Bob Brandom, University of Pittsburgh
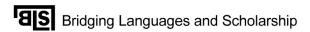
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EVISITING
ICHARD
ORTY

Edited by
Pedro Góis Moreira

Bob Brandom, University of Pittsburgh

Revisiting Richard Rorty

Edited by
Pedro Góis Moreira
Catholic University of Portugal

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Table of contents

Introduction

This collection of papers was born out of a conference organized on 25-26 September, 2017, at the University of Minho, Portugal, where we sought to honor the American philosopher Richard Rorty ten years after his death. Rorty is considered one of the most original philosophers of the last decades and has generated warm enthusiasm in many intellectuals and students, both within and outside of the field of philosophy. As the reader can see in this text, Rorty scholarship has expanded beyond the Anglo-Saxon world. Our conference and this text include valuable work in three languages — English, Portuguese, and Spanish — and is a small example of the reach of Rorty's thought only ten years after his death. Furthermore, since Rorty's impact was also due to his controversial thinking – a thought emancipated from contemporary academic rules – he also sparked heated controversy, thus justifying Christopher Voparil's claim that "Rorty criticism has gone beyond a cottage industry."[1]

The *Revisiting Richard Rorty* conference replicated this double movement: on the one hand, some of the essays presented there offered developments on trails opened by the American philosopher, and others, in contrast, emphasized a critical position in relation to Rorty's work and to the premises he established in the field of pragmatism. The result of this was the continuation of a goal Rorty always pursued: the *Rortian conversation*, which grew and crossed the Atlantic, transcending the boundaries between the so-called analytical and continental traditions.

Rorty said that he was continually inspired by the Hegelian motto "*die Philosophie ist ihre Zeit in Gedanken gefaßt*" ("Philosophy is its own time apprehended in thoughts"). In line with this, his philosophy always tried to remain close to the spirit of the time and to the recognition of the contingency that necessarily constrains us. As János Salamon humorously commented.

Most of us wouldn't recognize the spirit of the age if it passed us on the street, but that's only because most of us aren't great thinkers. Sometimes, it's the spirit of the age that fails to recognize the great thinker and then has to make a belated fuss catching up with him. (…) The American philosopher

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[1] Christopher Voparil, "On the Idea of Philosophy as Bildungsroman: Rorty and his Critics," in *Contemporary Pragmatism*, vol. 2, nº 1, 2005, 115-133: 115.

Richard Rorty had a much less dramatic encounter with the spirit of the age: he and it grew up together, so to speak.[2]

Rather than leaving us a philosophy frozen in time and hermetically closed, Rorty's legacy consists, above all, in having left us with the tools to think the world and its ideas even beyond our times – as if, by recognizing our contingency, we would then have a way to think beyond this very contingency. This has allowed many of our authors to take Rorty as a starting point in order to think about the challenges of today's society – a society marked by the emergence of strong figures, accusations of fake news, and the recognition of a post-truth era in which language plays a central role.

Like Roland Barthes, Richard Rorty, too, seemed to suffer from a certain kind of disease: "I have a disease: I see language."[3] However, this linguistic omnipresence, in the hands of Rorty, showed the revolutionary power of language and the importance of strong poets, thus acquiring the dimension of a conversation. If it is true that we are captives of language – and of *a* language – this does not mean that we are condemned to a contingency, to a truth, to a worldview. After all, to be human is, above all, to have this incredible capacity for conversation, which inevitably entails the possibility of change. It is in this sense that we could say that Rorty was always in a balance between instincts that were simultaneously conservative and revolutionary – as if he was constantly surprised by the presence of these two facets in himself and within the world.

It was the respect for this legacy that motivated the heartfelt homage we wanted to offer him. Even though it is difficult to speak of "a" Rortian philosophy, once we become familiar with the intellectual tools that Rorty made available to us – the feeling of openness, of distance, and of intellectual elevation that result from the recognition of our contingency, from the reflection on our historicity, and from thinking thought as a conversation – then we end up giving continuity to a way of thinking and to a tradition that did not want to become one in the first place. In this way, we end up valuing, above all, Rorty's incredible ability to remind us that it is always possible to have "something new under the sun."[4]

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[2] János Salamon, "The Afternoon of a Pragmatist Faun. Richard Rorty (1931-2007)," *in Eurozine*, August 7, 2007.

[3] Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 161.

[4] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Thirtieth Anniversary Edition (Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 389.

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The text that opens this collection was also the very last essay presented at the *Revisiting Richard Rorty Conference*. In "Rorty on vocabularies," Robert Brandom writes a chapter with several connections to his essay in *Rorty and his Critics*, "Vocabularies of Pragmatism." He explores Rorty's vocabulary of instrumental pragmatism, its resulting "vocabulary vocabulary," and Rorty's public/private distinction. Brandom also appears at the very end of this collection, with an interview given at the conference in Braga: "Remembering Richard Rorty: an interview with Robert Brandom."

The second text opens a section dedicated to politics. Ronald A. Kuipers, in "Successful prophecies, failed hopes? Richard Rorty and the demise of social justice," proposes an alternative to Rorty's "predictions" in *Achieving our Country*. Instead of seeing these "predictions" as a kind of foreknowledge, Kuipers suggests that we should understand them as a warning in the style of the biblical prophets and that they enable us to adjust our actions to our political hopes.

William Max Knorpp also retrieves these passages from *Achieving our Country* and, in "Richard Rorty's "strongman" prediction and the cultural left," he addresses Rorty's argument in order to understand in what way the Cultural Left should be held accountable for the emergence of the "strongman."

Agnė Alijauskaitė touches on a similar subject in "Achieving our cultural left? Rorty's argument," where she addresses, on the one hand, whether the 2016 US election marks the reemergence of class politics and, on the other hand, the extent to which class politics is compatible with Rorty's anti-foundationalism.

Following is an essay from Aldir Carvalho Filho. In "A fraternidade, depois dos anos sombrios. A redescrição rortyana de uma consigna esquecida," Aldir explores Rorty's "Looking Backwards from the Year 2096" (or, as it was originally titled, "Fraternity Reigns"). Through this analysis, he seeks to recover the value of fraternity that, as he notes, is the forgotten "third" value of the French Revolution's "liberty, equality, fraternity."

Two texts conclude this political section and address the relations between Rorty and Jürgen Habermas. On the one hand, Hernán Medina-Botero presents, in "Democratic politics without truth," a rebuttal of two criticisms from Habermas against Rorty's argument that truth is not relevant for an inclusivist political project. On the other hand, Juan Ignacio Cardona Giraldo also explores this question in "Educación para la democracia: una arista del debate Rorty – Habermas." He describes the exchange of arguments between both philosophers regarding the connection between truth and democracy

and, then, examines their distinctly different approaches to what constitutes an adequate education for democracy.

Thanks to Pietro Salis' "Varieties of anti-representationalism," we shift to a set of texts concerned with epistemological issues. Salis draws two notions of anti-representationalism (one with "weaker" claims, and another more thorough and radical in its anti-representationalism), shows how Rorty adopts this second form of anti-representationalism and argues that this second version entails difficulties that are avoided by the first.

In "Será que é dispensável falar da verdade de algo?" Bernhard Josef Sylla examines whether it is really necessary to stop talking about truth in order to achieve Rorty's goal, i.e., less cruelty and less dogmatism. In alignment with criticisms from Strawson, Davidson and Habermas, Sylla argues that Rorty's philosophy can incentive us to be open and anti-dogmatic without having to drop truth-talk altogether.

In "Realism and relativism: The Rorty, Putnam debate," David Haack explores the arguments of Rorty and one of his "most sophisticated critics," (p. 155) Hillary Putnam. Beginning with Putnam's arguments that Rorty's conception of "warrant" is a sociological notion and that Rorty's argument ultimately falls in a self-contradictory relativism, Haack explores Rorty's defense against this attack and considers the ethical implications of adopting a Rortian philosophy.

In "Self, mind and the recovery of Metaphysics," J. A. Colen and Anthony Vecchio evaluates Rorty's attempt to dissolving perennial philosophical concepts (such as "soul" or "metaphysics") and questions (such as the mind-body problem). They argue that one cannot do away so easily with what Isaiah Berlin called "incurable deep metaphysical needs" and that these perennial interrogations have the embarrassing tendency to come back.

Rebeca Pérez León then engages in a reflection on Rortian historicism in "Historicism without transcendence." Starting from the criticisms presented by Peter Dews in "The Infinite is Losing its Charm," she defends Rorty point by point by restating his linguistic theses and shows the strengths of his view of finitude.

Ángel Rivera-Novoa offers the last text of this epistemological section where he addresses the subject of religion in "Rorty's demands on religious belief: in search of a pragmatic rationality." He describes Rorty's two requirements for religious belief (privatizing it and emptying it of cognitive content), and, after arguing that they do not do justice to the average believer, he introduces a notion of "pragmatic rationality" where religious belief can be both rational and consistent with a democratic framework.

A final set of texts put Rorty in dialogue with three other philosophers. In "Inversión de la línea platónica: Heidegger desde Rorty," Pilar Salvá Soria

addresses the well-known question of the relationship between Heidegger and Rorty. Central in her essay is the analysis of the "inversions" in which Rorty argues that Heidegger (and Heidegger before him had argued that Nietzsche) is still a Platonist trapped in a metaphysics of presence.

Next, Rodolfo Gutiérrez Simón compares the philosopher Ortega y Gasset and Rorty in "Ortega y Gasset, ¿precursor de Richard Rorty?" He describes the view of the two on four main fronts: their liberalism, their historicism, their notions of secularization and historicity, and their view of ethnocentrism. He concludes his essay by noting the striking similarity of their anthropological views.

Lastly, in "Rorty leitor de Hume," Susana de Castro shows that even though Hume seems to only rarely emerge in his texts, Rorty (and especially the "late" Rorty post *Contingency, irony and solidarity*) follows the structure of Hume's philosophical bi-perspectivism and his alliance of philosophical moderate skepticism with common sense.

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We would like to thank all of those who have made the conference organization and this publication possible. First of all, we owe a special thanks to Professor Robert Brandom for kindly accepting our invitation and for making, with Barbara, the long trip to Braga. We are thankful for his friendly company, for the conversations about his work and, above all, for the discussions about Richard Rorty.

Special thanks also are owed to the research group at the University of Minho, the Center for Ethics, Politics and Society (CEPS), who provided a home for the organization of the conference. It is thanks to the experience of its members that the conference was a thorough success. Also fundamental was the support offered by the Luso-American Development Foundation (FLAD). This conference would not have been possible without its help.

Finally, our heartfelt thanks go to all who participated in the conference and who contributed their essays to this collection. You made possible not just a conference, but a conference that truly lived up to its name: Revisiting (and Remembering) Richard Rorty. Lastly, Pedro and Patrícia would also like to thank each other, which is a paradoxical thing to do in a text that is written by both! They are grateful that each was able to bring to life this homage to an author that they admire deeply.

Patrícia Fernandes and Pedro Góis Moreira

Lisbon, November 2019

Chapter 1

Rorty on vocabularies

Bob Brandom, University of Pittsburgh

I. The vocabulary vocabulary

Rorty thinks that philosophy came to be definable—even, though analytic philosophers would not typically have put it this way—as "the sort of thing that Kant did." Rorty stands in a tradition that understands that one of Kant's fundamental insights is that what distinguishes the judgments and intentional doings of discursive creatures from the responses of merely natural ones is that judgments and actions are things we are in a distinctive sense *responsible* for. They express *commitments* of ours, exercises of a special kind of *authority*. Reconstruing the Cartesian distinction between minds and bodies so as to render it in *de*ontological rather than *ontological* terms, Kant runs the danger of replacing a dualism of minds and bodies with one of norms and facts. As I would use the term, dualism is a distinction drawn in such a way as to make unintelligible the relation between the two sorts of thing one has distinguished. Following Kant in his own way, Rorty distinguishes *vocabularies*, within which various distinctive sorts of discursive, and therefore normative assessment are in order, from things like photons and butterflies, which interact with each other only causally. Things of this latter kind do not *normatively* constrain each other's activities; they are not in the business of obliging and entitling themselves or each other to do things one way rather than another. A distinction of this sort is recognizably central in the thought of figures otherwise as diverse as Kant, Hegel, Frege, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Sellars. Does Rorty's use of 'vocabulary' commit that great foe of dualisms to a dualism of norm and cause? I do not think so. But pursuing the issue opens up some interesting avenues through his thought.

If we take a step back, we can say that there is the *vocabulary* of causes, and there is the *vocabulary* of vocabularies (that is, of implicitly normative discursive practices). What can we say about the relations between them? First of all, they are *different* vocabularies. It may be that all Rorty needs of the

Kantian distinction between the order of causation and the order of justification is this fact: these 'orders' are specified in different vocabularies.[1]

It would be a mistake to confuse, conflate, or run them together. But they are not just different. For one thing, the vocabulary of causes is a vocabulary. It is something we can discuss in the metavocabulary of vocabularies. We can ask such questions as how the vocabulary of Newtonian causes arose, and how it differs from the vocabulary of Aristotelian causes in the questions it prompts us to ask about ourselves and our activities. Rorty himself often pursues such questions, and thereby affirms his practical commitment to historicism. But developing and applying vocabularies is something that we, natural creatures, do. Our doing of it consists in the production of causally conditioned, causally efficacious performances. That is to say that using vocabularies is also one among many other things that is describable in the vocabulary of causes. Rorty never loses sight of this fact. In his insistence on reminding us of the causal relations between our applications of vocabulary and the world in which we apply it, he affirms his practical commitment to naturalism.[2]

The fact that we can use the *vocabulary* metavocabulary to discuss the causal vocabulary (its emergence, peculiarities, practical virtues and vices, and so on), and the *causal* metavocabulary to discuss vocabularies (the role of reliable differential responsive dispositions in empirical vocabularies, the practical capacities they enable, what they are nomologically locked to, and so on) shows that the distinction between the vocabulary of causes and the

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[1] If we were to try to be even a little more careful about pinning this general distinction on Kant, we would have to acknowledge that causation is itself a thoroughly normative (rule-governed) affair for Kant—indeed, explaining the significance of this fact is an absolutely central task of the first *Critique*. But the distinction between things that act only according to rules and things that act according to conceptions or representations of laws, the realm of nature, and the realm of freedom, will do pretty well. Rorty sometimes (e.g., in "The World Well Lost") distinguishes these two by saying that what it is for us in practice to *treat* something as belonging to the first realm, is to see its antics as fit to be *explained* (which is the cash-value of adopting the causal vocabulary), while to treat something as belonging to the second realm is to see its antics as fit to be *translated* (which is the cash value of adopting the vocabulary vocabulary).

[2] Recall Rorty's observation in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 166–167, that near the end of the nineteenth-century philosophy was left with two approaches, historicism and naturalism, neither of which gave philosophical understanding any special dispensation. Russell and Husserl, each in his own way, responded to this situation by coming up with something for philosophy to be apodeictic about in the Kantian manner. It has taken us the better part of a century to see through their fascinating fantasies and work our way back to historicism and naturalism.

vocabulary of vocabularies is not drawn in terms that make relations between them unintelligible. So it is not playing the functional expressive role of a dualism. From the point of view of *this* question, when we have remarked on the complementary perspectives these metavocabularies provide on each other, we have said everything there is to say—at any rate, everything we *need* to say—about the relations between the two.

Rorty's positive suggestion, following Dewey and suggested by remarks of Wittgenstein, is that we can make sense of normative evaluations of vocabularies on the model of assessing tools as more or less useful in pursuit of certain *goals* or *purposes.* One of the cardinal benefits he sees stemming from the adoption of the vocabulary of instrumental pragmatism is the *discursive pluralism* that idiom encourages. It makes sense to make normative comparisons of tools once a task is specified. Hammers are better than wrenches for driving nails. But it makes no sense to ask whether hammers or wrenches are better, simply *as tools.* Assessment of tools is always relative to a purpose; to describe something as a tool is only to say that it has a purpose, not to specify some particular purpose. Similarly, Rorty wants to teach us not to ask whether one vocabulary is better than another simply *as a vocabulary.* We can say that the causal vocabulary is the better one to apply if one's purpose is to predict which way one billiard ball will move when struck by another, or to get someone to say "Ouch." And we can say that the vocabulary vocabulary is probably better if we want instead to discuss the relations between Blake's poetry and Wordsworth's.[3]

One of the main indictments of the metavocabulary of representation is that it tempts us to think that we can make sense of the question "Which vocabulary is better as a *representation?*" without having to specify a further purpose.[4] "Mirroring the world" is intelligible as such a purpose only as an element of some larger practical context. The root commitment of the representational metavocabulary as a metavocabulary is the idea that "representing the world" specifies a purpose that all vocabularies share—or at least a purpose to which they could all be turned, a dimension along which they could all be compared. But insofar as this is true, the purpose in question is devoid of any content common to the motley of vocabularies with which we

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[3] Though that is not to say that causal vocabularies are useless in this case, since we can learn a lot about the vocabularies of these poets by studying the social and political influences to which they were subject, the effects of their early familial experiences, and so on.

[4] See, for instance, the discussion that culminates at *Contingency, irony, and solidarity,* p. 21.

are familiar. It is an empty formal compliment that can be paid to any set of practices that deserve to be called 'linguistic', in virtue simply of some performances counting within them as having the significance of *assertions*. The compliment is empty because it is promiscuous. It affords no grounds for comparison, for assessments of better and worse.[5] For assertions just are claims about how things are. That is, we derive our practical grip on the notion of "representing how things are" from our practical mastery of assertion: representing how things are in this sense just amounts to what we are doing when we make claims.

So Rorty's purpose in introducing the vocabulary vocabulary is not to recommend it as a replacement for or competitor of the causal vocabulary. It is introduced as useful for some purposes, and not for others. It *is* intended to replace the metavocabulary of representations. For that one turns out, Rorty argues, to have outlived its usefulness for the purposes for which philosophers introduced it: understanding how vocabularies work in general (and in particular the relationship between the causal vocabulary of modern physics and the intentional vocabulary of everyday life). My purpose in the remainder of the essay is not further to examine those critical arguments, but rather further to explore the distinctive kind of vocabulary pragmatism Rorty recommends to replace the representationalism of our philosophical fathers.

II. Vocabularies as tools

If we should think of vocabularies instrumentally, as tools, what should we think of them as tools for doing? The purposes with respect to which we assess vocabularies as better and worse, more and less successful, come in two flavors. For we can think of purposes either as they come into view from the perspective of the *naturalist* or as they come into view from the perspective of the *historicist*. Vocabularies can be viewed as evolutionary coping strategies. As determinately embodied organisms, we come with interests in survival, adaptation, and reproduction. Vocabularies can be useful tools for pursuing those inbuilt ends—particularly the causal vocabularies that enable prediction and secure control over the natural environment. Broadening the focus somewhat, *whatever* it is that we find ourselves wanting or pursuing—

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[5] Of course, to say this is not to say that there is no point in coming up with some more limited theoretical notion of representation of things that applies to some vocabularies and not others, specifying a more specific purpose to which some but not all can be turned. But such a notion is not Rorty's target, for it does not aspire to being a metavocabulary—a vocabulary for talking about all vocabularies, the essence of what being a vocabulary is.

whether rooted in our biology, in the determinate historical circumstances under which we reproduce our social life, or in idiosyncrasies of our individual trajectories through the world—deploying vocabularies can be a useful means for getting what we want. This thought is the lever with which classical American pragmatism sought to move the conceptual world. To think of vocabularies this way is really to think of them in the terms of the metavocabulary of causes (of already describable effects).

But vocabularies can do more than just help us get what we already want. They also make it possible to frame and formulate new ends.[6] Rorty says:

> The Wittgensteinian analogy between vocabularies and tools has one obvious drawback. The craftsman typically knows what job he needs to do before picking or inventing tools with which to do it. By contrast, someone like Galileo, Yeats, or Hegel (a "poet" in my wide sense of the term—the sense of "one who makes things new") is typically unable to make clear exactly what he wants to do before developing the language in which he succeeds in doing it. His new vocabulary makes possible, for the first time, a formulation of its own purpose.[7]

No nineteenth-century physicist could have the goal of determining whether neutrinos have mass. No ancient Roman governor, however well-intentioned, could resolve to respect the human rights of the individuals over whom he held sway. No medieval poet could set out to show the damage wrought on an individual life by the rigidity of gender roles inscribed by an archetypal family romance. In fact, pragmatism itself is a prime example: Raymond Williams points out that the words 'problem' and 'solution' had only such rare and specialized uses (in mathematics) at the time that they do not even occur in the King James version of the Bible. (Nor, indeed, does 'happiness'.) Can we post-Deweyans so much as understand the way of being in the world natural to ones whose personal, professional, and political activities are not structured by the seeing of problems and the seeking of solutions to them?

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[6] Of course, the development of nonlinguistic tools can also make new purposes possible, though it is seldom possible to separate this phenomenon firmly from the discursive context in which it takes place.

[7] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 12–13 (© Cambridge University Press 1989 reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear).

And as purposes wax, so they wane. No physician can any longer so much as try to isolate the choleric humor in a feverish patient. No statesman can aim, like Metternich, to reestablish recognition of the divine right of kings. And it would be a rare contemporary poet who could adopt Milton's goal and write so as "to justifye the wayes of God to man." A distinctive feature of Rorty's discursive pragmatism is how seriously he takes this historicist point about the role of alterations of vocabulary in altering the purposes accessible to us—both by engendering novel ones and by rendering familiar ones obsolete or irrelevant. To think of vocabularies this way is to think of them in terms of the metavocabulary of vocabularies, rather than the metavocabulary of causes. For to do so is to focus on bringing about new descriptions, rather than new effects.

This insight provides another reason to reject the monolithic representationalist answer to the question: What are vocabularies *for*—that is, what purpose do they serve *as* vocabularies? For the representationalist, the answer is that vocabularies are tools for representing how things always, already, in any case, are. It entails that vocabularies can be partially ordered depending upon whether they do that job better or worse. Such a response is at least intelligible so long as we restrict our attention to the role of vocabularies in pursuing the sort of goals that come into view from the broadly naturalistic perspective. Insofar as the point of vocabularies is conceived as helping us to survive, adapt, reproduce, and secure antecedently specifiable wants and needs, limning the true vocabulary-independent structure of the environment in which we pursue those ends would evidently be helpful. It is much less clear what the representationalist picture has to offer if we broaden our attention to include the role of vocabularies in *changing* what we want, and even what we need. From the historicist perspective, insofar as it makes sense to talk about what all vocabularies are for, simply as such, the answer must give prominent place to the observation that they are for engendering new purposes. This function of vocabularies is simply not addressed by representationalist totalitarianism.[8]

These two sorts of purposes—those that loom largest from the perspective provided by the commitments implicit in the naturalist's preferred vocabulary,

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[8] Notice that this point is independent of, and less radical than, the lesson I suggested at the outset Rorty learned from his treatment of the mind in terms of incorrigibility. That case is different from the engendering of new (and obsolescing of old) *purposes,* because it purports to show how *representeds* can be brought into and out of existence by changes in vocabulary. It would accordingly be an even more extreme variety of alteration that could be wrought by changes in vocabulary. On Rorty's view, for us to have minds just is for us to use vocabulary that incorporates a certain structure of authority.

and those that loom largest from the perspective provided by the commitments implicit in the historicist's preferred vocabulary—fund structurally different sorts of assessments of more and less successful vocabularies, and consequently structurally different notions of conceptual or discursive *progress.* Assessments of the relative success of various vocabularies at achieving purposes of the first kind are at least in principle available *prospectively.* Assessments of the relative success of vocabularies at achieving purposes of the second kind are in principle only available *retrospectively.*

   Interests rooted in fundamental features of our embodiment and activities as social creatures transcend more parochial features of our vocabularies. They put even practitioners of discarded vocabularies in a position to assess with some authority the relative success of different attempts at pursuing them. Thus Aristotle would not, without complete re-education, be able to appreciate much of the conceptual progress we have made in physics since his time. But he would immediately be able to appreciate our greater facility at digging deep holes, constructing tall buildings, traveling and transporting cargo by air, and so on. For our techniques are simply and evidently better at doing things he could already perfectly well understand wanting to do—in a way that more accurately measuring the charge on an electron is not something he could already understand wanting to do. We owe the preservation of the bulk of classical Greek philosophy and literature—the repository of their vocabularies—to the admiration of the early Arabs for the practical achievements of Greek medicine. Greek doctors could save warriors from the effects of battlefield wounds and diseases the Arabs knew would otherwise be fatal. That gave them a reason to treasure and translate works of Greek theory that would otherwise have left them unmoved. For the medical practice answered to interests the Arabs shared, while the theory—which the Greeks insisted was inseparable from the practice—answered to interests formulable only in an alien vocabulary. In cases like these, progress in achieving ends can be visible even from the point of view of those speaking a *less* successful vocabulary.

   By contrast, the sophisticated interests that are intelligible only as products of particular vocabularies give rise to assessments of success and progress that are essentially available only retrospectively. From the privileged vantage point of (what we take to be) a mature atomic theory of the nature of matter, we can retrospectively discern (indeed, in an important sense, constitute) a progressive path trodden by Democritus, Lucretius, Dalton, and Rutherford, and contrast it with the mistakes of the fans of infinitely divisible cosmic goo. Nineteenth-century realist painters, having won their way clear to the purpose of conveying in a picture exactly the visual information available to an observer from a point of view fixed in space and time could then rewrite

the history of art Whiggishly, seeing it as structured by such epoch-making events as the discovery of the laws of perspective; medieval painters would not and could not have seen the later productions as doing better what they were trying to do. Assessments of progress in realism of portrayal are essentially retrospective.[9]

Assessments of technological and theoretical progress are evaluations of the relative success of different vocabularies at achieving a fixed constellation of goals. Such evaluation requires that the goals be specified in some vocabulary. The structural difference I am pointing to reflects the difference between goals that are specifiable in all the vocabularies being evaluated and those that are specifiable only in a privileged subset—in the limit, in one of them. Naturalistic pragmatism allows vocabularies to be evaluated only with respect to their utility for accomplishing the first sort of end. Historicist pragmatism allows vocabularies to be evaluated also with respect to their utility for accomplishing the second sort of end. Naturalistic pragmatism courts the dangers of reductionism and philistinism—as though we could safely dismiss romantic poetry by asking what contribution it has made to the adaptability and long-term survivability of human beings. Historicist pragmatism courts the dangers of smugness and empty self-satisfaction. For it is far too easy to tell Whiggish retrospective stories, rationally reconstructing one's tradition as a monotonic approach to the pinnacle of one's current vocabulary. We can all too easily imagine our scientific institutions falling into the hands of theological fanatics who can describe in excruciating detail just how the revolutionary change from present-day science to their loopy theories represent decisive progress along the essential dimension of pleasingness to God—a purpose unfortunately and pitiably no more available from within the impoverished vocabulary of twenty-first century natural science than that of measuring the charge of electrons was from within Aristotle's vocabulary.

Once these two sorts of purposes have been distinguished, it is obviously important to try to say something about how they ought to be understood to be related. It is a central and essential feature of Rorty's always-developing philosophical vocabulary that it strives to keep both the perspective of the naturalist and the perspective of the historicist fully in view at all times. The reductive naturalist must be reminded that she is leaving out of her story an absolutely crucial *practical* capacity that vocabularies give us: the capacity to frame genuinely novel purposes, and so in a real sense to remake ourselves. The uncritical historicist must be sprung from the dilemma of flabby

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[9] I am waving my hands here at the story Gombrich tells in his magisterial *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Presentation* (London: Phaidon, 1968).

relativism, on the one hand, and self-satisfied parochialism, on the other, by the reminder that there *are* purposes that transcend vocabularies and permit us to make comparative assessments. The theological fanatics should not be permitted to claim theoretical progress over traditional natural science until and unless that progress can be certified technologically as well. The question is: can they on the basis of their theories both keep the machines running and continue to make the sort of progress at securing common practical ends that would have convinced Aristotle of our greater prowess, and ought to convince contemporary scientists that their successors had indeed made corresponding progress? Pragmatism ought to be seen as comprising complementary vocabularies generated by the perspectives of naturalism and historicism, of common purposes and novel purposes, rather than as restricting itself to one or the other.

III. Vocabularies and the public/private split

One arena in which Rorty explicitly confronts this challenge might seem initially surprising: political theory. A distinctive feature of Rorty's thought is his conviction that adopting a philosophical vocabulary that treats people as incarnated vocabularies has specifically political implications.[10] This shared conviction is one of the deep underpinnings of his identification with Dewey and a warrant for the assertion of kinship implicit in adopting and transforming the tag 'pragmatism', even in the face of the many important differences between the two thinkers' use of it. Again, this commitment marks a significant point of contact with Habermas. Though both philosophers are quick to insist on the magnitude and import of the issues that divide them, they are each concerned to extract substantive political conclusions from a philosophical investigation of language. It is easy to see how an intellectual whose research as a philosopher has led him to view philosophy as one form of writing among others—distinguished by the vocabularies it has inherited and the texts to which it owes allegiance rather than by a distinctive task or timeless essence—should address himself to its relations to other sorts of literature and criticism. Seeking to situate one's research area in and to develop its significance for the culture more generally is, after all, the distinctive calling of the intellectual as such. It is perhaps more difficult to see how the vocabulary vocabulary could be thought to teach us lessons concerning our relations to institutions that articulate *power,* traditionally distinguished from mere talk. But for Rorty, it is vocabularies all the way down—and there is no such thing as "*mere*" talk, bearing *no* relation to power.

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[10] Rorty, "Private Irony and Liberal Hope," in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity,* 73–95.

Many of the lessons he extracts are critical, by way of ground-clearing: for example, do not think that the propriety and the utility of the vocabulary of rights, or of obligations, must be grounded in the existence of a distinctive kind of *thing* (rights, obligations), which another vocabulary must be getting wrong, or at least ignoring, insofar as it leads us to speak otherwise. After all, for Rorty mindedness turned out to consist in an authority structure instituted by an optional vocabulary, rather than in an antecedent structure of facts specifiable in a causal vocabulary. The most basic positive suggestion that Rorty makes in this area is that political wisdom begins with a sharp distinction between the *public* and *private* use of vocabularies.[11] The vocabularies in which we conduct our public business with each other must be shared. They answer to the goals of minimizing cruelty, humiliation, and injustice, and of creating a space in which individuals can pursue their private ends with as little interference from others as is compatible with minimizing cruelty, humiliation, and injustice. Our private vocabularies, by contrast, need not be shared. They answer to the goals of recreating ourselves individually by redescribing ourselves—transforming our inherited vocabularies in novel and unpredictable ways and pursuing idiosyncratic personal goals that come into view through the medium of those new vocabularies. Aristotle, Locke, Marx, Mill, Dewey, Rawls, and Habermas are theorists, practitioners, and admirers of the kinds of public vocabularies whose job it is to sustain and perfect communities, making possible the formulation and pursuit of shared goals and projects. Thoreau, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Heidegger, Proust, and Nabokov are theorists, practitioners, and admirers of the kinds of private vocabularies whose job it is to transform and perfect individual selves, making possible the formulation and pursuit of novel personal goals and projects. Public vocabularies articulate the norms that govern our answering to each other; private vocabularies articulate the norms that govern our each answering to ourselves--both our actual past selves and our multifarious possible future selves.

Rorty sees the distinction between public and private discourse as a special case of the distinction between thought and talk that takes place *within* a stable, shared vocabulary, on the one hand, and thought and talk that transcends such a vocabulary by creating a new, individualized, idiosyncratic vocabulary, on the other. Community-constitutive acts of forming 'we' intentions, and the giving

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[11] It should be clear throughout the discussion that Rorty's talk of 'private' uses of vocabulary does not fall afoul of the considerations advanced in the Wittgenstein's arguments against the intelligibility of private languages. Rorty's private vocabularies are private only relatively and *de facto*, not absolutely, or *de jure*.

and asking for reasons that such acts are embedded in, are made possible by the shared norms and commitments implicit in our use of a public vocabulary. Poets and revolutionary scientists break out of their inherited vocabularies to create new ones, as yet undreamed of by their fellows. The creation of novel vocabularies is an activity we can all partake in to one degree or another, but we should recognize the incommensurability of the vocabulary in which we publicly enact our concern for the development of the 'we' and that in which we privately enact our concern for the 'I'. Rorty says:

> There is no way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory. The vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange....

He recommends rather that we

> begin to think of the relation between writers on autonomy and writers on justice as being like the relation between two kinds of tools—as little in need of synthesis as are paintbrushes and crowbars. One sort of writer lets us realize that the social virtues are not the only virtues, that some people have actually succeeded in re-creating themselves. We thereby become aware of our own half-articulate need to become a new person, one whom we as yet lack words to describe. The other sort reminds us of the failure of our institutions and practices to live up to the convictions to which we are already committed by the public, shared vocabulary we use in daily life. The one tells us that we need not speak only the language of the tribe, that we may find our own words, that we may have a responsibility to ourselves to find them. The other tells us that that responsibility is not the only one we have. Both are right, but there is no way to make both speak a single language....

The demands of self-creation and human solidarity [are] equally valid, yet forever incommensurable.[12]

Here the tool metaphor is brought in to make intelligible the practical compatibility of both undertaking the shared commitments implicit in deploying the vocabulary of liberal community and adopting the attitudes of ironic detachment and playful creativity expressed in deploying idiosyncratic

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[12] Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, xiv–xv (© Cambridge University Press 1989 reproduced with permission of the Licensor through PLSclear).

vocabularies that bring novel possibilities and purposes into view. These two forms of life are equally near and dear to Rorty's heart, and central to his wider vision of our situation as incarnated vocabularies. We can lead these two lives if we keep a strict separation between the vocabularies of public and private life. The vocabulary that construes vocabularies as tools is Rorty's primary tool for construing that split coherently and nondualistically. For if there is no one thing that vocabularies as vocabularies are *for*—for instance, mirroring nature, representing how the *things,* from which we should read off our responsibilities, really are—then we can simply see tradition-sustaining and tradition-transforming vocabularies as serving different, equally valid purposes, and hence as not competing.

What more can we say about the relationship between these two discursive aspects of our lives, beyond the observation that they are distinct and do not compete with one another? I think they can be understood as expressions of the two dimensions of pragmatism noted in the previous section: public discourse corresponding to common purposes, and private discourse to novel purposes. The novel vocabularies forged by artists for private consumption make it possible to frame new purposes and plans that can be appreciated only by those initiated into those vocabularies. The recreation of the individual they enable makes possible a distinctive sort of assessment of success that is essentially retrospective—because prospectively, in the terms of the vocabulary that has been transformed and transcended, one cannot in general so much as understand the ends toward which one's efforts are now bent. By contrast, the overarching goals that structure and orient the public vocabulary Rorty envisages are common to, or at least intelligible in the terms of, a wide variety of vocabularies. Minimizing cruelty is an aim rooted ultimately in our biological encoding of pain as the mark of harm for creatures like us. A baseline or default abhorrence of the infliction of pain on one of *us* (though possibly not on one of those *others*) is accordingly one of the most basic attitudes instituting and sustaining an *us*. And just as *pain* is the paradigm of felt harm to an essentially biological creature, so is *humiliation* the paradigm of felt harm to an essentially social one. These are just the sort of vocabulary-transcendent common purposes highlighted by the pragmatist-as-naturalist.

Can the same be said of the other common civic aims that Rorty, as a liberal theorist, insists should be basic to our public discourse? On the face of it, the aspiration to *justice,* in the sense that those affected by plans for communal action should have a voice in the deliberation that leads to the adoption of those plans, and the aspiration to *freedom,* in the sense of ensuring to each individual appropriate behavioral and discursive space in which to pursue purely private ends (where that pursuit does not infringe on the corresponding space of others) have a different status. These aims evidently

are not shared by inhabitants of all political vocabularies—either historically or on the contemporary scene. And Rorty is constitutionally suspicious of the heroic efforts of thinkers like Rawls and Habermas (following such models as Locke, Kant, and Hegel) to exhibit commitments to goals like these as always already implicit in giving and asking for reasons in a vocabulary at all. For him, the practical efficacy of appeals to this sort of concern is always relative, not only to our embodiment and social nature, but also to our historical circumstance. That we cannot and need not insist that these considerations can be shown to be pressing from the vantage point provided by *every possible vocabulary* whatsoever is the upshot of the realization of the contingency of the conditions that make even a liberal polity possible. Nonetheless, though the goals of justice and freedom in these minimal senses may not *move* all those to whom we would in our actual circumstances, and with our actual traditions, like to address political claims in a public vocabulary, those goals are evidently *intelligible* to them. The problems posed by the collision of the aims of justice and freedom with the ruthless public pursuit of private interest by an arbitrarily privileged few, whether in Athens or in Washington, is not that the parties to the dispute cannot *understand* one another's goals. They understand each other all too well. The problems are rather practical: the wrong side too often wins. Disagreements of this sort do not belie a shared public vocabulary. (Indeed, a striking feature of contemporary political discourse—and not only in the developed, prosperous part of the world—is the extent to which debates are framed in terms of the opposition between justice and freedom in these minimal senses, on the one hand, and the ruthless public pursuit of private interest by an arbitrarily privileged few, on the other. The disputants just disagree about who is who: corporations and selfish undeserving rich Rauberreitern, on the one hand, or condescending self-interested petty government bureaucrats, on the other.)

IV. Discursive practice

Lining up the public/private split in this way with the two sorts of purposes pragmatists can appeal to—those that are most salient from the perspective of the naturalist, who starts out employing the metavocabulary of *causes*, and those that are most salient from the perspective of the historicist, who starts out employing the metavocabulary of *vocabularies*—suggests a way of using the vocabulary vocabulary to conceptualize the complementary relation between these perspectives. For this way of thinking about them emphasizes the divide between routine purposes and novel ones, and hence between shared, tradition-sustaining norms and idiosyncratic, tradition-transforming performances. And the way in which these two presuppose and involve one another is of the essence of specifically *linguistic* practices.

For the characteristic feature distinguishing vocabularies from nondiscursive tools is their function in generating novel claims, and hence novel purposes. Sixty years ago Chomsky made the epochal observation that novelty is the rule, rather than the exception, in human languages. In fact, almost every sentence uttered by an adult native speaker is new—not only in the sense that that speaker has never uttered it before, but more surprisingly, also in the sense that *no one* has ever uttered it before. A relatively few hackneyed sentences may get a lot of play: "Have a nice day," "I'm hungry," "You'll be sorry," and so on. But it is exceptionally unlikely that an unquoted sentence chosen at random from an essay such as this one will ever have been uttered before. Nor is this preponderance of novelty a feature special to the special vocabularies and complex sentences of professor-speak. Even the chit-chat we use to organize routine enterprises in our everyday lives consists largely of strings of words that have never before appeared together in just that order. Almost surely, no one has ever before said exactly "If it rains, we'll have to take both the baseball equipment and the picnic stuff out of the trunk of the car, because it leaks." That is, even where the sentiment is routine, the expression of it seldom is. (How much more unlikely is it that anyone before Sam Johnson had ever described an acquaintance as "obscurely wise and coarsely kind"!) This phenomenon has been repeatedly confirmed empirically, by searches of large corpora of spoken and written sentences. And it is easily deduced almost from first principles by a comparison of the number of sentences of, say, twenty words or fewer, generated by simple grammatical constructions from the very limited five thousand-word vocabulary of Basic English (readers of this essay probably not only passively understand, but actively use an order of magnitude more English words than that), with the number of sentences there has been time for all human beings to utter in the history of the world, even if they all always spoke nothing but English and did nothing but utter sentences.

Now some of this novelty is conceptually trivial—a matter of there being many ways to convey (what we want to call) essentially the same thought. But a great deal of it is not. As one moves away from the careless imprecision that can be perfectly in order in casual conversation, either in the direction of literature (with poems as the textual pole defining the dimension I mean to be pointing at) or in the direction of a technical discipline such as metallurgy (with equations couched in the mathematical language of fundamental physics as the textual pole defining that dimension), one finds more and more that to use a different string of words is to say something importantly different. The more specialized the vocabulary, the more likely it is that lexical or syntactic differences carry with them substantial differences in *inferential* behavior, and hence conceptual significance. Far more often than not, the uttering of novel sentences is the making of novel claims. The difference between ordinary and specialized idioms in this regard is only one of degree:

intensified, the phenomenon that is already evident in everyday life becomes more striking still in more specialized disciplinary idioms.

Novel claims have novel inferential consequences, are subject to novel challenges, and require novel justifications. The game of giving and asking for reasons largely consists in the entertainment of the possibilities for such novel commitments, and the exploration both of their consequences and of what would be required in order to become entitled to them. We spend most of our time on untrodden inferential ground. Although what else a novel claim would commit one to, what it would be incompatible with, and what would entitle one to it must in some sense be *controlled* by shared norms that antecedently govern the concepts one deploys in making such a claim; in the sense that the inferential moves are answerable for their correctness to those norms, it is simply a mistake to think of the antecedent norms as *determining* the process. In exploring the inferential significance of novel claims, we are not simply tracing out paths determined in advance. For the inferential norms that govern the use of concepts are not handed down to us on tablets from above; they are not guaranteed in advance to be complete or coherent with each other. They are at best constraints that aim us in a direction when assessing novel claims. They neither determine the resultant vector of their interaction, nor are they themselves immune from alteration as a result of the collision of competing claims or inferential commitments that have never before been confronted with one another.

Philosophy proper was born when Plato took as an explicit topic of understanding and explanation the Socratic procedure of exploring, querying, and grooming our concepts by eliciting novel claims and producing novel juxtapositions of commitments his interlocutors were already inclined to undertake so as to expose their potentially incompatible consequences. Socrates showed how it was possible for us to investigate the cotenability, by our *own* lights, of our various commitments, and indeed, of the coherence of concepts we deploy. Engaging in these characteristic exercises in Socratic rationality typically changes our dispositions to endorse claims and make inferences. Where these changes are substantial, the result is a change in the conceptual norms to which one acknowledges allegiance: a change in vocabulary. Such changes can be partially ordered along a dimension that has something that looks like change of meaning at one end, and something that looks like change of belief at the other.

Dummett points to the (now happily archaic) expression "Boche" as a useful paradigm of inappropriate pejoratives: its circumstances of appropriate

application are that someone is of German nationality, and its consequences of application include being barbarous or more prone to cruelty than other Europeans.[13] Using the word, applying the concept, commits one to accepting the propriety of the inference from the circumstances to the consequences of application. If, once Socratic exploration of the inferential and doxastic potential of this concept has made this implicit inferential commitment explicit, one does not endorse that inference, then one must relinquish the concept and refuse to apply the term at all. This is most like a change of meaning—but notice that it is occasioned by confronting that meaning with substantive beliefs, perhaps about the Germany of Bach, Goethe, and Kant. Again, I may be committed to the inference from something's tasting sour to its being an acid, and also to the inference from something's being acid to its turning litmus paper red. If I then run across something that tastes sour and turns litmus paper blue, I have a problem. Whether what I do should count as a change of belief about acids or a change in what I mean by acid is just not clear. My discovery that not *all* green tractors are made by John Deere and not *all* red ones by International Harvester presumably belongs pretty close to the change-of-belief end of the spectrum. But as we saw in Section I, the vocabulary vocabulary was originally introduced precisely to express our acknowledgment of the practical inadequacy of the theoretical vocabulary of meaning and belief that committed us to answering one way or the other to the question: change of meaning or change of belief?

So Quine's original point should be developed further. Every claim and inference we make at once sustains and transforms the tradition in which the conceptual norms that govern that process are implicit. The vocabulary vocabulary that replaces meaning-belief talk must incorporate and express our realization that *applying* conceptual norms and *transforming* them are two sides of one coin. (This is the point of Hegel's talk about the "restless negativity of the Concept." The later Wittgenstein's skepticism about the possibility of philosophical semantic theorizing also stems from a deep appreciation of the fundamental plasticity of language.) The only practical significance of conceptual norms lies in the role they play in governing the use and application of those concepts, in concert with their fellows. That use consists largely in making novel claims and novel inferences. And doing that leads inexorably to changes, not just in the claims we are disposed to make,

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[13] Michael Dummet, *Frege: Philosophy of Language,* 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 454. See also the related discussion in chapter 2 of Robert Brandom, *Making it Explicit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

but thereby in the concepts themselves. To use a vocabulary is to change it. This is a key feature distinguishing vocabularies from other tools.

I mentioned in the previous section that in employing the vocabulary vocabulary as he does to distinguish the public from the private dimension of our discourse, Rorty is placing himself in a tradition whose most influential contemporary practitioner is Habermas. It is a tradition that pursues a Kantian project with more contemporary tools—a tradition that seeks at least to explicate (and in its stronger versions, which Rorty does not endorse, even to justify) the fundamental commitments of its *political* theory in terms of an account of the specifically *linguistic* practices that structure our discursive activity. The considerations advanced I have advanced provide the raw materials for a pragmatist in Rorty's sense to develop this project along lines he has not pursued.

For perhaps the fundamental challenge of traditional (Enlightenment) political philosophy is to explain exactly why it is rational (if it is rational) for an individual to surrender any freedom of action by constraining herself by communal norms. What, it is asked, is in it for her?[14] The most natural answers all seem to justify only the conclusion that it would be in her interest for most or all *others* to do so. But our discussion of what is distinctive of vocabularies as tools—their essential self-transcendence as systems of norms that maintain themselves only by the generation of novelty that transforms them, their status, in short as engines that generate and serve the novel,

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[14] Of course the terms of this question are infinitely contentious. They remain so even when it is not taken to presuppose that this is an issue anyone ever actually faces, but merely a hypothetical whose answer can illuminate the normative status of political institutions. It is not obvious that the validity of political claims depends on their being an answer to any question analogous to this one. It is not clear why it should be norms of *rationality* that are taken to undergird political norms (though that is the thought of those who adopt the strong version of the Kantian tradition I am discussing). Nor, even supposing that, does it go without saying that the rational norms in question should be assimilated to the model of *instrumental* or means-end reasoning (though that is an orienting commitment of the pragmatist tradition that Rorty shares with Dewey). Again, the idea that the default position is one in which individuals possess maximal freedom of action, their surrendering, relinquishing, or renouncing of which deserves to be classified either as recompensed or unrecompensed presupposes a very specific Enlightenment picture of the human situation—one that we ought to be chary of root and branch. All these challenges I think are well taken. Nonetheless, it is instructive to see how the considerations assembled in the foregoing permit a novel response to the question of the nature of the authority of political norms even in the broad classical form in which not only Hobbes but Kant can be seen to be addressing it.

idiosyncratic purposes highlighted by the historicist, as well as the familiar, common ones highlighted by the naturalist—suggests that things will look different if the communal norms in terms of which we address the challenge are modeled on *linguistic* norms. For when the question "What purpose of the individual would be served by trading away some freedom for constraint by communal norms?" is asked, it has usually been assumed that the purpose in question must be one that is *antecedently* envisageable by the individual: security, access to collective means, the sentimental rewards of engagement in a common enterprise, and so on. This is to view community, with its normative demands on the behavior of individuals, as a tool subserving purposes that come into view from the standpoint of the naturalist.

Linguistic norms are special, in that being *constrained* by them gives us a distinctive sort of *freedom.* Subjecting oneself to linguistic norms by embracing a vocabulary is undeniably a form of constraint. It involves the surrender of what Isaiah Berlin calls negative freedom—that is, freedom *from* constraint. Not just anything one does counts as making a move in the language game. But since it also enables one to make and understand an indefinite number of novel claims, formulate an indefinite number of novel concepts, frame an indefinite number of novel purposes, and so on, subjecting oneself to constraint by the norms implicit in a vocabulary at the same time confers unparalleled positive freedom—that is, freedom *to* do things one could not only not do before, but could not even *want* to do. As Sellars says: "Clearly human beings could dispense with all discourse, though only at the expense of having nothing to say."[15] The point of speaking the common language of the tribe, binding oneself by the shared norms of a public vocabulary, is not limited to the capacity to pursue shared public goals. It consists largely in the private (in the sense of novel and idiosyncratic) uses to which the vocabulary can be put. Not the least of these is the capacity to generate new specialized vocabularies, the way in which private sprouts branch off of the public stem. Likening the point of constraining oneself by political norms to the point of constraining oneself by linguistic norms[16] opens up new theoretical possibilities for a response to the traditional

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[15] Wilfrid S. Sellars, "A Semantical Solution to the Mind-Body Problem," in *Pure Pragmatics and Possible Worlds,* ed. Jeffrey Sicha (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1980), 152.

[16] We need not think it is so much as coherent to conceive of this as a choice anyone ever actually confronts—no nonlinguistic creature would be in a position to weigh the various considerations. But—as was pointed out previously in discussing the perspective of the historicist—that does not mean that the costs and benefits of such a 'decision' cannot sensibly be assessed *retrospectively,* from the point of view of someone who can frame the purposes that only become available along one path.

challenge of political philosophy—possibilities that come into view only from the perspective of the historicist pragmatist. This model promises a different way of pursuing what I called in Section III of this chapter "the larger project of reconceptualizing the constellation of freedom and constraint characteristic of vocabularies."

I am inclined to extract more specific political claims from this observation by following the model of Kant and Habermas. Doing that is thinking of our moral value—in terms of which the purpose and limitations of political institutions and activities are to be understood—as deriving from our nature as essentially discursive creatures: vocabulary-mongers. What matters about us *morally,* and so ultimately *politically,* is not to be understood in terms of goals available from the inevitably reductive perspective of the naturalist: paradigmatically, the avoidance of mammalian pain. It is the capacity each of us discursive creatures has to say things that no one else has ever said, things furthermore that would never have been said if we did not say them. It is our capacity to transform the vocabularies in which we live and move and have our being, and so to create new ways of being (for creatures like us). Our moral worth is our dignity as potential contributors to the conversation. This is what our political institutions have a duty to recognize, secure, and promote. Seen from this point of view, it is a contingent fact about us that physiological agony is such a distraction from sprightly repartee and the production of fruitful novel utterances. But it is a fact, nonetheless. And for that reason, pain, and like it, various sorts of social and economic deprivation, have a secondhand, but nonetheless genuine, moral significance. And from that moral significance, these phenomena inherit political significance. Pragmatist political theory has a place for the concerns of the naturalist, which appear as minimal necessary conditions of access to the conversation. Intrinsically they have no more moral significance than does the oxygen in the atmosphere, without which, as a similar matter of contingent fact, we also cannot carry on a discussion. What is distinctive of the contemporary phase of pragmatism that Rorty has ushered in, however, is its historicist appreciation of the significance of the special social practices whose purpose it is to create new purposes: *linguistic* practices, what Rorty calls "vocabularies." There is no reason that the vocabulary in which we conduct our public political debates and determine the purposes toward which our public political institutions are turned should not incorporate the aspiration to nurture and promote its citizens' vocabulary-transforming private exercises of their vocabularies. The vocabulary vocabulary brings into view the possibility that our overarching *public* purpose should be to ensure that a hundred private flowers blossom, and a hundred novel schools of thought contend.

V. Pragmatist metaphysics

I have been urging that the public, tradition-sustaining and the private, tradition-transforming sorts of practices that Rorty discusses are two aspects of all discursive activity, neither intelligible apart from the other. This is to say that we should not think of the distinction between routine speaking of the language of the tribe and creative discursive recreation of the individual— pursuit of old purposes and invention of new purposes—in terms of the distinction between discourse that takes place *within* the boundaries of a vocabulary and discourse that *crosses* those boundaries and enters a new vocabulary. For that way of putting things owes its force to nostalgia for the distinction between deliberating about what we ought to believe, within a set of rules fixed by what we mean, on the one hand, and creating a new set of meanings, on the other. And that is the very picture the vocabulary vocabulary was introduced to overcome. *Every* use of a vocabulary, every application of a concept in making a claim, *both* is answerable to norms implicit in communal practice—its public dimension, apart from which it cannot mean anything (though it can cause something)—*and* transforms those norms by its novelty—its private dimension, apart from which it does not formulate a belief, plan, or purpose worth expressing.

To propose this sort of friendly amendment to Rorty's use of the vocabulary vocabulary is not to deny that it makes sense to talk about different vocabularies: that there is no difference between two conversations' being conducted in (and so liable to assessment according to the norms implicit in) some *one* vocabulary, and their being conducted in *different* vocabularies. Although to treat something as a vocabulary is to treat it as a fit object to be *translated* (as to adopt the causal vocabulary is to treat it as fit to be in a distinctive way *explained*), this claim does not entail that any two vocabularies must be intertranslatable. Rorty argues forcefully and to my mind convincingly that any two, as we might call them, *fundamental* vocabularies—autonomous language games that one could play though one played no other, vocabularies in which one pursues the common interests that come into view from the perspective of the naturalist—must be at least largely intertranslatable.[17] But *parasitic* vocabularies need not: the vocabulary of quantum mechanics and the vocabulary Eliot puts in play in "The Wasteland" are not in any recognizable sense intertranslatable. Remarks made or conversations conducted in these idioms simply come from different discourses. The purposes they subserve, the norms they answer to, are

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[17] See "The World Well Lost," in *Consequences of Pragmatism,* 3–18.

internal to those vocabularies; they are of the sort that come into view only from the perspective of the historicist. It makes perfect sense to call such vocabularies 'incommensurable', if by that we mean just this: they are not intertranslatable and not evaluable as alternative means to a common end, tools adapted to some one purpose specifiable from outside them both.

It does *not* follow, however, that they are incommensurable in the sense that "there is no way to bring them together at the level of theory," as Rorty claims in one of the passages quoted previously. That is, it does not follow that they cannot be articulated in some one metavocabulary. I have been arguing that public and private vocabularies are not incommensurable in this sense. To pick two examples not entirely at random: either the causal vocabulary or the vocabulary vocabulary can be used to talk about both sorts of vocabulary. Though one surely does not learn *everything* about them by doing so, one can sensibly discuss the social and economic conditions that causally occasioned and conditioned, say, Wordsworth's poetry or Dalton's atomic theory, and the effects those new vocabularies then had on other things. And we need not see two vocabularies as serving the *same* purposes in order to see them as serving some purposes in the way distinctive of vocabularies. Indeed, one of the cardinal virtues of Rorty's vocabulary vocabulary is precisely that it lets us talk about vocabularies—including both the differences and the intimate relations between their public and their private aspects—in just such a general way.

This claim raises the issue of just what status what I have called the "vocabulary vocabulary" has for Rorty. The characterization I have offered of the role it is intended to play—as an overarching metavocabulary—may well be one he is inclined to resist. For that way of putting things seems to place this idiom in the context of a sort of metaphysical project that Rorty explicitly and strenuously rejects as a matter of deep methodological and metaphilosophical principle. I would like to close by attempting to resolve this contradiction by the traditional irenic scholastic method of making a distinction.

Systematic metaphysics is a peculiar literary genre, to be sure. It may be thought of as distinguished by its imperialistic, even totalitarian discursive ambition. For the task it sets itself is to craft by artifice a vocabulary in which everything can be said. This enterprise can be interpreted in two ways: modestly or maniacally. On the maniacal reading, the project is to limn the boundaries of the sayable. What cannot be formulated in its preferred vocabulary is to be rejected as nonsensical. Thought of this way, metaphysics has two characteristics that are seen as objectionable from the point of view of the more modest reading. First, it aims at sculpting a vocabulary adequate to what can be said in every possible vocabulary. Second, it arrogates to itself a distinctive sort of privilege: the authority to determine (on the basis of translatability into its

favored terms) what is genuinely sayable, and hence thinkable, and what would be sham-saying and the mere appearance of thought.

It is the first lesson of historicist pragmatism that the notion of "all possible vocabularies" is one to which we can attach no definite meaning. Every new vocabulary brings with it new purposes for vocabularies to serve. These purposes are not in general so much as formulable in the antecedently available vocabularies. They are the paradigm of something that Rorty claims (as a lesson drawn from his eliminative materialism) we should not think of as part of the furniture of the world patiently awaiting our discovery of them, but as genuinely *created* by our new ways of speaking. As such, there is no way to throw our semantic net over them *in advance* of developing the languages in which they can be expressed. Further, to be a pragmatist about norms is to insist that every claim to authority or privilege be grounded in concrete practices of articulating and acknowledging that authority or privilege—that no normative status at all is conferred simply by *things,* not even by the whole universe, apart from their uptake into and role in some determinate vocabulary. That principle, rooted in Sellars's critique of the ideology of givenness, expands for Rorty into a view of metaphysics (in the maniacal sense) as the pursuit of theology by other means. He has relentlessly pointed out how pervasive are metaphysical claims that some vocabulary possesses a special sort of cognitive authority stemming from ontology alone.

On the modest reading of metaphysics, by contrast, the task of this genre of creative nonfiction writing is still understood as the engineering of a vocabulary in which everything can be said. But, first of all, the quantifier is understood differently. The modest metaphysician aims only to codify the admittedly contingent constellation of vocabularies with which her time (and those that led up to it) happens to present her—to capture her time in thought. She sees her task as that of constructing a vocabulary that will be useful for the purposes of the contemporary intellectual: the one who by definition is concerned with seeing the culture whole, trying to make the vocabularies it now seems useful to employ to get various sorts of practical grips on things hang together. As Rorty has pointed out in another connection, one should distinguish the enterprise of such intellectuals from the enterprise of various sorts of researchers, who work within definite disciplinary matrices, pushing back the frontiers of their particular portion of the culture, without in general needing to be concerned with how their area relates to the rest. The special research interest of the metaphysician, I am suggesting, is to build vocabularies useful for the purposes of intellectuals. The only authority such vocabularies can claim is derived from the success of the various vocabularies they address, and the illumination it can provide concerning them. Insofar as there are vocabularies that are practically

successful but not codifiable in a particular metaphysical vocabulary, it has failed. And here the measure of success is not only achievement of the sort of goals to which the naturalist draws our attention, but also of those to which the historicist does. But the sortings of vocabularies into those that fit smoothly into the regimented form and those that fit less well can still be valuable. In the past, such reorganizations have taught us a lot, even in cases where the metaphysical vocabulary generating those sortings patently fails to fulfill its imperialist ambitions. Once the metaphysician renounces the adoption of an exclusionary or dismissive attitude toward nonconforming vocabularies, the project of metaphysics modestly understood represents one potentially useful discursive tool among others for getting a grip on our multifarious culture. This is not an enterprise that the enlightened pragmatist ought to resist. Indeed, I have been claiming that that is precisely the enterprise in which the most prominent and accomplished pragmatist of his generation was in fact successfully engaged.[18]

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Remembering Richard Rorty:
An Interview with Robert Brandom

Pedro Góis Moreira, Catholic University of Portugal

In this interview, Robert Brandom discusses his friend and former mentor Richard Rorty, both his thought and the man himself. He talks about the prospects of anti-foundationalism today, the ways in which Rorty's thought has been used by other authors and Rorty's use of other authors, and he assesses Rorty's impact ten years after his passing.

Q: Why did you pick Rorty as advisor at the university?

I went to Princeton because Rorty was there and because I was so impressed with the account he gave of what Sellars was doing in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* and with [his view on] why it was important to set a view of the development of the history of philosophy. The way Rorty thought about things was not just driven by the most recent contributions to the journal literature, but by getting a running start historically, by starting a hundred years before and seeing how the discussions and how the profession had evolved and how pragmatism arose. [He did this] by, coming to appreciate the manifold contingencies involved such that we might have gone this other way, but for contingent reasons we went this other way. Now, Louis Menand taught us that, together with the later contingency of refugee German philosophers finding a haven in America, American pragmatism was a product of our Civil War, just as jazz was dependent on the war surplus of horns and brass instruments that flooded the American South after the war. Rorty very much appreciated the ways in which those contingencies altered the course of intellectual discussion. He came to think not 'oh, this a bad thing, it's bent out of shape,' but, rather, 'this is what disciplinary development is like.'

  I found this combination of sharp analytic appreciation of what was going on now, together with a more distanced historical perspective, [to be] very compelling. And the choice I had to make was to go to Pittsburgh to work with Sellars, or to go to Princeton work with Rorty. Since I too was committed to the project of a scientific formal semantics ([I was] coming out of mathematics as much as out of philosophy), and [since] Princeton was the

center of that, it seemed to me I could have both things. And, indeed, during my years in Princeton, I worked at both: with David Lewis in formal semantics and with Rorty in trying to get a larger, historically nuanced picture of how we got to where we are. So they were my co-supervisors, my *Doktorväter*. But it was politically fraught in Princeton of those years. The main department that Lewis came to speak for, by large, didn't speak to Rorty. And it was sort of understood that their very best students were expected *not* to be working with him. And so it was anomalous and, even if they continued to treat me respectfully, they could never understand why, given that I could do the sort of thing that they did care about, I would do something else. And Rorty himself was a little bit amused by this. He had sort of gotten used to the department discouraging their students they thought best of [from] working with him. But we ended up having a fabulous relationship. I was the only occasion for Rorty and Lewis to talk to each other when they needed to.

Q: How would you introduce Richard Rorty to someone completely outside of academia?

B: Rorty usefully distinguished 'researchers' in the high culture, that is, people who have a *fach* in the German sense. The word 'faculty' comes from 'those who have a research discipline' that they pursue and that requires them to push the boundaries of our understanding in some field or, more often, some subfield. So, 'researchers' in that sense is distinguished from 'intellectuals': the characteristic and defining job of the intellectual is to think about how, to begin with, the high culture hangs together – how the specialist in membrane physiology, or the specialist in nineteenth-century Russia educational theory, how what they are doing is contributing to furthering our understanding of human being. But then the intellectual is to be using this understanding of our best and most disciplinary understandings of the human being. Then to think how that can be brought to bear on political decisions which, in sufficiently advanced liberal democracies and sufficiently stable and prosperous parts of the world, we are privileged to have some say, however small it is, about who we are, what we're trying to do.

  Rorty is someone who's *fach* was traditional philosophy. There is nothing he enjoyed reading more than the mighty dead philosophers: that was what he mastered. He was a writer who wrote about those writers. But he also always had a commitment as an intellectual, and he was one of the premier Anglophone public intellectuals of his generation who tried to bring to bear what he understood from working within the philosophical tradition: first of all, on how to think about the high culture and where we are in our understanding of ourselves and, then, on how to broaden our perspective to

Bob Brandom, University of Pittsburgh

think about the issues of public moment. He weighed in weightily and wittily on those issues. Perhaps the work that speaks most immediately to that vocation of his is *Achieving our Country*, which is still not so much a work of contemporary politics as of advice for contemporary, politically active intellectuals. But if one is coming completely from outside of academia, one will appreciate his work within his *fach,* but his work as a public intellectual is very accessible and worthwhile.

Q: Do you think that Rorty's work was used in ways that Rorty himself would not expect? Did he end up having strange bedfellows, so to say?

B: By Rorty's own account – and this is seconded in Neil Gross's important intellectual biography of Rorty – he came to be disillusioned with analytic philosophy, along many dimensions and for many reasons, and became more interested in reading the path that was not taken by analytic philosophy. In the great divide after Kant, he took the Hegelian path instead of, as we could say, the Fregean path that Russel and Moore recommended. It was a Hegelian path that led through giants such as Heidegger – though it was always the early Heidegger, the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, that Rorty esteemed, – as well as Anglophone figures he had championed, particularly Dewey. And, though there basically were no heirs of Dewey anymore, there were Dewey scholars and strong philosophers in the Deweyan tradition, although not a critical mass of them. He did find smart people reading Hegel and Heidegger, in particular, Jacques Derrida who, like Rorty, was trained as a hard-nosed historian of philosophy, as a philosopher and historian of philosophy, and was essentially omniscient about the mighty philosophical dead. And Rorty thought: well, the people who – inspired by Derrida – are reading Hegel and Heidegger, are not in American philosophy departments anymore: they are in literature departments. These are the people I want to converse with, because these are the topics I want to converse about. So he moved into a literature department in 1982.

Around that time, he won the MacArthur prize – the so-called 'young genius prize' – and so there was $244,000, which he used to buy a house in Charlottesville and move out of the Princeton department, which had been uncomfortable for him for seven or eight years at that point. This coincided with the dissolution of his first marriage. It was generally a change in life for him. He moved not into the philosophy department but became, more generally, a professor of humanities at the University of Virginia with very few duties. So he could travel and talk to a much wider range of philosophers and philosophy departments than most of his American philosophical colleagues did at the

time. It coincidently had the consequence that he never again directed a philosophy dissertation. And, on the one hand, that pained him but, on the other hand, it liberated him. He wasn't tied down by having to do that either.

But as he had come to be disillusioned with analytic philosophy, he was desperately disappointed by the way capital 'T' Theorists, downstream from Derrida, deconstruction and cultural studies, became. But it happened that Derrida gave rise to a generation of thinkers who did not spend the time that Rorty and Derrida himself had spent doing what you needed to do to master Hegel, Heidegger and the philosophical tradition that they were imbued with. They combined an increasingly shallow sloganeering with a basically metaphysical ambition and pride that was, he thought, *exactly* what deconstruction was deconstructing, if one understood it properly. So he came desperately to regret having, as it were, thrown his lot in with this rising movement in the American humanities. Because he came to see it as a degenerating movement that did not give rise to anyone with the knowledge of the tradition that he was deconstructing, the one that Derrida and Rorty had. This movement was without the appreciation that you need to be, you need to live and move and have your being *within* a tradition in order to make the kind of move to it that Derrida was making. And the people were, on the one hand, raised with no such tradition. No body of canonical writings that gave a common conversational base to everyone. And, on the other hand, with the kind of over-winning hubris, intellectual hubris, rooted in what they took to be a deeper understanding of human being and of the high culture. That was exactly the deconstruction that he'd found joined: his pragmatist heroes with the possibilities of deconstruction.

So Rorty esteemed nothing so much as philosophical and intellectual conversation. He remained in conversation with a tradition that he had come to be disillusioned with, fighting the good fight for what he saw as the unrealized possibilities of Derrida's playful undercutting of the ultra-serious French literary culture – for example, the sort of physical humor/Jerry Lewis move where, when writing an article about Hegel, one's intellectual premise turns on the fact that in French his name rhymes with 'eagle,' or another essay that turns on how wide the margins are in a printed version of two essays. This ought to be seen as playfully refusing to take itself seriously or to take seriously a literary culture – the French café literary culture, in particular, took itself more seriously than anyone has ever taken themselves. And yet [deconstruction] was turned into the form of a metaphysical theory that even needed a capital 'T' to say how serious it was. Parenthetically, Rorty only capitalized concepts to make fun of them. Reality with a capital 'R' is something you should be *embarrassed* to identify. But they needed a capital

'T' so as to pursue exactly the sort of metaphysics that Rorty and, he was convinced, Derrida himself had seen through.

So he came desperately to regret having his name associated with this movement, although he always thought that there was a reason in continuing to believe that there were insights here. I edited my book on Rorty [*Rorty and his Critics*] because he expressed frustration, in the late eighties, with being thought of as the poet and the prophet of pragmatism – the title of a collection that had just emerged. Not that he was *unhappy* being a poet and a prophet of pragmatism, but he said he wished, just once, people would look back over his most serious contributions to the discipline of philosophy – to his *fach* narrowly conceived – and talk about what he contributed, as the analytic philosopher, to analytic philosophy. And that was the charge that I used as an animating motif of the book I edited, asking the most serious and influential analytic philosophers of the day to write, not about his turn to deconstruction or his literary turn or his incendiary suggestion that, because philosophy was the kind of thing Kant did, philosophy was dead as a discipline, but rather to focus on the arguments he made in the narrower analytic context. And he always maintained that this was the set of commentaries on his work that he found most satisfying and gratifying. And I think one sees that in the replies that he wrote. Where, inter alia, he articulates his disenchantment with this aspect of analytic philosophy.

One of the essays in that volume that he was most moved by – in a sort of larger disciplinary sense – took him to task for not appreciating the sociocultural difference between the way philosophy was conducted in France and the way it was conducted in the Anglophone world. In the Anglophone world, some academic generations down the road from the logical positivists had instituted a philosophical culture modeled on the natural scientific intellectual culture where it doesn't matter who's mouth a remark comes out of: one looks at the evidence for it, assesses the consequences, takes it seriously, thinks of one's interlocutors as all serious and able people, and thinks of the enterprises as cooperative. Each treats the other with the respect that colleagues in a cooperative undertaking have. [This is] by contrast to a café culture where who you know mattered at least as much as what you knew, where what sort of a figure one could cut, the style in which one could express oneself, [mattered]. In particular, a competitive intellectual culture where, in order to make room for your own reputation, you had to undercut another's and one of the ways to advance your own was with a particularly cutting remark about someone else. And, while Rorty had esteemed, participated in, identified with, and really came to take for granted the intellectual environment which analytic philosophy both created and thrived in, he failed to realize how different it was and how corrosive was the

culture that he admired of Derrida and Foucault. Even though, at least in the case of Derrida, he was desperately trying to rise above that, he had no visceral experience with an alternative to it. Rorty was criticized for not appreciating this tremendous sociocultural difference. And Rorty really took that criticism to heart. He came to think this is what was behind the sort of mistake he made in the way he engaged in conversation with people he continued to think were worth engaging with. But he, culturally, threw his lot in with them for the better part of the decade in a way he came to regret.

And people would not infrequently ask Rorty how he felt about having been excommunicated from analytic philosophy. And he always responded the same way: characteristically, he shrugged and would say he wasn't really aware it was a church! But there was some genuine pain behind that insouciant remark. What he came to discover was: it had been a church, and he had been excommunicated from it, and he needn't have been. It pained him that he was because that was, for better or for worse, his culture. For contingent reasons, he always intellectually identified, in his style and his way of thinking, with the analytic philosophy he had come to be a master of, and it was desperately unfair and unfortunate that he was read out of that culture in the way he was. He knew as well as anyone that he bore considerable responsibility for that, with the incendiary remarks he made and postures he adopted. He assumed that people would understand when he was and when he wasn't being serious, and they didn't! They took everything at the same level of seriousness. Jacques Bouveresse, in his essay [in *Rorty and his Critics*], more in sorrow than in anger, criticized Dick in this regard. But Dick meant to be – and he was – speaking socioculturally for what was good about the way in which analytic philosophers regard each other. But they felt he had put himself outside the fence.

Q: Where do you see anti-foundationalism going? And do you think it's heading the right way?

B: Epistemological foundationalism in the twentieth century is essentially coextensive with empiricism, and Empiricism has fallen severely out of favor in Anglophone philosophy and was never dominant outside of analytic philosophy. One of Rorty's deep historical insights into the situation he found himself in in the '60s was that he saw, with a clarity that no one else did, that two big things happened in analytic philosophy in the '50s: Quine's 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism' and Sellars' *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. They destroyed the two pillars of traditional empiricist foundationalism, in particular in its twentieth-century logical empiricist form: that regresses of justification were to be stopped by foundations of

Bob Brandom, University of Pittsburgh

unjustified justifiers, on the side of premises, by what was sensorially given; and that the regresses on the side of the inferences were to be stopped by inferences that were good in virtue of meaning alone, i.e., by analytic inferences. And then Quine had destroyed the one kind of foundation, and Sellars had destroyed the other. Though Rorty himself was less influenced by this one, one could mention Austin also as destroying the notion of sensory givenness as a foundation for knowledge.

Now, whether it was for exactly the reasons that Rorty recommended or not, that sort of epistemological empiricism is no longer the dominant view in analytic philosophy. There certainly are foundationalists, but that is no longer the consensus view. Quine reproduced in his own work and bequeathed to his many philosophical heirs twin commandments to epistemological empiricism and to ontological naturalism. Those are the twin commitments that nearly tore the Vienna Circle apart. What they divided over was the question of when your empiricist epistemology collides with your naturalist ontology, which do you hold on to? The Schlick wing said 'hold on to the empiricism,' and the Neurath wing said 'hold on to the naturalism.' And Carnap, powerful figure that he was, sat as the bird's body between these two wings, trying to keep them from flying off in different directions. They were reproduced in Quine and never sat easily with one another, as his empiricist rejection of modality was always in tension with his naturalist endorsement of scientific laws. But, in the wake of Quine's tremendous influence, felt nowhere more strongly than in the Princeton school of philosophy of my graduate school years, empiricism went by the board and naturalism won the day.

Foundationalism became, I think, not so much seen through in the way Rorty hoped it would be, as simply ignored. Rorty used to say that the final episode that drove a stake through the heart of his love affair with analytic philosophy was when, in the wake of the incipient modal revolution of the late 60s, Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* led, overnight, to a shift of philosophical winds: from Quinean disdain for modality to the appeal to modal primitives to address whatever was philosophically puzzling. Rorty said this confirmed his view that fashion was more determinative of philosophical commitments than anything else: that, on an issue of this importance, there could be a shift of this significance, sort of overnight, and that the old would be swept away as though it had never existed... forgotten, really. What exactly was the refutation of Quine's epistemological criticism of modality? There was no consensus about that; they just weren't interested in playing that game anymore, as he put it. And, though he had always thought that that was true of the discipline – at any rate, that it moved for contingent reasons, and that problems went in fashion and went out of

fashion – this was such a ferocious and cynical shift that he could no longer take it seriously. He could no longer unironically play this game, as he had with distinction and indeed brilliance for a decade.

Q: Steven Miller has this article called 'John Dewey is a Tool: Lessons from Rorty and Brandom,'[1] on the history of pragmatism. There, he argues that you follow Rorty in not confining certain authors – for instance, those of the classical pragmatic tradition – to a circle of specialists. And that you took those authors in other directions, which infuriated those specialists.

B: Well that's all true [laughs].

Q: Exactly. And he says that you're trying to take them out of those circles and use them for other productive purposes. Would you agree that you take this from Rorty and use this method as well?

B: I do agree with that – both that I do that and that I absolutely learned that from Rorty. I mean, there are some things that I think I ended up doing better than Rorty, and I think he ended up thinking I do those things better than he does. [For example,] the technical philosophy of language, which he was a practitioner of and a distinguished one, but I think that this was more my focus and I took some ideas that Rorty had and did things within that narrow subset field that go beyond the sort of thing he was able to do.

The retrospective, rational reconstruction of a tradition meant to vindicate a contemporary view (so really, the creating of a canon and a tradition); that the view one is now recommending is the natural culmination of and the natural next step in [the tradition] – Rorty was the unparalleled master of that. I think the lasting fascination and admiration that I have for Rorty is principally focused on the extent that he had mastered, essentially, the entire philosophical tradition that he inherited and that he could use it to tell philosophically edifying stories and discern minority traditions and strands of thought in it and [that he could] use that re-telling of the history to recommend a way of thinking these days. I was absolutely in awe of the mastery that Rorty had of the Kantian corpus, the Wittgensteinian corpus, the

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[1] Steven A. Miller, 'John Dewey is a Tool: Lessons from Rorty and Brandom,' *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol. 50, N°2 (Spring 2014), pp. 246-264.

Heideggerian corpus, and the art with which he could then deploy these intellectual raw materials to recharacterize what was going on.

I'm going to give an example of the sort of thing that seems to me… a remark that continues to enlighten, but I don't know that he's ever put it in print. He said it was dispiriting to see that, by the nineteenth century [there] had been the progressive triumph of historicist ideas, historicizing of philosophy from Hegel to Dilthey and of the growing appreciation of the significance of institutionalized social practices within which concepts were deployed. And then, just when those ideas were on the verge of triumphing, Bertrand Russel and Edmund Husserl, each in their own way, reinvented things for philosophy to be apodictic about, to be a historicist, to be removed from the social hurly-burly to the philosopher's armchair. And it [took us] us most of the twentieth century, in the traditions that Russel founded and that Husserl founded, to work our way back, to embody social practices and the historicizing appreciation. Now, as I say, I don't know that he actually gave that characterization in print, but I think that's a very good framework for thinking about nineteenth to twentieth-century philosophy. His view was, in a sort of Walter Pater, art for art's sake way, that the thing to do was to take an *aperçu*, an insight like that, work it out with apposite quotations, sort of showing how certain views fit into it, and then walk away and leave it behind and come up with a completely different one, that cuts in different ways. And this is an art form that he was the unsurpassed master at; he was just brilliant at doing that. And that is the art form that I, in a small way, practice.

I have different raw materials, but it entails the mighty dead. I'm self-consciously excavating a minority tradition. That's really retrospectively constituting a tradition that didn't exist until it was retrospectively discerned. It is inferentialist rather than representationalist, functionalist rather than atomistic. It's a rereading of most of the rationalist tradition that emphasizes completely different features of their thought than other great retrospective reconstructions of them – I think of Kant's. And I think this was one of Rorty's paradigms of this art, of Kant looking at the philosophies he inherited, dividing them into rationalist and empiricists – the rationalists assimilating all representations to thoughts and the empiricists assimilating all to sensations – and saying really what you should do is have concepts and intuitions. The concepts without intuitions are empty, and the intuitions without concepts are blind. That's an ideal retrospective reconstruction as a vindication of a view looking forward. Think of Kant as the great historian of philosophy, [even though] he was a practitioner. That's what inspired Hegel, who is, of course, the greatest practitioner of this.

Q: Four years before he passed, Rorty gave an interview to *The Believer*. The interviewer asked Rorty if he thought he had had any impact on the analytical philosophy establishment, to which Rorty answered 'I don't think any larger proportion of the population is persuaded of my line of thought than was thirty years ago.'[2] Do you think that we can, retrospectively, review this assessment?

B: Well, I think Rorty is unusual among analytic philosophers, in that I think his influence is growing after his death. In analytic philosophy, we're accustomed to ideas that influence programs having rather short shelf lives. I mentioned Gilbert Harman being steeped in history of philosophy and how everything he thought grew out of his understanding of the history of philosophy – it's just that he thought it started with Quine. My teachers in graduate schools thought of philosophy in a Quinean framework. They were brilliant original thinkers and were by no means simply parading a Quinean line, but the framework they were working in was certainly shaped by his. Even in David Lewis, in his book *Convention*, one can see the Quinean antecedents of this view. It's a line of thought that, I believe, grew out of Lewis' Harvard dissertation, and originated in deeply thinking about Quine's 1936's Carnapian and logical truth and his subsequent 'truth by convention' essays. *Word and Object* was published in 1960. By 1980, Quine was not being taught in major graduate programs in the Anglophone world. Having dominated the discussion for fifteen years, five years after that period, he was really only of antiquarian interest. It was felt that graduate students should know about him because he was influent, not because he was actually still influential. And Quine, I would say, was *the* Anglophone philosopher, *the* most influential Anglophone philosopher of his generation, [and he] wasn't safe. After dominating the discussion for fifteen years, a further five years and he's just another one of the mighty dead who one might study for historical insight.

    More recently, I think we've seen a figure who, in some ways, rivals Quine for his influence at the time, Donald Davidson. I don't believe there are any Davidsonians anymore. Insofar as there are, they're students of his and they're getting long in the tooth themselves. But Davidson is not someone that, as a systematic thinker, is studied or influential. Certain works on agency, other particular things, will come up, but Davidson is much less influential

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[2] Richard Rorty, 'Richard Rorty: "pragmatism is a philosophical therapy. It helps you stop asking the unhelpful questions,"' interview by Gideon Lewis-Kraus, in *The Believer*, vol. 1, nº3 (June 2003), https://www.believermag.com/issues/200306/?read=interview_rorty

now than he was ten years ago, less then than he was twenty years ago. I would say the same thing is true of one of my great heroes, Michael Dummett, in the British tradition. Eminent and accomplished students like Crispin Wright, [maybe,] but Dummett himself? Not much studied in Anglophone philosophy departments. I think this short shelf life is of a piece with the thought that, at any rate, in an ideological heyday of analytic philosophy, the appropriate form to produce and disseminate work was the gem-like journal article rather than a book that you spent years writing. Years was too long to wait to communicate your next new thought and too much trouble to read. And I think that the short form of the gem-like analytic philosophy journal article is much of a piece with the short shelf life of the analytic philosophical, if not career, anyway, post-career influence.

Now, for some figures, and Rorty is surely one of them, one worries about a waning of his influence after his death because his personal presence was so overwhelming. Anyone who ever heard Rorty talk knew they were listening to a distinctive voice, a voice in the literary sense. But he gave *literal* voice to that literary voice. Many, many people came to Rorty not knowing what to expect, not having a lot of background, and just being so compelled by the personality that comes through in his lectures. No one who ever heard him speak can read anything he wrote without hearing it in his voice, and it reads differently that way. One would have thought that this was a particular voice that would have trouble surviving his own spokesmanship, his own voicing of it. And indeed we've lost that. We don't have that and it's our loss. But I think that he continues to get new readers at a rate greater than Quine and Davidson and Dummett, who were all, within analytic philosophy, more mainstream, more appreciated, and more influential than Rorty was. His influence is growing and has continued to grow.

Rorty was much less active in the last decade of his life, when he was fighting the cancer that killed him. He continued to write, but did not travel, did not speak as much. His influence on his audience continued to grow during that time and has continued to grow since his death. We're [coming up on] the anniversary of the founding of the Richard Rorty Society,[3] an international society who's had as a principal activity running group meetings with the American Philosophical Association where scholars of Rorty's work can share their work with each other. We've had a Wilfrid Sellars Society for only about five years, and he died twenty years before Rorty did. It took fifteen

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[3] The Richard Rorty Society held its inaugural session in September 8-10, 2016, at Hamilton College in New York. More information: https://richardrortysociety.org/

years to get a Sellars Society. I think Sellars is another figure whose influence has grown since his death. He was never as influential as Quine was during his life, though always appreciated as original and important.

I think there's a crucial divide among philosophers as to whether their writings continue to inspire new generations of young philosophers or whether they were contributors to their moment. Hegel said philosophy was its time captured in thought. And that's an honorable function to perform – one should not be unhappy to have performed that function. I don't think that's the function Rorty performed. I think his was a contribution to what Sellars called perennial philosophy, to a treatment of concerns of continuing interest, with each new generation finding inspiration in reading the things that he wrote.

Index

J

James, William, 117, 211, 236

justification, 2, 99, 104, 117, 122, 162, 192, 206, 209, 211, 214, 215, 256

K

Kant, Immanuel, 2, 13, 16, 17, 19, 57, 116, 130, 138, 156, 157, 255, 259

knowledge, 26, 30, 31, 101, 116, 117, 119, 122, 156, 200, 254, 257

L

language, 9, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 42, 60, 101, 119, 121, 122, 123, 126, 127, 129, 155, 157, 160, 162, 163, 164, 187, 188, 191, 192, 194, 197, 199, 201, 205, 258

liberal, 11, 13, 49, 53, 64, 66, 76, 78, 96, 112, 157, 188, 198, 232, 246, 252

liberalism, 44, 65, 73, 76, 87, 200, 232, 235

Locke, John, 10, 13, 156

M

Marx, Karl, 10, 29, 32, 54, 56, 58, 78

Marxism, 26, 29, 79, 200, 234

mathematic, 14, 251

mathematics, 5

McDowell, John, 165, 166

metaphysics, 21, 22, 201, 255

mind, 57, 115, 117, 119, 120, 128, 132, 157, 189

mind / body, 1

morality, 33, 57, 64, 167, 208

Myth of the Given, 122, 156

N

Nietzsche, Friedrich, 10, 198, 219, 221, 223

normativity, 103, 130, 215

O

objectivity, 46, 60, 61, 117, 189

P

Peirce, Charles Sanders, 158, 164

physics, 4, 7, 14

Plato, 15, 28, 164

poet, 5, 6, 11, 57, 86, 88, 151, 227, 241, 255

political theory, 9, 17, 19

pragmatism, 3, 5, 8, 12, 22, 59, 118, 123, 164, 201, 205, 217, 220, 229, 237, 242, 243, 251, 255

progress, 7, 8, 27, 62, 160, 162

prophecy, 26, 28, 29, 31, 34

public/private, 10, 13, 54, 58, 59, 63, 213

Putnam, Hilary, 155

Q

Quine, Willard Van Orman, 16, 117, 137, 138, 156, 189, 199, 242, 257

R

Ramberg, Bjørn, 128, 129, 130, 131, 133

Rawls, John, 10, 13, 233

realism, 8, 118, 121, 155, 242

reality, 29, 62, 65, 101, 116, 118, 121, 128, 133, 155, 162, 163, 187, 188, 191, 193, 201, 212, 214, 254