

Doktori (Ph.D.) értekezés

**Antipodean Conversations:
Rhetorical Strategies of Discursive Authority in
Richard Rorty's Metaphilosophy and Political Thought**

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Introduction

The present dissertation focuses on the work of Richard Rorty, one of the most influential and most debated contemporary philosophers. Rorty started his career as a distinguished analytic philosopher, who—rather uncharacteristically—developed a profound interest in Continental philosophy, and has become renowned for his revival of American pragmatism. Since the publication of his seminal *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979; henceforth *Mirror*), and his subsequent “pragmatic turn,”¹ Rorty has been recognized not only as a relentless critic of analytic philosophy, but also as a detractor of all forms of essentialistic, metaphysical, or foundationalist thinking. His critical reflection, however, extends far beyond the realm of disciplinary philosophy: the wide range of discourses on which he has reflected through his prolific writing career includes political theory, historiography, and literary criticism, not to mention his numerous essays and articles on topics as diverse as terrorism, human rights, or evolutionary biology.

Rorty’s multidisciplinary disposition is admittedly far from the image of the professional academic philosopher who specializes in a single field of study, much like natural scientists do. Rather, Rorty conceives of philosophy as an ongoing conversation, and the philosopher as a “Socratic intermediary” (*Mirror* 317), a public

¹ While *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* doubtlessly marks Rorty’s break with the analytic tradition, commentators are divided as to the inception of the pragmatist phase of his thought. For discussions and different views of this problematic, see Cornel West (196-98); Richard J. Bernstein, (*The New Constellation* 258); Alan R. Malachowski (*Richard Rorty* 41; 67-68); Jürgen Habermas (*Rorty and His Critics* 31ff), and Neil Gross (93ff). It is also worth comparing Rorty’s initial reluctance to designate his position as “pragmatism” (*Mirror* 176) with his wholehearted espousal of the term in the introduction to his *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982), as well as some pertinent essays thereof, especially “Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism” (160-75).

intellectual conversant with several kinds of language games, practicing a kind of interdisciplinary cultural criticism. Generally speaking, the dissertation concentrates on this “Socratic”/“conversational” aspect of Rorty’s work, and investigates certain rhetorical mechanisms operative in his neopragmatist discourse.

It is to be noted, therefore, that my argument is not, strictly speaking, a *philosophical* argument, in that the dissertation is not intended to analyze or adjudicate substantive conceptual issues related to Rorty's work by way of the analytic tradition, Continental philosophy, or pragmatism. Neither does it aim at a comprehensive representation of his philosophical thought, thus it can by no means be regarded as a contribution to the history of contemporary philosophy. Rather, it offers a tendentious reading of his thought, delimited by a specific set of problems. For this reason, my approach is necessarily “angled,” and, perforce, fails to span the whole range of themes and ideas associated with Rorty’s vast oeuvre. Furthermore, the dissertation takes the form of a critique, but it does not aim to contradict or offer a corrective to Rorty's overall philosophical position. On the contrary, both the logic and the rhetoric of my argument are determined by my fundamental accord with the basic assumptions of his neopragmatism, especially with regard to its antiessentialistic traits. In this sense, I intend to offer a *Rortyan* reading of Rorty, in an attempt to pick up the language he speaks as a public intellectual, rather than a professional philosopher.

The main title of the dissertation is adopted from the second chapter of *Mirror* (70-77), where Rorty adduces a short science fiction tale to illustrate the argument he devises against the philosophy of mind.² The “Antipodeans” are imaginary

² It is to be noted that I use the Antipodean-tale as a cogent demonstration of the specific problems I focus on below, without assessing the first-order philosophical issues it raises about the mind. For a detailed

extraterrestrial humanoids, with a culture much like our own. They cultivate a discipline which can be referred to as “philosophy,” but their philosophical vocabulary entirely dispenses with the notion of “mind.” When analytic philosophers from Earth visit their planet, the attempted philosophical dialogue between Earthlings and Antipodeans fails, due to the analyticians’ unwillingness to accept the fact that there *can* be persons living without minds, as a result of which they insist on redescribing the natives in the terms their analytic vocabulary.

“Antipodean conversations” can be read as “failed conversations,” preemptively—and none the less ironically—undercutting Rorty’s concluding statements in the very same book, where he argues that the moral duty of the philosopher is to sustain conversation (*Mirror* 394). The tale, willy-nilly, becomes an illustration of how communicational impasse occurs in an attempted conversation where one interlocutor tries to redescribe the other in the terms of his/her vocabulary, being convinced of its discursive supremacy. Besides being an imaginative jibe at some of the basic tenets of analytic philosophy, this illustration, on a more general reading, also points up questions about the interrelatedness of communication, ethics, and authority, which are precisely those aspects of Rorty’s philosophy that my discussion aims to probe.

The chief contention of my dissertation is that despite Rorty’s professed anti-authoritarian persuasion and overtly emancipatory endeavors, we can read his texts as *performatively* evincing certain rhetorical strategies which appear to aim at

discussion of the tale, see Kenneth T. Gallagher’s “Rorty’s Antipodeans: An Impossible Illustration,” in which he discusses the self-referential tensions of Rorty’s example. I discuss the tale in more detail in Chapter Two.

maintaining the discursive authority of his own radically antiessentialist idiom. In four chapters, I identify and discuss four closely interrelated rhetorical strategies, which can be glossed as (1) “conversation”; (2) “irony”; (3) “appropriation”; and (4) “exclusion.” The former two are Rorty’s own terms, the latter two are my designations. The whole of my argument is thematized by the apparent conflict brought about by Rorty’s simultaneous valorization of “conversation” and “irony.” In contrast to received critical opinion,³ the claim I will defend through the dissertation is that these two rhetorical elements function in a complementary fashion in Rorty’s discourse, constituting a *consistent* metaphilosophical and political standpoint. I also claim that this consistency hints at a surreptitious authoritative intent taking shape in the guise of an emancipatory rhetoric. Rorty, however, shies away from confronting the coercive element in his discourse, which results in an ambivalent rhetoric in cases where his commitment to democratization clash with his uncompromising pragmatic antiessentialism. To accomplish the contradictory feat of keeping both endeavors in play without the two of them coming into conflict, he has to devise certain exclusionary strategies in such a way that the semblance of his antifoundationalism and his liberal democratic disposition remain intact.

Through the metaphors of “conversation,” first deployed in *Mirror* (264), Rorty stresses the importance of unbounded communication both among academic disciplines and in political practice. On the other hand, “irony,” a central notion of his

³Rorty’s critics—for instance, Nancy Fraser, Jo Burrows, Thomas McCarthy, Frank Lentricchia, and Norman Geras—object that the notion of conversation is all too vague to have any substantial consequence to philosophical discourse or political practice, and that his championing of private idiosyncrasy potentially propagates a kind of dissident irrationality, which not only blots out the ideal of conversation, but is also incompatible with his professed commitment to liberal democratic values.

Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity (1989; henceforth *Contingency*), argues for the value of idiosyncratic redescription, relating to such key notions of Rorty's philosophy as "abnormal discourse" or "strong poetry," which function both as vehicles of cultural progress and as quasi-poetic means of private self-fashioning. Conversation, in Rorty's view, can serve as a model of an antifoundationalist discourse: conversations proceed without theoretical grounding or the control of a formalized discipline, while they require that ideas and arguments be formulated in terms intelligible to all participating interlocutors. On the other hand, irony—in its specifically Rortyan sense—requires a capacity to invent novel metaphors, formulate hitherto unimaginable patterns of thought, reveal or establish unforeseen relations. These "idiosyncrasies" can either be enlisted for the purpose of the social, cultural, political or scientific advancement of a community, or be so thoroughly "privatized" that they remain valueless or unintelligible to anyone but their inventor. In short, while conversation calls for the ability and willingness to come to an agreement on the rules of the language game being played, redescription in idiosyncratic terms aims to be incommensurate with all extant language games.

Adopting Thomas Kuhn's terminology, conversation presupposes "normal discourse," in that interlocutors have to cover a large amount of common ground, that is, to rely on already in-place discursive norms to secure the potential of mutual understanding. Novel redescriptions, by contrast, constitute what Rorty—patterned on Kuhn's notion of "revolutionary science"—calls "abnormal discourse," which privileges idiosyncrasy and innovativeness over consensus. Rorty repeatedly declares his disdain for the stasis of uncritical consensus and the potential emergence of an

oppressive discourse, which might result from normal discourse, while commending the energizing and emancipatory potentials of abnormal discourse. Nonetheless, the burden of my argument is that what underlies Rorty's argumentative strategies is, in fact, a "normalizing" intent, which he keeps effacing by his blatant endorsement of "abnormal" discourses.

In the first chapter, discussing Rorty's conversational metaphors, I argue that not only does he refrain from the kind of rhetorical invention he associates with abnormal discourse, but also seeks to redescribe complex philosophical/theoretical abstractions and idiosyncratic rhetorical configurations in his own pragmatic terms. Thus, what his redescription aims at in such cases is just the reverse of poetic innovation: it acquires a demystifying function, its purpose being to make philosophical problems cast in highly specialized terminologies available to a wider circle of interlocutors than that delimited by the boundaries of a professionalized academic discipline. This endeavor is entirely compatible with the ideal of furthering interdisciplinary/interdiscursive communication, as it facilitates the opening of the conversational space to a diverse array of disciplines/discourses, which, however, require a certain basis of "normalcy" (strictly in the Kuhnian sense) if mutual understanding is to be achieved.

This normalizing tendency harmonizes with Rorty's liberal democratic persuasion: besides the right to unrestrained communication being one of the central values of all liberal democracies, he repeatedly emphasizes that democratic politics do not require abstract philosophical or theoretical grounding. Instead of elaborate theories, what is required for achieving and maintaining democracy is a thoroughly

practice-oriented disposition, which necessitates a widely comprehensible common language in which to articulate and negotiate political needs and interests—in other words, democratic politics at its best must be normal discourse. Furthermore, the primacy of the normal also comports with a key concept of Rorty’s moral philosophy, according to which our moral duty consists not in discovering an underlying metaphysical essence in the other, but finding what we have in common, thereby strengthening our sense of solidarity. This can be achieved through a conscious enlargement of our community by positing a large basis of “we-intentions,” (*Contingency* 189-198) which, in turn, can be accomplished by engaging ourselves in as many conversations as we can.

In the second chapter, I discuss Rorty’s concept of irony as an entailment of the latent authoritative purport of his conversational trope. I claim that Rortyan “ironism”—despite the putative subversive/liberating function associated with it in *Contingency* (75ff)—can be viewed as a rhetorical means of discursive control, which serves to keep the conversational space safe for normalcy. I discern two senses in which the notion of irony, on Rorty’s hands, functions as a means of control: it can denote (1) his radical nominalism (linguistic antiessentialism), which enables his discursive operation to be kept at a constant meta-level; and (2) an entirely privatized way of self-fashioning, which, by the same token, keeps the “private ironist” barred from entering “public” forums of cultural/political conversation. In the first sense, irony acquires traits reminiscent of the Socratic method. “Private irony,” in its turn, can be interpreted as marking out the limits of public acceptability for a discourse, and as such part and parcel of Rorty’s normalizing intent. In this sense, the operative term

is “private,” rather than “irony,” which can be applied to any discourse or utterance that harbors potential dangers to the given normal discourse.

In the third and fourth chapters, I examine Rorty’s normalizing argumentative strategies at work in specific metaphilosophical and political contexts by focusing on two discourses that he has extensively reflected on: Derridean deconstruction and religion respectively. The common denominator between the two discourses is Rorty’s much debated claim that certain forms of abnormal discourse (such as deconstruction) and certain individual beliefs (such as religious faith) may be instrumental in one’s private self-perfection, but are to be rendered irrelevant—and even potentially detrimental—to “public” (political, institutional, academic, etc.) practices. I will examine the curious ambiguity that inhabits Rorty’s rhetoric in his writings on deconstruction and religion, which results from a constant attempt to poise between the liberal compulsion to accommodate both in discursive space, and the pragmatic urge to displace them on account of their implicit or explicit metaphysical/essentialistic content. The rhetoric of endorsement, I will argue, masks a coercive attempt at banishment.

In the former case, Rorty endorses Derridean discourse as an example of “private irony” (a paradigm case of abnormal discourse), but, by the same token, plays down the philosophical (and potentially political) significance of deconstruction. He suggests, moreover, that deconstructive rhetoric is highly abstract and overstated for an efficacious critique of metaphysics. Thus, Rorty’s pragmatic (normalizing) interpretation of deconstruction obtains a quasi-political edge besides the more evident metaphilosophical one. Rorty’s intention can be revealed to have a power-laden

undercurrent to it, in that he renders the critical function of deconstruction inconsequential, while surreptitiously *appropriating* that very function as a pragmatist monopoly.

In the case of religion, we can observe the same power-laden argument taking shape, devised in more overtly political terms. Despite his repeatedly professed atheism, not only does Rorty render religion acceptable as a form of private self-perfection, but he also denies the epistemic inadequacy of religious faith in the face of the alleged supremacy and universality of post-Enlightenment rationality. He stipulates, nonetheless, that religiously conceived arguments had best be *excluded* from public discourses, whereby he reinstates the distinction between faith and reason, where the latter reappears in the guise of the pragmaticized normal discourse of secularized democracies.

* * *

I closed my research in December, 2007, so the dissertation does not include references to sources beyond that date. Most of the present text had been written before Rorty's unfortunate death on June 8, 2007, so I retained references to his person in the present tense throughout the dissertation.

Chapter One

Conversation and the Authority of Normal Discourse

Rorty introduces the notion of “conversation” in the last part of *Mirror* as a rhetorical underpinning of his large-scale antifoundationalist project of deconstructing the Platonic image of philosophy as search for perennial truths, thereby seeking to supplant the “ocular metaphors” of foundationalist epistemology. In place of grounding theories of knowledge, Rorty envisions interdiscursive/interdisciplinary conversations, whose participants aspire to agreement through a hermeneutic process of playing propositions off against each other and interpreting them in accordance with the variable discursive conditions that obtain in the context of a specific dialogue, rather than through implementing acontextual and invariable routines of inquiry to adjudicate knowledge claims.

In this chapter, I will probe Rorty’s metaphor of conversation, discussing it as a rhetorical device which bears significantly on his metaphilosophical and political thinking. I will construe “conversation” in close conjunction with Thomas Kuhn’s notion of “normal discourse.” Although conversation—in its specifically Rortyan sense—is primarily associated with a tendency toward emancipation and democratizing, it is not devoid of an authoritative trait. Adducing a hermeneuticized/pragmaticized model of communication, Rorty seeks to offer an alternative to the potentially hegemonic “normal discourses” of philosophy and—by implication—politics. My contention is, however, that conversation is bound up, in

Rorty's usage, with an inherent sense of "normalizing," which may come into conflict with his pronounced emancipatory efforts.

In three sections below, I will discuss (1) how the notion of conversation is related to normal discourse; (2) how the normalizing tendencies are observable in Rorty's conception of "conversational" philosophy; and (3) reflect upon some overlaps between his earlier metaphilosophy and his recent political thought to argue that his covert penchant for normal discourse stems from his profound antimetaphysical persuasion.

The primacy of conversation and the allure of abnormal discourse

Rorty adopts the conversational trope from Michael Oakeshott's essay, "The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind" (*Mirror* 264). Oakeshott's essay does not address questions pertaining directly to professional philosophy, but it deploys a rhetoric which Rorty readily enlists in advancing his own antifoundationalist agenda.

The essay's pertinent passage is worth quoting at length:

It may be supposed that the diverse idioms of utterance which make up current human intercourse have some meeting-place and compose a manifold of some sort [. . .], [but] the image of this meeting-place is not an inquiry or an argument, but a conversation. In a conversation the participants are not engaged in an inquiry or a debate; there is no "truth" to be discovered, no proposition to be proved, no conclusion sought. They are not concerned to

inform, to persuade, or to refute one another, and therefore the cogency of their utterances does not depend upon their all speaking in the same idiom; they may differ without disagreeing. [. . .] In conversation, “facts” appear only to be resolved once more into the possibilities from which they were made; “certainties” are shown to be combustible, not by being brought in contact with other “certainties” or with doubts, but by being kindled by the presence of ideas of another order; approximations are revealed between notions normally remote from one another. (196-97)

Oakeshott’s concept of conversation is congenial to Rorty’s antifoundationalism insofar as it emphasizes that the plurality of (often conflicting) worldviews, discourses, language games should not be viewed, in a teleological fashion, as converging toward a final metaphysical truth. “Inquiry” and “argument”—the invoked antonyms of “conversation”—are epistemologically-charged terms, which presuppose a disciplinary matrix that determines the rules of their deployment so that they can attain the ideal *teloi* of “truth” or “certainty.”

The ideal upshot of conversational practice is a “holistic” discourse, which no longer relies on epistemological models of universal commensuration when adjudicating diverse knowledge claims, but on a potential intersubjective agreement among the members of what Oakeshott calls “*societas*” (*Mirror* 318). *Societas*, in the sense used by Oakeshott and adopted by Rorty, suggests the possibility of constituting an interdiscursive space, the meeting-place of “diverse idioms of utterance,” where even remote (philosophical/theoretical) positions can be revealed to have affinities. Rorty paraphrases Oakeshott’s conception of *societas* by saying that the term denotes

a group of “persons whose paths through life have fallen together, united by civility rather than by a common goal, much less by a common ground” (*Mirror* 318). Rorty challenges the idea of a “common ground” as long as it is used to denote “epistemic foundation,” emphasizing that conversation is contingent and unpredictable, so its procedures cannot be described by reference to transcendental schemes or the formalized constraints of an academic discipline. Neither is it a dialectical process, in that it does not necessarily serve the purpose of resolving disagreement or synthesizing thesis and antithesis by means of rational argument. Rather, it carries the hope of eventual agreement and consensus, dispensing with the notion that it should do so in the name of a metaphysically or rationally conceived necessity: “conversation [. . .],” Rorty affirms, “presupposes no disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers, but [. . .] the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts” (*Mirror* 318).

The metaphors of conversation is certainly not unprecedented: Hans-Georg Gadamer adduces it as a model of hermeneutic understanding, stressing—much like Oakeshott and Rorty—the immanent contingency of conversations: “a genuine conversation,” Gadamer observes, “is never the one that we wanted to conduct,” therefore “it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation,” in which “the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led” (383). Jürgen Habermas observes that both hermeneutics and pragmatism attribute “epistemic authority to the community of those who cooperate and speak with one another. Everyday communication makes possible a kind of understanding that is based on claims to validity and thus furnishes the only real alternative to exerting influence on

one another in more or less coercive ways” (*Moral* 19). Thus far, Gadamer and Rorty would probably agree, but Habermas goes on to interpret the notion of conversation in accordance with his concept of transcendental rationality, through which critical projects can acquire transcontextual (universal) applicability: “[t]he validity claims that we raise in conversation—that is, when we say something with conviction—*transcend* this specific conversational context, pointing to something beyond the spatiotemporal ambit of the occasion”⁴ (*Moral* 19; emphasis added).

Rortyan conversation, however, is designed precisely to repudiate any claim to transcendence: in Rorty’s view, nothing ever transcends a “specific conversational context,” nothing ever goes beyond “the spatiotemporal ambit” of an occasion. The Habermasian notions of “communicative reason”⁵ and “ideal speech situation,”⁶ which supposedly guarantee that communication should proceed without being distorted by ideology or misrepresentation, is, for Rorty, just one more metaphysical delusion.⁷ A thoroughly pragmatized antifoundationalism cannot admit of any form of transcendence, even in the form of rationality: “the life of reason,” Rorty claims, “is not the life of Socratic conversation but an illuminated state of consciousness in which one never needs to ask if one has exhausted the possible descriptions of, or explanations for, the situation” because “[o]ne simply arrives at true beliefs by

⁴ By imputing transcendental motives to pragmatism and hermeneutics, Habermas arguably misrepresents both positions. Nevertheless, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith points out, this interpretive move can be seen as a conciliatory gesture insofar as Habermas enlists pragmatism and hermeneutics in “the service and rehabilitation” of Enlightenment rationality. At the same time, the argument can also serve to “strip them [hermeneutics and pragmatism] of their critical force and [. . .][of] their identity as alternative theoretical projects” (*Belief* 115).

⁵ Most cogently discussed in *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (115-147).

⁶ The most eloquent formulation of which is to be found in “Wahrheitstheorien,” quoted by Omid A. Payrow Shabani in his *Democracy, Power, and Legitimacy* (49).

⁷ Much of the argument in his “Universality and Truth” consists in Rorty’s criticism of these Habermasian concepts.

obeying mechanical procedures” (“Pragmatism, Relativism” 164). Those of transcendentalist persuasion, he adds, aim to “avoid the need for conversation and deliberation and simply tick off the way things are” (“Pragmatism, Relativism” 164), without having to engage one’s peers in negotiating knowledge claims.

Much as he emphasizes the importance of negotiation, Rorty tends to downplay the obvious fact that conversations, however colloquial and freewheeling they might be, do indeed presuppose a large amount of common ground to be covered by the participating interlocutors. Being highly critical of the idea that knowledge claims can be adjudicated on firm epistemological foundations, he lashes out against the notion of commensurability, which he seems to regard as a byproduct of epistemology. For it is epistemology, he observes, which “proceeds on the assumption that all contributions to a given discourse are commensurable,” capable of being “brought under a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached on every point where statements seem to conflict” (*Mirror* 316). He goes on to say:

The dominating notion of epistemology is that to be rational, to be fully human, to do what we ought, we need to be able to find agreement with other human beings. To construct an epistemology is to find the maximum amount of common ground with others. The assumption that an epistemology can be constructed is the assumption that such common ground exists. (*Mirror* 316)

Rorty’s skepticism owes a great deal to Thomas Kuhn’s work in the philosophy of science, where commensurability is identified as the hallmark of “normal science,” the paradigm-case of a discourse which operates under agreed-upon norms of inquiry, founded on a definable body of accumulated knowledge. Insofar as normal science is

“predicated on the assumption that the [normal] scientific community knows what the world is like” (Kuhn, *Structure* 5), Rorty is quick to note that it “is as close as real life comes to the epistemologist’s notion of what it is to be rational” (*Mirror* 320), and adopts the attribute “normal” to apply it, as a term of criticism, to pertinent fields of philosophy and human discourse in general.

Normal science, according to Kuhn, “often suppresses fundamental novelties [offered by revolutionary science] because they are necessarily subversive of its basic commitments” (*Structure* 5). Rorty puts this Kuhnian notion to good use in advancing his emancipatory agenda: the normal discourse of “systematic philosophy,” he asserts, displays an “objectionable self-confidence,” which lies in the tendency to “block the flow of conversation by presenting itself as offering the canonical vocabulary for discussion of a given topic” (*Mirror* 386-87). The ultimate danger to be warded off is the “freezing-over of culture,” “the dehumanization of human beings” by “deceiv[ing] them into thinking that from now on all discourse could be, or should be, normal discourse” (*Mirror* 377).

Rorty seems to be acutely aware⁸ of the various exclusionary strategies—depicted most effectively in Michel Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization*—which have been implemented throughout human history in the guise of “normalization” to fight the bogeys of “passion,” “unreason,” “insanity,” or any other culturally recognized form of abnormality. Unlike Foucault, however, he rarely ventures into direct discussions of power relations, and refuses to look upon modern culture as

⁸ See especially the arguments he advances in “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality,” “Rationality and Cultural Difference,” “Feminism and Pragmatism” (*TP* 167-227); and “Universality and Truth” (14-17).

irredeemably power-ridden through and through.⁹ Rorty, unlike Foucauldians, does believe that obnoxious forms of power can be warded off by means of “abnormal discourse.” One such discourse is what he designates as “edifying philosophy”—being derived from Gadamer’s notion of *Bildung*¹⁰—which he posits as the token of liberation, functioning as the guardian of the freedom of conversations: it is “not only abnormal but reactive, having sense only as a protest against attempts to close off conversation through the hypostatization of some privileged set of descriptions” (*Mirror* 377). Edifying philosophy “is *supposed* to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings” (*Mirror* 360).

This kind of discourse is practiced by “oracular world-disclosers” such as Plato, Hegel, or Derrida, as opposed to “argumentative problem-solvers” like Aristotle and Bertrand Russell (“Is Derrida” 123). The “problem-solvers,” Rorty states, are scornful of “the notion of incommensurable scientific world-pictures,” while the “world-disclosers” are characterized by the need to present themselves “obliquely, with the help of as many foreign [unfamiliar] words and as much allusiveness [. . .] as possible” (“Kind of Writing” 92). A close kin to the edifier and the world-discloser is the “ironist,” the hero of Rorty’s subsequent “liberal utopia,” who scorns the metaphysician’s “common sense,” and engages himself in the dialectical practice of

⁹ See especially *Contingency* (62-65) and *Achieving Our Country* (94-95). I will have more to say on Rorty’s view of power in the last section of this chapter.

¹⁰ This marks a case of strong misreading on Rorty’s part. Gadamer does indeed define *Bildung* as being characterized by the ability to keep “oneself open to what is other,” but then goes on to contend that it “embraces a sense of proportion and distance in relation to itself, and hence consists in rising above itself to universality” (*Truth* 17). Apart from his overall anti-universalist stance, Rorty’s understanding of *Bildung* or “edification,” on the other hand, stresses what is idiosyncratic rather than universal, and he also ignores Gadamer’s emphasis on tradition in the edifying process. See Warnke (106-7), and Bialostosky (111-12).

offering “massive [idiosyncratic] redescrptions” (*Contingency* 78). Redescription at such a massive scale, Rorty stipulates, is “dialectical,” insofar as it consists in “the attempt to play off vocabularies against one another”; it is not “an argumentative procedure or a way of unifying subject and object, but simply a literary skill—skill at producing surprising gestalt switches by making smooth, rapid transitions from one terminology to another” (*Contingency* 78). Thus, Rorty contends, irony cannot serve *public* purposes, for he “cannot imagine a culture which socialized its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization. Irony seems inherently a private matter” (*Contingency* 87).

Nonetheless, giving in to the allure of abnormal discourse and rendering argumentation otiose to deconstruct the notion of an epistemologically conceived common ground seem to belie the utmost priority of keeping communication going. World-disclosure, according to Rorty, entails the consequence that “the only thing that can displace an intellectual world is another intellectual world—a new alternative, rather than an argument against an old alternative” (“Is Derrida” 121). Thus, world-disclosure breeds novel vocabularies, which are incommensurate with all extant vocabularies that could negotiate or criticize their “world-disclosing” claims, for edifying philosophers “dread the thought that their vocabulary should ever be institutionalized, or that their writing might be seen as commensurable with the tradition” (*Mirror* 369).

This must also mean, however, that world-disclosers—the alleged catalysts of cultural progress, who earn themselves Rorty's full approval—opt out of the “conversation of mankind.” Refusing to resort to argumentation, edifying philosophers

of world-disclosing magnitude are highly unlikely to find much to converse about with each other, and even less communication is possible between edifiers and systematic philosophers. As Nancy Fraser observes, abnormal discourse, in this sense, would consist “of a solitary voice crying out into the night against an utterly undifferentiated background,” to which the “only conceivable response [. . .] is uncomprehending rejection or identificatory imitation,” but there is “no room for a reply that could qualify as a different voice [. . .], no room for interaction” (314).

The possibility of conversation, thus, appears to be restricted to those shared discourses which qualify as “normal,” that is, the language games played by the antiheroes of Rortyan narratives: the normal scientist, the systematic philosopher, or the commonsensical metaphysician. The question that arises, of course, is how the ideal of conversation, which presupposes a certain degree of “normalcy,” can be reconciled with the salutary idiosyncrasies of abnormal discourses. As we will see below, however, normal discourse is not entirely incompatible with Rortyan antifoundationalism.

From Rorty's discussion of abnormal discourse, Steven Mailloux infers the “Wittgensteinian point that propositional argumentation does not bring about persuasion between two different paradigms or language games” (*Reception* 57). Mailloux interprets Rorty as saying that there is “a distinction [to be drawn] between the suitability of argumentation within paradigms and the unsuitability of argumentation between paradigms,” and since “we do not know how to argue across different paradigms [. . .], argumentation is completely irrelevant to changing position from one paradigm to another” (59). Mailloux also points out, however, that

“conversion to a new paradigm is often dependent upon the weakening of the old [. . .], [which] includes refutation through propositional argumentation” (59). This means that although “solving problems [arguing a case] and disclosing worlds [aiming for incommensurability] are two radically different rhetorical goals, [. . .] the means to achieve these goals can share rhetorical strategies, including propositional argumentation” (60). What Mailloux points out is that incommensurability and argumentation do not necessarily exclude one another as Rorty seems to assume. In fact, examining Rorty's further argument, we may feel justified to pose the question whether he allows for the incommensurability of discourses in the first place.

Rorty suggests that the desire for epistemic commensuration should be replaced by an aspiration for hermeneutic understanding. Operating with the notion of hermeneutics in a “limited and purified sense” (*Mirror* 344), and stipulating that it is not to be viewed as a “successor subject” to epistemology, he argues that

“hermeneutics” is not a name for a discipline, nor for a method of achieving the sort of results which epistemology failed to achieve, nor for a program of research. On the contrary, hermeneutics is an expression of hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled—that our culture should become one in which the demand for constraint and confrontation is no longer felt. (*Mirror* 315)

Consequently, for “hermeneutics to be rational is to be willing to refrain from epistemology—from thinking that there is a special set of terms in which all contributions to the conversation should be put—and to be willing to pick up the jargon of the interlocutor rather than translating it into one's own” (*Mirror* 318).

It is, however, not quite clear what kind of interlocutors Rorty has in mind: world-disclosers, by definition, *create* unfamiliar jargon, which those involved in normal discourse are unlikely to pick up without interpretive mediation. Although he claims to adopt his own conception of hermeneutics—virtually with no regard to its Heideggerian origins—from Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* (*Mirror* 357-58), he seems totally oblivious of Gadamer’s “rehabilitation” of authority and tradition (*Truth* 277-85) as central to hermeneutic understanding.¹¹ Nonetheless, once he introduces “hermeneutics”—even though in an attenuated sense—into his language game, he cannot dispense with the notion of discursive authority as the inevitable corollary of interpretive practice.

The act of translation, however, is bound to take place at some point during the conversation if hermeneutic understanding is to be reached.¹² He claims that hermeneutics is “the study of an abnormal discourse from the point of view of a normal discourse—the attempt to make sense of what is going on at a stage where we are still too unsure about it to describe it, and thereby to begin an epistemological account of it” (*Mirror* 321). Thus, hermeneutics, far from aiming at world-disclosure, undertakes to mediate abnormal discourse, taming it, as it were, through an interpretive procedure whereby the unfamiliar is turned into familiar: “we play back and forth between guesses about how to characterize particular statements or other

¹¹ On Rorty’s peculiar view of hermeneutics, see Jacek Holówka’s “Philosophy and the Mirage of Hermeneutics”; on his problematic reading of Gadamer, see Warnke (105-14). I will revisit Rorty’s understanding of hermeneutics in Chapter Two, when discussing his antiessentialist treatment of theories of interpretation.

¹² Gadamer is quite clear on this point: “Every conversation obviously presupposes that the two speakers speak the same language. Only when two people can make themselves understood through language by talking together can the problem of understanding and agreement even be raised” (*Truth* 385).

events [. . .] until gradually we feel at ease with what was hitherto strange” (*Mirror* 319).

Furthermore, with hermeneutic mediation in view, Rorty needs to qualify the notion of “edification” by adumbrating two forms it can take: it “may [either] consist in the hermeneutic activity of making connections [. . .] between our own discipline and another discipline which seems to pursue incommensurable aims in an incommensurable vocabulary,” or “it may [. . .] consist in the ‘poetic’ activity of thinking up [. . .] new aims, new words, or new disciplines, followed by [. . .] the inverse of hermeneutics: the attempt to reinterpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions” (*Mirror* 360).

The “hermeneutic” sort of edification clearly argues for the availability of a “common ground,” as it admits of an interpretive move by means of which we can gain access to discourses or vocabularies that operate under different discursive rules than ours. “Incommensurable,” in Rorty’s usage, does not refer—as on Kuhn’s account—to the mutual impermeability between radically different discourses: it seems to mean hardly more than “unfamiliar,” which is still capable of being explained in “familiar” terms. The possibility of radical otherness, apparently entailed by abnormal discourse, is thus precluded. In effect, however, edification in a “poetic sense” seems no less “hermeneutic” and thus preclusive of radical abnormality: if it is *our* “familiar surroundings” that are redescribed in the “unfamiliar terms” of *our* new (rhetorical) inventions, we are still located in the interior space of a *familiar* interpretive discourse, which enables us to measure *our* familiar/normal experience up

against what *we* deem unfamiliar/abnormal. Either way, the notion of *commensurability* remains operative.

On closer inspection, Rorty turns out to be less of a Kuhnian than he initially appeared to be. He certainly sympathizes with Kuhn's historicist penchant,¹³ but he is skeptical about the more radical implications of the notion of "incommensurability," epitomized by statements such as: "when paradigms change, the world itself changes with them [. . .] [so] after a [scientific] revolution scientists are responding to a different world" (Kuhn, *Structure* 111). Rorty takes such assertions to be indicative of a remnant idealism in Kuhn's argument, which he duly rejects.¹⁴ Criticizing the notion of "neutral observation language," Kuhn challenges the view that "what changes with a paradigm is only the scientist's interpretation of observations that themselves are fixed once and for all by the nature of the environment and the perceptual apparatus," thus, "[w]hat occurs during a scientific revolution is not fully reducible to a reinterpretation of individual and stable data" (*Structure* 120-21). The point Kuhn is making, of course, is not that scientists do not interpret data and observation, but that they do so *within* their own paradigm, not *across* paradigms (*Structure* 122).¹⁵ According to Rorty, however, cross-paradigmatic interpretation ceases to be

¹³ See, for instance, Kuhn's contention that "normal-scientific tradition that emerges from a scientific revolution is not only incompatible but often actually incommensurable with what has gone before" (*Structure* 103).

¹⁴ Rorty especially deprecates Kuhn's description of Galileo's pendulum as being "*brought into existence* by something very like a paradigm-induced gestalt switch," which enables the view that "when Aristotle and Galileo looked at swinging stones, the first saw constrained fall, the second a pendulum" (*Structure* 120-21; emphasis added). Rorty's anti-idealist way of reformulating the pendulum-problematic is to say that "we need to make no more of the gestalt-switch in question than the fact that people became able to respond to sensory stimulations by remarks about pendulums, without having to make an intervening inference" (*Mirror* 325).

¹⁵ As Kuhn goes on to say: "Paradigms are not corrigible by normal science at all. Instead [. . .], normal science ultimately leads only to the recognition of anomalies and to crises. And these are terminated not by deliberation and interpretation, but by a relatively sudden and unstructured event like the gestalt switch" (*Structure* 122).

problematic if we say merely that “the results of looking [at the objects of scientific observation] can always be phrased in terms acceptable to both sides¹⁶ [of pre- and post-revolution scientists]” (*Mirror* 324).

By granting the possibility of a common interpretive ground between rival paradigms or conflicting language games, Rorty, distances himself from Kuhn and aligns himself with Donald Davidson. Davidson rejects the idea of conceptual relativism that is arguably harbored by the notion of incommensurability, as he argues in his famous essay against the idea of conceptual schemes.¹⁷ Davidson insists that *ultimate* failure in the translation and eventual understanding of another discourse is implausible, since the very ability to detect difference(s) between two discursive positions already presupposes a large amount of consensus: “Different points of view make sense,” Davidson contends, “but only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them; yet the very existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability. [. . .] Given the underlying methodology of interpretation, we could not be in a position to judge that others had concepts or beliefs radically different from our own”¹⁸ (*Inquiries* 184, 197).

From a Kuhnian perspective, Davidson’s argument harbors the disquieting conclusion that, in point of fact, all discourses can be revealed to be *normal*, since they all share a sufficient amount of beliefs to be capable of reaching—if not full agreement—at least a state of mutual interpretability. Davidson criticizes Kuhn for

¹⁶ Such as “the fluid looked darker” or “the needle veered to the right” (*Mirror* 324).

¹⁷ See Rorty’s exposition and defense of Davidson’s argument in *Mirror* (295-305).

¹⁸ Davidson, avoiding relapse into a naïve universalism, qualifies this claim as he concludes his essay by pointing out that it would be “wrong to announce the glorious news that all mankind—all speakers of language, at least—share a common scheme and ontology. For if we cannot intelligibly say that schemes are different, neither can we intelligibly say that they are one” (198).

positing “different observers of the same world who come to it with incommensurable systems of concepts [. . .], [thus operating with] the dualism of total scheme (or language) and uninterpreted content” (*Inquiries* 187). The disagreement between the two philosophers can be given a plausible reading from either’s position. Kuhn certainly does not advocate the notion of “uninterpreted content,” otherwise he could not make a convincing case for his notion that scientists work in “different worlds” in the wake of revolutions. To this extent, Kuhn could argue that Davidson—whose holistic line of criticism hangs on assuming the notion of “uninterpreted content” to be an integral part of paradigm-theory—performatively demonstrates a case of incommensurability. On the other hand, Davidson’s counterargument is likely to be that Kuhn could not even recognize the constitutive difference between their positions, and deploy the term “incommensurability,” if the two of them did not have a large amount of beliefs in common in the first place.

Rorty clearly favors the Davidsonian approach, asserting blatantly in his recent work that “the very idea of incompatible, and perhaps reciprocally unintelligible, language-games is a pointless fiction, and that in real cases representatives of different traditions and cultures can always find a way to talk over their differences” (“Universality” 12), which he backs up with an uncharacteristic line of reasoning. Arguing against the Aristotelian dictum that “all human beings by nature desire to know,” he asserts that the “need to make one’s beliefs coherent is [. . .] not separable from the need for the respect of our peers” (“Universality” 15). Then, with a rather unexpected turn, he goes on to explicate the need for coherence as a constitutionally induced desire of human beings:

We pragmatists think that the reason people try to make their beliefs coherent is not that they love truth but because *they cannot help doing so*. Our minds can no more stand incoherence than our brains can stand whatever neuro-chemical imbalance is the psychological correlate of such incoherence. Just as our neural networks are, presumably, both constrained and in part constructed by something like the algorithms used in parallel distributed processing of information by computer programmers, so our minds are constrained [. . .] by the need to tie our beliefs and desires together into a reasonably perspicuous whole. (“Universality” 15; emphasis added)

Given Rorty’s radical antiessentialism, this reasoning is somewhat perplexing inasmuch as it seeks to condemn Aristotle’s appeal to a putatively inalienable faculty in human beings, but it posits another faculty which seems no less inalienable. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find any substantial difference between the contention that yearning for coherence is embedded in our nature, and the claim that we cannot help yearning for it because that is the way our brains are wired up; both explications seem equally question-begging—and none the less essentialistic.

More importantly, however, Rorty’s notion of coherence is predicated on the Davidsonian insight that what we designate as “belief,” moreover, as “language,” cannot escape the tribunal of communal justification: “[w]e need the respect [or approval] of our peers because we cannot trust our own beliefs [. . .] unless we are fairly sure that our conversational interlocutors agree among themselves on such propositions as ‘He’s not crazy,’ ‘He’s one of us’ [. . .]” (“Universality” 15).

Paraphrasing a more recent argument by Davidson, he declares even more forcefully that

you cannot have any language, or any beliefs, without being in touch with both human communities *and* non-human reality. There is no possibility of agreement without truth, nor of truth without agreement. [. . .] Most of our beliefs must be justified in the eyes of our peers [. . .]: if they were not justified [. . .] they would have to conclude that they had either misunderstood us or that we did not speak their language. Coherence, truth, and community go together [. . .] because to ascribe a belief is automatically to ascribe a place in a largely coherent set of mostly true beliefs. (“Universality” 16)

The significance of this line of argument is apparent when examined alongside Rorty’s previously outlined endorsement of abnormal discourses. As long as edifying philosophy and ironism are to be intelligible, as long as they are to convey beliefs and be mediated via language, their discursive operation is permitted at the cost of empowering a linguistic community, which constantly monitors edifying and ironist utterances. Abnormal discourse, in other words, can be abnormal only to the extent that the normal discourse of the given community allows it to be. In Rorty’s economy, therefore, the radical otherness and the potentially subversive content of abnormal discourses are safely kept under the control of communal surveillance, whether in the form of hermeneutic mediation or simple peer-pressure. Thus, the priority of conversation over the allure of abnormal discourse is always already secured: the edifying/ironist innovators do not stand a chance unless they join in. What we might

infer from the way Rorty conceives of the role of philosophy, however, is that edification, ironism, and innovation are not what he is really pursuing.

The normal discourse of conversational philosophy

As noted above, the target of Rorty's critique in *Mirror* is the foundational conception of knowledge as "accurate representation, made possible by special mental processes" (*Mirror* 6), cognizable via rigorous epistemological inquiry. This concept adds up to what John Dewey called the "spectator theory of knowledge,"¹⁹ which operates with the metaphors of "vision," in keeping with the root meaning of *theoria* as visual contemplation. By contrast, Rorty advocates the Wittgensteinian notion that knowledge is a linguistic affair, "a relation to propositions," whose justifiability is a function of the "relation between the propositions in question and other propositions from which the former may be inferred," rather than that of "privileged relations to the objects those propositions are about" (*Mirror* 159). Invoking Dewey's notion of "warranted assertibility," he argues for the espousal of a "conception of knowledge as what we are justified in believing" (*Mirror* 9), which would bring us to drop the notion "that there are enduring constraints on what can count as knowledge, since we will see 'justification' as a social phenomenon rather than a transaction between 'the knowing subject' and 'reality'" (*Mirror* 9). In this vein, "true knowledge" can be viewed as the outcome of communal justification, implemented through currently

¹⁹ See *The Quest for Certainty* (23; 204)

tenable discursive practices, rather than as correspondence to an “extra-discursive” reality, which serves as an immutable constraint on knowledge claims.²⁰

Besides the more obvious function of emphasizing the discursivity of knowledge, the metaphors of conversation seems also to imply a sense of liberation and democratization, as if Rorty were arguing that ousting foundationalist metaphors is tantamount to overthrowing a tyrannical hegemony: “[i]f we see knowledge as a matter of conversation and of social practice, rather than as an attempt to mirror nature,” he claims “we will not be likely to envisage a metapractice which will be the critique of all possible forms of social practice” (*Mirror* 171). He reaffirms this notion in the conclusion of *Mirror*, where he refers to “knowing not as having an essence, to be described by scientists and philosophers, but rather as a *right*, by current standards, to believe,” (389; emphasis added), and further qualifies this point in *Consequences of Pragmatism* by arguing that “there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones—no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow inquirers” (“Pragmatism, Relativism” 165).

Rorty’s rhetoric here unmistakably prefigures what can be called his “political antifoundationalism,” the basic tenet of which is that democratic politics, analogously to knowledge, “[do] not need philosophical backup,” just as no theory of the human self can justify democratic institutions “by reference to more fundamental premises,

²⁰ Barry Allen explicates Rorty's discursivist view of knowledge invoking Berkeley's notion that “nothing but an idea can be like an idea,” which Rorty can be understood to rephrase as “nothing but a sentence can justify a sentence” (223). Allen gives a cogent account of Rorty's discursive penchant when he writes: “Knowledge [in an antifoundationalist sense] does not require that a Real Something transcend belief and measure the cognitive quality of our conversations. Knowledge revolves entirely within discourse. It is entirely a matter of sentences people believe true, the statements they make, the interlocutors who receive and criticize such statements, and the standards they go by” (223).

but the reverse: he or she is putting politics first and tailoring a philosophy to suit” (“Priority” 178).²¹ This claim testifies to Rorty's apprehension that a founding theory of democracy might constitute a monolithic power discourse, which invests more authority with the philosophical initiates than the members of the democratic community.

This politically charged apprehension is detectable already in his metaphilosophical urge to substitute the conversational model of knowledge for the “confrontational” one.²² According to the latter, true knowledge is achieved when the knowing subject—as a result of rigorous inquiry—finally finds oneself “confronted” by the object of knowledge in the form of a privileged representation (pure “internal” vision). This representation, then, imposes itself on the knower’s mind by virtue of a metaphysically conceived immediacy, which circumvents the tribunal of social justification. In this foundationalist view, social justification, or communal considerations in general, are immaterial in attaining true knowledge since the adjudication of the truth of a knowledge claim is contingent upon the extent to which it can serve as the accurate mirror-image of a mind-independent, external reality.

Should this foundational reasoning be valid, no discursive mediation would be needed any longer: we could get into “a situation in which argument would not just be silly but impossible, for anyone gripped by the object in the required way will be *unable* to doubt or see an alternative. To reach that point is to reach the foundations of knowledge” (*Mirror* 159). Reaching this point would thus be tantamount to finding

²¹ See also *Contingency* (44-45).

²² Cf. “Once conversation replaces confrontation, the notion of the mind as Mirror of Nature can be discarded. Then the notion of philosophy as the discipline which looks for privileged representations among those constituting the Mirror becomes unintelligible” (*Mirror* 170).

the one true description of the world, where reality reveals itself in its entirety, without any discursive residue to come between the knowing subject and the object to be known. Rorty, however, finds this foundationalist notion not only conceptually incoherent but also ethically detrimental, as it disregards the importance of “the responsibility for choice among competing ideas and words, theories and vocabularies” (*Mirror* 376).

Rorty’s deployment of a politicized rhetoric in a metaphilosophical context paves the way for the radical conclusion that the “free-market”²³ ideal of conversation, in a philosophical context, is impeded by the hegemony of disciplinary philosophy itself. Philosophy displays hegemonic traits insofar as it sees itself as “foundational in respect to the rest of culture,” attempting to “underwrite or debunk claims to knowledge made by science, morality, art or religion” (*Mirror* 3). “It can do so,” Rorty goes on to add, “because it understands the foundations of knowledge, and it finds these foundations in a study of man-as-knower, or of the ‘mental processes’ or the activity of representation which makes knowledge possible” (*Mirror* 3). Rorty claims that to give up this representational model would eventually bring us to stop “think[ing] of knowledge [as that] which presents a ‘problem,’ and about which we ought to have a ‘theory’” (*Mirror* 136). “The moral to be drawn,” he continues, “is that if this way of thinking is *optional*, then so is epistemology, and so is philosophy

²³ Christopher Norris points out that adopting metaphors from the realm of economics (e.g., “wholesale” vs. “retail”; “competition,” etc.) indicates Rorty’s tendency to apply free-market doctrine (despite subscribing to tenets of Keynesian economics in terms of politics) “to the realm of philosophy and intellectual culture at large” (*Contest* 6-7). Philosophy, on Rorty’s account, should be comparable to a noninterventionist state, which withdraws from “inter[vening] and criticiz[ing] notions which have got themselves decently established as part of an ongoing cultural dialogue” (Norris 7).

as it has understood itself since the middle of the last [nineteenth] century” (136; emphasis added).

If we accept that epistemology is indeed “optional,” we will settle for the fact that “[o]ur certainty will be a matter of conversation between persons rather than a matter of interaction with nonhuman reality” (*Mirror* 157). The radical implication of Rorty's argument, however, is that philosophical problems, be they related to metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics, or ethics, are not engendered by some metaphysical or rational compulsion, but by conversations taking place in communities whose members find such problems important to talk about. Thus, apparently inevitable philosophical predicaments can be construed as contingent configurations of thought in the history of Western culture, so there should be no reason why we could not adapt them to our own historical contingencies in the contemporary West. Rorty's directive to philosophers in the concluding sentence of *Mirror* is phrased accordingly: “philosophers' moral concern,” he contends, “should be with continuing the conversation of the West, rather than with insisting upon a place for the traditional problems of modern philosophy within that conversation” (394).

What Rorty urges is that philosophy should “change the subject,” to turn from “Philosophy” into “philosophy,” to abandon seemingly perennial and ineluctable questions (concerning Truth, Goodness, or Knowledge) that have been known to define philosophical inquiry since Plato (*Consequences* xiv). This transformation, however, takes place not so much at the level of concepts, as at that of rhetorics. In the introduction to *Consequences of Pragmatism*, we find this unorthodox idea distilled in

Rorty's famously provocative claim that "pragmatists [such as himself] keep trying to find ways of making antiphilosophical points in nonphilosophical language" (*Consequences* xiv). Rather than heralding the end of philosophy as such, this paradoxical statement can be read as yet another proof of Rorty's endeavor to democratize a traditionally closed discourse: it suggests the range of philosophical topics be extended to include issues which normally do not fall within the realm of traditional philosophizing.

The underlying assumption seems to be that the fewer "professional" constraints are imposed on the subjects discussed, the more interlocutors can participate in the given conversation without being restricted by their lack of specialized knowledge or their inadequate grasp of a formalized terminology. Since Rorty's critique of foundationalism is predicated on the insight that all philosophical discourses are optional, no inquiry ever penetrates into essence, no theory can provide immovable foundations, he sees no reason why entrenched theoretical vocabularies could not be refashioned in more transparent terms (in "nonphilosophical language") to enhance the efficacy of interdiscursive/intertheoretical communication. David Hall rightly observes that Rorty's conversational penchant "leads him away from a concern with the virtuosic manipulation of formal theories in the direction of more informal categorization" (79). Hall, however, also points out that intertheoretical communication is far from being unproblematic:

In any given intellectual discipline, sophisticated theoretical activity could lead to the generation of a large number of closed systems. [. . .] If there is no viable realm of *unprofessionalized* or *demotic* discourse, intertheoretical engagement

is impossible since the constitutive rules of alternative discourses frustrate communication across rule-defined boundaries. (75; emphasis added)

From Hall's formulation we may infer that for conceptual disparities to be overcome in the case of vocabularies as airtight as those of philosophy, a certain degree of "deprofessionalization" must take place, which may entail the abandonment of the constitutive idiosyncrasies of philosophical vocabularies.

Rorty's urge to make philosophy accessible to the laymen aims to defy the Platonic heritage²⁴ of philosophical elitism. Philosophy, in Rorty's view, should take the path of democratic politics by dispensing with foundational objectives, and reconciling to the fact that it is merely one of the several participating voices in the "conversation of mankind." Thus, the role Rorty envisages for conversational philosophy is that of a discipline which moves freely among discourses without aspiring to be their foundation:

In this conception, "philosophy" is not a name for a discipline which confronts permanent issues, and unfortunately keeps misstating them, or attacking them with clumsy dialectical instruments. Rather, it is a cultural genre, a "voice in the conversation of mankind" [. . .], which centers on one topic rather than another at some given time not by dialectical necessity but as a result of various things happening elsewhere in the conversation [. . .]. (*Mirror* 264)

The new philosophical model, in its turn, calls for a new type of philosopher, who is willing to rise above disciplinary boundaries, and phrase arguments outside the professionalized vocabularies of academic philosophy. Accordingly, Rorty urges that

²⁴ See especially Socrates' conversations with Crito in the *Euthydemus* (304d-305d), and with Glaucon in the *Republic* (493a-494a).

philosophers relinquish their claim to the authority of the “Platonic philosopher-king,” the “cultural overseer who sees [from a transcendental vantage point afforded by philosophy] everyone’s common ground” (*Mirror* 317). Instead, he advocates the emergence of “the informed dilettante, the polypragmatic, Socratic intermediary between various discourses,” who is capable of charming “hermetic thinkers [. . .] out of their self-enclosed practices,” claiming that “[d]isagreements between disciplines and discourses [can be] compromised or transcended” in the course of conversations (317).

In the next chapter, I will discuss the discursive consequences of Rorty’s latter-day “Socratism” in more detail. At this point, let it suffice to point out that the kind of philosopher he envisages will have to cope with a number of conflicting tasks if s/he is to fulfill all the criteria of being a “Socratic intermediary” and an edifier at the same time: s/he has to be able to mediate between various discourses without relying on a common ground; s/he has to speak a language which is acceptable and intelligible to everyone involved in the conversation, yet s/he has to deploy novel and idiosyncratic metaphors to facilitate cultural progress; s/he has to forsake the sense of debilitating consensus entailed by the unreflected and unchallenged rules of normal discourses, only to initiate a deprofessionalized cultural discussion which requires consensus on a larger scale. Most importantly, to charm professional philosophers out of their “self-enclosed practices,” s/he has to be able to persuade them to yield up their professional authority, afforded and secured by the normalcy of their disciplines, to the “polypragmatic” factotum administering the newly formulated discourse of “informed dilettantism.” It is highly unlikely that any compelling reason can be adduced for

“hermeticists” to dissolve their professionalized vocabularies in the polyphony of the conversation of dilettantes, thereby being complicit in undoing their own authority.

Apparently, the tension between these conflicting demands can be alleviated if we map Rorty’s distinction between normal and abnormal discourse, systematic and edifying philosophy onto his subsequently posited dichotomy of liberalism and private irony, the separation of which is not only possible, but outright desirable. Since irony is “inherently a private matter” (*Contingency* 87), our private self-fashioning should not get in the way of our public commitments, moreover, we had best give up the attempt to sublimate our sense of private bliss and our publicly avowed moral duty to diminish the suffering of fellow human beings (*Contingency* 86-91).²⁵ Arguing in this vein, it seems plausible to suggest that the intermediary and the edifier need not be the same person.

Nevertheless, even though the public/private distinction is well-articulated—if not unproblematic—in Rorty's later work, it is absent from his argument in *Mirror*, where these conflicting demands are formulated. It is still possible, then, to dismiss what appears to be a set of inconsistencies in his earlier work by pointing to his later output as offering the necessary qualifications. We could thus come to the conclusion that the conflict between the normal conversationalist and the abnormal edifier does not have to be decided in favor of either party as long as they are kept in separate compartments.

Taking a broader view, however, one may venture to claim that Rorty has, in fact, conceived of himself as a Socratic intermediary and tried to remain faithful to that image throughout his long writing career. Not only does he engage himself in

²⁵ For an autobiographical exploration of this problematic, see Rorty’s “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids.”

discussions on topics which point far beyond the realm of disciplinary philosophy, but he rarely confronts complex philosophical or theoretical issues with a problem-solving intent: most of the time he engages himself in metadiscursive critique, keeping ample distance from the object of his discussion. Most importantly, as exemplified by the third and fourth chapters below, he has given second-order accounts of discourses he considers abnormal, ironist (or merely private), without his own discourse ever partaking of first-order abnormality or ironism. Instead, these accounts mostly take the form of historicist explicative and *argumentative* narratives, bearing no resemblance to the idiosyncratic rhetoric of his much-appreciated world-disclosers. Furthermore, he obviously cannot argue for the separation/separability of “public” normality and “private” abnormality from within a neutral “observation language”: he does so from the deprofessionalized vocabulary of a public intellectual who assumes authority to redescribe various discourses and personages in the common language of a radically antiessentialist neopragmatism. Therefore, there is no need for an externally administered adjudication between normal and abnormal discourse, because Rorty *performatively* resolves the matter in favor of the normal.

Rorty’s overt endorsement of abnormal idiosyncrasies and the apparent normalcy of his discourse yield an ambivalent rhetoric on his part, which arguably admits of the semblance that he assumes an authoritative position in relation to the discourses to which he attaches the label “abnormal” or “ironist.” In this sense, the labeling itself can be seen as an authoritative gesture in defense of the normalcy of conversations. Nonetheless, I certainly do not wish to make the reductive claim that Rorty’s emancipatory strivings mask a surreptitious will to naked power. In what

remains of this chapter, therefore, I will delineate how his demotic view of philosophy is echoed in his more recent politically related work, which also enables an insight into his pragmatic understanding of power.

The antimetaphysical dimension of normal discourse

Rorty's championing of abnormal discourse, his celebration of "private irony," and the public/private split have earned him a fierce barrage of criticism. His critics fear that the abandonment of the regulative ideals of a unified rationality (whether in the form of an epistemology, cross cultural commensurability, or communicative reason) for the incessant free play of innovative, but socially irresponsible edifiers, poets, or ironists, threatens to disrupt the proper functioning of a community. They assume that in the absence of regulative universals, notions of truth and justice will dissolve in the murky waters of a poeticized culture, leaving us with a totally relativized sense of what is real or unreal, right or wrong. Without trying to represent the full scale of the attacks, I invoke a characteristic example of the several critical voices.²⁶

The charge that Rorty's advocacy of ungrounded conversation does not take sufficient account of the specific political conditions obtaining in a given society is formulated in the most direct fashion by Frank Lentricchia. He reflects that "Rorty's conversation sounds like no conversation at all. To give up the constraining ground of a natural standpoint means for Rorty to be left with a kind of nominalism of cultural

²⁶ See also Norman Geras (112-13; 128; 107; 132-33); Thomas McCarthy (367-370); Sabina Lovibond (66).

dancers each moving to the beat of his own drum” (137). It is, however, not a relativistic pluralism that Lentricchia cautions against, but—advancing a Marxist argument—an overemphasis on private pleasures, without regard to the interests of the community. He objects that the “missing term in Rorty's analysis is ‘society,’” but if we “put ‘society’ back into his analysis, we will quickly see that the conversation is not, and has never been, as free as he might wish it; that the conversation of culture has been involved as a moving force in the inauguration, maintenance, and perpetuation of society; that the conversation of culture [. . .] displays some stubbornly persistent patterns” (137-38). By contrast, Rorty's emphasis on the “pleasures of the imagination” (the quasi-poetic creativity associated with abnormal discourses) reflects a “hedonic” tendency, which is due to his failure to recognize that late capitalist economy has “decisively co-opted” the values of “ungrounded cultural conversation,” because “[i]t, too, wants to send things in new directions without reaching any goals, since the classic goals of the commodity are no longer of the essence for the proper maintenance of the economic structure: The Romantic yearning for the new is now transformed into an energetic consumerism” (139-40).

Rorty's *Achieving Our Country* (1998) could rightfully be regarded as a belated refutation of Lentricchia's charges. In this book, Rorty's rhetoric is anything but equivocal or complacent when it comes to discussing political practice. Commending the Old Left while condemning the contemporary “cultural Left,” he urges that there be less theorizing and more concrete political initiatives to improve the social and material conditions of the underprivileged. He bluntly states that “the Left should put a

moratorium on theory. It should try to kick its philosophy habit” (91). He goes on to elaborate what he means as follows:

The contemporary academic Left seems to think that the higher your level of abstraction, the more subversive of the established order you can be. The more sweeping and novel your conceptual apparatus, the more radical your critique. [. . .] Theorists of the Left think that dissolving agents into plays of differential subjectivity, or political initiatives into pursuits of Lacan’s impossible object of desire, helps to subvert the established order. Such subversion, they say, is accomplished by “problematizing familiar concepts.” [. . .] But it is impossible to clamber back down from their books to a level of abstraction on which one might discuss the merits of a law, a treaty, a candidate, or a political strategy. (92-93)

It seems that on the threshold of the new millennium, Rorty bears the same hostilities toward much of contemporary literary and cultural theory as he did toward professional philosophy in *Mirror*. Although he does not get down to a substantive reading of the theories he lashes out against, the names of Jameson, Lacan, Levinas, Foucault, and Derrida figure prominently in his discussion. What is ironic about Rorty's critique of these theorists is that—considering their innovative theoretical constructions—most of them would qualify as doing *abnormal* discourse, which Rorty initially invested with an emancipatory potential. Now it turns out that what hinders them from accomplishing their liberating endeavors is precisely their abnormality.

At this point in his oeuvre, Rorty has already concocted his notion of “ironist theory,” which is more suited to Hegelian and Nietzschean self-creation than to

public politics (*Contingency* 96-97). Thus, he can safely consign the discourses he renders politically ineffectual to the private sphere: “insofar as these antimetaphysical, anti-Cartesian philosophers offer a quasi-religious form of spiritual pathos, they should be relegated to private life and not taken as guides to political deliberation” (*Achieving* 96). Levinas’s notion of “infinite responsibility,” for instance, or Derrida’s “frequent discoveries of impossibility, unreachability, and unrepresentability [. . .] may be useful to some of us in our individual quest for private self-perfection. When we take up our public responsibilities, however, the infinite and the unrepresentable are merely nuisances” (*Achieving* 96-97). Lentricchia’s wry remark that the absence of the social dimension in Rorty’s work “accounts more than a little for the warm reception that his neo-pragmatism has won in American poststructuralist circles” (137), turns out to be unfounded in both its claims; it is Rorty who seems to refuse to have any truck with poststructuralists, because of *their* apparent disregard for the social.²⁷

Furthermore, the denunciation of theoretical abstractions echoes his call for the demotism of a “nonphilosophical” language in *Consequences*. In both cases, Rorty seems to appeal to Occam’s razor, aiming for the economy of explanations. He assumes, in a genuinely pragmatic fashion, that there is no point in deploying more abstraction than what is needed to solve a specific problem: where targeted political action is what solves the given problem, the law of parsimony (*lex parsimoniae*)

²⁷ Also, it is not quite clear what “American poststructuralist circles” Lentricchia has in mind. There is virtually no reflection on Rorty’s work by Yale deconstructors, except for some scant remarks—quoted mostly on dust-jackets or introductions—by Harold Bloom about Rorty’s being “the most interesting philosopher in the world today” (See *Contingency*). As I will reflect in Chapter Three, American theorists of poststructuralism such as Rodolphe Gasché or Jonathan Culler (as well as their British colleagues, Christopher Norris and Simon Critchley) disagree with Rorty about his reading of poststructuralism in general and Derrida in particular.

dictates that theorizing take a back seat. Moreover, his reference to the “quasi-religious form of spiritual pathos” hints at the fact that from the vantage point of his pragmatist antiessentialism, those abstract theories retain a trace of metaphysical mystification. While in *Contingency* he speaks in a tone of sympathy toward the practitioners of ironist theory,²⁸ he finds their mystifications annoying when it comes to taking action in socio-political matters.

The same demystifying intent permeates his understanding of power. He deplors the tendency on the part of cultural Leftists to “Gothicize” the notion of power in its specifically Foucauldian sense: “The cultural Left,” he observes, “is haunted by ubiquitous specters, the most frightening of which is called ‘power.’ [. . .] The ubiquity of Foucauldian power is reminiscent of the ubiquity of Satan, and thus of the ubiquity of original sin—the diabolical stain on every human soul” (*Achieving* 95). The rhetorical strategy deployed here seems similar to the one we have just seen: Rorty theologizes “power” to make it appear as a metaphysically conceived mental construction, having little to do with everyday practices. The suggestion is that it is a matter of *faith*, pure and simple, whether you believe in the threats posed by “power,” but such metaphysical convictions are worthless in the face of *actual* manifestations of abusive power. As he puts it somewhat facetiously: “One might spot a corporate bagman arriving at a congressman’s office, and perhaps block his entrance. But one cannot block power in the Foucauldian sense” (*Achieving* 94).

But why this conspicuous belittling of contemporary theories, which partake very much of the political? Since his emancipatory disposition is very much in

²⁸ Cf., “The ironist theorist [. . .] is continually tempted to try for sublimity, not just beauty. That is why [s]he is continually tempted to relapse into metaphysics [. . .]” (*Contingency* 105).

evidence, we may surmise that his criticism is not directed at the *political* content of the theories he associates with the cultural Left. Rather, what he rejects is a way of speaking that he cannot assimilate to his own neopragmatist idiom. The radical antiessentialism of Rorty's discourse consists—among other factors—in his refusal to internalize a rhetoric which admits even vaguely of being interpreted as metaphysical. This, in turn, may also account for Rorty's characteristically transparent language: for instance, the less terminology and metaphoric he adopts from Continental philosophy, the less likely he is to replicate their metaphysical blunders. The endeavor to initiate and maintain conversation on the broadest possible cultural basis serves not only the purpose of discursive liberation, but also that of distancing his own rhetoric from the isolated discourses—academic philosophy or contemporary cultural theories—that deal in abstractions, flaunting quasi-metaphysical terms. Rorty's aspiration for the “conversation of mankind” can be seen, therefore, as the attempt to break free from philosophical isolation, which breeds closed professional vocabularies populated by concepts invested with an agency of their own.

In the next chapter, I will argue that the main attraction of a broad-based, open, conversational discourse may not lie in its inclusiveness only, but also in its capability of affording an authoritative position to the Socratic intermediary. Nonetheless, the role of the mediator, I claim, seems hardly distinguishable from the role of the ironist.

Chapter Two

Irony as “Meta-Metaphilosophy”

In the first chapter, we encountered the “private” function of irony as a form of abnormal discourse, invested with subversive potentials. I also noted that Rorty himself—due to his normalizing tendencies—refrains from pursuing abnormality and private irony in his own discourse. In this chapter, I wish to discuss irony in a different sense, as the trope of metadiscursive operation, which is more suited to Rorty's antiessentialist disposition. I argue that insofar as he conceives of his role in philosophy as that of a Socratic intermediary, he has to occupy a metaposition from which he can adjudicate other discourses. The metaposition, supposedly, lies outside all the discourses it purports to adjudicate, but it is certainly not suspended in a neutral space: rather, it assumes a further normalizing function, which can take different forms.

Below, I will adumbrate four such forms in four different contexts. In the first section, I will discuss the relationship between Rorty's notion of irony and its relation to the idea of “meta-metaphilosophy.” In the second, I will examine two critical reflections on Rorty's work, arguing that the critics cannot help abiding by Rorty's (Socratic) “meta-metadiscursive” rules. In the third, I will discuss the coercive aspects of metadiscourse by revisiting the tale of the Antipodeans. In the fourth, I will point up a possible relationship between Rorty's concept of “private irony” and Socrates's defense of philosophy.

The (Socratic) ironist as “meta-metaphilosopher”

The ironist, as Rorty tells us in *Contingency*, is a staunch antimetaphysician, who thinks “nothing has an intrinsic nature, a real essence,” and defies the metaphysician’s assumption that “the presence of a term in his [the metaphysician’s] own final vocabulary ensures that it refers to something which *has* a real essence” (74). The ironist “has radical doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses,” and “she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than any others” (73). Furthermore, ironists are “nominalist and historicist” by conviction, so they “see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary, nor by an attempt to fight their way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old” (73-74). Ironists also realize that “anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed” (73). They come to occupy a “metastable” position (Sartre’s term)²⁹, in that they are “never quite able to take themselves seriously because [they are] always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves” (73-74).

The ironist’s predicament is described in mostly negative terms as characterized by self-doubt and the inability to take herself or any vocabulary seriously. The ironist, however, does not seem to differ much from the Socratic intermediary, who is capable of mediating between various discourses and language

²⁹ Sartre defines “metastable” as pertaining to a “hybrid state”: it is “unstable and transitory [. . .] neither entirely perceptive nor entirely imaginative, that would be worth describing for its own sake” (qtd. in Cumming 214).

games because s/he does not belong to any of them. To this extent, we may talk about a “Socratic ironist,” who might just be pretending to entertain self-doubt and a sense of rootlessness. In fact, just as Plato’s Socrates, s/he might engage in conversations, where s/he phrases his/her questions in such a way that each corresponding answer should strengthen his/her position, leaving him/her, at the end of the dialogue, in full possession of his/her discursive powers. One of the ways in which this feat can be accomplished is for the ironist to turn him/herself into a metaphilosopher, much like Rorty has.

Nevertheless, self-evident as it may seem to think of Rorty as an ironist, it seems all the more problematic to regard him as a metaphilosopher. The slight transcendentalist tinge of “meta” arguably conjures up the image of the Platonic “philosopher king,” contemplating his domain from a regal distance. Habermas duly reads Rorty’s “Metaphilosophical Difficulties” (his famous introduction to the *Linguistic Turn* [1968]) as marking a “break in the history of analytic thought” (“Rorty’s Pragmatic Turn” 32), and sees Rorty’s metaphilosophical proclivity as part and parcel of his historicist outlook: “the metaphilosophical distance from which the editor [Rorty] comments on the texts [collected in the volume],” Habermas goes on to contend, “betrays the Hegelian message that every manifestation of Spirit that achieves maturity is condemned to decline” (“Pragmatic Turn” 32). Indeed, the ironist’s distance manifests itself not only in Rorty’s apparent unwillingness ever to adopt the rules of a language game other than his own, but also in his reluctance to take an atomistic view of the object of his analysis. In most of his work, he prefers to talk of historical epochs, rather than specific historical events, communities, rather

than subjects, and vocabularies, rather than individual sentences (*Contingency* 5). This may contribute to the appearance that he acts as the philosopher king, whose reign he seeks to overthrow.

His apologia rests on a pragmatic basis: “[w]hen we turn from individual sentences to vocabularies and theories,” he contends, “[the] critical terminology [we deploy] naturally shifts from metaphors of isomorphism, symbolism, and mapping to talk of utility, convenience, and likelihood of getting what we want” (“Pragmatism, Relativism” 163). This, however, does not exempt him from the semblance that he is reclaiming the authority he urges philosophers to relinquish. He may talk about “utility” instead of “accurate representation,” “hermeneutics” instead of “epistemology,” but he still seems to assume the role of the *theorist* who oversees philosophical culture from far enough to be able to judge which vocabulary promises to be of more utility than others.

Even sympathetic commentators seem to be well aware of this tension, which they try to alleviate by palliating Rorty’s role as a *metaphilosopher*. Alan Malachowski suggests discarding the term “metaphilosophy” altogether in reference to Rorty’s work, contending that he does not “mak[e] claims *about* philosophical claims,” but rather, “*at them*” (*Rorty* 19). The “meta-philosophical level,” Malachowski adds, “is not an incommensurable platform,” which means that claims “made there can still be engaged by moves that belong within traditional [philosophical] debates” (*Rorty* 19). As opposed to this, the level at which Rorty’s discourse works, Malachowski concludes, “is a sort of *extra-philosophical*,

performative level, a place outside philosophy from which words are issued to change what is going on there” (19-20).

János Boros also cautions against the use of “metaphilosophy”: he points out that precisely because Rorty claims that criteria of vocabulary-choice cannot be formulated by reference to a neutral and universal metavocabulary, viewing him as practicing metaphilosophy might create the misleading semblance that he is tacitly engaged in the kind of transcendentalist project he explicitly denounces (Boros 144). Since there is no conceivable place *beyond* or *outside* vocabularies (philosophical or otherwise), Boros contends, it would be less misleading to use “intervocularity” in place of “metaphilosophy,” which argues for the ability to switch from one vocabulary to the other (144). This ability presupposes willingness to pick up the interlocutor’s vocabulary, rather than translating it into one’s own terms,³⁰ or into those of a putative metavocabulary in the name of a universal understanding (Boros 144).

Rorty himself, however, seems to be quite content to be called a metaphilosopher, or more precisely, a “meta-metaphilosopher.” Very early in his career, in 1961, he published an essay, which is lesser-known today, bearing the laconic title “Recent Metaphilosophy.” Although still in his “analytic phase,” Rorty clearly prefigures his subsequent pragmatist turn. It is in this early essay that Rorty most explicitly argues for the inseparability of interdiscursive communication (conversation) and metaphilosophy. Moreover, he identifies pragmatist metaphilosophers (which he was shortly to turn into) as “meta-metaphilosophers,” and contends in the tone of *Mirror* and his subsequent work: “[m]eta-metaphilosophy makes possible communication among metaphilosophers,” adding that “since

³⁰ See also *Mirror* (318), where Rorty defines the hermeneutics of conversation in these exact terms.

communication is the goal, rather than truth (or even agreement), the prospective infinite series is a progress rather than a regress: it becomes a moral duty to keep the series going, lest communication cease” (301-2).

It is notable that even though Rorty’s philosophical outlook may have undergone a number of *Gestalt*-switches, much of his later work might be interpreted as so many ways of shoring up this early thesis. So much so, that even in one of his last essays, he echoes his younger self claiming that first-order argumentation and second-order metareflection are indissoluble constituents of philosophical discourses:

The question of whether philosophy should think of itself as a science, like that of whether it can be assimilated to intellectual history, might seem discussable without reference to substantive philosophical doctrines. But in fact metaphilosophical issues—issues about what, if anything philosophy is good for and about how it is best pursued—are inseparable from [first-order] issues about the nature of knowledge, truth, and meaning. (“Analytic” 122)

It seems that insofar as he wishes to maintain the consistency of his philosophical antiessentialism, metaphilosophy becomes the most adaptable mode of discursive operation for him.

Nonetheless, the double “meta”-prefix certainly cannot be overlooked. What it suggests is that Rorty sees the pragmatist philosopher’s task as consisting in the formulation of not even second-, but *third*-order reflections, as it were, adjudicating the extant metaphilosophical vocabularies. Rorty does not elaborate on what enables the *pragmatist* metaphilosopher to occupy this position and where s/he is located in relation to second-order metaphilosophy. It seems, however, that the further the given

discourse gets in terms of metalevels, the less appropriate it may be to call it “philosophy.” It is unlikely that Rorty, even as early as 1961, could have posited a sovereign discursive level three removes from actual first-order philosophical practice. Since he associates meta-metaphilosophy with communication, however, there is good reason to believe that the designation prefigures what he was later to call conversational philosophy, and the pragmatist meta-metaphilosopher anticipates the Socratic intermediary.

Furthermore, the urge to occupy a meta-metaposition may seem like an attempt to escape the confines of first-order debates, and in this sense it can also be looked upon as a rhetorical defense mechanism, since it enables one to opt out of a given discursive predicament by appealing to second- or third-order considerations. Rorty might have developed this defense strategy in response to the immense amount of criticism he has received during his long and prolific writing career. Indeed, most of his commentators focus on Rorty’s *philosophical* output, apparently operating under the assumption that professional philosophy is the most appropriate interpretive framework for his arguments to be explicated. Many of the philosophical analyses of his work are formulated as first-order arguments, oftentimes aiming to criticize his pragmatic stance in relation to a host of philosophical problems (such as truth, meaning, reference, representation, epistemic justification, etc.) claiming that his understanding of these problems is partly or totally flawed.³¹

³¹ The examples are all too numerous to be itemized here, but the tendency is clearly observable in several critical essays collected in various volumes, where the predominance of philosophical subjects delimits the critics’ understanding of Rorty (see Malachowski ed. *Reading Rorty*; Herman J. Saatkamp ed. *Rorty and Pragmatism*; Robert Brandom ed. *Rorty and His Critics*; Charles Guignon and David R. Hiley ed. *Richard Rorty*). Hilary Putnam (especially in *Realism with a Human Face*) and Roy Bhaskar (esp. in *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*) figure prominently among the philosophers who criticize

Most of the time, Rorty fails to meet his critics on their own ground, and defends himself by arguing that the assumptions on which the diatribes are predicated lose their relevance when viewed from a pragmatist perspective. In other words, he resorts to his ironist strategies and opts out of the conversation. There is, however, another strategy, which is closer to the Socratic method. It consists in bringing round the interlocutor to his own position in a *performative* fashion, so that s/he cannot help but reaffirm *his* position. In what follows, I will focus on two such communicative situations.

Socratic conversations

The debates between Rorty and his fellow-philosophers constitute a testing ground for his conversational philosophy. Refusing to abandon the philosophical/theoretical premises constitutive of their discourse, Rorty's critics often point out either that, despite his endeavor to the contrary, he still operates under epistemological assumptions, or that the notion of conversation is too vague to have any explicative value in accounting for human knowledge. Malachowski delineates these two types of criticism by saying that there are detractors who interpret Rorty's work as just another version of "*arguing a case* against philosophy-as-epistemology" (much like analytic philosophers do), and those who assume "that Rorty is not even trying to 'make a case' of *any* kind, that he has completely forsaken philosophy's 'normal discourse' of

Rorty, in the name of philosophical realism, for his "frivolous" attitude towards epistemic justification, and his nominalist understanding of truth.

‘rational argumentation’ and is merely indulging in ‘rhetoric.’ Their verdict is usually equally complacent: Rorty's rhetoric can be ignored—so it is carry on as usual as far as philosophy-as-epistemology is concerned” (*Richard Rorty* 64).

The critical reflections on Rorty's work by two of his fellow philosophers, Hilary Putnam and Barry Allen, are cases in point. Rorty's conversational philosophy proves successful in that it does indeed—as befits a Socratic intermediary—“lure” these philosophers out of their “self-enclosed” discursive practices. The desired conversation, however, cannot come to full fruition in accordance with the democratizing principles he valorizes. The reason for this is that Rorty's critics, by (temporarily) forsaking their own discursive practices—performatively and not at the level of argumentation—do not find themselves in a neutral interdiscursive space (the Oakeshottian “meeting place” of “human intercourse”), but in a metadiscursive one, where Rorty's “meta-metarules” prevail. Putnam and Allen cannot help but play along.

Putnam, in his critique of Rorty, points out a classical self-referential paradox to the effect that despite his pronounced antiepistemological endeavor, Rorty still persists in operating under epistemological assumptions.³² He contends:

But notice that the very person who strongly denies that there is any such property as truth, and who waves his picture at us to call our attention to its various attractions, as, for instance, Richard Rorty does in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*—notice that this very philosopher does not recognize that his

³² See also Charles Taylor's criticism of Rorty along similar lines. Taylor, while agreeing with Rorty's critique of foundationalist epistemology, criticizes him in the name of an “uncompromising realism” which, he thinks, would lend substance to his antiepistemological arguments. Taylor holds that Rorty's “non-realism is itself one of the recurrently generated *aporiae* of the [epistemological] tradition,” and sees him “as still very much a prisoner of the epistemological world-view” (“Epistemological Tradition” 258).

picture is only a picture, but believes that in some deep pretheoretic sense his picture is the way the world is. (*Realism* 32)

Addressing the problem of self-referentiality in a more substantive manner, he observes: “It seems [. . .] likely to me that [. . .] Rorty really thinks that metaphysical realism [inclusive of the representational view of knowledge] is *wrong*. [. . .] [B]ut this, of course, is something he cannot admit he really thinks. I think, in short, that the attempt to say that *from a God’s-Eye View there is no God’s-Eye View* is still there, under all that wrapping” (*Realism* 25).

According to Putnam, Rorty errs twice: once by rejecting the contemplative moment of theoretical reflection, thus renouncing the privileged insight reserved for philosophers, and, second time, by being blind to his own tacit theoretical assumptions. Rorty, in Putnam’s interpretation, cannot admit he thinks *any* view to be wrong, otherwise he would betray his own conception of rightness and wrongness as functions of social practices. This assumption sits well with Putnam’s criticism of Rorty for what he takes to be his “cultural relativist” outlook (*Realism* 18-26, 125).

The real burden of Putnam’s criticism, however, is the claim that Rorty’s denouncement of metaphysical realism can only issue from a “God’s-Eye View,” which, in turn, is identified as the *essence* of Rortyan thought concealed, as it were, “under all that [pragmatist/antifoundationalist] wrapping.” Thus, according to Putnam, he remains captive of the philosophical preconceptions³³ he seeks to swing free from,

³³ As a specific example, Putnam mentions that Rorty’s “analytic past shows up” in his rejection of philosophical controversies which he thinks revolve around “pseudo-problems,” such as those between realism and antirealism or emotive and cognitive content. According to Putnam, Rorty “*scorns* controversy” in a “Carnapian tone of voice” (*Realism* 20). In his response to Putnam, Rorty admits to the “tone of Carnapian scorn” in *Mirror*, saying, “I should not speak, as sometimes I have of ‘pseudo-problems,’ but rather of problematics and vocabularies which might have proven to be of value but in fact did not” (“Relativist Menace” 45). This rhetorical ruse is typical of Rorty’s discursive strategies: he

thus being incapable of a plausible defense of his “antiphilosophical” claims without running the risk of self-contradiction. Putnam’s argument thus precludes the possibility of an open conversation between philosophical and nonphilosophical discourses by implicitly pronouncing professional philosophy a sealed vocabulary, incarcerating those who once get involved in any kind of philosophical discussion, and Rorty is no exemption.

The case being made by Putnam is comparable to what Alexander Nehamas calls the “Protreptic Dilemma” (396), by which he refers to the fragment from Aristotle’s exhortation to “the love of philosophy,” which features a rather playful defense of the need to philosophize. On Aristotle’s account, philosophy is inescapable even if one self-consciously chooses *not* to philosophize, for in that case “we are obliged to inquire how it is possible for there to be no Philosophy; and in inquiring, we philosophize, for inquiry is the cause of Philosophy” (qtd. in Nehamas 396).³⁴ As Nehamas comments, the “argument depends on taking philosophy to be flexible enough to include as its own proper parts even attempts to show that it is an impossible or worthless endeavor” (396).

From a Rortyan vantage point, the Protreptic Dilemma can be read in one of two ways. It can be interpreted as celebrating the discursive power of philosophy, in that the kind of “flexibility” the fragment argues for is, in fact, a way of empowering a discourse—indeed, an academic faculty—by proclaiming its quasi-oppressive

concedes the validity of the case his interlocutor makes against him, but rephrases his earlier statement in such a way that it should only minimally modify the position for which he is brought to task.

³⁴ The fragment, as quoted by Nehamas, reads in full: “If one must philosophize, then one must philosophize; and if one must not philosophize, then one must philosophize; in any case, therefore, one must philosophize. For if one must, then, given that Philosophy exists, we are in every way obliged to philosophize. And if one must not, in this case too we are obliged to inquire how it is possible for there to be no Philosophy; and in inquiring we philosophize, for inquiry is the cause of Philosophy” (395-96).

ubiquity. In this sense, the Protreptic Dilemma reaffirms the very notion against which Rorty defines his antifoundationalism: that philosophical reflection (at least for someone even loosely affiliated with the discipline) is an inevitable exigency, being enforced by the nature of the “explananda” that arise.

It can also be read, however, as advancing the notion that once we have appropriated the insight that philosophy is an *optional* social/discursive practice (which entails that we *can* stop playing the philosophical language game if we choose to), we must assess both the defense and the criticism of philosophy as emerging *from within* the practice,³⁵ rather than emanating from a transcendental source beyond discourse. The defense of philosophy is no less in need of second-order deliberations than its critique, for specialized, first-order philosophical reasoning can neither plausibly defend nor voluntarily criticize the very discourse from which it derives its legitimacy. Thus, while the Protreptic Dilemma conceives of philosophy as an ever-extendible interior space, which cannot transcend itself even by self-reflectively accounting for its own practices, it makes a philosophically ingrained statement *about* philosophy, whereby, performatively, it turns itself into a metaphilosophical reflection. It is certainly not a metareflection in the sense that it goes *beyond* its own discursive limits to occupy a transcendental standpoint from which philosophy can be evaluated in critical or eulogistic terms. Rather, the reflection is more akin to the rhetorical gambit Douglas Hofstadter dubs “going meta,” which is a self-reflective move whereby discussion is taken to a different (“higher”) level (22). In the case of the

³⁵ Bernstein convincingly advances this notion when he asserts that we must shun the danger of “reifying the very idea of social practice and failing to appreciate that our very criticisms and arguments [formulated within the vocabulary of a discourse] [. . .] are constitutive of traditions and social practices” (“Philosophy” 773).

Aristotle-fragment, however, it is not so much an intended gambit as a performative corollary of the self-reference.

This kind of metareflection is observable in Putnam's argument as well, insofar as he seems to be provoked by Rorty's "deprofessionalized" rhetoric to enter the metaphilosophical arena in defense of philosophy. Some of the statements Putnam makes are metaphilosophical in the Rortyan sense of the word, in that they are potential answers to the question of "what, if anything philosophy is good for and about how it is best pursued" (Rorty, "Analytic" 122). In keeping with Rorty's view about metaphilosophical reflection being inseparable from first-order philosophical issues ("Analytic" 122), Putnam prefaces his more substantive claims about realism, relativism, "warrant," communal agreement, and social justification (*Realism* 18-29) by reflections on the nature and tasks of philosophy: "there is a sense," he contends, "in which the task of philosophy is to overcome metaphysics and a sense in which its task is to continue metaphysical discussion" (19). At another point, he reflects: "I hope philosophical reflection may be of some real cultural value; but I do not think it has been the pedestal on which the culture rested, and I do not think our reaction to the failure of a philosophical project [. . .] should be to abandon ways of talking and thinking which have practical and spiritual weight" (20). Moreover, he makes it explicit that his reflections have been inspired by "a very fruitful ongoing exchange with Richard Rorty" (19). Rorty, thus, "charms" a "hermetic thinker" out of his "self-enclosed practices" by setting what Janet Horne calls a "baited rhetorical hook" (255). Rorty does not simply provoke conversation, but generates a discursive predicament in which his interlocutor is compelled to retort in accordance with *his* (Rorty's)

conversational strategies, that is, leaving first-order philosophical considerations behind and take the discussion to a metalevel.

Barry Allen's attack on Rorty's discursive view of knowledge illustrates the second type of criticism Malachowski adduces (one which accuses Rorty of being "merely" rhetorical rather than substantively philosophical). Allen impugns the conversational model of knowledge for its failure to answer the Socratic-Platonic question (familiar from Plato's *Theaetetus*) of why knowledge is preferable to mere belief or opinion (230). Allen agrees with Rorty that representationalist accounts of knowledge are to be abandoned, but disputes that devising such accounts is the only alternative to Rorty's suggestion of giving up altogether on epistemology:

But isn't that the real question—whether ruling out the epistemology of mirrors as good as proves the pragmatism of conversation? Have we an exclusive choice to make between metaphysics and sociology, mimesis and conversation, Platonism and Pragmatism? [. . .] The oppositions Rorty presents are not logically exclusive, so no objection against one side favors the other, and *no* argument can prove the negative proposition that there is no understanding of knowledge apart from the antithetical ones Rorty considers. [. . .] The question is not "how else?" [i.e., how else understanding knowledge is possible other than on a conversational basis]. It is why saying *no* to the epistemology of privileged representations is supposed to be as good as saying *yes* to Rorty's pragmatism? (225)

Allen suggests an alternative epistemology, one that is built around "artifacts [objects produced by our technological civilization], whose use is as social as conversation

though there need be nothing linguistic or conversational about it” (226). His proposal that our adjudication of knowledge claims should be based on something “harder” than “mere” linguistic configurations is reminiscent of the Parmenidian skepticism about language and the Platonic contempt for rhetoric: Allen warns that knowledge is not to be confused with “prestigious talk,” that is, with the “communicative skills by which someone makes a case and persuades others” (228-29). The consequence of Rorty’s championing language over artifacts is that he “banalizes technical or artifactual practice by redescribing it in his relentlessly linguistifying terms,” so the “superiority” of one knowledge claim over another “becomes essentially rhetorical,” whereas “the knowledge mostly responsible for present-day technological civilization does not have this rhetorical, linguistic character” (231). Allen seems intent on avoiding idealist fallacies, so he insists that it is artifacts, the world of objects, that generates language, and not vice versa: “[w]e learned a new way of talking as a result of living with Maillart’s concrete bridges, but to confuse a new language-game with the artifactual innovation that gives it a point and material reference is to confuse a parasite with its host and make a mystery of both language and technics” (231).

Rorty’s response to Allen is typical of his argumentative strategies in the face of criticism. He concedes Allen’s antirepresentationalist and nonidealist stance, but reflects that there is no point in making a sharp differentiation between artifacts and language, for “sentences, skills, and disciplines [. . .] can all be treated as artifacts” (Brandom 238). With this move, he has achieved that the debate goes on to proceed by the rules of *his* language game. He has appropriated Allen’s position and, thereby, defused the critical force of his argument, which was predicated on positing the

privileged status of artifacts as opposed to language and discourse. It is also characteristic of Rorty's argumentation that he does not insist on the unconditional primacy of the discursive—as opposed to the “artifactual”—nature of knowledge, thus avoiding the mistake of setting up impermeable positions by positing immovable binaries. Instead, he advances the pragmatic notion that “it is hard to have the leisure for language-building if you lack non-linguistic artifacts with which to defend yourself against the climate and the predators. One can see why the two kinds of artifacts are likely to have been produced around the same time, and to have developed in tandem” (Brandom 239). Evidently, Rorty is ready to pick up his interlocutor's vocabulary and refer to language (and discourse at large) as “artifact” without having to worry about giving up his position, since all this talk about language and artifacts remains implicated in discourse.

Allen thus falls victim to performative self-contradiction when, negating Rorty's claim, he asserts that

[t]he important thing is the quality of the performance that puts knowledge into practice [rather than the conversations in which knowledge is supposed to be discursively formulated]. Such performances are at most occasionally dialogical, and are usually evaluated not by conversational consensus but artifactual reliability—not by anybody's *agreeing* that a work is reliable or well done, but by its *being* so. [. . .] Conversation [therefore] is not the context in which it is ultimately decided what is knowledge. (232-33)

The contradiction, at the most basic level, stems from the fact that Allen's definitive statements about what knowledge is (and about what it is not) are actually formulated

within the discursive confines of a *conversation*. Furthermore, “artifactual reliability” is not a free-floating value: at the very least, its recognition requires a set of in-place cultural practices which enable one to identify specific purposes that an artifact can reliably serve as opposed to other purposes for which it is utterly unsuitable. Allen’s distinction between an artifact being *agreed* to be reliable and its *being* reliable would make sense only if there were a transparent relation of correspondence between the purposes to be served and the artifacts available or yet to be made. This would be possible if the purposes were “given” in an essentialistic sense: not only presenting themselves in a self-authenticating fashion, but also marking out the artifacts most suitable to serve them. Nevertheless, there are no indisputable criteria available in reference to which one could decide whose position contains more “prestigious talk” as opposed to philosophical substance.

Furthermore, Allen’s criticism certainly misses the mark insofar as Rorty does not want to decide *what* knowledge is: “it will work better,” he replies to Allen, “just to drop knowledge as a topic rather than to say that I, and other critics, [. . .] have gotten knowledge wrong” (Brandom 237). Rorty’s “Socratic ironism” is very much in evidence in this statement: if the desperate attempts to define the notion of knowledge result in more confusion than what they clarify, we are at liberty to eliminate the whole topic, that is, to change the subject when the ideal goal of continuing the conversation is jeopardized.

The trap that a sympathetic reader of Rorty can walk into is that all s/he notices is Rorty's rhetorical triumph over his interlocutor, without the other’s viewpoint gaining sufficient recognition. Nonetheless, it raises an important ethically related

question: how the interlocutor relates to being deprived of his/her discursive ground? I will reflect on the question in the section below, using the tale of the Antipodeans as an example.

The power of redescription (the Antipodeans revisited)

The Antipodeans, Rorty tells us, are “beings, much like ourselves—featherless bipeds who built houses and bombs, and wrote poems and computer programs” (*Mirror* 70). They have a definite notion of what it means to be a person, as opposed to a robot or a pet, but they do not “explain the difference between persons and non-persons by such notions as ‘mind,’ ‘consciousness,’ or anything of the sort” (70). They also believe in immortality which, however, does not “involve the notion of a ‘soul’ which separated from the body,” but is, rather, a “straightforward matter of bodily resurrection” (70). Underlying these seemingly minor differences between their culture and ours is the fact that for the Antipodeans neurology and biochemistry were the “first disciplines in which technological breakthroughs had been achieved,” and so “a large part of the conversation of these people concerned the state of their nerves” (71).

In other words, it does not take any professional expertise for the Antipodeans to be able to express their sensations, perceptions, or any experience in the language of neurology, for “their knowledge of physiology was such that each well-formed sentence in the language which anybody bothered to form could easily be correlated with a readily identifiable neural state” (71). Thus, the Antipodeans can describe pain

on account of burning by reporting that their C-fibers are being stimulated, the perception of an aesthetically pleasing red rectangle by saying that it “makes neuron bundle G-14 quiver,” or feeling thirsty by claiming to be “in state S-296” (71). They cannot, however, make sense of the notion that the various neural states signify “peculiar and distinct sort[s]” of “*mental* states” (70). Apparently, these imaginary extraterrestrials are perfectly capable of functioning without positing an extra faculty (mind, “the mental,” etc.) beyond the boundaries of material explicability. They seem to have no need for any distinct conception (philosophical or otherwise) of what we, Earthlings, call “mind” to account for any nonmaterial aspect of their experience.

A dramatic turn of events sets in with a team of various experts from Earth landing on the Antipodeans’ planet sometime in the twenty-first century. The team comprises philosophers of both Continental and analytic persuasion, who give very different interpretations of the Antipodean predicament. The former sort holds the quasi-Heideggerian view that “there was no real problem about whether the Antipodeans had minds [. . .], for what was important in understanding other beings was a grasp of their mode of being-in-the-world” (73). Philosophers of the latter sort are designated by Rorty as “tough-minded,” who found “much more straightforward and clean-cut question[s] to discuss” (73). While the neurologists and biochemists from Earth are elated to find the extraterrestrials amazingly knowledgeable in their fields, the *analytic* philosophers on the expedition are all the more baffled by the apparent absence of the conception of mind from the Antipodeans’ philosophical vocabulary. “Tough-minded” as they are, however, these philosophers “did not care what the Antipodeans thought about themselves, but rather focused on the question:

Do they in fact have minds?" (73-74). Nevertheless, the questions by means of which they could determine whether the Antipodeans *really* have minds can only be formulated in the vocabulary of analytic philosophy, which cannot be separated from the assumptions that incite them to pose those questions in the first place. The Antipodeans, however, are unable to make sense of such individual vocabulary items as "raw feel," cannot conceive of pain as different from stimulated C-fibers, nor can they tell the difference between "conceptual truth" and "empirical generalization" when reporting a sensation. Not sharing the terms and concepts whose mastery would be essential in order for the interlocutors to come to an even temporary agreement on what they are supposed to be conferring about, the attempt to answer the "straightforward question" of whether or not the outer space creatures have minds inevitably results in a communicational impasse and the utter frustration of the analytic philosophers.

Although Rorty's primary purpose with this tale is to question some basic assumptions in analytic philosophy, it can also be read as thematizing three interrelated insights which determine Rorty's metaphilosophical position throughout his oeuvre: (1) philosophical problems and vocabularies are linguistic constructions, shaped by contingent historical, cultural, socio-political, and institutional factors, so it is misleading to believe that these problems are perennial "topics of concern to any reflective mind at any era and in any society" (Rorty, "Analytic" 125); (2) philosophical problems are not "natural explananda" which "arise as soon as one reflects" (Rorty, *Mirror* 3), but, rather, optional ways of interrogating issues which fall outside the realm of "expert cultures" (such as the natural sciences or specialized

politics); (3) it is always possible to break free from a certain philosophical vocabulary and create a new one through the dialectical practice of offering alternative descriptions of the problems at hand so that they cease to seem relevant or problematic.

It is notable that the failure of communication is caused not by a disagreement between the two parties involved. Instead, they come to a standstill on account of the fact that neither can have recourse to apodictic means of demonstration whereby to provide unfailing proof of the validity of their position. One can conceive of no demonstration or rational argument that could ultimately convince the Antipodeans that they *have* minds, or the analytic philosophers that they have encountered humanoids living *without* minds.

In one of his recent writings, Rorty envisions an analogous problematic,³⁶ relying on Wittgenstein's "beetle in a box"³⁷ for demonstration, and infers that "a descriptive term [cannot] have a sense if its application is regulated by no public criteria" ("Cultural" 11). Drawing on the analogy, we can explain the communicational impasse in which Antipodeans and Earthlings find themselves by saying that they see different beetles (mind and neurons) in the same box (the human[oid] body). Nevertheless, this is not how the two interlocutors are likely to describe each other: from the vantage point of the extraterrestrials, the box seems to

³⁶ This time, Rorty's example involves human beings with "consciousness" and "zombies" who "behave just like normal people, but have no inner life" ("Cultural" 11).

³⁷ "Suppose everyone had a box with a beetle in it: we call it 'beetle.' No one can look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle. – Here it would be possible for everyone to have something different in his box. [. . .] But suppose the word 'beetle' had a use in these people's language? – If so, it would not be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as *something*: for the box might even be empty" (*Investigations* I.273).

have no beetle in it, while the Earthlings blame it on the philosophical myopia of the Antipodeans that they cannot see even their own beetle.

Rorty champions conversational philosophy on account of his conviction that such cases of first-order stalemating can be resolved through moving the problems one level up, as it were, to a meta-level, at which one compares whole vocabularies rather than individual claims and arguments formulated in vocabulary-specific ways. Rorty's demonstrative tale, however, also points up why it is paradoxical to conceive of metadiscourse as the ideal context for resolving disagreements.

The tale *itself* is a metareflection, demonstrating that no vocabulary is ever safe from being displaced by another, no description can ever be the right and only description. This is why the vocabularies of neurology and biochemistry are capable of being substituted for that of the philosophy of mind, inasmuch as they give more workable descriptions of human experience without positing an invidious mind/body dichotomy. Nonetheless, abandoning a certain philosophical vocabulary or shifting from one description to another is not as innocent and unproblematic a process as Rorty appears to suggest. What he does not seem to take into consideration is that by giving up the intuition that the Antipodeans possess minds and have mental states, the analytic philosophers would eliminate a distinctive and constitutive element of their own philosophical vocabulary, thus jeopardizing the validity of *any* philosophical claim they might make both prospectively and retrospectively. For the same reason, the philosophers cannot afford to declare the operative terms of their vocabulary mere rhetorical configurations, without running the risk of putting in question the theoretical foundations of their philosophy, thus undermining its disciplinary status.

Conversely, Rorty's metalevel claim that the vocabulary of the philosophy of mind is optional stems from his antiessentialist conviction, which *he* cannot afford to give up without undermining the validity of his pragmatist line of reasoning. The fictionalized tension between Earthlings and Antipodeans thus reproduces itself at the metalevel of Rorty's critical reflection on analytic philosophy, the only difference being that in this case it is Rorty's second-order claims that clash with the first-order claims of the analytic philosophers.

Rorty operates under the genuinely pragmatic assumption that the vocabulary he proposes (like that of neurology and biochemistry in the tale) is appropriate to replace the one currently in use for the simple reason that it enables the given "explananda" to be accounted for in a more economical fashion. But the economy of explanation is beside the point when it comes to ethical considerations concerning vocabulary-shifts and redescrptions. Rorty is well aware of the coercive aspect of redescrptions: "Ironism," he contends, "results from the awareness of the power of redescrption" (*Contingency* 89). He is also aware, however, that "most people do not want to be redescrbed"; they "want to be taken on their own terms—taken seriously just as they are and just as they talk. [. . .] The redescrbing ironist [. . .] suggests that one's self and one's world are futile, obsolete, *powerless*. Redescrption often humiliates" (*Contingency* 89-90).

What I will focus on in the next two chapters are precisely such cases of redescrption on Rorty's part. The operative term both in the redescrption of deconstruction and in that of religion is "private," which serves, in both cases, to delimit a normal discourse of pragmatism and secular liberalism respectively. I close

this chapter by adumbrating how Rorty's Socratism may be related to his normalizing strategies in terms of private irony.

A Socratic role for the public/private split

Rorty's invocation of Plato as the "philosopher king" and Socrates as the "intermediary" to represent opposing poles of the philosophical spectrum is not without irony. By all means, he recalls the Socrates of the *Apology*, the embodiment of intellectual integrity, who stands up against the tyrants and chooses to die rather than leave Athens.³⁸ Socrates is indeed depicted as a public intellectual, capable of conversing on a diverse array of topics with interlocutors of very different persuasions (such as, say, the shrewd Sophist, Protagoras and the dogmatically pious Euthyphro). As is well known, however, the Socratic vessel is filled with Platonic wine: several of the dialogues contain eulogies on the privileged status of philosophy amongst all other disciplines, and on the philosopher as, at least, *primus inter pares* in the community of intellectuals. The kind of demotic philosophy Rorty champions would most probably be dismissed by Socrates/Plato (or "Platocrates" [Hall 132]) as an exercise in sophistic rhetoric.

Socrates lashes out against "second-rate practitioners"—the Sophists—who denigrate philosophy by describing its practitioners as "people talking nonsense and making an unworthy fuss about matters worth nothing at all" (*Euthydemus* 304e), and calling the "whole system [of philosophy] and the men engaged in the system [. . .]

³⁸ See "Pragmatism, Irrationalism" (169) and David Hall (136-37).

contemptible and ridiculous” (305a). Socrates accounts for the antiphilosophical rhetoric of such men by saying that they believe “that if they can reduce the reputation of [philosophy and philosophers] [. . .], and make them of no account, they will at once win the prize of undisputed victory in public opinion as men of wisdom” (305d). These men, in short, are appealing to the low tastes of the ignoble crowds, for whom “philosophy, [. . .] the love of wisdom is impossible” (*Republic* 494a).³⁹ The reason why “the multitude” can never appreciate the true wisdom that philosophy has to offer is phrased by Socrates in the form of a rhetorical question to Glaucon: “Can the multitude possibly tolerate or believe in the reality of the beautiful in itself as opposed to the multiplicity of beautiful things, or can they believe in anything conceived in its essence as opposed to the many particulars?” (*Republic* 493e-494a). Not surprisingly, Glaucon’s answer is in the negative.

The point Socrates is articulating here seems to be more than just a self-servingly elitist defense of philosophy. The argument is not exhausted by the disdainful claim that the multitude, due to their limited vision barred by the contingent and the particular, are constitutionally unreceptive to the love of eternal and universal wisdom. Conversely, philosophy’s contempt for alluring semblances and trifle particulars is constitutive of the very alterity that lends a sense of putative universal appeal to it. Thus, philosophy, by definition, becomes a safeguard against contingency, and retains its privileged (foundational) position not in spite of, but *on account of* the fact that it is not appealing (because not accessible) to the multitude. A philosophy that is accessible and attractive to the masses is undeserving of the name

³⁹ As Stanley Fish remarks, “there is always just beneath the surface of the antirhetorical stance a powerful and corrosive elitism” (*Doing* 473).

“philosophy.” On this Platonic view, philosophy is dealing in essences and eternal truths which are, by definition, universally valid. This universality, however, is not the upshot of an intersubjective agreement, but, conversely, a matter of privileged insights available only to the members of a relatively small community. The privilege persists only as long as the insights remain concealed from the unworthy masses; the insight of philosophers is, therefore, contingent on the blindness of the multitude.

Rorty's democratic vision of philosophy can certainly be looked upon as a form of latter-day Sophistry, which he readily espouses as a philosophical heritage,⁴⁰ but it is not clear how he wishes to harmonize it with the elitist aspects of the Socratic model. One way of reconciling the two could be to ignore the Platonic content and read Rorty's fleeting references to Socrates as aiming at no more than a rhetorical effect, marking out a pattern of virtue for intellectuals to follow. Nevertheless, there may be more affinity between Socratic elitism and Rortyan conversational philosophy than meets the eye. The force of Socrates' arguments is, by all means, contingent on the communal practices of the *polis* (Hall 136), but he takes pains to safeguard his own privileged discourse from dilettantes by positing a metaphysically conceived affinity between the *nature* of philosophy and the capabilities of those who are allowed—by this very nature and not by human agency—to participate in it.

Rorty certainly cannot have recourse to such a metaphysical argument, but he may be seen as appealing to more circuitous ways of setting the limits of the kind of philosophical and political discourse he deems acceptable. My argument in the two chapters that follow can be glossed as saying that his appeal to the notion of “the

⁴⁰ See his claim that if we proceed along conversational lines, “[w]e shall [. . .] be where the Sophists were before Plato brought his principle to bear and invented ‘philosophical thinking’: we shall be looking for an airtight case rather than an unshakable foundation” (*Mirror* 157).

private” may serve to isolate what appears to be detrimental to “public” discourse. In the case of Derridean deconstruction, the “public” denotes antimetaphysical discourse which rests on *pragmatist* assumptions, while in the case of religion, the “public square” of secular democratic society. The fact that Rorty seeks to keep both pragmatic discourse and the public square “pure,” results in an ambivalent rhetoric in both cases, which oscillates between endorsement and banishment. Thus, it seems that Rorty adopts a Socratic rhetorical strategy for radically “un-Socratic” purposes: his restrictive maneuvers aim at safeguarding a thoroughly antimetaphysical and secular conversational space, reserved for those who do not pose as being in touch with extrahuman powers either through privileged philosophical terms or through faith in a deity.

Chapter Three

The Will to Antimetaphysics:

Rorty's Circumvention and Appropriation of Derrida

What is most peculiar about Rorty's readings of Jacques Derrida is that while he himself never ceases to level harsh criticism at the metaphysical tradition, he insists that Derrida—no matter what he himself thinks—had best withdraw from such critique; this seems to hint at a case which arguably shares motifs with the Antipodean tale. Further, Rorty seems less intent on explicating or analyzing Derrida's work than using it as a pretext to devise pragmatic arguments for the futility of being preoccupied with metaphysics, while he himself continues to be preoccupied with it. Likewise, the role in which Rorty casts Derrida is twofold: he discusses him either as a philosopher, still obsessed with the question of how to overcome metaphysics (hence, still held captive by it), or as a private ironist, a quasi-man-of-letters, who has abandoned philosophical argumentation to fashion his own idiosyncratic style, which enables him to toss out playful parodies of (rather than philosophical arguments against) the metaphysical tradition as well as desperate philosophical attempts to overcome it.

In accordance with this ambivalent pattern, while Rorty never fails to testify to a profound appreciation of Derrida's later writings, this appreciation is offset, in each pertinent text, by a severe criticism of his early work.⁴¹ Unlike most sympathetic

⁴¹ On Rorty's problematic differentiation between the “early” and “late” Derrida, see Jolán Orbán (36-37).

commentators on deconstruction,⁴² Rorty downplays the significance of such seminal texts as *Speech and Phenomena*, *Of Grammatology*, “Structure, Sign and Play,” “Différance” or “White Mythology” as representing the “luminous, constructive, bad side” of Derrida (“Philosophy” 99). By contrast, Rorty eulogizes what he calls Derrida’s “shadowy, deconstructive, good side” (“Philosophy” 99), being represented by later—and less traditionally philosophical—writings, such as *Glas*, *The Post Card*, or “Circumfessions.” In these works, Rorty holds, Derrida performs a genuine postphilosophical turn by renouncing traditional modes of philosophical argumentation and espousing a quasi-literary style of writing which features idiosyncratic tropes, private allusions, jokes and fantasies rather than meticulous inquiries into the nature of language or writing. In short, Rorty thinks that Derrida’s image as a philosopher eclipses the originality of his thought.

I claim in what follows that Rorty's endorsement of Derrida as a private ironist and criticism of him as a philosopher are part and parcel of his normalizing strategies, through which he seeks to redescribe deconstruction in his own pragmatist terms. I argue that in his interpretation of Derrida, Rorty is poised between two roles: one that he actually plays, and one he claims to wish to play. The first role is that of the well-established pragmatist, renowned for writing lucid metaphilosophy and cultural criticism in a “nonphilosophical” (“transparent,” “nonabstract”) language. The second role is that of the “strong poet” who strives to be “something more than a pragmatist,” someone who wields a language more opaque and original than what the winsome but—as compared to Derrida—unspectacular prose of Rorty's pragmatist discourse.

⁴² Notably, Rodolphe Gasché, Jonathan Culler, and Christopher Norris whom Rorty has engaged in debates on deconstruction.

The former is on familiar ground when engaged in critique and argumentation—precisely what Rorty thinks Derrida should not be seen as offering—while the latter is distinguished by his/her ability to invent novel metaphors from which new discourses can spring. While Rorty admires Derrida for this latter ability, he refuses to acknowledge the discursive import of the inventive metaphors deployed in deconstructive discourse.

In five sections below, I will discuss the consequences of Rorty's ambivalent treatment of Derrida. I will reflect on (1) the relationship between deconstruction and pragmatism; (2) the philosophical character of the “private-irony” argument; (3) the imperviousness of pragmatism to deconstructive analysis (and vice versa); (4) Rorty's critique of transcendental argument; and (5) the rhetorical strategies of circumvention and appropriation.

Deconstruction and pragmatism

Deconstruction and pragmatism in general, and the work of Derrida and Rorty in particular have both been discussed as “antifoundationalist,” on account of their shared skepticism and radically critical attitude toward the metaphysical tradition and the hegemony of reason in its extreme positivist form.⁴³ Giving a concise account of

⁴³ For a cogent overview, see Chantal Mouffe's “Deconstruction, Pragmatism, and the Politics of Democracy,” in which she notes that the endeavor shared by Derrida's deconstruction and Rorty's neopragmatism to “undermine the very basis of the dominant rationalist approach” has repeatedly caused traditional philosophers to decry both for undermining the validity of the legacy of the Enlightenment (1). See also Kathleen Wheeler's *Romanticism, Pragmatism and Deconstruction*, especially “Preface” and Chapters 4-10.

the overlaps and discrepancies between the critical projects of Rorty and Derrida, Simon Critchley contends that pragmatism is deconstructive and deconstruction is pragmatist insofar as “pragmatism deconstructs all forms of foundationalism (Platonism, Metaphysical Realism, Analytic Neo-Kantianism, Pre-Heideggerian Phenomenology) and argues for the contingency of language, self and community” (19). Deconstruction, Critchley goes on to add, can be seen as pragmatist inasmuch as “what Derrida calls ‘the metaphysics of presence can be assimilated to an antifoundationalist critique of philosophy,” and, more importantly, “the deconstructive claim that the ideality of meaning is an effect of the differential constitution of language [. . .] can be assimilated to a pragmatist conception of meaning as a function of context, i.e. the Wittgensteinian reduction of meaning to use” (19). Jonathan Culler argues along similar lines when he claims that “[o]ne might be tempted to identify deconstruction with pragmatism since it offers a similar critique of the philosophical tradition and emphasizes the institutional and conventional constraints on discursive enquiry” (153). Speaking specifically of Rorty, Culler also remarks that *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* “proves very useful in understanding Derrida, for it is an analytical philosopher’s critique of what Derrida calls the logocentrism of Western philosophy,” the difference being that Rorty uses “analytical arguments against the analytical enterprise” (152, 11n).

Rorty himself also appears to suggest that there is some kind of an alliance between the two modes of philosophical thought when he contends: “I take pragmatists and deconstructionists to be united in thinking that anything can be anything if you put [it] in the right context, and that ‘right’ just means the context that

best serves somebody's purposes at a certain time and place" ("Response to Critchley" 43). Furthermore, Rorty views Derrida's preoccupation with language from the vantage point of his own Wittgensteinian-Davidsonian nominalism. This also appears to constitute a common ground for deconstruction and pragmatism, insofar as it enables a construal of Derridean discourse as part and parcel of that recalcitrant branch of analytic philosophy which seeks to supplant foundationalist thought by viewing its problems on a nominalist (rhetorical), rather than on a transcendentalist (representationalist) basis. It is in this vein that Rorty places Wittgenstein, Quine and Derrida on a par, claiming that each "dissolves substances, essences and all, into a web of relations" ("Habermas and Derrida" 315).

Despite what they may have in common, however, it is only at the cost of obfuscating a basic difference between the *rhetorics* of the two discourses that one can take deconstructionists and pragmatists to be two sides of the same coin, two ways of narrating the *same* story—the eclipse of Western metaphysical thought and that of Enlightenment rationality. This view would suggest a disruption of a monolithic philosophical project—the overthrowing of metaphysics—which has broken up into different sub-projects: the deconstruction of logocentrism, the critique of foundationalism and the analytic tradition, or the pragmatist reformulation of conditions of truth, but all these diverse endeavors are united, as it were, against a common adversary. This view, however, is not compatible with Rorty's suggestion that deconstruction should not have anything to do with metaphysics, or, for that matter, with *philosophy*.

Rorty's urge to save Derrida from traditional philosophy appears to accord with his own attempt to withdraw from it. This urge, however, yields a rather controversial result, insofar as Rorty's arguments for the desirability of abandoning philosophy are embedded in extensive comments on, and analyses of a wide range of *philosophical* problems related to a host of names (mostly those of *philosophers*) which Rorty eagerly disseminates all over his texts. Indeed, he cannot *not* philosophize. It follows from the large number of diverse issues addressed in these texts that the focus is never kept tightly on Derrida's work. Derridean deconstruction rather serves as an eligible context for Rorty to weave elaborate narratives of the metaphysical tradition, in which he implicitly argues that pragmatism is the right way to deconstruct metaphysics. In the sections to follow, I will examine some of his arguments which point toward this kind of appropriation.

Private irony vs. philosophy

Rorty offers one of his most controversial readings of Derrida in Chapter 6 of *Contingency* in which he discusses "Envois" from *The Post Card* as the work of a *par excellence* private ironist, claiming:

The later Derrida privatizes his philosophical thinking, and thereby breaks down the tension between ironism [seeking private bliss] and theorizing [serving "public" purposes]. He simply drops theory—the attempt to see his predecessors [all the great Western philosophers from Plato to Heidegger]

steadily and whole—in favor of fantasizing about those predecessors, playing with them, giving free rein to the trains of associations they produce.

(*Contingency* 125)

Due to this radical privatization, Rorty contends with full approval, “[t]here is no moral to these fantasies, nor any public (pedagogical or political) use to be made from them; but, for Derrida’s readers, they may nevertheless be exemplary—suggestions of the sort one might do, a sort of thing rarely done before” (*Contingency* 125). Private irony entails a disruption of discursive consensus, not unlike an innovative literary work does, which is how Rorty reflects on “Envois” in *The Post Card*, comparing Derrida’s significance to that of Proust in having “written a kind of book which nobody had ever thought of before” (*Contingency* 137). In Derrida’s case, it means no less than renouncing the Platonic-Kantian striving for a minutely explicative metalanguage, and framing his texts in a highly original vocabulary which, however, he does not necessarily share with his audience.

The germs of the “private irony”-argument are to be found already in Rorty’s earliest essay on Derrida, in which he operates with a threefold perspective, claiming that “[o]ne can see Derrida as a philosopher of language whose work parallels Wittgenstein’s, or as a disciple of Heidegger striving to undo his master, or as a writer who is helping us to see philosophy as a kind of writing rather than a domain of scientific inquiry” (“Derrida on Language” 673). Rorty explicitly states that Derrida’s work is to be regarded as abnormal discourse (“Derrida on Language” 679). As we noted in the first chapter, however, abnormal discourse depends for the recognition of its “abnormality” on normal discourse, which adjudicates the discursive import of the

new mode of thinking, thereby normalizing it. By the same token, Derrida's "private irony" can be cognized only from the vantage point of normal (in this sense, "public") philosophizing, which Rorty readily concedes when he claims that "[a]nybody who has read little of philosophy will get little from 'Envois,' but for a certain small audience [for those initiated in philosophy] it may be a very important book" (*Contingency* 134). Accordingly, in his reading of "Envois," Rorty cites numerous instances of punning and allusive word-play, most probably inexplicable to the philosophically uninitiated.⁴⁴ Thus, argument: Derrida's "postphilosophical" significance can be recognized only from within a philosophically ingrained discourse, not to mention that his alleged act of "privatizing" the time-honored vocabularies of his grand predecessors is itself a philosophical gesture. Thus, Derrida can preach only to the converted: the rather select audience from which his (earlier or later) writings might evoke any resonance is largely made up of philosophically-trained intellectuals. It is from the vantage point of the earlier, more conventionally philosophical texts that one comprehends the significance of the putatively *nonphilosophical* later texts.

Furthermore, the "private irony"-argument, on Rorty's hands, serves a well-defined discursive purpose: that of demonstrating the feasibility of a liberal ironist discourse which prefigures the kind of utopian culture envisaged in Chapter 4 of *Contingency*. Hypothetically, this culture enables philosophy to survive as *a kind of writing*, one that takes full advantage of traditional disciplinary erudition, but evinces it in radically "unphilosophical" ways, just like Derrida does.

⁴⁴ Including the postcard(s) with the figures of "Socrates" and "plato" on it/them, invoking the "S-p" (subject-predicate) distinction from analytical philosophy (127); the Oxford philosophers' (e.g., P.H. Nowell-Smith, Gilbert Ryle) "Fido"-Fido theory of meaning (131); the association of the mention of children with "Socrates' talk of 'midwifery' and 'wind-eggs' in the *Theaetetus*" (128), just to recall the most important ones.

Nonetheless, Rorty's interpretation of deconstructive texts as embodiments of private irony is itself a metaphilosophical gesture, which presupposes the kind of epistemic disposition that Rorty denies to Derrida by rendering him a private ironist. Furthermore, if we yield to Rorty's persuasive powers and concede that Derrida *is* a private ironist, we find ourselves thereby affirming Rorty's metaposition, which implicitly hints at the existence of a perspective that is impervious to ironist vagaries. For this reason, Rorty's moves can be interpreted as preparing the ground for his appropriating strategies. Below, I discuss the prerequisites of appropriation and the way it is effected.

Can pragmatism be deconstructed and deconstruction pragmatized?

Rorty's championing of private irony through argumentative strategies which are themselves anything but ironic may hint at an apparently self-refuting position, on which deconstructive readings frequently capitalize. If we proceeded along this deconstructive line, we could point out that despite the pragmatic penchant for blurring distinctions, Rorty actuates a number of attendant binary oppositions: private vs. public; literature vs. philosophy; (private) allusion vs. (philosophical) argument, from which we can derive further ones at a more general level, such as discursive vs. *adiscursive*; epistemology vs. rhetoric; knowledge vs. opinion, interior vs. exterior, etc. So it appears that Rorty's claim that Derrida has managed to liberate his thought from the debilitating rigors of normal philosophy can be defended only at the cost of

reinstating certain philosophically-ingrained distinctions which, however, threaten to “undo” the wholesome pragmatic narrative.

The passage quoted above about Derrida's being a private ironist could be premium grist for the deconstructor's mill. To recall:

The later Derrida privatizes his philosophical thinking, and thereby breaks down the tension between ironism and theorizing. He simply drops theory—the attempt to see his predecessors steadily and whole—in favor of fantasizing about those predecessors, playing with them, giving free rein to the trains of associations they produce. (*Contingency* 125)

Notably, the passage is replete with overt or implied oppositions: private vs. public, ironism vs. theorizing; fantasy vs. theory; free associations vs. “steady” and “whole” conceptions; playfulness vs. rigor; successor vs. predecessor. The pattern to be followed is all too familiar: first, show how Rorty attempts a chiasmic reversal of philosophically-charged oppositions, endorsing the traditionally less privileged notion of a pair at the expense of its counterpart, and then refute his claim by pointing out that, *in fact*, he can never escape the ineluctable necessity of having to derive each notion from its putative opposite, regardless of which one is privileged at the moment. It is, indeed, to be conceded that the notion of the nonphilosophical (whatever its momentary designation: “literary,” “ironist,” “private,” or “phantasmagoric”) is irreducibly predicated on that of the philosophical, and that Rorty's argument for private irony can derive its legitimacy from that very predication.

For Rorty, however, this is a trivial insight: he repeatedly denounces the schematism of deconstructive readings (which he mostly attributes not to Derrida but

to literary critics of Derridean persuasion) for their pretentious endeavor to reveal philosophical truths in (mainly literary) texts about the “nature of language” (*Contingency* 134). At one point, he writes:

One learns to “deconstruct texts” in the same way in which one learns to detect sexual imagery, or bourgeois ideology, or seven types of ambiguity in texts; it is like learning how to ride a bicycle or play the flute. Some people will have a knack for it, and others will always be rather clumsy at it—but doing it is not facilitated or hindered by ‘philosophical discoveries’ about, for example, the nature of language, any more than bicycle riding is helped or hindered by discoveries about the nature of energy. (*Contingency* 134, 33n)

Rorty arguably takes a relaxed attitude towards the portentous binary oppositions, whose devious workings deconstructionists are so eager to reveal: he thinks all that needs to be done in this respect is to point out “that the oppositions are there, and then not taking them very seriously,” for “[t]hat is what our culture has been doing for a long time now” (“Circumvention” 103). Elsewhere, he notes: “Deconstruction is not a novel procedure made possible by a recent philosophical discovery. Recontextualization in general, and inverting hierarchies in particular, has been going on for a long time” (*Contingency* 134). At another point, he states even more poignantly: “I confess I find the knee-jerk suspicion of binary oppositions among deconstructionists baffling [. . .], [for] the fact that two contrasting terms get their meaning by reciprocal definability, and in that sense ‘presuppose’ each other, does nothing to cast doubt on their utility” (“Two Meanings” 208).

From a pragmatist's viewpoint, the rhetorical force of a deconstructive argument is contingent upon a deliberate effacement of the nominalistic hyper-awareness which is at the heart of the pragmatic outlook. In fact, Rorty cannot but take the paradigmatic deconstructive project of hitting upon binaries to be an unpragmatic endeavor to find "conditions of possibility," insofar as one element of an opposition gets identified as the condition of possibility for its counterpart. For Rorty, it is always the causal conditions of actuality—the particular reasons for privileging one element of the opposition over another—that gain more importance in the face of the quasi-transcendentalist gesture to point up an "ineluctable" logical impasse. On this account, the invidious logic of binary oppositions does not attain "supra-discursive" status: it is just as much a nominal function of a given vocabulary—and so serves some specific purpose—as any other linguistic configuration.

Furthermore, Rorty's aversion to mystification causes him to be highly suspicious of what he takes to be a tendency on the part of Derrida and his followers to treat "concepts as agents or subjects," which he deems a "Platonist way of speaking," not to be "reconciled with his [Derrida's] criticism of the metaphysics of presence" ("Derrida and Tradition" 331). For the same reason, he objects to Rodolphe Gasché's claim that deconstruction "presupposes a concretely developed demonstration of the fact that concepts and discursive totalities are already cracked and fissured by necessary contradictions and heterogeneities that the discourse of philosophy fails to take into account" (136). Rorty takes Gasché to be attributing independent agency to "concepts" and "discursive totalities," which is incompatible with the

“straightforward” pragmatic notion that concepts (or any linguistic formulations) do not *do* anything by and of themselves. As he puts it:

The best we nominalists can do with such claims is to construe them as saying that one can always make an old language game look bad by thinking up a better one—replace an old tool with a new one by using an old word in a new way [. . .], or by replacing it with a new word. But this need for replacement is *ours*, not the concept’s. *It* does not go to pieces; rather, *we* set it aside and replace it with something else. (“Is Derrida” 126)

By the same token, he refuses Derrida's repeated claim that *différance* is “neither a word nor a concept” (*Margins* 3): according to Rorty’s “Wittgensteinian nominalist” stance, “[a]ny word that has a use automatically signifies a concept,” moreover, it “can’t *help* doing so” (“Circumvention” 103).

Rorty elaborates on this point as he hypothesizes a book called *Derrida for Davidsonians*, which (unlike most books on Derrida) would be “addressed to people who think that nothing lies behind the use of words except the causal conditions of those uses” (“Derrida and Tradition” 330). Then he goes on to ask: “Couldn’t the different species of antimetaphysician—deconstructionists, Deweyans, and Davidsonians—at least agree on the need to be nominalists?” (336). If they did agree, Derrida would probably not say that *différance* is neither a word nor a concept, unless he wishes to be accused of “constructing yet another transcendental idealism” (“Kind of Writing” 99). Rorty also thinks that in his attempt to avoid representationalism by resorting to neologisms, Derrida “comes perilously close to giving us a philosophy of

language, and thereby perilously close to slipping back into what he and Heidegger call ‘the tradition of onto-theology’” (“Kind of Writing” 101).

The radical element in this proposition is that Rorty attributes a downright *metaphysical* purport to Derrida's terminology, whereby he virtually calls into question the *raison d'être* of deconstruction. Invoking some familiar antinomies from the metaphysical tradition—such as that of monism vs. pluralism with Parmenides and Spinoza, form vs. matter with Aristotle, phenomenal vs. noumenal with Kant—Rorty throws into relief the apparently inevitable self-referential paradox which obtains whenever philosophers come to privilege a notion as forming the condition of possibility for all other related notions, and, thereby, for the whole of the given philosophical vocabulary. (As Rorty cogently epitomizes the problem: “one cannot say that only *x*'s are intelligible if the only way to explain what an *x* is is by assuming that one's auditor knows what a non-*x* is” [“Circumvention” 91].)

For the given vocabulary to be able to justify its privileged position, the notions it operates with are supposed to “make themselves available” through self-authentication (an invidious term for an antifoundationalist) instead of being inferred from the nonprivileged ones. This enterprise is paradoxical because, as Rorty puts it, “you have to have a theory about the origin and nature of error, about the possibility of progress from error to truth. You have to understand a bad language in terms of the good one while not permitting the bad one to be either a proper part of the good one or ‘intertranslatable’ with it” (“Circumvention” 90). This, however, is an unviable feat: the only way to make it viable would be to assume a transcendental position in relation

to both the “good” and the “bad” language, to have an infallible, acontextual theory of what it is to be right and what it is to be wrong.

Hypostatizing this transcendental position, however, leads to an impasse like the one exemplified by Kant’s phenomenal-noumenal dichotomy. Rorty contends: “[Kant] needed noumena, things-in-themselves, to give sense to the claim that the spatiotemporal world was phenomenal, merely apparent. There cannot, as he said, be appearance without something that appears. But we have no idea what it would be like for the nonspatiotemporal to appear (or to do anything else, for that matter)” (“Circumvention” 90-91). The paradox, of course, is that one cannot make sense of the noumenal only by explicating it as a special case of the phenomenal, whereas the former is meant by Kant to serve as the transcendental condition of possibility for the latter, or, to put it differently, the noumenal is *parasitic* upon the phenomenal.

Besides this more complex antimetaphysical argument, we can also observe the familiar Rortyan strategy of demystification through appealing to Occam’s razor. His disambiguating explications of deconstruction suggest that substituting his own neopragmatist vocabulary for Derrida’s deconstructive idiom would engender a more reasonable discursive economy for an efficacious critique of metaphysics. Rorty’s penchant for such demystification transpires in such paraphrases of deconstruction as the following:

[W]hen pragmatists are told by “deconstructionists” that Derrida has “demonstrated” that Y, the condition of possibility of X, is also the condition of the impossibility of X, they feel that this is an unnecessarily high-faluting way of putting a point which could be put a lot more simply: viz., that you

cannot use the word “A” without being able to use the word “B,” and vice versa, even though nothing can be both A and B. (“Remarks” 16)

This skeletal explication clearly suggests that Rorty conceives of deconstruction as an “unnecessarily high-faluting” version of pragmatism, which goes astray because it dispenses with the kind of default nominalism that would prevent its practitioners from forging quasi-metaphysical privileged notions. By the same token, he downplays the significance of deconstructive rhetoric, hinting—despite himself—that it is merely a superficial gloss on the underlying pragmatic truth. This is possible, however, only as long as we maintain a sharp distinction between the “purely conceptual” and the “purely rhetorical,” between transparent literal, and opaque figurative (or “private ironist”) language, between what Derrida says and how he phrases it. By implicitly making these distinctions, however, Rorty comes close to betraying his nominalism, which, nonetheless, may seem a small price to pay for the pragmatizing of deconstruction.

This tension, in its turn, marks the onset of another potential deconstructive argument, for if Derridean rhetoric is found to be superfluously tortuous, but corrigible by means of pragmatic measures, Rorty's explications will function as *supplement* to Derrida's texts. Rorty, indeed, does not assume the “noninterventionist” stance of a “theorist” who contemplates its object from a distance, but, rather, that of a therapist who *amends* Derridean discourse, whereby the quasi-transcendental terms in which it is cast are supplemented by a pragmatic language. The implication is that, due to its transparency, that kind of language is better at facilitating postmetaphysical thinking.

However, by suggesting this, Rorty, again, seems to yield the terrain to his deconstructors, for the devious logic of the *supplement*—in its distinctively Derridean sense—undermines Rorty's position both in its sense of “addition” (in this case: explication/disambiguation) and as “replacement” (pragmatization). In the former case, Rorty would pose as offering amendments to the deconstructive critique of metaphysics, thereby conceding that it does have a critical purport even without his supplementation, which, however, he initially denied. In the latter case, he could be seen as supplanting deconstructive thought, replacing it with his own “transparent” terms, but then he has to convince his readers that greater linguistic transparency serves antimetaphysical purposes better than private fantasizing, which would come into conflict with his ironist leanings.

Rorty's rejoinder to such a reading would be to point out that he attributes no more privileged status to the concept of the “supplement” than to any other concept or word in discursive circulation—in any case, this is what we can infer from his observation that “Derrida cannot simultaneously adopt the [Wittgensteinian] language-game account of meaning for all words and try to privilege a few selected magic words as incapable of theological [privileged] use” (“Circumvention” 103). No privileged words (or language games), no deconstruction—at least not without the intervention of some human agency. On the pragmatist's side, it also entails the rather unimaginative conclusion that arguments constructed in one vocabulary cannot be “undone” (*de*-constructed) in another. To *undo* a pragmatist argument would literally mean to *de-pragma*-tize it: to deprive it of its distinctive impulse to treat linguistic configurations as causal entities which always ensue from human needs, are put to use

by human agency, and serve some specific purpose at hand. The result of this, as we will see in the next section, is that Rorty casts doubt on the equally definitive functions of *critique* and *analysis*, both being, by definition, denoted by the very notion of deconstruction.

Rorty's apparent eagerness to rewrite Derridean insights in "useful" and "transparent" terms results in the rhetorical deflation of deconstructive texts, which leads to their trivialization both as critical discourse and as the embodiment of private irony. Rorty's blindness to the functioning of deconstruction lies, however, not in the fact that he is incapable of grasping something essential about the workings of language, or that he has a more superficial view of it than deconstructionists do, but rather in his unwillingness to acknowledge that Derrida's rhetorical innovations constitute the critical force of his discourse, and, *vice versa*, the critical function legitimates the rhetoric.

Arguing against transcendental argument

In "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing," Rorty bases his argument on a differentiation between quasi-scientific Kantian, and "world-disclosive" Hegelian ways of philosophizing. "The first tradition," he contends, "thinks of truth as a vertical relationship between representation and what is represented. The second tradition thinks of truth horizontally—as the culminating reinterpretation of our predecessors'

reinterpretation of their predecessors' reinterpretation . . ." ⁴⁵ (92). The difference between the two ways boils down to the familiar antinomy of epistemology and rhetoric, insofar as any attempt at adjudicating between the two traditions would involve the question: is truth something one arrives at through rigorous philosophical inquiry, or is it no more than a function of various recontextualizing maneuvers, which serve no higher purpose than to provide new metaphors to replace the old ones. As Rorty puts it: "The first [kind of philosophy] likes to present itself as a straightforward, down-to-earth, scientific attempt to get things right. The second needs to present itself obliquely, with the help of as many foreign [unfamiliar] words and as much allusiveness and name-dropping as possible" ("Kind of Writing" 92).

Rorty takes Derrida's work to belong to the second type of discourse, as "the latest development" in the "non-Kantian dialectical tradition—the latest attempt of the dialecticians to shatter the Kantians' ingenuous image of themselves as accurately representing how things really are" ("Kind of Writing" 93). The non-Kantians, however, such as Heidegger and Derrida, "do not solve problems, [and] they do not *have* arguments or theses" ("Kind of Writing" 93), for they see philosophy as a "kind of writing" which is "delimited, as is any literary genre, not by form or matter, but by tradition" ("Kind of Writing" 92).

Accordingly, Rorty thinks Derrida is at his worst when engaged in a metaphilosophical project, where the norm is to offer arguments. In such cases, Rorty contends, Derrida "betrays his own project" by "imitat[ing] the thing he hates and starts claiming to offer 'rigorous analyses'" ("Circumvention" 93). By the same token,

⁴⁵ Rorty concludes "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing" by claiming that it is wrong to regard the two traditions as alternative and independent ways of writing philosophy, for, as he puts it "these traditions live each other's death and die each other's life" (107).

he virtually denies Derrida the right to argue, claiming that: “Argument works only if a vocabulary in which to state premises is shared by speaker and audience. Philosophers as important as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida are forging new ways of speaking, not making surprising philosophical discoveries about old ones. As a result, they are not likely to be good at argumentation” (“Circumvention” 93).

In spite of his eulogy on the opaque style these Continental philosophers, Rorty himself never leaves the safe ground of a pragmatic language, which he is more likely to be able to share with a larger audience. Nonetheless, the fact that he champions nonargumentative language gives rise to the charge that he is advocating rhetorical opacity for its own sake, which is tantamount to the celebration of sheer irrationality. His rhetoric being transparent as it is, he exposes himself to more frontal attacks than any philosophical neologist, which is also the very reason why he is always compelled to *argue*.

Accordingly, Rorty gets his share of criticism for his espousal of “misology” by theorists who credit deconstruction with critical potentials, and claim that it is far more radical in its strategies and possible consequences than Rorty is willing to concede. Jonathan Culler deplors Rorty’s (and, generally, pragmatism’s) “appeal to consensus and convention—truth as what is validated by our accepted methods of validation” (153). Culler also criticizes Rorty’s view of truth as a function of intersubjective agreement, epitomized by his claim that objectivity is a matter of “finding out whether there is general agreement among sane and rational men on what would count as confirming their truth” (*Mirror* 337). According to Culler, this attitude on Rorty’s part advocates the kind of undesired consensus which he himself seeks to

defy, one that can be achieved via excluding the “views of those who do not count as sane and rational men: women, children, poets, madmen” (Culler 153).

Another related charge on Culler’s part is leveled at Rorty’s “attitude towards reflexive enquiry,” namely at the view according to which, as Culler puts it, “we cannot by an effort of self-scrutiny or theoretical enquiry get outside the framework of beliefs and assumptions within which we operate [. . .] so we should not worry about these matters [of self-reflection] but should go pragmatically about our business” (154). Although Culler acknowledges that the deconstructive critique of logocentric Western thought may involve epistemological skepticism of this kind, he emphatically argues that such a critique “repudiates the complacency to which pragmatism may lead and makes reflection on one’s own procedures and institutional frameworks a *necessary task*” (154; emphasis added).

What appears to be the source of disagreement here is that Culler implicitly assumes that deconstruction is not simply one alternative mode of critique available among others, but it is singularly suited to uncovering philosophical or political anomalies which would otherwise remain hidden. The pragmatist thinker, however, finds this assumption objectionable because it suggests that deconstructive critique is motivated by nonrelational (internal) forces which make it constitutionally more qualified than pragmatism (or any other theoretical discourse) to perform critical reflection on one’s procedures and institutions.

This view is corroborated by such advocates of Derridean discourse as Barbara Johnson, according to whom the very term deconstruction denotes *critique par excellence*, as inferred from the root meaning of “analysis” as “breaking up,” or

“undoing” (*Dissemination* xiv-xv). Deconstructive critique, she contends, “does not point out the flaws or weaknesses or stupidities of an author, but the *necessity* with which what he *does* see is systematically related to what he does *not* see. [. . .] It is not a set of criticisms designed to make the system better. It is an analysis that focuses on the grounds of that system’s possibility” (xv).

By contrast, Rorty defines “deconstruction” not as originating from some irreducible necessity, but as being operated by the contingent agency of a *person* called Jacques Derrida: “there is no need,” he writes, “to be more precise about the nature and procedure of deconstruction than to say, ‘You know—the sort of *thing* Derrida *does*’” (“Derrida and Tradition” 339; emphasis added).⁴⁶ Rorty’s phrasing suggests not only that “deconstruction” is too diffuse a denomination to mark a systematic philosophy or a critical method, but also that it is best definable as *pragma*: *something* someone *does* for some specific purpose within definable discursive limits. Johnson’s reference to the “grounds of that [any] system’s possibility” reads invidious for a pragmatist like Rorty, who rejects the idea of any mode of analysis or discursive practice whose justification involves reference to “grounds” or “conditions of possibility.” He believes such terms to be hallmarks of transcendental arguments in the Kantian sense. Thus, when Rorty’s view of deconstruction is criticized from a perspective which smacks even vaguely of Neo-Kantian presuppositions, the debate which ensues is interminable, for the primacy of a transcendental over a pragmatic

⁴⁶ Rorty repeats this claim when he claims: “I see no real connection between what Derrida is up to and the activity which is called ‘deconstruction,’ and I wish that the latter word had never taken hold as a description of Derrida’s work. I have never found, or been able to invent, a satisfactory definition of that word. I often use it as a shorthand for ‘the sort of thing Derrida does,’ but I do so *faute de mieux*, and with a self-exculpating shrug” (“Remarks” 15).

stance (and the other way round) cannot be plausibly defended, since each position presupposes the other as its negation.

Christopher Norris's incisive criticism of Rorty, precisely for his views on Derrida, is a case in point. Norris adamantly objects to Rorty's view of philosophy as a "kind of writing," insisting ostensibly that Rorty "has *got Derrida wrong*," for "there is no good reason to suppose that the manifest presence of figural elements in a piece of argumentative writing must in any way impugn its theoretical adequacy or undercut its philosophical truth-claims" (*Deconstruction* 150). As opposed to Rorty, Norris holds that "there is no escaping [. . .] [the] post-Kantian enlightenment tradition" ("Philosophy" 199), especially if there is nothing else to replace that tradition with than a "postmodern-pragmatist" discourse which denies critical force to philosophical arguments.

Norris maintains that "it is only by working persistently *within* that tradition, but *against* some of its ruling ideas, that thought can muster the resistance required for an effective critique of existing institutions" ("Philosophy" 199-200). He categorically refuses the idea that Derrida has no relevance to the critique of political institutions, and echoes Culler in condemning what he calls Rorty's "consensus view of knowledge" for offering the "least resistance" ("Philosophy" 201) in the face of hegemonic traits of public (political, philosophical, or literary) discourses which necessitate the kind of radical critique one can derive from Derrida's work. While Rorty is far from denying the utmost necessity of such a critique, he claims, *pace* Norris and Culler, that philosophizing ("loving wisdom") and theorizing

(“contemplating an object from afar”) are hardly the most effective ways of critical intervention.⁴⁷

Norris, by contrast, overtly claims that “deconstruction preserves its critical thrust insofar as it engages with properly ‘philosophical’ problems” (“Philosophy” 201). Elsewhere, Norris concedes that “[p]hilosophy has tended to bypass the problems of coming to terms with its own textual and rhetorical constitution,” but he hastens to add that

[t]his is *not* to say, with Rorty, that philosophy should henceforth be treated as just one ‘kind of writing,’ along with all others that make up a flourishing culture. Rather, it is to agree that deconstructive theory has uncovered a certain problematic aspect of philosophy which can now be thought through in more rigorous fashion *without* losing sight of philosophy’s distinctive concerns. (*Contest* 11)

In his monograph on Derrida, Norris enlarges upon what he means by “properly philosophical” and “philosophy’s distinctive concerns”: he argues that “Derrida is broaching something like a Kantian transcendental deduction, and argument to demonstrate (‘perversely’ enough) that *a priori* notions of logical truth are *a priori* ruled out of court by rigorous reflection on the powers and limits of textual critique” (*Derrida* 183).

It is this foregoing claim that falls farthest from Rorty’s position on Derrida, and thwarts the possibility of a meaningful conversation with Norris. Rorty responds to Norris by contending that Derrida “nudges us into a world in which ‘rigorous

⁴⁷ See his “Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?” (119-120). He also elaborates this point in his reply to Richard J. Bernstein in “Thugs and Theorists: A Reply to Bernstein,” and in *Contingency* (especially chapters 5 and 6).

reflection on the powers and limits . . .’ has as little place as do ‘*a priori* notions of logical truth.’ This world has as little room for transcendental deductions, or for rigor, as for self authenticating moments of immediate presence to consciousness,” adding that the “idea that there is some neutral ground on which to mount an argument against something as big as ‘logocentrism’ strikes me as one more logocentric hallucination” (“Is Derrida” 121). Furthermore, relying on Davidson’s argument against the idea of conceptual schemes, Rorty thinks it pointless to distinguish between “empirical inquiry into causal conditions of actuality and philosophical inquiry into transcendental conditions of possibility”⁴⁸ (“Derrida and Tradition” 331).

The debate cannot be conclusively arbitrated, but not primarily for conceptual, but, rather, for rhetorical reasons: it is their differing routines of argumentation that rift an ever widening gulf between the two positions. These argumentative routes, however, cannot be renounced by either interlocutor, as they are *constitutive* of their positions. Rorty, in fact, does not engage Norris in a genuine conversation: he is oversensitized to metaphysically-charged usage, which is why he rather jumps, as it were, at the *words* “transcendental” and “*a priori*,” than refutes his opponent’s argument. It seems obvious, though, that Norris does not advocate “*a priori* notions of logical truths” any more than Rorty does. Rather, he argues that it is the unfeasibility of such notions that must be taken as a fundamental premise in critical discourses. Rorty’s apparent objection is that Norris posits this premise as a transcendental condition of

⁴⁸ Rorty also criticizes Geoffrey Bennington for advocating a quasi-transcendental view of deconstruction by making the controversial claims that “deconstruction is not essentially a Kantian type of philosophy, and cannot be content with the idea of conditions of possibility and everything that that idea entails” (“Derridabase” 88), and that philosophical discourse is not “merely forgotten or worn-out metaphors, a particularly gray and sad fable, mystified in proposing itself as the very truth” (122). Rorty rejoins by contending that “[q]uasi-transcendentality is what you go in for if you heed both of these warnings” (“Derrida and Tradition” 332).

possibility for any effective critique, otherwise he would eschew terms like “*a priori*” or “transcendental,” let alone invoking Kantian methods.

In a pragmatic view, what is devised as “transcendental argument” can by no means *transcend* being a causal function of some actual human need, that is, it must serve some nominalistically accountable specific purpose,⁴⁹ while the Neo-Kantians hold that the pragmatists’ insistence on the primacy of contextuality, causality, actuality, nominalism, etc. serves to posit *their* transcendental (*a priori*) conditions of possibility.⁵⁰ There seems to be no way to disrupt the circular movement of such an exchange: the pragmatist’s argument cannot avoid exposing itself to the charge that it, willy-nilly, relies on foundations (concerning the nominal nature of transcendental arguments, or the rhetoricity of *a priori* conditions of possibility, etc.) whose inescapability it is unwilling to acknowledge. Neither position is capable of ultimately refuting the other, not only because there is no obvious way in which a hierarchy could be set up between them by reference to neutral criteria of veridicality, but also (and more importantly) because “quasi-transcendentality,” hinted at by Norris, is precisely what Rorty’s pragmatism defines itself against. By the same token, since it is not at all self-evident that the critique of our extant institutions should necessarily be

⁴⁹ See also his argument against Bennington’s claim that “[i]f one says that finitude is in some sense the condition of transcendence, and one makes it into a condition of possibility of transcendence, and one puts it into a transcendental position with respect to transcendence” (“Derridabase” 279). To this, Rorty responds: “I am inclined to protest that the only reason anybody would want to say the former [part of the claim] is to urge that the word ‘transcendence,’ like all other words, is a human invention, designed to serve various human, finite purposes” (“Derrida and Tradition” 333).

⁵⁰ In a similar vein, Charles Eric Reeves argues that Rorty comes “very close to a ‘metaphysics of utility’” (355). See also his claim that due to his failure to provide an account of how “silent canons of the ‘natural’ become established,” and of the human motives to change them, Rorty cannot move out of a *physis/nomos* dichotomy, for as he “attempts to move cultural discourse to a new terrain he makes of this terrain a new *physis*—a new originative and regularizing nature” (355). Rorty also reflects that pragmatism is accused by Bennington of being complicit with Kantian thought for accepting “Kant’s distinction between the empirical and the transcendental, and then opt[ing] for the empirical—attempt to make whatever remains of philosophical discourse an empirical discourse” (“Derrida and Tradition” 332).

cast in opaque *Derridean*, rather than more transparent *Rortyan* terms, Norris, in his criticism of the latter in favor of the former, must resort to positing principles of criticism which—he thinks—*transcend* the pragmatic concern with the finite range of contingent actualities.

The rhetoric of circumvention and appropriation

Rorty rejects Gasché's and Norris's interpretation of deconstruction, for he takes them to suggest that Derrida is involved with the “standard German academic project of finding ‘conditions of the possibility’ of familiar experiences” (*Contingency* 123). He concedes, however, that Derrida's earlier work can be read as “continuous with Heidegger's in that he, too, wants to find words which get us ‘beyond’ metaphysics—words which have force apart from us and display their own contingency” (*Contingency* 123). Rorty, being highly critical of this attempt, argues that ascribing such noncausal, nonrelational force to deconstructive metaphors is tantamount to a relapse into metaphysics. Moreover, he seems to suggest that while Derrida's later work is irrelevant to the large-scale project of overcoming the metaphysical tradition, his early work fails to be a powerful critique of metaphysics on account of the fact that he (Derrida) is excessively preoccupied with it. In other words, the more argumentative he is, the more metaphysical thinking he produces: “Derrida cannot *argue*,” Rorty claims, “without turning himself into a metaphysician, one more claimant to the title of the discoverer of the primal, deepest vocabulary”

(“Circumvention” 101). Derrida, on Rorty’s reading, cannot do much more on the antimetaphysical front than offer refurbished versions of arguments other philosophers—notably, Wittgenstein, Austin, Quine, and Davidson—have already devised more effectively.⁵¹

Nonetheless, there is a different kind of strand running along the yarn of Rorty’s argument against Derrida’s involvement in the antimetaphysical project. He suggests in “Deconstruction and Circumvention” that metaphysical problems are obsolete,⁵² no longer relevant to the purposes of more expedient inquiries. (“Circumvention” 86). His ensuing suggestion is that metaphysical problems had better be *circumvented* than *overcome*, which seems to differ significantly from his previously construed suggestion that Derrida should not pose as constructing antimetaphysical arguments because his strength lies in private fantasies. The new element in his argument is the claim that metaphysics, being *passé* as it is, does not deserve critical attention. This underrating of metaphysics, however, seems to be yet another move to make deconstruction fit the pragmatist’s mold.

In a footnote to “Derrida and the Philosophical Tradition,” Rorty refers to his earlier text, “Deconstruction and Circumvention,” as his “first attempt at figuring out Derrida’s relation to previous philosophers” (344). “Circumvention” is a felicitous metaphor in a pragmatist discourse: it implies that a tendentious movement is disrupted due to a blockage on the way to one’s goal. In more pragmatic terms: some

⁵¹ For all his avowed admiration for Derrida, Rorty claims that “[i]f we are to find something in all this [Derrida’s] sidestepping of Hegel, out-magicking Heidegger, escaping to the margins, and so on, it had better be something more than a repeat of Austin’s and Quine’s criticisms of Locke’s and Condillac’s ‘idea idea’” (“Circumvention” 103).

⁵² As he puts it with his typical wit: “[i]t is considerably more difficult than it used to be to locate a real live metaphysical prig” (“Circumvention” 86).

specific purpose is better served if, as Dewey puts it, one got around the “useless lumber that blocks our highway of thought” (“Absolutism” 26). This “useless lumber,” in our context, is obviously the metaphysical tradition, but it is not at all obvious what it would mean to circumvent it, or what it would mean to prove it useless. And what is the specific purpose which is better served by circumventing metaphysics?

First and foremost, it is feasible to construe circumvention as a rhetorical move. David Hall implicitly renders Rorty’s “circumventive” maneuvers rhetorical in nature when he suggests that “circumvention” be understood as “circumlocution” which operates by means of “personal, self-encapsulating stories which permit Rorty to avoid having to meet a conversant on his own terms” (234). Hall is right when he claims that “[c]ircumvention is *possible* because of the nominalism and poetic narrativism characteristic of Rorty’s thinking,” and that “[r]econtextualization aims at the isolation, encapsulation, and circumvention of philosophic concepts and issues which fall outside his [Rorty’s] self-justifying narratives” (221). Nonetheless, I contest his claim that “circumvention is [. . .] the reactive consequence of trying to prevent being co-opted by an alien discourse” (221).

Hall apparently takes “circumvention” (or “circumlocution”) to mean “avoidance,” which hints at a self-protective intent on Rorty’s part—as if the chief motive behind his call for circumvention were to dissociate himself from deconstructive thought as fully as possible. My contention, however, is that this is not the case: rather than isolating his own discourse for fear of being co-opted by an “alien discourse,” his rhetorical maneuvers work toward isolating, encapsulating, and,

eventually, appropriating (co-opting) that discourse precisely because he does not consider it so alien.

Rhetorical circumvention can also mean the abandonment of metaphysical rhetoric to be substituted by a novel mode of discourse. Insofar as “getting around” means “finding an alternative way,” the question is not so much what will replace metaphysical tradition, but what will replace the metaphors deployed by its Continental critics. Rorty's key proposition in “Deconstruction and Circumvention” might suggest a possible answer. He contends:

The claim shared by Heidegger and Derrida, that the “ontotheological” tradition has permeated science, literature, and politics—that it is central to culture—is a self-deceptive attempt to magnify the importance of an academic specialty [philosophy]. [. . .] The big esoteric problem common to Heidegger and Derrida of how to “overcome” or escape from the ontotheological tradition is an artificial one and needs to be replaced by lots of little pragmatic questions about which bits of that tradition might be used for some current purpose. (87)

This proposition is reminiscent of the paradox of Theseus's ship, inasmuch as one may rightfully ask whether we can speak of the *same* “metaphysical tradition,” once all bits of that tradition have been replaced by “little pragmatic questions,” or we have simply “changed the subject.” To replace the “big esoteric” problems with questions of more urgency and expediency is, again, an unmistakable pragmatizing move. After all, determining the principles of usefulness or uselessness, and adjudicating among the “current purposes” to be served are governed by various intradiscursive (or intradisciplinary) criteria, which is why it seems problematic,

especially on an antifoundationalist basis, to posit a metacontext within which “current purposes” could be given a normative sense. Although hypothesizing primacy on an epistemic basis is at odds with Rorty’s antifoundationalist persuasion, the opposition posited between the “little pragmatic questions” and the “big esoteric” ones ineluctably presupposes that the former sorts of questions are phrased in a transparent, literal language which constitutes a metavocabulary within which the fallacies of other vocabularies can be adequately pointed out.

Insofar as “ontotheological tradition,” in this context, is extended to include the attempts at overcoming this tradition, Rorty’s seems to trivialize Heidegger and Derrida as *antimetaphysicians*. This suggests that it is not so much the metaphysical tradition that he seeks to circumvent, but rather fellow-critics of it. In this regard, my view is congenial to Henry Staten’s contention, according to which: “Rorty’s own deconstructive project is too close to that of Derrida for Rorty to be able to disassociate himself so neatly from it. So Rorty makes Derrida’s project look on the one hand viable and important (so that it chimes with Rorty’s own), and on the other hand senseless and useless (so that Rorty is left holding the field alone)” (455). But how can he justify such an authoritative move on an *antifoundationalist* basis?

As part of his justificatory strategies in arguing for circumvention, Rorty repeatedly draws upon Heidegger’s assertion that metaphysics is sustained even by the urge to overcome it, and so those doing philosophy should “cease all overcoming, and leave metaphysics to itself” (19).⁵³ Although Heidegger, in this oft-quoted passage, does not speak of “circumvention,” Rorty argues as follows:

⁵³ The full passage reads: “To think Being without beings means: to think Being without regard to metaphysics. Yet a regard for metaphysics still prevails even in the intention to overcome metaphysics.

Despite himself, what Heidegger did to the history of philosophy [the metaphysical tradition] was not to deconstruct it but further encapsulate and isolate it, thus enabling us to *circumvent* it. What Derrida has done, also despite himself, is to show us how to take Heidegger with Nietzschean gaiety, how to see his handling of the metaphysical tradition as a brilliantly original narrative rather than as an epochal transformation. (“Circumvention” 105)

Although Rorty's argument suggests a more radical break with the discourse of philosophy, he acknowledges that Derrida's work is, to a great extent, continuous with the “ironist theorizing” of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Viewed from the vantage point of these two philosophers (“theorists” as Rorty calls them), Derrida’s deconstruction represents the latest stage in the series of efforts to overcome the metaphysical tradition. On this account, Derrida is regarded as standing in a filial (Oedipal) relation with the major figures of this long tradition from Plato and Aristotle through Kant and Hegel to his immediate predecessors, Nietzsche and Heidegger, thus being caught up in a dialectical pattern: “Derrida stands to Heidegger as Heidegger to Nietzsche,” Rorty writes, “[e]ach is the most intelligent reader, and most devastating critic, of his respective predecessor. That predecessor is the person from whom he has learned most, and whom he most needs to surpass” (*Contingency* 122).

In this pattern, Derrida’s work is assumed to be of therapeutic significance, for, Rorty adds, Derrida “continues to think about the problem[s] which came to obsess Heidegger: that of how to combine irony and theorizing. But he has the advantage of

Therefore, our task is to cease all overcoming and leave metaphysics to itself” (*On Time and Being* 24). Rorty thinks, however, that Heidegger got only halfway in circumventing metaphysics.

having observed Heidegger's failure [to overcome metaphysics], as Nietzsche and Heidegger had the advantage of having observed Hegel's" (*Contingency* 122).

On this account, Derrida's role is to offer emendations to Heidegger's critique of metaphysics, pointing out the metaphysical traits in the texts of his predecessor. Rorty also suggests that Derrida's resort to private irony is the best way to obviate such a critical assault on his own work, for "[f]alling back on private fantasy is the only solution to the self-referential problem which such theorizing encounters, the problem of how to distance one's predecessors without doing what one has repudiated them for doing" (*Contingency* 125). Thus, Rorty takes "Derrida's importance to lie in his having had the courage to give up the attempt to unite the private and the public, to stop trying to bring together a quest for private autonomy and an attempt at public resonance and utility" (*Contingency* 125). According to this logic, however, Rorty's reading pulls Derrida back, as it were, into the realm of the public, by explicating his work in the "nonphilosophical" language of his pragmatism in which he deems it liable to the critique of the next antimetaphysician in line that is Rorty himself.

When Rorty speaks of Heidegger and Derrida having "encapsulated" and "isolated" the metaphysical tradition, thereby enabling its circumvention, he can be taken to suggest one of two things. On the one hand, he might suggest that the writings of Heidegger and Derrida work in a self-consuming (self-deconstructing) fashion: their critique of the metaphysical tradition performs the displacement of that tradition so effectively that even their own critical discourse suffers marginalization as a result. On the other hand, circumvention via "encapsulation" and "isolation" may simply mean the deployment of metaphors so novel that the discourse of the metaphysical

tradition and mainstream philosophy prove too parochial to accommodate them. However, both alternatives may leave us, at the end of the day, with nothing to be circumvented.

In unfolding this claim, we can rely on Staten who argues along similar lines when he observes that Rorty's project of circumvention leaves us with "two characterizations of the history of philosophy" (456):

(1) It is a constantly changing, self-deconstructing enterprise which is therefore not characterizable in terms of any single system of metaphors. [. . .] (2) It is a "metaphysical tradition" which has dreamed the dream of a closed, total, and transparent vocabulary which would tell the truth and nothing but the truth. [. . .] If (1) is true, then there is nothing to be sidestepped. If (2) is true, and there is a unity of structure to this dream, then there is something to be sidestepped, and it is also plausible that, guided by our understanding of this structure, we could find a system of metaphors undergirding the tradition that has dreamed it. (456)

Both alternatives presuppose a perspective entirely dissociable from the canonized narratives of the metaphysical tradition and its metaphors. One of the reasons why Rorty thinks Heidegger and Derrida acted "despite themselves," is that they could not dispense with their privileged metaphors—their "magic words," as Rorty likes to dub them ("Circumvention" 103)—such as "Being" or "Appropriation" in Heidegger's vocabulary, and "archi-writing," "trace," or *différance* in Derrida's. Being confined in their highly specialized metaphors, they are led to overestimate the significance of "unanswerable questions," such as that of the ontological difference between Being

and beings, or of the possibility of the “nontheological,” yet privileged usage of *trace* (which, Derrida tells us, is neither “ground” nor “origin”) or *différance* (“neither a word nor a concept”).

Then, the question arises whether there is any other way to appreciate the novel metaphors of Heidegger and Derrida than seeing them in their relation to the metaphors of the tradition whose critique they perform, moreover, whether it is possible at all to escape that metaphors. For a philosopher, it is virtually impossible to escape the *knowledge* that the texts of Heidegger and Derrida are *coalescent* with the metaphysical tradition. Although it is always possible to attempt alternative descriptions of the tradition to overwrite the institutionally implemented metanarrative of what is taken to be “mainstream” philosophical discourse, it is hardly possible, for a philosopher, to forget that metanarrative, or wish it away. Nonetheless, some of Rorty’s statements do imply that circumvention should not simply entail dropping the vocabulary of metaphysics but also *forgetting* it.

This suggestion emerges quite clearly when he criticizes Derrida’s “Anglophone fans,” who “think of him as providing new, improved tools for unmasking books and authors—showing what is really going on behind a false front.” Then, he goes on to add:

I do not think that a critic of metaphysics, in the tradition of Nietzsche and Heidegger, should be read in this way. For without the traditional concepts of metaphysics one cannot make sense of the appearance-reality distinction, and without that distinction one cannot make sense of the notion of “what is really going on.” No more metaphysics, no more unmasking. (“Remarks” 14)

First of all, the passage seems to convey the controversial claim that Derrida should not be read as stimulating further critiques of metaphysics (not even in the form of textual exegeses) *because* he is a critic of metaphysics. Rorty's grounding assumption seems to be that once Derrida has successfully "shown" the metaphysical tradition to be no more than a "brilliantly original narrative," any further critique of this narrative runs the danger of being redundant. Such a critique would be just a misplaced attempt at reinvigorating overwrought pseudo-problems and reinstating obsolete metaphors. Nonetheless, this claim would make sense only if we took Derrida to have achieved something more ultimate than just pointing up the rhetorical constitution of metaphysics—if we took him to have completed the project of *eradicating* metaphysics from the memory of Western culture. This, in turn, would mean forgetting metaphysics *as metaphysics*,⁵⁴ with its attendant oppositions of appearance and reality, surface and depth, true knowledge and mere belief, etc.

Nevertheless, we can see that it is this forgetting that, paradoxically enough, yields something that poses as "reality" and "true knowledge": we no longer need to ask "what is really going on," since now we know what is *really* going on. No more unmasking is needed, it is suggested, for now everything is out in the open, we have gained access to the naked truth, and the pseudo-problems at last turn into real—that is, *pragmatic*—problems. The pragmatic mode of speaking gets posited as the model of transparent, literal speech through which one confronts what metaphysical metaphors worked to dissimulate.

⁵⁴ For texts written in this tradition could still be read as innovative literary achievements, which comports with the way Rorty wants to relate see not only metaphysics, but its Continental critique as well.

In addition, Rorty prefigures his argument in *Achieving Our Country* by advancing an explicit political agenda when he claims that we ought not to be preoccupied with the “textbook dilemmas” of metaphysics, and talk as if these dilemmas “were real ones, as if there were a terrible, oppressive force called ‘the metaphysics of philosophy’ or the ‘history of metaphysics’ which is making life impossible not only for playful punsters like himself but for society as a whole” (“Circumvention” 100). Then, he concludes:

But things are just not that bad, except in special circumstances of the sort which once produced the Inquisition and, more recently, the KGB. [. . .] Not only is there no universal agreement on the conditions of intelligibility or the criteria of rationality, but nobody even tries to pretend there is, except as an occasional and rather ineffective rhetorical device. The discourse of high culture has [. . .] been considerably more fluid and chatty and playful than one would guess from reading either Heidegger or Derrida. (“Circumvention” 100)

What Rorty seems to suggest is that Heidegger and Derrida, being preoccupied with artificial dilemmas, cannot see through to “real” problems. This, however, is a highly incautious suggestion on the part of an antifoundationalist, pragmatist thinker, for he cannot plausibly acquire epistemic priority over other ways of critiquing metaphysics, unless he can provide “rational” criteria for adjudicating between the “artificial” and the “real.” Moreover, from the fact that he disparages the pressure towards universal agreement as a “rather ineffective rhetorical device,” at most, a matter of “pretense,” one may conjecture that nonmetaphysical arguments, appealing

to intersubjective, rather than universal agreement, are more effective rhetorical devices, or even that they may be closer to some central truth about metaphysics.

To conclude, it seems that Rorty's privileging circumvention in favor of the free play of private irony is far from putting an end to the time-honored quest for the last word to be written down on metaphysics. On the contrary, Rorty tries to suppress the antimetaphysical purport of deconstruction so that he can assume the ground reserved, as it were, for the true and efficacious critique of metaphysics *through pragmatism*, whereby he adds one more chapter to the history of metaphysics. Deploying a rhetoric of approval, he performs a pervasive criticism of deconstruction, the main argument of which, however, is not that Derrida or deconstructive philosophy is on the wrong track conceptually, but that pragmatist philosophy has the right to appropriate it on account of its parsimony. In the next chapter, I will consider Rorty's similarly dichotomous discussion of religion, where the ambivalent rhetoric he deploys masks an attempt not at appropriation, but at exclusion.

Chapter Four

Religion, Conversation, Exclusion, or,

Is There Such a Thing as Antifoundationalist Faith?

Since the 1990s, Rorty has shown a growing interest in discussing issues related to religion. He has published several essays on the subject, and recently a book, *The Future of Religion* (2006), has also come out, comprising his conversation with Gianni Vattimo. These discussions display a peculiar analogy with Rorty's reading of deconstruction: similarly to the way he classifies deconstruction as a form of private irony, irrelevant to mainstream philosophy, he considers religious belief an irreducibly private matter, irrelevant to public political practices. The upshot of this view, in turn, is no less dichotomous than it is in the case of deconstruction. On the one hand, the commendation of a privatized religion founders on one of the basic premises of classical liberalism, in that it argues for the individual's right to retain his/her faith without the compulsion to justify it in terms acceptable to a secularized community. To this extent, Rorty takes the practice of one's freedom of religion—analogously to private irony—to be a form of self-fashioning, which does not necessarily have to be interwoven with one's communally avowed commitments. On the other hand, this democratic gesture can easily be turned inside out, and interpreted as an undemocratic suggestion to the effect that religious views and arguments be banished from the public conversations in which decisive issues relevant to one's communal existence are discussed. With his staunch commitment to liberal democratic values in view, however, Rorty's arguments must shun even a vague semblance of political

exclusionism, as a consequence of which a curious ambiguity comes to inhabit his texts on religion.

I contend, in what follows, that this ambiguity in Rorty's argumentative strategies functions as a rhetorical ploy, which serves to mask a thoroughgoing critique of religion on both epistemological and political grounds. I will investigate the dichotomous interplay between Rorty's epistemological and political interpretations of religion, exploring different, but related, dimensions of the problematic in three of the four sections below. In the first, I will delineate the political and the epistemological traits in Rorty's discussions of religion, arguing that, despite his attempt to set them apart, the two are inextricably intertwined. In the second, I will concentrate on Rorty's reading of William James's "The Will to Believe," in which Rorty discusses religious faith as "unjustifiable." My contention will be that this claim is plausible only if we reinstate the distinction between faith and reason, which Rorty, due to his skepticism about foundational epistemology, wholeheartedly opposes. Thus, talking about "unjustifiability," I argue, yields the same political verdict for religion as talking about "private self-fashioning" does. The third section takes the form of a "case study," to shore up the argument of the second: I will discuss an intellectual debate on faith and reason, which took place between antifoundationalist literary theorist Stanley Fish and Richard J. Neuhaus, a Catholic priest. Neuhaus defends the *rationality* (that is, justifiability) of religious faith, whereby he seeks to legitimize religion as a public discourse. Fish, on the other hand, argues from the same kind of antiessentialist premises as Rorty does, but, unlike Rorty, he concedes the authoritarian dimension of his position, and recognizes that taking an antifoundationalist stance in

epistemological matters entails a definitive political stance, as well. In the fourth section, I conclude the chapter by a brief account of how Rorty's liberal democratic commitments relate to his antifoundationalist "faith."

Exclusion via tolerance

Rorty, in his liberal utopia, depicts an ideal community, in which conversations can be commenced and kept going for the greater benefit of all those involved, even though different communities may have radically different views on what counts for them as "the greater benefit." Several critics have been exasperated by Rorty's "light regard for the political" (Cochran 194), pointing out the vulnerability of his views in the face of extant material and institutional conditions. One of Rorty's most outspoken critics on this front is Nancy Fraser, who objects that "Rorty homogenizes the social space, assuming, tendentiously, that there are no deep social cleavages capable of generating conflicting solidarities and opposing 'we's' [. . .], where politics is a matter of everyone pulling together to solve a common set of problems" (314-15). In her view, antiessentialism does not necessarily lead to the improvement of social practices, since "there is no relation of logical entailment between anti-essentialism and loyalty to one's society [. . .], to say goodbye to objectivity" does not necessarily entail "say[ing] hello to solidarity" (308).

Fraser's critique targets Rorty's apparent reluctance to explore the mechanisms of intricate and ubiquitous power relations and dissident group interests, which

substantively shape the vocabularies in which conversations are framed. Thus, while Rorty's shift from the metaphors of vision to that of conversation serves to abandon the generalizing impulses of foundationalist epistemology in favor of specific and contextualized social practices, the notion of "conversation" turns out to be insubstantial when it comes to construing its significance in political terms. This political vagueness, as Jo Burrows points out, stems from Rorty's failure to offer proper answers to questions about the political prerequisites and consequences of the conversations he envisages: "What are the political preconditions for conversational practices? Are these practices 'benign' (i.e. non-confrontational), and if so, how can this be squared with political reality? [. . .] In short, what determines the style and content of conversation, and who gets to take part?" (322-23). Burrows is right insofar as Rorty—operating with as lofty a notion as the "conversation of mankind"—refrains from specifying the political conditions of possibility of conversations. Even Stanley Fish, a fellow-antifoundationalist, accounts for the difference between himself and Rorty by asserting that while "Rorty wants to continue the conversation of humankind. I want to end it" (Olson 7).

Nonetheless, while Rorty's conversational metaphoric, as it is delineated in *Mirror*, may be criticized for not allowing for confrontational encounters, his recent politically-related work evinces the recognition that the "conversation of mankind" does have its limits. Proclaiming that there are no mutually unintelligible (incommensurable) language games does not mean that there are no impermeable positions, which thwart any attempt at starting a conversation. Moreover, it *can* be stipulated what discourses can participate in certain conversations, depending on

whether or not they pose a threat to liberal democracy. Rorty suggests at several points in his work that religion is one of those discourses which might hinder the thriving of liberal democratic societies.

Throughout his oeuvre, Rorty has repeatedly professed himself an “atheist,” or, alternately, a “militant secularist” (Boffetti 24), or an “anticlericalist” (*Future* 33). At his blandest, he adopts Max Weber’s phrase to refer to himself as “religiously unmusical” (*Future* 30). This critical attitude toward religion is hardly surprising in light of Rorty’s antimetaphysical/antifoundationalist disposition. In fact, his skepticism about religion is fueled by the same distrust that he bears against foundationalist epistemology and, by implication, professional philosophy. Religion, much like foundationalist epistemology in terms of human knowledge, promises to provide ultimate answers to perennial questions of human existence in an attempt to render all further human inquiries superfluous. Philosophy, to recall Rorty’s opening statement from *Mirror*, “sees itself [. . .] [as] foundational in respect to the rest of culture because culture is the assemblage of claims to knowledge, and philosophy adjudicates such claims” (3). The belief that philosophy is able to adjudicate *all* knowledge claims can easily be mapped onto the religious believer’s faith in the almightiness of his/her god.

Rorty’s antiessentialist view of philosophy dovetails with his political inclinations, for he holds that the dismantling of foundationalism paves the way for a democratized and solidary culture whose members are sufficiently “nominalist and historicist” to believe that “nothing has an intrinsic nature, a real essence,” thus being

more willing to abandon essentialism and pernicious forms of ahistorical thinking⁵⁵ (*Contingency* 74). Envisaging his liberal utopia, Rorty casts his large-scale antiessentialism in explicitly *antireligious* terms when he urges that “we try to get to the point where we no longer worship *anything*, where we treat *nothing* as a quasi divinity, where we treat *everything*—our language, our conscience, our community—as a product of time and chance” (*Contingency* 22). He also infers the desirability and plausibility of the deposal of metaphysics from the post-Enlightenment dethronement of religion: he argues that the idea of a culture without religion before the Enlightenment must have appeared no less utopian than the idea of a postmetaphysical culture might appear in contemporary liberal democracies. The decline of religious faith, he contends, “and specifically the decline of people’s ability to take the idea of postmortem rewards seriously, has not weakened liberal societies, and indeed has strengthened them” (*Contingency* 85). Moreover, in order for the utopian liberal culture to function properly, it has to be fully “de-divinized.” As he argues:

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

⁵⁵ For a pervasive critique of this view, see Norman Geras’ *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind*. Geras challenges Rorty’s claim in the concluding chapter of *Contingency* (189-98) that specific acts of human solidarity can only be explained by an appeal to parochial interests and relations. Geras bases much of his argument on testimonies of people who acted as rescuers to Jewish persecutees during the time of the Holocaust, and he cautions that: “If it is indeed true that most rescuers were moved by anti-universalist impulses, then this is something we need properly to register. The real sources of their behaviour are certainly worth trying to understand, unobstructed by myth or mere phrases. On the other hand, *unless* it is true that they were moved by such impulses, Rorty’s suggestion may unintentionally dishonour them” (14-15).

divinization [. . .] should, ideally, culminate in our no longer being able to see any use for the notion that finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings might derive the meanings of their lives from anything except other finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings. (*Contingency* 45)

The idea is clear, and hardly surprising, but Rorty is known to have made even more poignant remarks to the detriment of religion. As Jason Boffetti reports, he bluntly stated in a public lecture that the Enlightenment was “right to suggest that religion is something that the human species would be better if it could outgrow” (24).⁵⁶

In Rorty's more recent texts, the militant rhetoric is somewhat softened in his discussions of religion, though his critique has become no less severe. He stipulates, nonetheless, that his criticism is motivated by “anticlericalistic” rather than “atheistic” impulses, to stress its distinctively political edge, in that it is directed at “ecclesiastical institutions,” not at individual believers (*Future* 33).⁵⁷ He outright claims that despite “all the comfort they provide to those in need or in despair,” these institutions “are dangerous to the health of democratic societies” (*Future* 33). Religion, he continues this line of thought, “is unobjectionable as long as it is privatized—as long as ecclesiastical institutions do not attempt to rally the faithful behind political proposals and as long as believers and unbelievers agree to follow a policy of live and let live” (*Future* 33).

⁵⁶ Boffetti also quotes Rorty as reminding his audience of Diderot's notorious claim that “the last king should be strangled with the entrails of the last priest,” adding that “even though some of my best friends are priests, I feel some sympathy with all these critics of religious institutions” (24).

⁵⁷ See his “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration,” in which Rorty reformulates his anticlerical views in specific—and none the less scathing—terms. He fervently criticizes contemporary Christian churches for providing tacit ideological support for homophobes, which he puts on a par with their connivance at anti-Semitic pogroms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (143-47). One could hardly conceive of a more devastating critique of clerical institutions than the one Rorty advances when he states: “if the Christian clergy had, in the century or so before Hitler, simply ceased to mention the Jews in their sermons, the Holocaust could not have happened” (145).

Rorty traces this line of political reasoning back to Thomas Jefferson, whose famous maxim he quotes approvingly: “it does me no injury for my neighbor to say that there are twenty Gods or no God” (“Priority” 175). Nonetheless, in a society whose political practices are thoroughly secularized, it is imperative to find a way of “privatizing religion—keeping it out of [. . .] ‘the public square,’ making it seem bad taste to bring religion into discussions of public policy” (“Conversation-Stopper” 169). The democratic tolerance towards religion comes at the price of what Rorty dubs the “Jeffersonian compromise,” according to which religious believers should “remain willing to trade privatization for a guarantee of religious liberty” (“Conversation-Stopper” 171). Thus, the religious “must abandon or modify opinions on matters of ultimate importance [. . .] if these opinions entail public actions that cannot be justified to most of their fellow citizens” (“Priority” 175).

While privatization appears to be a reasonable price to pay for religious freedom from an atheist’s point of view, it might well be looked upon as the curtailment of that very freedom by religious advocates. Stephen Carter is a case in point, whose *The Culture of Disbelief* provoked a response from Rorty with the telling title, “Religion As Conversation-Stopper,” in which he argues that the “main reason religion needs to be privatized is that, in political discussion with those outside the relevant religious community, it is a conversation-stopper” (171). Carter, however, finds it objectionable that the relegation of religion to the private sphere leaves such a narrow discursive space to the faithful that their religion-specific arguments become inconsequential outside that limited space. Rorty quotes Carter as saying:

[T]he effort by contemporary liberal philosophers to create a conversational space in which individuals of very different viewpoints can join [in] dialogic battle, in accord with a set of dialogic conventions that all can accept. The philosophical idea is that even though all of us have differing personal backgrounds and biases, we nevertheless share certain moral principles in common. [. . .] [The problem is that] all these efforts to limit the conversation to premises held in common would exclude religion from the mix. [. . .] [The solution would be to form] a public square that does not restrict its access to citizens willing to speak in a purely secular language, but instead is equally open to religious and nonreligious argument. (qtd in Rorty, “Conversation-Stopper” 170-71)

Carter, from his own vantage point, makes a convincing case: in his view, what he is asked to do is disparage his faith by declaring it politically insubstantial. Rorty's statement to the effect that religion needs to be excluded from the public square *because* it is a conversation-stopper must strike him as merely a question-begging attempt at silencing religious voices in public debates. To Carter, it seems highly paradoxical that liberal democracies are founded on the ideal of an open and inclusive discursive space, capable of accommodating several conflicting viewpoints, whereas the religious find themselves excluded and trivialized by the champions of this very ideal.

This contradiction can be seen to inhabit Rorty's argument, in that the success of his democratically conceived attempt to accommodate religious faith within the discursive space of a secularist society is predicated on the extent to which he is

capable of proving religion to be antithetical, if not outright detrimental, to liberal democratic values. Rorty seems to be well aware of this tension, which is why he tries to blunt the “exclusionist” edge of his rhetoric by arguing that the privatization of religion is in the best interest of the religious themselves. His rejoinder to Carter is that the fear of being excluded is founded on “the [false] premise that the nonpolitical is always trivial” (170). Rorty urges that religion be treated like poetry: nonpolitical, yet having the potential of being a matter of vital importance for certain individuals—a private pursuit that “both give[s] meaning to individual human lives and [. . .] [is] such that mature, public-spirited adults are quite right in not attempting to use them as a basis for politics” (170). This analogy makes Rorty's argument no less problematic, for it implicitly raises doubts as to whether religion is capable of constituting a ground firm enough for the believer on which to determine his/her political views. He seems to suggest, thereby, that one's religion cannot constitute an acceptable set of beliefs to rely on in a public conversation unless it is purged of its specifically religious content. Furthermore, Rorty's insistence on a depoliticized religion gains relevance only within a politicized discursive space: despite his intention to the contrary, his argument cannot escape being articulated in political terms.

There is, however, a notable change of heart to be observed in writings where Rorty construes religion in *epistemological*, rather than in political terms. He endorses the classical pragmatist view of religion, which rests on Peirce's redefinition of belief (adopted, in fact, from Alexander Bain) as “habit of action” as opposed to representation (Rorty, “Anti-Authoritarianism” 10). The antirepresentationalist view holds that religion can be construed as a set of social and discursive practices (adopted

reflectively or unreflectively), which constitute, rather than represent, one's faith. This is, in fact, the reversal of the traditional metaphysical model which posits faith as an essentially internal property, and treats any linguistic expression of it as an external auxiliary in representing that faith. The reversal consists in the claim that faith is not a property one can *de facto* internalize, but, rather, one claims oneself a believer from within a certain set of discursive practices in which one is implicated. It is due to the assumptions resulting from these practices that, for instance, the believer sees providence where the nonbeliever sees mere contingency. Thus, one's actions and utterances are not merely representations of faith, but its very abode. This antifoundationalist approach to religious faith is cogently phrased by Gary Wihl in his discussion of the broader issue of conviction: "Convictions do not appear as representable things in and of themselves, separate from their concrete embodiment. The language of convictions, therefore, does not function like a representational medium" (10).

We can take Wihl's account of conviction to be applicable to religious faith, in that his formulation argues against the existence of a nondiscursive object of representation to which faith can be shown to correspond. It also implies that any faith or conviction can be firmly held inasmuch as certain assumptions constitutive of that faith remain unexamined, or even inaccessible. For this reason, if a religious believer—given that s/he is sufficiently aware of the distinctively philosophical sense of "representation"—were consciously to reflect on his/her language when involved in a religious practice (such as praying), s/he would be unlikely to differentiate between his/her words being *representations* and those being *constituents* of his/her faith.

Moreover, the ability to make this differentiation might undercut the distinctively religious content of one's faith simply on account of the epistemological (or rationalizing) nature of the reflection. Thus, for very different reasons, "the language of convictions" can be accepted as being nonrepresentational by the pragmatist antifoundationalist and by the religious believer alike: to the former, this fact is a logical corollary of discarding traditional epistemological distinctions, while to the latter, his/her religious conviction constitutes a foundation firm enough to be sustained without epistemological underpinnings.

This curious affinity seems to account for Rorty's conciliatory attitude toward religion, not least because once he resolutely turns his back on foundational epistemology, he cannot appeal to classical distinctions between faith as an epistemologically dubious form of thought, and something less dubious like rationality. As he outright states at one point: the "claim that [. . .] we [atheists] are appealing to reason, whereas the religious are being irrational, is hokum" ("Religious Faith" 172). At another point, he criticizes Sidney J. Hook for championing science as a model for pragmatist thought, and for debunking faith in the face of rationality. Hook antagonizes science and theology by reference to their differing attitudes toward "the mysterious:" "one tries to solve mysteries," Hook says, "the other worships them [. . .] [and] believes that some specific mysteries are final" (181). Rorty, by contrast, claims that the "anti-scientific, holistic pragmatist [which he considers himself to be] [. . .] wants us to adopt naturalism without thinking of ourselves as more rational than our theistic friends" ("Without Method" 66). Pragmatists, Rorty adds, should settle for "the laissez-faire attitude that sees religion and science as alternative ways of solving

life's problems, to be distinguished by success or failure, rather than rationality or irrationality" ("Without Method" 66). In short, religion and science can, at best, be demarcated by reference to the different purposes they serve as social and discursive practices, not along illusory epistemological lines.

This pragmatist argument revolves around the assumption that appealing to reason when justifying a knowledge claim yields no more unfailing *epistemic* validity than appealing to religion. This insight, however, does not exempt us from the necessity to be able to tell the "right" sort of justification from the "wrong" one, since, as we can surmise from Rorty's foregoing politically-charged argument, there is much at stake when it is to be decided whether a certain justification does or does not fall in with the discursive norms of a community. In this specific context, marking out the right kind of justification is of crucial importance, if one is to argue convincingly either for the inclusion, or for the exclusion of religion in/from the public square. Further, the ability to make a differentiation between religion conceived in political terms, and religion conceived in epistemological terms presupposes some kind of a method whereby one can isolate the "purely" epistemological from the "purely" political content in the argument of one's religious interlocutor. Nonetheless, once the distinctions between faith and reason (neither being more or less epistemologically sound than the other), or between truth and justifiability (both being functions of social and discursive practices) have been blurred, there is no reason to retain the dividing line between the political and the epistemological either—in other words, there is no such thing as "pure content" (epistemological or political) to be isolated. For this reason, it is misleading to construe Rorty's attitude toward religion as

oscillating between “epistemic acceptance” and “political dismissal,” for that would presuppose two essentially distinct antithetical poles, which allow one to switch back and forth between them at will. Rather, the two kinds of attitude can be seen as intertwined, amounting to a critique of religion that is more tangled than to admit of the neat economy of binaries.

What obfuscates the binary pattern is the fact that Rorty's critique of religion (involving hints at the desirability of a postreligious culture, and at overthrowing divinities) stems from his thoroughgoing antiepistemological persuasion. His dismissal of foundational epistemology, in its turn, can be seen as the prerequisite of his defense of religion in the face of rationality. As we have seen, however, Rorty's comprehensive argument against foundationalist epistemology extends to include religion as one possible form of thought which posits a putatively ultimate foundation which is instrumental in adjudicating knowledge claims. Nonetheless, it is only from the premise of the vacuity of such epistemological foundations that Rorty's endorsement of religion can be plausibly argued for. Thus, ironically enough, the platform on which Rorty is willing to grant the practical use of religious faith is predicated upon the insight that religion, as subsumed under the notion of foundationalist epistemology, is a redundant nonsubject, and, as such, due to be disposed of. In other words, once we concede Rorty's argument that epistemological foundationalism is to be overthrown, it becomes impossible to ascribe even a deflated (private) significance to religion, which Rorty is willing to grant.

The (un)justifiability of faith

In classical pragmatism, the dismissal of the faith-reason dichotomy is perhaps most pronounced in William James's "The Will to Believe." In his seminal essay, James bluntly claims to be "defending the legitimacy of religious faith" in the face of "some rationalizing readers" (449), being represented in the essay by the British mathematician and philosopher, William Kingdon Clifford. Clifford held the rigidly rationalist view that "[b]elief is desecrated when given to unproved and unquestioned statements, for the solace of the private pleasure of the believer. [. . .] It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" (qtd in "The Will" 461-62). James argues that if one were to agree with Clifford on the wrongness of holding religious beliefs on insufficient evidence, one might be withheld from the hope of having something greater than oneself to hold onto: "one who should shut himself up in snarling logicity," James contends, "and try to make the gods extort his recognition willy-nilly [. . .] might cut himself off forever from his only opportunity to make the gods' acquaintance" (476). James identifies the difference between religious belief and other kinds of belief by relating the former to one's "passional nature," the latter to one's "intellect" (rationality). He states his thesis as follows: "*Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must decide an option between propositions whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds*" (464). This thesis is indicative of James' attempt to blur the distinction between faith and reason in repudiation of the metaphysical notion

of an all-encompassing epistemology, but he still does not seem to break entirely with epistemologically-conceived distinctions.

Despite the apparent affinities between their positions, Rorty severely criticizes James for this equivocation, which he takes to be an undesirable (and avoidable) relapse into the paradigm of foundational epistemology (“Religious Faith” 154). In critique of James’ above-quoted thesis, Rorty objects that “James accepts exactly what he should reject: the idea that the mind is divided neatly down the middle into intellect and passion, and the idea that possible topics of discussion are divided neatly into the cognitive and the noncognitive ones” (“Religious Faith” 155). Rorty thinks that James should not have drawn a distinction between “intellect” and “emotion,” but, rather, he should have “distinguish[ed] issues that you must resolve cooperatively with others and issues that you are entitled to resolve on your own” (“Polytheism” 37). Religion, according to Rorty, is clearly the latter sort of issue: like Romantic art, he argues, religion is a “paradigmatic project of individual self-development,” in that it does not require intersubjective agreement like natural sciences or law, which are “paradigmatic projects of social cooperation” (“Polytheism” 35). Rorty, however, does not so much blur the cognitive-noncognitive distinction as reformulates it in terms more congenial to his neopragmatist discourse by substituting the socially-conceived dichotomy of public and private for the invidious epistemological dualism. The new distinction certainly makes it more difficult to dismiss religion with the offhand gesture of rendering it “irrational,” but it also makes it vulnerable to an alternative form of dismissal: one that is based on the thoroughly pragmaticized view of religious faith as a dispensable add-on to culture.

To spell out what is at stake in Rorty's argument, it is worthwhile to examine how he reiterates the rationale for the socially-conceived split in his recent work. He contends: "If social cooperation is what you want, the conjunction of the science and common sense of your day is all you need. But if you want something else, then a religion that has been taken out of the epistemic arena, a religion that finds the question of theism versus atheism uninteresting, may be what suits your solitude" (*Future* 39). Using the word "solitude"⁵⁸ points up yet another affinity between Rorty and James. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), James defines the object of his inquiry as follows: "Religion [. . .] shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine*" (36). "Solitude" in both James and Rorty signifies the nonepistemic nature of religious experience, which entails that shared norms of commensuration may not be applied to explicate it. James also contends that science—the paradigmatic discourse of epistemic commensuration—merely "catalogues her elements and records her laws indifferent as to what purpose may be set forth by them, and constructs her theories quite careless of their bearing on human anxieties and fates" (*Varieties* 440). Human anxieties and fates are to be tackled at an individual level, which, according to James, is the very purpose religion serves. As he goes on to add:

The pivot round which [. . .] religious life [. . .] revolves, is the interest of the individual in his private personal destiny. Religion, in short, is a monumental chapter in the history of human egotism. The gods believed in [. . .] agree with

⁵⁸ See also "Religion As Conversation-Stopper," where Rorty, in reference to Whitehead, defines religion in pragmatic terms as "'what we do with our solitude,' rather than something people do together in churches" (169).

each other in recognizing personal calls. Religious thought is carried on in terms of personality, this being, in the world of religion, a fundamental fact. Today, quite as much as at any previous age, the religious individual tells you that the divine meets him on the basis of his personal concerns. (440)

James's claim for the individualization of religion would, in principle, explain away the need for the common ground of epistemology. With faith having become an irreducibly private matter, religious experience takes singular forms not translatable into communal terms, which, however, has anomalous consequences regarding the cultural sustainability of religion. By positing the radical privacy of religious faith, one undercuts the status of religion as a discursive practice, or as a language game whose rules can be mastered (or, at least, observed) on account of which it would be capable of being publicly shared. As a consequence, religion can be saved only at the expense of demotion: once we acknowledge that the singularity of one's religious experience is exempt from communal accountability, religious discourse gets inevitably isolated from the secular public discourses of the given community, whereby its cultural impact gets drastically reduced. Radically private experience presupposes a radically private language which, constituting an incommensurable conceptual scheme, makes conversation between the religious and the nonreligious next to impossible.

Conceding the privacy of religious experiences, however, serves very different purposes for James and Rorty. James' aim in *Varieties* is to chart out the psychology, or, one might say, phenomenology⁵⁹ of religious faith based on numerous case studies whose specific content, though connected by various intracultural elements, proved to be singular to the individual case being investigated. In Rorty's usage, however,

⁵⁹ See especially the first chapter of *Varieties* on religion and neurology.

“solitude” assumes a function analogous to that of “private irony”: it serves to argue that religion, being nonepistemic, can and should retreat from public discourse (*Future* 36), but this retreat is one that religion can only benefit from. For this retreat to occur, Rorty argues, not only the notion of rationality, but also the “pursuit of universal intersubjective agreement” should be abandoned by religious people (*Future* 36). His explanation runs as follows:

[I]f you identify rationality with the pursuit of universal intersubjective agreement and truth with the outcome of such a pursuit, and if you also claim that nothing should take precedence over that pursuit, then you will squeeze religion not only out of public life but out of intellectual life. This is because you will have made natural science the paradigm of rationality and truth. Then religion will have to be thought of either as an unsuccessful competitor with empirical inquiry or as “merely” a vehicle of emotional satisfaction. (*Future* 36-37)

The force of the argument is contingent on accepting Rorty's hypothesis that “rationality” and “universal intersubjective agreement” are interchangeable terms. It is hard to see, however, the compelling reason for conceding the validity, let alone the inevitability, of the hypothesis. Intersubjective agreement is highly conceivable within and among religious communities, whose members might even make a point of avoiding the semblance of “rationality” in discourses on matters of faith. Conversely, it is also possible (as we will see below) that a religious believer wittingly appeals to rational reasoning when devising a religious argument for fellow-believers or when justifying his/her faith to nonbelievers. Rorty does not explicitly deny the plausibility

of these options, but he does hold the view that refraining from rationality and thereby from participating in conversations in the “public space” of the “epistemic arena” (*Future* 36) is an opportunity that religious believers would do well to act upon. As he contends:

[T]o say that religion should be privatized is to say that religious people are *entitled* to opt out of this [epistemological or political] game. They are entitled to disconnect their assertions from the network of socially acceptable inferences that provide justifications for making these assertions and draw practical consequences from having made them. (*Future* 37-38; emphasis added)

By saying that “religious people are *entitled* to” choose to stop playing their language game by publicly acceptable rules, Rorty seems to suggest that it is to their *benefit* that they can do so, while participants in scientific, political, or philosophical conversations are required, willy-nilly, to abide by the consensual discursive norms of their respective discourses. In the rest of this section, I will argue that that not only are the religious required to keep to communally acceptable discursive rules when devising arguments for their faith, but it might well be a prerequisite of articulating the distinctively religious content of their beliefs.

To unfold the argument, we need to revisit James’ above-quoted thesis in “The Will to Believe,” which can be read as advancing the central antifoundationalist claim that “evidence” as the token of “truth” is just as much a matter of belief as religious faith, for there is no ultimate court of appeal which could conclusively adjudicate among various knowledge-claims: “The desire for a certain kind of truth [. . .],” James

observes, “brings about that special truth’s existence” (“The Will” 473). What James is articulating here is by no means a paradigmatic idealist statement: instead, he argues that “evidence” and “truth,” just like faith, are intersubjectively formulated social/cultural constructions. As he puts it: “Our faith is faith in someone else’s faith, and in the greatest matters this is most the case. Our belief in truth itself, for instance, that there is a truth, and that our minds and it are made for each other—what is it but a passionate affirmation of desire, in which our social system backs us up?” (“The Will” 463).

The Rortyan claim that religion is what one does in one’s solitude may be seen as a corollary of James’ implicit suggestion that becoming religious means taking up a certain habit of action (rather than, say, of epiphany), so the primary question to be raised is not how this habit squares with the social/political climate or the scientific findings of the day, but how the religious believer can benefit from his/her faith. James’ genuinely pragmatic insight is that the legitimacy of one’s religious faith is not determined by epistemological validity or communal arbitration, but solely by its utility: “On pragmatic principles, if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, [it] is true” (*Pragmatism* 618). Rorty endorses this Jamesian view, which he restates as follows: “Do not worry too much about whether what you have is a belief, a desire or a mood. Just insofar as such states as hope, love and faith promote only [. . .] private projects, you need not worry about whether you have the right to have them” (“Religious Faith” 155). In other words, you are under no compulsion to justify your religious beliefs (desires, moods) to your (nonreligious) peers as long as you keep them private.

This, however, is not quite what James suggests. Following right after the above-quoted sentence about utility being the only test of one's faith, James goes on to add: "Now whatever its residual difficulties may be, experience shows that it [the hypothesis of God] certainly does work, and that the problem is to build it out and determine it so that it will combine satisfactorily with all the other working truths" (*Pragmatism* 618). It would be wrong to surmise, however, that the acts of "building out" and "determining" the "hypothesis of God" are solely matters of individual volition: what James designates as "all the other working truths" can be taken to mean "justified" beliefs shared by a certain community.

For the "hypothesis of God" to combine satisfactorily with the shared beliefs of a thoroughly secularized community, however, either the communally defined discursive practices and processes of justification, or the hypothesis needs to be so radically modified that neither could be recognized as bearing out its original function. On the one hand, if communal agreement on justificatory processes is adjusted to apply to religious beliefs, certain entrenched (because hitherto justifiable) beliefs are bound to be discarded as being incompatible with the newly acquired (hereupon justifiable) ones. In this case, however, the justificatory processes themselves are in danger of getting distorted to the point of losing their capability of yielding epistemic consensus (unless the very concept of justification is radically altered). On the other hand, if the "religious hypothesis" is to be made plausible even to atheists, the hypothesis itself, while leaving justificatory processes intact, gets deflated to such an extent that its distinctively religious content is likely to evaporate.⁶⁰ This seems to

⁶⁰ This problem, of course, dates back to much earlier times than the heyday of classical pragmatism. With the advent of the so called "new probability" in the mid-seventeenth century, religious hypotheses could no longer be

imply that the justification of one's religious faith in the face of a secular community (like the secularized institutions of contemporary liberal democracies) can be spelled out in terms acceptable for that community, or the very need to justify religious faith is to be abandoned altogether.

To be able to argue coherently for beliefs which do not stand in need of justification, Rorty makes a distinction between religious belief and other kinds of belief, asserting that "pragmatist philosophy of religion must follow [Paul] Tillich and others in distinguishing quite sharply between faith and belief" ("Religious Faith" 158). "Belief," in this pragmatist sense, is a habit of action that one might be called upon to justify when involved in a "common project" which requires a responsibility "to ourselves to make our beliefs cohere with one another, and to our fellow humans to make them cohere with theirs" ("Religious Faith" 149). According to Rorty, one should not expect this kind of coherence from religious believers, which implies that they are free to go without justifying their faith to others:

Liberal Protestants, to whom Tillich sounds plausible, are quite willing to talk about their faith in God, but demur at spelling out what beliefs that faith includes. Fundamentalist Catholics, to whom Tillich sounds blasphemous, are happy to enumerate their beliefs by reciting the Creed, and to identify their faith with those beliefs. The reason the Tillichians think they can get along either without creeds, or with a blessedly vague symbolic interpretation of

defended exclusively on authority, but, rather, on "internal evidence," which, however, posed insurmountable obstacles, for instance, in the case of testimonies of miracles, and other "unevidenced" articles of faith. This epistemic paradigm-shift initiated the turn from theism to deism, where representatives of the latter would accept articles of faith purely on evidence, regardless of authority, which made the notion of faith radically deflated, if not redundant. See Jeffrey Stout's claim that "[t]o remain religiously interesting, it [Deism] would have to retain at least some of the content of traditional theism. Yet, this constraint clearly conflicted with the aim of high probability. To heighten probability was to lower religious satisfaction" (10).

creedal statements, is that they think the point of religion is not to produce any *specific* habit of action, but rather to make the sort of difference to a human life which is made by the presence or absence of love. (“Religious Faith” 158)

By referring to love, Rorty seems to be making the case that not only is faith exempt—by subjective volition—from having to be justified to others, but it is virtually inexplicable. Rorty cites as an example a parent’s or spouse’s love, which “often seems inexplicable to people acquainted with those spouses and children” (“Religious Faith” 158). By implication, we can infer from the inexplicability of faith to the explicability of belief, but this inference runs the danger of reinstating the epistemological dichotomy of the cognitive and the noncognitive (rationality and irrationality), which Rorty is ever so eager to discard. Furthermore, Rorty does not make a convincing case for his allegation that one’s religious faith can be enclosed in a putatively private sphere, insulated from the beliefs of others as well as from one’s own different kinds of beliefs.

He seems to be aware of how problematic his claim is, as he poses the question at one point: “Can we disengage religious beliefs from inferential links with other beliefs by making them too vague to be caught in a creed [. . .] and still be faithful to the familiar pragmatist doctrine that beliefs have content only by virtue of inferential links to other beliefs?” (“Religious Faith” 159). For, he goes on to ask, “what becomes of intersubjectivity once we admit that there is no communal practice of justification—no shared language game—which gives religious statements their content?” (“Religious Faith” 159). Rorty’s answer is that we can still make sense of utterances of religious content by correlating them with certain “patterns of behavior,

even when we cannot do so by fixing the place of such utterances in a network of inferential relations” (160).

This answer suggests that, when engaged in conversation, an atheist has to have recourse to a radical interpretation (in the original the Davidsonian sense) of the utterances of his/her religious interlocutor. Not sharing the religious person’s language game, the atheist would have to translate “from scratch,” as if they were speaking different languages proper, or as if they were communicating from within remote cultures. Rorty, it appears, does not take into consideration the possibility that the religious believer can appeal to his/her secularist interlocutor’s language game to argue for his/her faith. This assumption, however, could be valid only if religious faith, like any other belief, were not always already contextualized in an epistemologically and politically constrained conversational space, without which it would not be possible to ascribe any cultural value to religion in the first place. As a consequence, not only are religious believers under constant compulsion to justify their faith to those who do not share in it, but they are also compelled to rely on a publicly accepted language game for them to be taken seriously in the given debate. This is what I will demonstrate in the section that follows, focusing on an exchange between the antifoundationalist Stanley Fish and the Catholic priest, Richard J. Neuhaus. The reason I am adducing this particular dialogue is that it points up the fact that religious faith, to great extent, is *argumentative*, and is predicated very much on adherence to the discursive norms of dominant community.

Faith and reason revisited (Fish vs. Neuhaus)

In 1996, *First Things* featured a debate between Richard J. Neuhaus, a prominent Catholic priest, and the neopragmatist literary theorist, Stanley Fish. In the essay which provoked Neuhaus's response, Fish, similarly to Rorty, denounces the opposition traditional epistemology sets up between faith and reason, and claims outright that "[t]here is no opposition [. . .] between knowledge by faith and knowledge by reason" ("Why" 245), for both faith in a deity and reason presuppose certain "first principles," which enable one's participation in a given discourse, and, to varying degrees, entail interpretive reasoning. Reasoning of any kind starts off on the basis of some deeply cherished premises which, in their turn, determine the route (and, to some extent, the outcome) of the given argument. The "logic" of the argument is, therefore, relative to the premises from which it commences. A more important consequence is that whatever discourse (religious or secular, essentialist or antiessentialist) one represents, the first principles one acts upon—contrary to the presupposition of epistemological realism—cannot be ultimately adjudicated through rational inquiry. One of Fish's most pregnant claims is that one's "consciousness must be grounded in an originary act of faith—a stipulation of basic value—from which determinations of right and wrong, relevant and irrelevant, real and unreal will then follow" ("Why" 247). He also adds that from an antifoundationalist point of view it is unthinkable to posit "rational criteria that are themselves hostage to no belief in particular" ("Why" 247). The entailment of this is that what we call "rational inquiry" is no less enabled by a set of unquestioned premises than a religious argument is.

Similarly to Rorty, Fish argues that “a person of religious conviction should not want to enter the marketplace of [rational] ideas, but to shut it down, at least insofar as it presumes to determine matters that he believes have been determined by God and faith” (“Why” 250). The reasons he gives for this view of his are also similar to those of Rorty, though argued in blunter terms. He contends that “to ask a religious person to rephrase his claims in more mainstream terms [acceptable in a community whose institutions are founded on secular premises] is to ask that person to cut himself off from the very source of his conviction and to become in effect the opposite of what he is, to become secular” (“Why” 254). According to Fish, religious people often get themselves into such predicaments, which, he thinks, is an erroneous strategy on their part, for they yield up their discursive terrain to secularist opponents, thus undermining their own political interests as religious believers.

Fish’s reasoning is analogous to Rorty’s, insofar as they both recommend the religious to withdraw from conversations taking place in secular forums, because this is the only way for them to preserve the value of their faith. There is, however, a major difference between their arguments: Fish, instead of making the negative claim that neither faith nor reason has stronger epistemological foundation, he *equates* the two forms of belief, saying that “on the level of epistemology both are the same” (“Why” 245). Moreover, he adds that his intention is not to “debunk rationality in favor of faith but to say that rationality and faith go together in an indissoluble package: you can’t have one without the other” (“Why” 255). Thus, Fish takes an argumentative shortcut to the exclusionary gesture that Rorty arrives at through a more circuitous route. He, in fact, makes two consecutive statements which blot each other out: first, that the

religious should not wish deploy rationality as an argumentative tool, and, second, that faith and rationality are indissoluble. The consequence of his statements is, therefore, that if the religious do indeed endeavor to “shut down the marketplace of ideas”—as Fish clearly states they should—they would thereby deprive themselves of their chance to articulate their faith as a distinctive value. In short, by giving up their claim to rationality, they would also give up their religious convictions.

Nonetheless, if we grant the validity of Fish’s contention that faith and reason are indissoluble, we also have to acknowledge that the criteria according to which one notion could be granted priority over the other are never obvious to discern. Therefore, it is not at all self-evident whether faith precedes and paves the way for rational arguments, or faith is a function of sufficient rational reasoning. Rorty and Fish both assume that the former is more appealing to religious people, but Neuhaus clearly proves this assumption unfounded.

He outright rejects the claim to the effect that faith and rationality are incompatible.⁶¹ As Fish puts it at one point, the conflict between faith and reason is a conflict between two “rationalities,” for what counts as evidence for one of the disputants will not count as evidence for the other, and vice versa (255). Neuhaus, by contrast, defends rationality as a universal principle which applies to the religious as well as to atheists. In support of this allegation, he invokes St. Augustine’s *The Usefulness of Believing*:

Augustine makes the case that belief is necessary for understanding. He explains in great detail to his unbelieving interlocutor the reasonable case for believing. It is clear that Augustine and his interlocutor share a common “a

⁶¹ This is, in fact, what John Paul II argues in his encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, promulgated in 1998.

priori” in what they mean by reason and reasons. The argument is that belief is necessary to understanding—in everyday life, in science, in friendship, and in matters religious—and why belief is necessary is itself rationally explicable. (29)

He then goes on to quote Augustine as saying: “No one believes anything unless he first thought it believable. Everything which is believed should be believed after thought has preceded. Not everyone who thinks believes, since many think in order not to believe; but everybody who believes thinks” (29). Neuhaus also emphasizes that Augustine was firmly opposed to the fideistic view according to which faith is arbitrary, and, as such, is “not supported by and cannot appeal to an a priori about what is reasonable” (29).

This religious argument dissolves a binary opposition in a way that we could almost call deconstructive. The idea that not only can faith and reason be reconciled, but they are inseparable counterparts will appear paradoxical only from a secularist perspective. For a religious believer, the paradox can be undone, or, rather, preempted by simply claiming rationality to be god-given, just like everything else in the world. On the believer’s account, rationality is not a menacing external force—the “enemy’s weapon,” as it were—which threatens to encroach on faith as its “Other.” Conversely, rationality—as a divine auxiliary—is a *function* of faith, which serves to ground it, rather than undo it. Neuhaus eventually comes to make this point as an ultimate argument against Fish. His line of reasoning is undoubtedly circuitous, but the point he is articulating aims clearly at the affirmation of rationality’s being on a par with faith:

However partial our knowledge, and however stumbling our ability to communicate, we finally do all participate in one discourse, the one Logos of the mind of God. This gives the Christian confidence that he can enter into a conversation with the non-Christian. [. . .] Therefore, when Christian's in conversation with non-Christians "rephrase" what they want to say, they are not necessarily surrendering to the opposition. The reason and language of the non-Christian, when rightly exercised, is ordered to the same truth. The Christian therefore tries in various ways to enter into the reason and language of non-Christians in order to help reorder them to truth. (30)

This passage leaves us with two important points to be noted. First, Neuhaus makes the case for the existence of a (god-given) common ground on which believers and nonbelievers can peacefully co-exist. Yet, he phrases his argument in such a way that it becomes a perfect exemplification of Fish's claim that the reasoning of the believer and the non-believer can never be brought to converge.

What Neuhaus, in effect, formulates is the *par excellence* foundationalist assertion that—however circuitously and mildly he tries to put it—there is a single immutable truth presiding over the world, and this truth is on *his* side. In fact, there is little else he *could* say: this is the only conclusion his faith allows him to come to, otherwise it would not be designated as "faith." The point finally has to be driven home so that even the slightest semblance of relativization could be avoided. Fish sees this very clearly when he contends: "Religious discourse [. . .] cannot be unconcerned with the substantive worth and veracity of its assertions, which are in fact *presupposed*, and presupposed too is the urgency of proclaiming those assertions—the good news—to a world asked to receive them as the whole and necessary truth"

(“Why” 252). And indeed, the believer cannot *not* assert the “truth”: for him/her it is no longer (and, perhaps, has never been) a matter of claiming supremacy in an epistemological debate, but, rather, that of moral exigency. What is seen from one angle as vertiginous circularity, is seen from the other as the most straightforward relation to a power which conveys its claims in unequivocal terms.

The second point to be noted has to do precisely with what enables these terms to be unequivocal. Neuhaus’s claim that we all participate in the divine discourse of the Logos, which enables Christians and non-Christians to comprehend each other, implies that rationality can be seen as of a piece with the Logos. This entails the argument that rationality—as, indeed, *all* discourses—has always already belonged to God. Augustine quite clearly points this out when he maintains that “the validity of logical sequences is not a thing devised by men, but is observed and noted by them [. . .]; for it exists eternally in the reason of things, and has its origin with God” (734). Reason and logic, for Augustine, are divine attributes rather than human inventions. Consequently, if rational reasoning involves a language spoken and understood by believers and non-believers alike, the believers may see it justified to conclude that it is a language God him-/her-/itself speaks, from which one can argue, yet again, that detaching faith from reason is an absurdity, for they are indissoluble in the boundless mind of God. Thus, what Fish regards as “rephrasing,” is, for Neuhaus, just a rhetorical turn deployed in a language he and his fellow-Christians never ceased to possess.

Moreover, the Christians’ goal, as Augustine says, is to bring all human beings to understand the divine language in the proper way so that they can be “reordered” to

truth. “Reordering” in this context can be understood as “persuasion,” but less in a rhetorical than in an epistemological sense, for the prefix “re-” suggests a pre-existent order which is to be restored for the non-Christian by (re-)directing his/her gaze to it. The very notion of order, on the other hand, intimates that the process of persuasion can follow a logical sequence at the end of which one comes face to face with Truth. This implies that regardless of the terms in which one casts one’s argument for faith, there is a single immutable truth masked by the words, which serve merely to constitute a medium of representation for this truth. Thus, the aim of this persuasion is not merely to make the disbeliever succumb to the persuasive force of a logical argument, but to see through the representation to truth.

This, in itself, is just another reiteration of a familiar metaphysical pattern, but, in this specific case, a disconcerting tension develops between the truth that is supposed to be represented and the medium of representation, which is the language of logical argument. A logical argumentative sequence (whether deployed by religious believers or staunch secularists) starts from certain first premises, follows an inferential route, and ends in a syllogistic conclusion which is presented as a necessary outcome of the argument. For the religious believer who attempts to reorder his or her disbelieving peer to faith, this necessary outcome is the ineluctable truth of God’s existence which has to be presented as a “logical” consequence of his or her argument; the process appears to be linear, whereas it is, again, circular. As Neuhaus’s example also testifies, the logical route is followed only up to the point where the syllogism is to be presented as an ineluctable entailment, yet what happens is that we jump back to square one, to the very premise we started from, namely that God’s will governs all,

which is what Neuhaus means by saying that we all participate in the divine Logos. The end of his line of reasoning (which, Neuhaus insists, has been “rational” all along) was never in doubt, thus the need for a logical (deductive) argument is undone. Furthermore, if we believe with Augustine that logical validity is to be perceived as a godly design, we attribute the status of divine truth to an argumentative sequence whose function is merely perfunctory; it is an auxiliary in reordering one to divine truth.

In fact, the very recognition of *anything* as of divine origin annuls the need for a logical argument whose main goal is, after all, to convince the one in doubt. But if only those who are convinced can see anything as of divine origin, what is the point in convincing the ones who are already convinced? The sequential steps of a logical argument should be replaced by the instantaneous perception of the full presence of divinity. This perception, however, is far from being the result of a step-by-step logical argument at the end of which one gets through to divine truth, but, conversely, the argument can reorder to truth only those who, in a certain sense, already possess this truth, the implication being that faith persists with or without the argument deployed.

The motivation behind Neuhaus’ argument for the rationalistic foundation of faith is clearly to demonstrate that religion can and should participate in the prevailing language game of a secularist society. Hence Neuhaus’s rather confusing argument that if Christians and atheistic liberals “have systems of reasoning that have nothing in common, we could not call them both ‘systems of reasoning.’ To call them systems of reasoning is to assert that they have in common the fact that they both belong to the

genus called ‘systems of reasoning’—which of course they do” (28). The contention reflects a kind of twisted nominalism, and it can be paraphrased in the following circular statement: “Systems of reasoning are what they are *because* we call them by that name.” This circularity appropriately describes the whole problem at hand: what enables faith is a common rationality (in the sense of postulating some form of verifiability) which, in turn, has to be suspended when one has to testify to one’s belief in phenomena (resurrection, virgin birth, etc.) that are unverifiable through rational inquiry and inexplicable by rational argument. As Fish puts it: for the religious believer “the absence of a rational explanation is just the point, one that, far from challenging the faith, confirms it” (“Faith” 268). This confirmation, however, can occur only at the expense of abandoning the rational principles without which, according to Augustine and Neuhaus, faith would not be possible. Consequently, the religious have to disconfirm reason so as to confirm faith and vice versa so that faith and reason are constantly and simultaneously enabling and disabling each other, and this circular movement will keep both in play.

Fish’s reasoning appears plausible, but he cannot evade the contradictions we have seen being operative in Rorty. First, he blurs the difference between knowledge by faith and knowledge by reason, for they both involve certain articles of faith or first principles which set different argumentative paths for believers and nonbelievers, while faith and reason—on the level of epistemology—remain indissolubly intertwined. This having been conceded, we learn that rational reasoning and reasoning by faith will never stand on a common ground, thus it is a highly futile attempt, on both parts, to engage each other in conversation, for it can result only in an

unfortunate dissolution of faith in the discourse of rationality, thus the two had best be kept separate. Fish's argument, just like Rorty's, can be seen to have run a full circle from denouncing the distinction between faith and reason to the reinstatement of this same distinction. The point Fish is making can be qualified by saying that there is no *epistemological* distinction between faith and reason, but as *communal* discursive practices, they can (and should) still be marked off. This differentiation, however, bears no consequence either to the antifoundationalist or to the faithful. On the one hand, for the antifoundationalist, epistemology is no less a function of a set of communally determined discursive practices than any other discourse. On the other hand, the religious believer, fearing marginalization, gets under constant pressure to defend his/her faith, which s/he can only do by adopting the prevailing discursive practices of his/her community. Therefore, Fish is wrong when he concludes that the best possible outcome for the religious person would be to silence the dissenters, to shut down the marketplace of ideas because it is through this very marketplace that religious conviction can be given a hearing. There is no other choice for the religious believer but to *argue* with whatever communal means available.

From the point of view of religious believers, Fish's argument is on a par with Rorty's contention that religion should be kept isolated from public discourses. An important difference between Rorty and Fish, however, is that while the former thinks this separation can take the form of a benign privatization in keeping with liberal democratic values, Fish clearly sees that the public/private split may amount to no more than a barely disguised secularist effort to silence religion ("Why" 249-52). While Rorty holds that the liberal community (for all its anomalies) can still constitute

a common ground for the conversation between the religious and the atheists, Fish believes that the only possible form of interaction between them is one of confrontation. Fish also makes a point of blatantly facing up to this fact as the status quo, shunning the illusory view that some remedy should be found to alleviate this deplorable predicament. In the last part of this chapter, I will make an attempt to explicate why—given his pragmatic antiessentialism—it is inevitable for Rorty to entangle himself in an equivocating rhetoric, instead of coming forward with outright condemnation, when it comes to the critique of religion.

“Reaching for the gun”: the limits of conversation

As we have seen, Rorty fiercely rejects the idea that claims to knowledge can be adjudicated in reference to a universally applicable notion of rationality, which his critics often interpret as breeding unwanted consequences. When he is called upon to answer the question how he would go about refuting a Nazi, Rorty replies that he can think of no *ultimate* argument with which to convince his opponent. In his reply to Thomas McCarthy’s criticism, he concedes that there is no way to block the infiltration of pernicious views, but he would at least make an attempt at “converting” the Nazi, rather than answer or refute him/her (“Truth and Freedom” 637). He could “show him how nice things can be in a free society, how horrible things are in the Nazi camps, how his Führer can be redescribed as an ignorant paranoid rather than an inspired prophet,” but he cannot, as Karl-Otto Apel and Habermas believe, “convince

the anti-democrat of a performative self-contradiction” (“Universality” 14). He also concedes, however, that where the rhetoric of conversion does not work, there remains little else but “helpless passivity or a resort to force” (*Contingency* 73). As he argues:

The fact that there are no mutually unintelligible language games does not, in itself, do much to show that debates between racists and anti-racists, democrats and fascists, can be decided without resort to force. [. . .] The most that an insistence on contingency can do for democracy is to supply one more debating point on the democratic side of the argument, just as the insistence that (for example) only the Aryan race is in tune with the intrinsic, necessary nature of things supplies one more debating point on the other side. I cannot take the latter position seriously, but I do not think that there is anything self-contradictory in the Nazi’s refusal to take me seriously. We may both have to reach for our guns. (“Universality” 13-14)

What makes the prospect of “reaching for the gun” relevant in the present context is that the surreptitious pattern of normalizing, examined in Rorty’s arguments in the previous chapters, here becomes explicit. Far from subscribing to a relativistic agenda, or deploying an ambiguous argument, his rhetoric is fervent and straightforward when it comes to defending core values of liberal democracy, as it is demonstrated by the following passage:

The racist or fundamentalist parents of our students say that in a truly democratic society the students should not be forced to read books [such as Richard Wright’s *Black Boy*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, or Paul Monette’s *Becoming a Man*] by such people—black people, Jewish people, homosexual

people. They will protest that these books are jammed down their children's throats. I cannot see how to reply to this charge without saying something like "There are credentials for admission to our democratic society, credentials which we liberals have been making more stringent by doing our best to excommunicate racists, male chauvinists, homophobes and the like. You have to be *educated* in order to be a citizen of our society, a participant in our conversation, someone with whom we can envisage merging our horizons. So we are going to go right on trying to discredit you in the eyes of your children, trying to strip your fundamentalist religious community of dignity, trying to make your views seem silly rather than discussable. We are not so inclusivist as to tolerate intolerance such as yours." ("Universality" 22)

This is no longer the voice of the fastidiously arguing philosopher, but rather that of a heated preacher. Richard Bernstein rightly remarks that "despite Rorty's professed secularism, his characteristic style is [. . .] a type of lay sermon" ("Inspirational" 137). This passage also exemplifies Rorty's much debated "ethnocentrism," which appears alarming to most of his readers. Although ethnocentrism seems to harbor a sense of elitism and exclusionism,⁶² which is repulsive to many, what Rorty means by the term is that "we bourgeois liberals" are no less constrained by our most fundamental beliefs than, for instance, religious fundamentalists. It is only a matter of historical contingency that it happens to be a culture whose "sense of its own moral worth is founded on its tolerance of diversity" ("Ethnocentrism" 204).

Nonetheless, Rorty cannot help confronting the perennial question that is often asked by and of proponents of democratic liberalism: can we extend our tolerance of

⁶² Criticized most scathingly by Thomas Auxter and Rebecca Comay (Horne 254).

diversity to such lengths as to be inclusive even of those, who are sworn enemies of our liberalism? To this question, there is no other way for Rorty to answer than in the negative. Unlike Apel, Habermas, or McCarthy, however, he cannot *justify* his “no” by drawing on transcendental rationality, or some form thereof, which certainly enables the aforementioned three philosophers to devise eloquent arguments to *prove* that the exclusion or inclusion of various views or persons from/in liberal democratic communities is not an arbitrary gesture, but one that is justifiable by means of rigorous philosophical argument. Thus, Rorty *must* resort to the glowing rhetoric of the furious “lay preacher,” while the others can still pose as coolheaded rationalists. Both positions, in fact, are founded on faith, but it is more evident in Rorty’s case: he can defend the primacy of liberal democracy over other political systems by merely enumerating what he finds appealing in it, and thus his account is bound to remain just as question-begging and circular as any testimony of religious faith. Thus, the answer to the question, posed in the title of this chapter, seems to be: yes, there *is* such a thing as antifoundationalist faith.

Nonetheless, when it comes to the critique of religion, Rorty finds himself in an ambivalent position, which is brought about precisely by the conflict of his *faiths*. Knowing that no transcendental argument can be brought to bear when the undesirability of religion is at stake, he is compelled to admit that religious faith must be accorded a place—though within limits—in extant liberal democracies, while also being aware that religious thinking can hinder his liberal utopia from turning into reality. What comes into conflict are his faith in the validity of extant liberal

democracy and his conviction that the ideal liberal culture must dispense with *all* forms of essentialism, including—perhaps most of all—religion.

Conclusion

The argument I have been advancing on the foregoing pages rests on the claim that Rorty's simultaneous valorization of interdiscursive communication is not necessarily a paradoxical gesture. Accordingly, I have discussed the metaphors of "conversation" and "irony" as complementary elements of Rortyan metaphilosophy and political thought, which are indicative of an authoritative dimension in his discourse. I have also claimed that Rorty's conversational penchant entails "normal" operation in the Kuhnian sense, where normalcy is a function of the empowerment of a community which legitimates the consensus underlying the given discourse. I have argued that Rorty's championing of the conflicting poles of conversation and irony can be interpreted as adding up to a consistent metaphilosophical and political position, insofar as we take his deployment of irony to be a means of control whereby the given conversation can be safeguarded as normal discourse.

Rorty, however, shies away from directly construing questions related to power. He refuses to look upon power, in a Foucauldian way, as a ubiquitous and specter-like force, because he sees such notions of ubiquity as metaphysical remnants. Instead, he treats the issue of power in a pragmatic fashion, operating under the assumption that we can only identify *concrete* manifestations of power, which can be duly resisted or defied. This "un-Foucauldian" understanding of power is at least partly responsible for his ambivalent rhetoric in cases where his emancipatory commitments clash with an uncompromising pragmatic antiessentialism, as his discussions of religion adequately demonstrate.

Through examining Rorty's interpretation of Derrida, I have touched upon the issue of intertheoretical commensurability, through the construal of the relationship between deconstruction and pragmatism. Although the two philosophical positions seem to be united by their common antimetaphysical outlook, their constitutive rhetorics rift an unbridgeable chasm between them. Furthermore, I have argued that Rorty's radically nominalist conception of language makes him incapable of assimilating a deconstructive mode of analysis, and it is highly problematic to apply deconstructive analysis to his own texts. What we can bear witness to in Rorty's readings of Derrida is a kind of "theoretical stalemating," due to the fact that practitioners of either theoretical position look upon the other as embodying a relapse into metaphysics.

At a more general level, the dissertation has targeted questions related to the rhetorical constitution of Rorty's work: I was less interested in *what* he says than in *how* he says what he says. According to Cornel West, "Rorty's style leaves the reader always enlightened and exhilarated, yet also with a quirky feeling that one has been seduced rather than persuaded, talked into Rorty's perspective rather than talked out of one's own position" (197). What West touches upon here has inspired me to explore the rhetorical, rather than conceptual dimensions of Rortyan discourse. The initial question that was to give rise to the main argument of the present work is: to what extent is the deceptive transparency of Rorty's prose constitutive of his substantive philosophical outlook? One of the distinctive traits of his texts proves to be his "flair for redescription" ("Trotsky" 10), the ability to recontextualize the most diverse kinds

of discourses in relation to his neopragmatism, which admits of no trace of metaphysics, essentialism, or foundationalism.

On the one hand, this is what makes him capable of posing in the role of the Socratic intermediary, who charms “hermetic thinkers out of their self-enclosed practices” (*Mirror* 317) by provoking responses, ranging from the well-mannered to the downright furious in temper. On the other hand, his rhetoric often isolates him from his fellow philosophers, since his redescrptions in most cases are motivated by a demystifying intent, which consists—as in the case of his interpretation of Derrida—in substituting his own “nonphilosophical” vocabulary for their idiosyncratic prose, thereby downplaying the constitutive role of *their* style of writing.

Thus, West's contention that one is talked *into* Rorty's perspective, rather than *out of* one's own, can be read as saying that Rorty, as it were, inscribes the object of his redescription or his conversational partner in his own narrative without regard to the extent to which s/he could identify with the basic assumptions or the rhetorical constitution of that narrative. Recognizing this as discursive arrogance, the interlocutor under redescription may not feel compelled to abandon his/her position. The discursive authority I have ascribed to Rorty is a function of his apparent certainty about the right(ful)ness of the antiessentialist premises underlying his redescrptions. As a paradigmatic ironist, he may have doubts about whether or not he uses the right vocabulary, but it seems these doubts never overwrite the convictions formulated *within* that vocabulary.

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