.³² Alternatively, philosophy can be viewed as a separate concern, as the attempt to provide a purely rational justification for exporting the ideas – cultural, moral, aesthetic, etc. – of one community to another. Rorty as we have seen certainly rejects this second notion, thinking it philosophically incoherent. The claim that liberalism is more rational – when rationality is viewed, in Barry's term, as a 'bare notion' – than religious orthodoxy or fascism cannot be sustained. Rationality must be given content, and this will be done in the light of particular values and therefore in such a way that some will find question-begging. Like Gray, Rorty does not think of philosophy as standing outside of culture, but as a part of it ('culture' being, for Rorty, a rough assemblage of habits). Barry agrees,

³⁰ Kelly, 'Political theory in retreat?', p. 233.

³¹ Harvey Siegel, 'Multiculturalism and the Possibility of Transcultural Educational and Philosophical Ideas', in Alan Malachowski (ed.) *Rorty: Sage Masters of Modern Social Thought, volume 4* (London: Sage Publications, 2002), pp. 25 – 44 at 40.

³² Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake*, p.viii.

at least to the extent that he takes reason to require specific content, and all three are thus united in agreeing that philosophical concerns are bound up with cultural ones.

However, if by 'philosophical imperialism' is meant advocating liberalism as suitable and desirable for societies that are currently not liberal, it is clear that Rorty endorses it. He seems perfectly prepared to be a 'philosophical imperialist' if this is understood as the attempt to seek to commend and extend liberalism abroad. He speaks for example of desirability of Western organisations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Doctors Without Borders and the Peace Corps.³³ Thus, when Barry writes that cultural relativists think 'that it would be "cultural imperialism" for liberals to bring pressure to bear on regimes that violate human rights in an attempt to increase the number of people in the world who enjoy their protection',³⁴ Rorty is on this account at least not a cultural relativist.

Rorty's view is that it is appropriate to seek a global polity without needing philosophical backup from notions like universal validity. He urges that we should create, not presuppose, universality, and makes this point by distinguishing 'universal validity' from 'universal reach',³⁵ and allowing for a notion of 'transcendence' if it means transcending the present in the effort to create a better future. Thomas McCarthy seeks to make a contrast between Rorty, Jürgen Habermas and Hilary Putnam on this point by considering their different views of a purportedly non-metaphysical account of universal validity, which he terms a universal 'transcultural notions of validity'.³⁶ On this account, the issue between Rorty on the one hand, and Habermas and Putnam on the other, 'is

³³ Rorty, 'The Communitarian Impulse'.

³⁴ Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 140.

³⁵ Rorty 'Justice as a Larger Loyalty', p. 230.

³⁶ Thomas McCarthy, 'Private Irony and Public Decency: Richard Rorty's New Pragmatism', *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Winter 1990), pp. 355 – 370 at 361.

the context-transcendence of truth-claims: do they or don't they claim a validity that transcends the particular contexts in which they are raised?³⁷ McCarthy contrasts what he takes to be Rorty's position, that validity reaches 'to the borders of a language and no further', with that which he attributes to Putnam and Habermas, that 'there are no such impassable borders; truth-claims can be contested indefinitely and from an indefinite diversity of points of view, precisely because they claim unconditioned validity'.³⁸

The contrast with Putnam and Habermas is not however as strong as McCarthy suggests. Rorty would agree that there are no impassable borders insofar as there is no limit to the number of people one can talk to with the hope to reaching such agreement. He can also agree with the view that truth-claims can be forever contested from a potentially infinite number of viewpoints. This point can be seen if we contrast the notion of 'transcultural validity' with that of 'unconditioned validity'. Transcultural can be given a political sense, of seeking to extend the 'validity' of one's beliefs beyond one's culture. But it cannot be given a transcendental meaning as, in Habermas's usage of the term, the transcending of the temporal with the eternal. To transcend a social practice is for Rorty to replace it with another social practice, not with something 'unconditioned'. We can hold open the possibility that everyone may come to take a belief to be valid, and we can also hope that this possibility is someday realized; this is why Rorty accepts that universal reach, unlike universal validity, sits well with constructivism.³⁹ Thus, when Thomas Nagel urges us to 'climb outside of our own minds',⁴⁰ this stems from his view that the order of reasons is structured independently of us, serving as a foundational which regulates our thoughts and behaviour. In Rorty's view, transcendence, or climbing outside of our minds, can be given a political, but not a metaphysical or epistemological, sense.

³⁷ McCarthy, 'Ironist Theory as a Vocation: A Response to Rorty's Reply', p. 646.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Rorty, *Justice as a Larger Loyalty*, p. 230.

⁴⁰ Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, p. 9.

19.2 The legitimacy of extending the scope of liberalism

Some however maintain that notions such as universal validity are important, and cannot be reduced to purely political notions. For if they are, then the consequence, as Rorty accepts, is a morality that is mandated not by reason or human nature, but that is merely the imposition of a particular morality upon other communities and cultures. *Philosophical* imperialists (in Kelly's sense of the term) might avoid *cultural* imperialism by making a claim for universal validity; that is, by claiming that liberalism is not merely a Western invention. This Rorty denies, but Barry is more ambiguous. On one hand, he is very clear that liberalism arose in a particular context. Criticising Alasdair MacIntyre's view that liberalism was a philosophical deduction from the Enlightenment, Barry argues that this is a fiction, and points out that liberalism is a development (*not* a conscious creation) of the Enlightenment. He also argues, as we saw in chapter 6, that liberals like Rawls and Dworkin theorise from a particular historical context, the political and economic background of the New Deal settlement.⁴¹ On the other hand, he is less prepared to recognise the contingency of liberal values when engaging with explicitly contextualist writers such as Michael Walzer. In a discussion of Walzer's account of 'internal social criticism', Barry writes that what is at issue when drawing on a tradition is who can claim the *best* of it⁴², but in so doing he leaves aside the question of the standard by which 'the best' is to be measured. He himself claims to 'draw upon ordinary beliefs critically and selectively, employing a general theory of justice as a touchstone',⁴³ but he passes over exactly what is meant by that generality. Clearly it is a liberal egalitarian theory, which in

⁴¹ Barry, *Liberty and Justice*, p. 119.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁴³ Barry, *Justice as Impartiality*, p. 10.

response to MacIntyre he is keen to emphasise is itself informed by particular historical and socio-economic factors. I therefore agree with Matt Matravers's suggestion that Barry can be read in part as attempting to work out the implications of widely shared beliefs about fundamental equality.⁴⁴ This is of course to hit Barry where it hurts most for it is to say, as Matravers intimates, that his account is itself a form of Walzerian interpretivism.⁴⁵

Barry's position is thus rather closer to that of someone like Walzer than he would allow. But recalling the distinction that Barry emphasises between a writer's professed belief and the logic of their proposals,⁴⁶ his probable refusal to accept the similarity with Walzer is not in itself a reason to deny it. That he stresses his differences from such writers stems, I suggest, from a concern with what he takes to follow from their position. For Barry, as we have seen, their accounts do not allow for meaningful social criticism. They are also said to deny the possibility of judging and criticising the standards of other societies.⁴⁷ However, this concern is eliminated if it is correct to say, with Rorty, that the localised origin of beliefs carries no necessary consequences for the extension of those beliefs. It is, he argues, often the case that the best ideas are not somehow latent in human understanding or nature, but are the product of a very few people and societies: he writes that 'ideals may be local and culture-bound, and nevertheless be the best hope of the species'.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Matt Matravers, 'What's "Wrong" in Contractualism?', in Paul Kelly (ed.) *Impartiality, Neutrality and Justice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 108 – 119 at 119.

⁴⁵ Matravers goes on to say that Barry's is a more sophisticated version of Walzer's project, perhaps because he takes Barry to separate two points that Walzer conflates, attachment to a society and preparedness to criticise it. But as was argued in chapter 6, there is no reason why Walzer need be committed to denying the legitimacy and desirability of the second.

⁴⁶ Barry, 'Second Thoughts – and Some First Thoughts Revived', p. 211.

⁴⁷ Barry, *Justice as Impartiality*, pp. 3 – 10.

⁴⁸ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 208.

Is Rorty correct to say this? That he recognizes the emptiness of notions of universal validity and yet remains convinced of the desirability of exporting liberalism, has led to the charge that he is a ‘cultural imperialist’, either because, as Mark Taylor claims, that is his explicit intention,⁴⁹ or because, as Honi Haber has it, he serves as an apologist for it.⁵⁰

Those who warn against cultural imperialism however often fail to distinguish the various ways in which ideas can be ‘exported’ in an effort to justify them to more and more people. In the debate about extending liberal rights abroad, there is considerable ambiguity as to of what this extension would consist. Haber for example does not seem to recognise, let alone consider, the differences between: allowing *A Theory of Justice* to be translated into Chinese, foreign sponsorship of indigenous reformist political movements, support for cross-national organisations such as Amnesty International, humanitarian aid, international military intervention, and wars of conquest. Rorty makes this point in a response to Mark Taylor:

Taylor calls me a “cultural imperialist” for saying that “truth and justice lie in the direction marked by the successive stages of European thought”. “Imperialist” is a fighting word, in the sense that it suggests images of the Conquistador’s horses and of Gatling guns. But I bet that Taylor too thinks that truth lies in the direction that leads away from Aristotle toward Darwin, and that justice lies in the direction that leads away from Marsilius of Padua and toward John Stuart Mill.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Mark C. Taylor, ‘Paralectics’, in Robert P. Scharlemann (ed.) *On the Other: Dialogue And/Or Dialectics* (London: University of America Press, 1991), pp. 10 – 41 at 33.

⁵⁰ Haber, *Beyond Postmodern Politics*, p. 44.

⁵¹ Richard Rorty, ‘Comments on Taylor’s “Paralectics”’, in Robert P. Scharlemann (ed.) *On the Other: Dialogue And/Or Dialectics* (London: University of America Press, 1991), pp. 71 – 78 at 77.

Rorty's aim, following the line developed in chapter 6 concerning the necessity of argument and persuasion in political discussion, is to seek to persuade others of the desirability of liberal democracy. 'It is', he writes, 'self-contradictory to think of imposing democracy by force rather than persuasion, of forcing men and women to be free. But it is not self-contradictory to think of persuading them to be free'.⁵² Further, by avoiding in the main reference either to cultural relativism or cultural imperialism, Rorty makes the pragmatic point that sometimes it is good to export ideas and practices, and sometimes not, but that there is no neutral criterion that can be used to determine which is which.

The value of warnings of cultural imperialism is that they remind us that there is nothing intrinsically worthy about making claims for universality; liberals are joined with religious fanatics in viewing the scope of their doctrine to be universal. And even so staunch a universalist as Barry recognizes that the charge of cultural imperialism is not always misplaced. Writing of Victorian attitudes towards clothing, he says:

One of the complaints against about Victorian "cultural imperialism" which is well founded is that Europeans (especially missionaries) tended to attribute universal moral significance to what in fact were simply the sartorial customs familiar to them from their own culture.⁵³

That this discussion focuses only on clothing perhaps disguises the importance of this comment by one of the most universalistic of liberals. Barry would probably accept that there are many other beliefs, of Victorian missionaries and others, that have been exported, and that were not a source of enlightenment but rather were an illegitimate

⁵² Rorty, 'Philosophy and the Future', p. 205.

⁵³ Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 287.

imposition. The question therefore is not whether 'cultural imperialism' as a concept is morally legitimate, but rather how to separate different instances: how to distinguish proper moral outrage at the practices of other societies from prejudice. Barry writes that the difference is that liberalism, unlike fashion, is universally valid, but as we have seen he qualifies this claim by saying it is valid insofar as one accepts other assumptions such as the desire to reach reasonable agreement with one's fellows, and that notions of reasonableness must necessarily be filled out with specific content. He is therefore, I suggest, in fact very similar to writers as otherwise different as Rorty, John Gray and Charles Taylor, who all agree that what Barry thinks 'the right thing to do'⁵⁴ is informed by particular, Western, notions. What distinguishes Rorty from Gray and Taylor is that unlike them, Rorty thinks that this does not carry any consequences for the legitimacy of extending liberalism abroad. As he puts it, 'the demands for reform made on the rest of the world by Western liberal societies ... are simply expressions of loyalty to local, Western, conceptions of justice ... but are none the worse for that'.⁵⁵ Insofar as Barry accepts that liberalism is not a view from nowhere, that it is not neutral between every vision of the good life, and that its notions of reasonableness have to be filled out in accordance with particular values, he has joined Rorty in becoming ethnocentric. In so doing however, he has not disqualified himself in any way from making his claims for the fairness and universal desirability of liberalism.

Rorty and Barry are thus, I suggest, substantively in agreement. For Barry, liberalism is universally valid (in his non-Kantian sense of the term) not because of the demands of reason, but because it is the universally desirable means by which humans should come together to organise their lives. This view stems, as I suggested in chapter 5, from two

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 284.

⁵⁵ Rorty, 'Justice as a Larger Loyalty', p. 228.

premises: a belief in the equality of human beings and the right of every individual to choose her own ends, together with the absence of any means to determine a uniquely rational way to judge or adjudicate between those ends. Liberalism is for him not premised on views about the ultimate source of value, and values freedom and equality not for doctrinal reasons, but in order to give everyone a chance of framing their own view of the good, and the opportunity to follow and alter it. Similarly for Rorty, ‘The point of a liberal society is not to invent or create anything, but simply to make it as easy as possible for people to achieve their wildly different private ends without hurting each other’.⁵⁶ Individuals should be left free to create themselves; as Rawls puts it, for them to be free to frame, pursue and revise their own notions of the good. Rorty writes: ‘One of my aims in this book [*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*] is to suggest the possibility of a liberal utopia: one in which ironism, in the relevant sense, is universal’.⁵⁷ Ironism, standing in contrast to ‘common sense’, he takes to concern self-creation and the refusal uncritically to accept inherited descriptions, typically those of one’s community or culture. Once we give up on the notion of a single best human life, liberalism is required precisely because it provides the freedoms for us to construct our own views of the good.

20. Achieving universality

20.1 A liberal metanarrative?

That Rorty continues to argue for the universality of liberalism once he has acknowledged its contingent and local origins has led to the charge of self-contradiction,

⁵⁶ Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, p. 196.

⁵⁷ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. xv.

of his tacitly relying on assumptions that he claims to reject. John Gray and Christopher Norris are unusual among commentators because they both recognise that Rorty seeks to claim that liberalism is of universal value. Gray however claims that it is contradictory to affirm that liberalism is merely one form of life among others whilst proclaiming its moral superiority. Rorty cannot take a full-bloodedly particularist and historicist view of liberal cultures and at the same time make the standard liberal imperialist claim that western “cultures of rights” are superior to all others.⁵⁸ Gray thinks that Rorty does so because, although historicist, his is a teleological historicism. Rorty’s account of liberalism rests, Gray argues, on an Enlightenment philosophy of history, in which Western (or more accurately, North American) liberalism is the future of the species. It is a philosophy of history in which ‘local American individualist cultural forms are conceived of as the germ, or exemplar, of a universal or cosmopolitan civilisation.⁵⁹ Thus although he takes Rorty to be a relativist, his is a relativism with universalistic aspirations: Gray speaks of the ‘relativistic position of Rorty, in which liberalism is represented as only one form of life among others – if, as we shall see, a form of life with unique historical privileges’,⁶⁰ the privileges being that it is the destiny of all humankind.

Similarly, Norris thinks that Rorty relies on a metanarrative to defend liberalism. Rorty is said to raise ‘a specific set of cultural values – those of bourgeois liberalism – to the status of a wholesale teleology and universal ethos’.⁶¹ Although both he and Gray recognise that Rorty claims to renounce all metanarratives, rejecting any notion of history being shaped by forces outside of human endeavour and thus (potential) control, his account of the emergence of liberalism is nevertheless said to rest on a metanarrative.

⁵⁸ Gray, *Endgames*, p. 59.

⁵⁹ Gray, *Mill on Liberty*, p. 157.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁶¹ Norris, *The Contest of Faculties*, p. 159.

That is, Rorty implicitly relies on a teleological account to back up his postmodernist view that denies there is any such thing as teleology.

Rorty certainly likes sweeping narratives of human history, all of which he tells from the perspective of humanity having made progress.⁶² However, although he likes such narratives, his is not I suggest a *metanarrative*, a narrative underpinned by a teleological philosophy of history. To be sure, Rorty thinks that if there is a future for humanity, it will come through historical developments, not reason or human nature: he writes of his hopes of a 'historical progress that will gradually encompass all of the human race',⁶³ resulting in a worldwide moral community. This is however a hope, one which is not, I think, based upon a philosophy of history. One illustration of the tentative nature of Rorty's thoughts for the future is that, insofar as he ventures an opinion, it is both speculative and subdued. He writes for example that 'If I were a wagering Olympian, I might well bet my fellow divinities that pragmatism, utilitarianism and liberalism would, among mortals, be only faint memories in a hundred years' time'.⁶⁴ But that is, he believes, no reason to give up trying to secure a better future.

That Rorty's view of liberal democracy does not depend upon a metanarrative can I think be seen if we turn to another of Rorty's narratives, which he calls the narrative of 'the Pragmatist's Progress'.⁶⁵ This narrative, intriguingly, is a narrative of the development of how one tells narratives of development. At first, one tells stories that are, like Hegel's, teleological, in which the World Spirit, or human destiny, is working itself out through history. However, as one progresses, one can set aside such teleology as itself stemming

⁶² For a scathing critique of liberal humanism, see John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta, 2002).

⁶³ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 219.

⁶⁴ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 274.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

from the Platonic urge for certainty, and instead tell as many stories as there are hopes to express. This later stage is reached when ‘one begins to see one’s previous peripeties not as stages in the ascent toward Enlightenment, but simply as the contingent results of encounters with various books which happened to fall into one’s hands’.⁶⁶ This is the point at which one thinks of oneself, and everything else, as capable of potentially infinite re-descriptions, reflecting the diversity of human interests and needs.

This is exemplified in Rorty’s own view of the different plausible narratives of the history of Western metaphysics. He agrees with Heidegger that Platonic assumptions about the need for clarity and certainty result in pragmatism.⁶⁷ The history of philosophy shows, he suggests, that the only things that we can ever be sure about are our own needs and desires. Unlike Heidegger, Rorty thinks this a good thing but, more importantly for my argument, as no more an accurate representation of the true nature of reality than any other.⁶⁸ For him, the past provides the raw materials to draw upon, but that material provides no obligation for it to be used in any particular way. The past should be seen as ‘material for playful experimentation rather than as imposing tasks and responsibilities upon us’.⁶⁹

Rorty claims that ‘Teleological thinking is inevitable’.⁷⁰ It should however be relativist not absolutist, in the sense of explaining to our particular community how it got to the position that it has, and offering suggestions for the future. In this respect, Gray himself is similar to Rorty, insofar as he himself offers a narrative. For Gray,

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ See in particular Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, pp. 27 – 49.

⁶⁸ Rorty suggests that in his later writings, Heidegger lapsed back into this way of speaking. Ibid., pp. 64 – 65.

⁶⁹ Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 87.

⁷⁰ Richard Rorty, ‘Dewey Between Hegel and Darwin’, in Herman J. Saatkamp Jr. (ed.) *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics* (London: Vanderbilt University Press, 1995), pp. 1 – 15 at 13.

In truth, neither a return to a pre-modern world-view nor the post-modern affirmation of a distinctively modernist project are viable historical options for us. We need to consider how to think and act in a culture that has been transformed irreversibly by an Enlightenment project that has shown itself to be self-consuming.⁷¹

Thus I think that the real disagreement between Rorty, Gray and Norris is that each of them have different political hopes. Gray thinks Rorty's optimism misplaced, seeing the hopes and goals engendered by the Enlightenment to be bad ones. He writes dismissively of 'the shallow optimistic creeds of our age ... for which human evils are to be solved rather than sorrows to be coped with or endured'.⁷² Against them, he proposes what Heidegger called 'releasement', that 'we let things be rather than aiming wilfully to transform them or subject them to our purposes'.⁷³ It is their different visions of our contemporary condition and of the future, not the philosophical or historical resources that they draw (or rely) upon to justify them, that marks the difference between Rorty and Gray. Both set out their views on what they think will happen, what needs to happen, and what they would like to happen, but both seem to me to offer relativist narratives, not absolutist metanarratives.

20.2 Achieving universality through free discussion

⁷¹ Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake*, pp. 146 – 7.

⁷² Ibid., p. 18.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 153.

If we set aside reference to the universal validity of liberalism, how are we to achieve a global polity? One way would be to claim that liberal values form a part of the value system of every society, and that the task of the theorist ought to be to discover and propagate those values. Barry takes this approach to be central to Walzer's account, and rejects it. Responding to what he takes to be Walzer's view that cultures contain a distinct, homogeneous, and coherent set of values, Barry counters by pointing out that '[t]here is no such thing as a set of underlying values waiting to be discovered'.⁷⁴ In saying this, Barry is in agreement with Rorty, who dismisses the task of seeking to identify cultural universals as fruitless.⁷⁵ Moreover, in the face of the fact that most people do not believe in human equality, Rorty writes, 'So what? We Western liberals *do* believe in it, and so much the better for us'.⁷⁶ Ruth Anna Putnam has suggested that this is 'arrogant' and that one should instead say 'I believe in human equality, and I am glad that others do too'.⁷⁷ However, from what I have argued above, this amounts to exactly the same claim. Dropping the assumption of, as distinct from the aspiration to, universalism, Rorty substitutes the role of creation or invention in moral life. He writes that whilst his pragmatist account rules out the possibility of burrowing down behind appearance to reality, it proposes instead that we imagine a different, better future. As he puts it,

Instead of appealing from transitory current appearances to the permanent reality, appeal to a still only dimly imagined future practice.

Drop the appeal to neutral criteria, and the claim that something large like Nature or Reason or History or the Moral Law is on the side of the

⁷⁴ Barry, *Justice as Impartiality*, p. 5.

⁷⁵ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, p. 51.

⁷⁶ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 207, emphasis in original.

⁷⁷ Ruth Anna Putnam, 'Democracy without Foundations', *Ethics* 110 (January 2000), pp. 388 – 404 at 401, emphasis in original. Putnam goes on to say that this criticism applies to Rorty's writings of the 1980s, and that his more recent views are not open to this objection. In contrast, I do not think Rorty's position has changed. See for example Rorty, 'Universality and Truth', p. 22.

oppressed. Instead, just make invidious comparisons between the actual present and a possible, if inchoate, future.⁷⁸

In saying this, he criticises what he takes to be a further problem with Kantian universalism, its potential conservatism. He takes Kant to be hostile to diversity and self-creation: '[u]niversalist philosophers assume, with Kant, that all the logical space necessary for moral deliberation is now available – that all important truths about right and wrong can not only be stated but be made plausible, in language already to hand'.⁷⁹ However, as the case of feminism demonstrates, sometimes that language does not presently exist, and the purpose of philosophy should be to help create it.

His claim might then be summarised as saying that if a society contains values upon which the liberal can draw they should do so, but that if it does not, the liberal should refuse to work within the boundaries of that moral world and seek instead to create her own. This position, I take it, is in accord with Barry's view that political philosophers may 'with luck eventually extend the boundaries of what is politically thinkable'.⁸⁰ There is for Rorty no difference between saying that liberalism ought to be universalistic, and that it ought to be responsible to its own, liberal, traditions, since that includes the attempt to try to extend liberal values to countries and communities that are currently non-liberal. Notions such as 'universal validity' are superfluous, serving at best as a somewhat misleading description of a political aspiration.

Accepting the partiality of liberalism has, finally, the advantage of consistency. Far from being a weakness, we can say that acceptance of the partiality of one's views helps to get

⁷⁸ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, p. 217.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁸⁰ Brian Barry, 'Spherical Justice and Global Injustice', in David Miller and Michael Walzer (eds.) *Pluralism, Justice, and Equality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 67 – 80 at 80.

around some of the apparent inconsistencies presented by some claims to universalism. David Miller suggests that if we are to take the claims of universalists at face value, they are inconsistent in their own terms. It is, he believes, inconsistent to claim to be cosmopolitan whilst simultaneously regarding the principle of national autonomy to be so strong that cosmopolitans are invariably opposed to imposing their beliefs on others.⁸¹ If there is a duty to protect basic rights wherever they are, universalists should not rule out what Miller terms 'benevolent imperialism'.⁸² Miller claims that Barry in particular draws back from the full conclusions of complete universalism, which for Miller require for example redistribution of wealth between nations by taxing GDP and mineral extraction.⁸³ He accepts that a 'universalist approach to ethics might still be the correct one',⁸⁴ but his point is that either one accepts this, in which case one must fully accept the conclusion that national boundaries are of no intrinsic significance, or, as he undertakes to do, proposes a particularist position and sees if it can be defended. He thus finds universalists guilty of failing to live up to their own professed standards. However, if writers like Barry are prepared to eschew reference to the inherent universal validity of liberalism, and recognise its contingent historical emergence whilst not allowing this to stop them from seeking to show liberalism to be the best form of life, and from seeking to convince other people and communities that this is the case, we can say that there is nothing inconsistent with for example attempting to spread human rights but at the same time not seeking to tax mineral extraction. If the desire for universality is held as a political aspiration, one coloured by reference to what can and cannot be achieved given the circumstances that obtain in the world as we find it, then such things are not intellectual inconsistencies but are born rather

⁸¹ Miller, *On Nationality*.

⁸² Ibid., p. 77. To be sure, Barry does not necessarily rule it out. See for example *Culture and Equality*, p. 138 – 139.

⁸³ Miller, *On Nationality*, p. 105, n. 33.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 64.

of the recognition that in practice liberalism is unable to be defended and 'exported' to that extent.

In conclusion, Rorty is a liberal universalist in the sense that he believes it desirable to seek to commend and extend liberal values and institutions to non-liberal countries. He does not think that one can or should attempt to do so by making appeals to reason, or to human nature, but rather that liberals should do so by suggesting that liberalism is preferable to any alternative. He is untroubled by claims of blanket 'Western cultural imperialism', suggesting that, depending on the ideas to be exported, cultural imperialism can be a good or a bad thing. In the case of liberalism, he is emphatic that, despite the specific origins of liberalism, it is desirable to export it.

Chapter Nine

Conclusion

This thesis set out to defend Rorty's account of political liberalism. It did so by rebutting the widely held view that Rorty's anti-foundationalism, and consequential ironism, either consciously proposes, or logically entails, the denial of ethical commitment and the practice of moral justification. Anti-foundationalism, it is said, renders obsolete normativity in political theory, ruling out any role for ethical theory or social criticism. Rorty's ethnocentrism is held to exclude the possibility that the practices of communities might be judged morally unacceptable, either from within (as a corollary of his account of morality as 'we intentions') or from without, since there is no extra-societal standard other than the agreement of a community.

I have argued, against critics who view Rorty as reducing moral commitment to an unacceptably parochial concern, that this is to misunderstand both what is entailed by anti-foundationalism, and what Rorty commends in his own writings. I have argued that these claims are inconsistent with his own stated position, and that none necessarily follows from the logic of that position. Rather, I have sought to show how, despite rejecting notions such as universal validity, as well as any constructive role for truth, Rorty can still claim that values have legitimacy beyond their being merely what we think, and that they can be extended to 'forms of life' other than those whose members already ('happen') to value them.

It is for Rorty a decisive step in human maturation to accept the ‘anti-authoritarian’ view that there is no way to turn away from those obligations by seeking recourse either in monotheism, or secular counterparts such as Enlightenment Rationalism and scientism. Concern with the latter, it was argued, is a half-way between the need for religious certainty, and a fully matured humanity that can thrive without backup from non-human authorities. Political liberalism is for Rorty the full application of anti-authoritarianism, the view that we owe no respect or obligation to anything other than our fellow human beings.

It was then argued that ‘conversation’ cannot be guided by notions such as the natural order of reasons or of universal validity. In the absence of the sort of foundations Rorty takes philosophers typically to have sought, many claim that Rorty reduces truth, goodness, etc. to a matter of what we *happen* to think around here. I have argued that this inference is a mistake, and that it represents a misunderstanding of Rorty’s ‘ethnocentric’ position. For him, what matters are freedom and equality, notions that must be construed politically, in particular as the sort of opportunities provided by liberal democracies (at their best). The removal of any philosophical pre-conditions of such notions does not, it was argued, make our commitments morally arbitrary or relativistic. Conversation and argument take place by considering the concrete advantages and disadvantages of proposals, not their philosophical status. The claim of moral arbitrariness was seen to fail because it has no contrastive force; there is nothing that is *not* a historically contingent belief.

It has been suggested that in advocating ironism, Rorty removes any basis for moral commitment or conviction. Awareness of contingency will, he believes, leave us with fears that we will be unable to dispel. However, against the fears of writers like Alasdair

MacIntyre who think the ironic attitude to be one of detachment, it was argued that the sort of global detachment that ironism (following Rorty's definition) seems to imply is impossible, and that ironic doubts concern particular parts of a vocabulary, not vocabularies as a whole. It is this doubt that makes, I have suggested, ironism cohere well with the liberal desire to alleviate cruelty. Once 'cruelty' is construed as a category, one which is open and ideally continually revised in order to take account of hitherto unperceived instances of cruelty, it is clear that the ironist's interest in other vocabularies comes together with this concern. That is not to say that ironism leads inevitably to liberalism. It is to suggest however that a fully-fledged liberalism should be an ironic one.

Turning to address the nature of Rorty's political liberalism, I have argued that liberalism is not something that 'just happens' to be valued 'around here'. Critics have claimed that since what is believed 'around here' is *merely* what we think, there is no possibility of justifying those beliefs either to others or to ourselves. Rorty is held to have given up on justification by claiming either that justification falls out of the picture altogether, or that the beliefs and practices of particular communities are somehow self-justifying. I have rejected this reading, distinguishing justification that will persuade all-comers from everyday justification as answerability to reasonable requests for explanation. Justification is important, but it is inescapably tied to the standards of a particular *ethnos*. Certainly, liberalism resulted from contingent historical events, not the inevitable unfolding of history. It can however be justified, both by invidious comparison with non-liberal regimes and, more positively, by showing that its emphasis on individual liberty is suited to societies whose members belong to more than one form of life.

I then turned to address the role of the political theorist. Rorty argues that political theorists ought to be concerned not with justifying liberal democracy as a philosophical

deduction from what has come to be called the ‘Enlightenment Project’, but with offering a philosophical articulation of the practices of liberal societies, in so doing drawing attention to the ways in which the practices of those societies fail to live up to their self-image. Rorty’s position was examined and defended against two objections, those of incoherence and of critical impotence. It was then contrasted with Michael Walzer’s account of ‘internal social criticism’ which, though very similar, misrepresents the debate between political theorists and social critics.

The parochialism implicit in ethnocentrism was taken up in a consideration of to whom it is that Rorty thinks we should be concerned to justify ourselves. I considered how an ethnocentric account of justification can escape making the standards of a particular *ethnos* the last word. It is not possible to appeal to notions of objectivity, since that notion, understood – as it must be – as inter-subjectivity, is itself informed by human practices and beliefs. However, drawing on Rawls’s account of wide reflective equilibrium, we can seek to increase the scope of our *ethnos*.

Finally, I examined the scope of Rorty’s claims for liberalism, arguing that although we cannot justify the universality of liberalism by drawing upon ‘human nature’ or ‘reason’, the two notions that have traditionally been called upon when attempting to do so, Rorty holds to the possibility of extending liberalism beyond the frontiers of one’s community. Despite his hostility to Kantian universalism, he is a universalist in the sense that he believes in the desirability of extending liberal values and institutions, ideally globally. I examined how he suggests this should be done, by relying on political, not philosophical, arguments.

I have suggested that a correct understanding of ethnocentrism leaves a robust and refreshed account of liberalism, one which is freed of the legitimate criticisms that have been levelled against other accounts of liberalism.

The most significant point that emerges from this thesis, beyond what I hope is a more accurate and nuanced interpretation of Rorty's position than is standard, is that it raises questions about the self-image of philosophers and political theorists. Notions like 'rationality', 'logical', and 'human nature' are used freely in political philosophy, but it is unclear what substantive, as distinct from rhetorical, work these comments do. To give one final example, Brian Barry argues that logic can play a substantive determining what counts as justification. He writes that it is not sufficient to justify one's actions simply by appealing to one's culture; were one to point out that something is part of one's culture, this observation, Barry writes, 'has no bearing on the logical structure of your defence of your actions'.¹ Clearly though, for some, pointing out that something is part of the cultural practice of one's community *is* to justify it. Members of religious communities often appeal to cultural (as distinct from religious) traditions in order to justify their practices. For Orthodox Jewish men, the wearing of a *kippah* (skull cap) outside Synagogue has no religious justification in the Torah, but is rather a cultural practice, one that is logically justified in those terms. Logic alone cannot establish whether or not any particular factor has a bearing on justification; that is, logic cannot determine what counts as the logical structure and defence of one's actions.

Barry really means that culture *should* play no role in justification, and to make his point designates as 'illogical' those who think otherwise, persons who include 'the ranks of ...

¹ Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 253.

political philosophers who have succumbed to cultural relativism'.² The tired charges of relativism and irrationalism are however best put to rest. The term 'relativist' is typically used as a term of condemnation rather than for any clearly defined substantive issue,³ marking out and castigating those who one thinks have reached a different conclusion from oneself. For example, Barry claims that John Gray's account of strong value pluralism is 'another name for moral relativism',⁴ despite Gray explicitly claiming otherwise.⁵ Relativism conflates the empirical truth that different people hold different beliefs with the normative claim that some beliefs are right and others wrong, some true and others false, some moral and others immoral. I do not think anyone genuinely denies any of these normative positions. The issue is rather how far we are prepared to go in challenging other people's beliefs, and what resources we can draw upon to do this. People differ over how far judgments of goodness and rightness extend – to the boundaries of a particular society, or beyond – but again, I doubt that anybody falls crudely into rigidly affirming either. We all think that some things are simply and absolutely wrong, and that other people and communities that do not agree with us are by extension wrong, mistaken, or immoral. Barry himself sums this up nicely when he writes: 'virtually everybody agrees that there are some universal standards and also that there are some matters that are subject to culturally variable norms ... The question is, where does one end and the other take over?'.⁶ Significantly, Walzer has recently made

² Ibid., p. 284.

³ This can in part be seen in that most people accused of relativism do not identify themselves as relativists; Walzer and Paul Feyerabend being rare exceptions, both with rhetorical purposes of their own. In *The Last Word*, aside from a few quotations, Nagel does not argue against specific 'relativist' philosophers, but attacks a generic 'relativism' broadly conceived. The problem with this broad-brush approach is that the writers Nagel cites as relativists – Hilary Putnam, Bernard Williams, and Rorty – are all different. In his book *Renewing Philosophy*, Putnam accuses both Rorty and Williams of relativism, but for different reasons. In turn, writing of Williams' paper 'The Truth in Relativism', Rorty says that 'I would hold that there is *no* truth in relativism'. Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, Truth*, p. 31 n.13, emphasis in original.

⁴ Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 133.

⁵ Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake*, p. 70.

⁶ Barry, 'The Muddles of Multiculturalism', p. 60.

the same point: 'We choose within limits, and I suspect that the real disagreement among philosophers is not whether such limits exist – no one seriously believes that they don't – but how wide they are'.⁷ Both claims seem to be the same as Rorty's ethnocentric one, that the difference between pluralism and cultural relativism is 'the difference between pragmatically justified tolerance and mindless irresponsibility'.⁸ Rorty would agree with both Barry and Walzer that we should be mindful of both concerns. There are of course limits to tolerance; we should avoid, he writes, the situation where we have become 'so open-minded that our brains have fallen out'.⁹ But the limits to tolerance are not set, as Nagel for example seems to believe, from a neutral perspective that constitutes the 'last word', but from a specific and ever-changing viewpoint.

The difficulty in locating Rorty's own position in many contemporary philosophical debates reflects, I suggest, the inadequacy of many of the categorisations employed in those discussions.¹⁰ Rorty himself has lamented the continuing interest shown in the 'communitarian-cosmopolitan debate',¹¹ and the so-called 'liberal-republican debate' noting, against Michael Sandel, that people are concerned both with individual liberty to choose their own ends, and the need for citizen participation in government. 'They see no need to choose between these two definitions. Any society that does not meet *both*

⁷ Walzer, *On Toleration*, pp. 5 – 6.

⁸ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. 276.

⁹ Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p. 203.

¹⁰ The ambiguity about Rorty's position is captured in the title of Andrew Jason Cohen's paper, 'On Universalism: Communitarians, Rorty and ("Objectivist") "Liberal Metaphysicians"'. In that paper, Cohen argues that Rorty is not a communitarian, but that his liberalism is insufficiently robust.

¹¹ That Rorty offers an alternative to that debate is proposed by Yong Huang in his paper, 'Political Solidarity and Religious Plurality: A Rortian Alternative to Liberalism and Communitarianism', *Journal of Law and Religion* 11 (1994), pp. 499 – 534. Rorty however, as has been argued throughout this thesis, clearly does not view his position as an *alternative* to liberalism. For Rorty's rejection of the 'cosmopolitan-communitarian debate', see his 'Response to Molly Cochran', p. 200.

requirements, they think, hardly deserves to be called “free”.¹² Clearly he is not alone in calling into question debates that are taken to be central to political theory; Walzer and Charles Taylor have for example both questioned the liberal-communitarian debate.¹³ Following Rorty, I think this critique applies much more generally. In particular, I have suggested that Rorty’s position demonstrates the artificiality of the contrast that is held to obtain between liberals and those who would draw on the ‘shared understandings’ of their own societies. Walzer is mistaken to suggest that his proposals amount to a challenge to how political theory has been practiced, for political theory in the case of writers like Rawls is itself the attempt to articulate the values latent in liberal societies. Barry’s fears that Walzer’s approach is ‘dangerous’ are correspondingly mistaken, since that approach characterises his own project too.

In making this claim, there is of course the danger that I am overlooking significant differences between theorists and their positions. John Searle believes Rorty does just this. In a discussion of Rorty’s view of the similarity between John Dewey’s views of higher education and the current situation in North American humanities departments, Searle writes that Rorty’s position reminds him ‘of a remark of Wittgenstein’s, where he says that if you wrap up different kinds of furniture in enough wrapping paper you can make it all look the same shape’.¹⁴ But we can be mindful of this concern whilst not refraining from challenging issues and debates, even those where battle lines have long been drawn. Keeping with the self-image of political theorists, despite his trenchant criticisms of Walzer, Barry draws on ideas current and latent in society to back up his claims for egalitarianism. He refers to the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and

¹² Rorty, ‘A Defense of Minimalist Liberalism’, p. 117, emphasis in original.

¹³ Charles Taylor, ‘Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate’, in his *Political Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 181 – 203; Michael Walzer, ‘The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism,’ *Political Theory*, 18 (1990), pp. 6 – 23.

¹⁴ Richard Rorty and John Searle, ‘Rorty v. Searle, At Last: A Debate’, *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 2 (1999), pp. 20 – 67 at 30.

of the Citizen, the American Declaration of Independence, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹⁵ He does so in a selective way, and, in the case of the French and American declarations, by giving a particular interpretation of them: as is frequently observed, the framers of those documents certainly had no thought that the equality they sought to enshrine would include women or non-whites. Barry does not say that current standards are irrelevant, rather that the best should be made of them. 'Moral reformers, however radical, never start completely from scratch. Rather, they reject some existing ideas while at the same time extending the scope of increasing the importance of others'.¹⁶ This I take to be in essence the same claim as Walzer's when he writes that 'We become critics naturally, as it were, by elaborating on existing moralities and telling stories about a society more just than, though never entirely different from, our own'.¹⁷ Barry would probably object that Walzer is unable to join him in providing such a selective interpretation but, as I have suggested, there is no reason why not. Barry's point is that one connects with current understandings of justice, utilizing those understandings to articulate a better conception of justice, and Walzer seems to be committed to the same thing.¹⁸

It may seem strange and perhaps even perverse to claim as I have that Rorty's position offers greater clarity for political philosophers. For he is critical of those analytic philosophers who present themselves as seeking greater precision, or as clarifiers of concepts.¹⁹ This, he argues, is merely a matter of philosophers complimenting themselves, assuming that they are more clear-sighted than historians, lawyers, physicists or literary

¹⁵ Barry, *Culture and Equality*, p. 284; Barry, *Justice as Impartiality*, p. 8.

¹⁶ Barry, *Liberty and Justice*, p. 115.

¹⁷ Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, p. 65.

¹⁸ More generally, Barry makes the Wittgensteinian point that if we use the word 'justice' to describe something that no one recognizes as justice, there is no reason to use the word justice at all. Barry, *Liberty and Justice*, p. 115.

¹⁹ For a recent expression and endorsement of this idea, see Adam Swift, *Political Philosophy*, p. 4.

critics. Their doing so is not only arrogant, but moreover rests on a mistaken view that concepts *need* clarifying. On Rorty's Wittgensteinian view, a concept is simply the use of a word, and the 'conceptual confusion' from which philosophers like Swift seek to save us are simply alternative uses of words. Nevertheless, I suggest that the self-image of theorists is important, and that in thinking about this image Rorty has something of significance to offer. As we saw in chapter 3, Rorty agrees with Alasdair MacIntyre that contemporary moral discussion is an inconsistent mixture of notions – notably 'reason' and 'human nature' – that depend on an Aristotelian worldview, and a mechanistic and Darwinian view that implicitly refutes it. In urging that we discard the last vestiges of the Aristotelian vocabulary, we would not give up on notions such as reason,²⁰ but would treat them not as philosophical honorifics, something that we but not our opponents possess, but rather as moral virtues, of open-mindedness and tolerance.

This is, further, how Rorty might respond to critics of the Enlightenment like MacIntyre and John Gray. For Rorty, in their respective accounts of 'the Enlightenment project', these writers conflate two different ideas: that social and political life ought to be reasonable, guided by principles that all who live under them can – or at least could – freely endorse; and that those principles have some ahistoric independence or rational grounding in something like the Kantian moral law. There is no reason to think that the incoherent second idea negates the aspiration to the first. For MacIntyre, the Enlightenment was 'the project of founding a social order in which individuals could emancipate themselves from the contingency and particularity of tradition by appealing

²⁰ One way of summarising this position is that I suspect Rorty would agree with an analogy used by Daniel Dennett in his discussion of free will. Dennett argues that concluding that free will is a myth because we learn that it does not exist in the form in which it has traditionally been thought of is like concluding that love does not exist because one learns that it is not caused by being struck by one of Cupid's arrows. Daniel Dennett, *Freedom Evolves* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), pp. 222 – 223. This analogy accurately captures Rorty's view of notions like 'reason', 'truth', 'clarity', etc.

to genuinely universal, tradition independent norms',²¹ providing 'a rational vindication of morality'²² free from the contingent influences of traditional forms of life. Similarly, Gray understands the Enlightenment project to be displacing 'local, customary or traditional moralities, and of all forms of transcendental faith, by a critical or rational morality'.²³ It seems to me that both contain ambiguities over important terms. Tradition-independent rational principles are of course what Kant thought was delivered through the exercise of pure practical reason. But we could follow Rorty and reject any idea of a norm reflecting an independent moral order, and say simply that it has to be separate from the whims of political leaders, open to scrutiny by a free press, subject to democratic decision making, etc. No sense can be made of transcending contingency with something ahistoric, but we can of course scrutinise the contingencies that made us who we are, and that seek authority over us.

I am not suggesting however that a Rortyan account of political theory would alter the *practice* of political theorising. Although he seeks to overcome many of the oppositions of philosophy, I do not think that Rorty wishes to alter the substantive role of the political theorist. He is sometimes compared to Michael Oakeshott, notably by adopting Oakeshott's notion of 'conversation', but this comparison should not be pushed. Philosophy has for Oakeshott no social function. It cannot illuminate practice, or offer any help in practical matters; it is rather a 'well-considered intellectual adventure recollected in tranquillity'.²⁴ For Rorty in contrast, philosophy is practical or it is nothing; it is its relevance that makes Rawls's writings for example important and 'non-fantastical'. It is an attempt to improve the human condition, albeit a rather peripheral one. Philosophy ought to be 'a

²¹ Quoted in Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake*, p. 149.

²² MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 50.

²³ Gray, *Enlightenment's Wake*, p. 123.

²⁴ Michael Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. vii.

matter of fulfilling human needs and interests',²⁵ not, as Oakeshott maintained, 'an escape [from practical life], perhaps the only complete escape open to us'.²⁶

In part, it is this relegation (although not negation) of philosophy that has led to Rorty's writings being thought of as dangerously subversive of notions of truth, justification, or the importance of reason giving. I hope to have shown that this is not the case, and that these notions survive for the better in the form in which he recasts them. I suggest that in terms of the practices of political theory, he would not view himself as altering those practices, but as offering a clearer description of what it is that we are doing when we theorise. To illustrate, although she is critical of Rorty, Chantal Mouffe writes that, in contrast to most liberal political theorists, he shows much greater awareness of the limitations of theorising about politics, and of the need to seek and secure allegiance to democratic principles and institutions. Mouffe claims that, unlike Rorty,

Most liberal theorists are bound to miss the relevance of that kind of reflection because they operate with a metaphysical conception which sees the individual as prior to society, bearer of natural rights, utility maximizer or rational subject – according to the brand of liberalism that they follow – but, in all cases, as abstracted from social and power relations, language, culture and the whole set of practices that make agency possible.²⁷

²⁵ Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, p. xxvii.

²⁶ Michael Oakeshott, *Experience and Its Modes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933), p. 3.

²⁷ Chantal Mouffe, 'Deconstruction, Pragmatism and the Politics of Democracy', in Chantal Mouffe (ed.) *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 1 – 12 at 5 – 6.

This picture is however a caricature of most actual liberal theorists. Few for example operate with a conception of the self existing prior to society and abstracted from the things that Mouffe lists. But clearly some, such as Rawls, have said things that have led to their being interpreted in this way. Rorty writes of the need to avoid such misunderstandings by not carelessly evoking notions like 'the self'. Liberals should not, he writes, allow themselves to be encumbered by the idea of an unencumbered self, 'an existentialist, Californian, self which can somehow sit back and choose its ends, values, and affiliations without reference to anything except its own momentary pleasure'.²⁸ My claim is not that Rorty differs from other liberal theorists in this way, but that he is far more prepared to follow through on what that acceptance entails for the intellectual resources upon which we are able to draw.

²⁸ Rorty, 'A Defense of Minimalist Liberalism', p. 118.

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