Richard Rorty's Ironic Liberalism, The Charge of Relativism, and the Priority of Pragmatism

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Readers of Richard Rorty are rarely ambivalent about his philosophy. Although many of his most staunch and vocal critics point to the necessity of rejecting his arguments, one senses that their disapproval often has its roots in emotion and instinct as much as it does in reason. Upon first reading Rorty's discussion of liberal irony as a means by which one can tend to both the public and private goods, I had a similar reaction, but in the opposite direction: I felt an immediate and deep resonance with his project, but was unsure of whether it would hold up under scrutiny. Because these polar reactions are often justified with arguments made *ex post facto*, I am skeptical about the possibility of an eventual resolution to this standoff between Rorty's critics and supporters—not because the effort to find justifications for a conclusion to which one is instinctively drawn is inherently problematic, but because the *reason* that these conclusions are accepted prior to any arguments favoring them is that attachment to them is emotional and irrational. Accordingly, the arguments constructed *ex post facto* are doing no real work in the conversation: it does not matter much whether they succeed or fail, because their success or failure has no bearing on what explained the original attachment to the conclusions. I believe that without paying significant attention to the emotional nature of this debate, interlocutors on both sides will continue to clash. Further, I believe that it is precisely because of the emotional nature of this debate that we are

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obliged to examine it: Rorty's philosophy would not be so contentious if the issues it raises were unimportant to our society.

I believe that the first step to resolving this debate—or, at the very least, to shedding new light on it—is to seek a fair and comprehensive understanding of Rorty's project. Granted, an understanding of the project does not preclude a rejection of it, but one must fully grasp his arguments before one can successfully criticize them. To this end, I begin in Section I by situating Rorty within his wider philosophical context. In general, he is responding to the key presupposition that underlies traditional philosophy, which states that all moral beliefs need philosophical foundations to substantiate them. Section II outlines Rorty's book *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* and the alternative to foundationalism that he advocates therein: a philosophic outlook called "liberal ironism," whereby one can benefit from the advantages of ironism without compromising one's commitment to liberalism (defined by Rorty as the belief that "cruelty is the worst thing that we do") (1989: xv). I also lay out the key features and terms associated with his "liberal utopia," where this philosophy would be put into practice. In Section III, I examine a common criticism of Rorty, which is that his liberal ironism necessarily leads to relativism. In Susan Haack's essay "Vulgar Pragmatism, An Unedifying Prospect," she argues that despite Rorty's claims to the contrary, he is, as Hilary Putnam puts it, a "closet relativist" as well as a cynic (1995: 138). Rorty's response to this charge involves the clarification that he rejects relativism for the very same reason that he rejects foundationalism: it implies the possibility of transcending oneself and attaining a God's-eye view of the world and its moral truths. In Section IV I outline this argument and evaluate its effectiveness, contending that Haack tends to depict Rorty's project in an

over-simplified manner and to presuppose the preeminence of the very concepts he is trying to challenge.

This is not to say, however, that Rorty's philosophy is beyond censure. Given the goal of Rorty's liberal ironism to foster communities that encourage free and open discourse between conflicting beliefs while still denouncing cruelty, one may question whether abjuring foundations is the best way to secure this goal—or, at least, whether there is sufficient evidence to concede that it is (Baker 1992: 698). Historically, some of the most powerful and successful efforts to fight cruelty and make moral and social progress have relied heavily on philosophical foundations; Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," for example, makes reference to "eternal and natural law" and "the law of God" as a basis for condemning segregation and other racist practices (1963: 80). In my conclusion in Section V, therefore, I reiterate that Rorty's philosophy is exempt from the charge of relativism and, on the whole, is theoretically sound. But before one can recommend the widespread adoption of liberal ironism, one must determine whether anti-foundationalism is actually superior to foundationalism in accomplishing the stated objective (Baker 1992: 698). Until Rorty provides evidence that indicates otherwise, history suggests that foundationalism may, after all, be more effective than liberal ironism in reducing cruelty. As a pragmatist committed to the view that an idea's worth is determined by its usefulness in the real world rather than its theoretical validity, Rorty is obliged to reconsider his recommendation of liberal ironism as a preferable alternative to foundationalism.

I.   Rorty: Abjuring Foundations

The Oxford American Dictionary defines philosophy as "the study of the

fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence." Indeed, when most people think of philosophy, they think of a discipline dedicated to identifying essential truths about the world, and then providing unconditional justifications for these conclusions. But the idea of Truth as the ultimate goal of inquiry is not exclusive to philosophy; it has dominated Western thought for so long and to such an extent that it has seeped into the groundwater of the culture. Modern historians, writers, lawmakers, and even artists seem to understand their job, first and foremost, as Truth-seeking, with the implication being that conclusions based on objective reasoning are far preferable to those based on one's subjective opinion. Traditionally, this idea that "there is universal human agreement on the supreme desirability of truth" has been conjoined with two further premises:

> (1) that truth is correspondence to reality, and (2) that reality has an intrinsic nature…. [Philosophers] proceed to argue that Truth is One, and that the universal human interest in truth provides motive for creating an inclusivist community. The more of that truth we uncover, the more common ground we shall share, and the more tolerant and inclusivist we shall therefore become. (Rorty 2000: 1)

Given that these are the basic premises that dictate the workings of society, it is no wonder that Richard Rorty's philosophy has proven so controversial. By calling into question the fundamental assumption that we *need* foundations in order to justify our values and beliefs, he refuses to participate in the idolatry of Truth. Many people have mistakenly assumed, however, that if we have no foundations for our values and beliefs, then we have no right to them at all. Because we are a culture sincerely attached to certain of our values (democracy and liberty, for instance), the very suggestion of a worldview that fails to grant them the status of Truth can generate incredulity and even outrage.

But are these philosophical foundations doing any significant work to advance our society's moral conversations, or are they actually roadblocks to progress? Further, how should we define "progress"? Rorty's engagement with these questions leads to the classification of his philosophy as *pragmatism*: he argues that traditional philosophy, through its absolute valuing of and search for ultimate principles, has rendered itself useless in our daily lives. If we are to evolve beyond the doldrums of foundational thought, we must rethink the philosophy that has taught us to draw sharp and often arbitrary distinctions between what is true and false, good and bad, and to presume that we can validate these distinctions with truths that exist independently of our conception of them.

Rorty does more than decry traditional philosophy, however; he offers the positive alternative that we should "substitute Freedom for Truth as the goal of thinking and of social progress" (1989: xiii). With freedom as our goal, we can relinquish the need to find and agree upon a neutral position from which to evaluate epistemological claims, metaphysical views, and systems of morality. In his article, "The Three 'Rs': Reading/Rorty/Radically," Allan Hutchinson explains that while Rorty grants that the impulse to find a neutral position is understandable, he maintains that it is also useless:

> modern philosophers would do well to develop a strong case of metaphysical vertigo. Their informing ambition is to rise above the phenomenal world of manifold appearances in the hope of locating some noumenal vantage point from which to gaze down upon the hidden, but essential, unity of the world and human history. (Hutchinson 1989: 558-559)

He even rejects the traditional understanding of science as an endeavor that "methodically allows us to be constrained in our beliefs by the world" (Ramberg 2002). If science appears to be successful in consistently predicting events and behaviors in the

natural world, it is not because it has a special relationship with reality, independently of our contingent beliefs and interpretations. In fact, Rorty says, the very idea that science can offer hard or objective truths that correspond to ultimate reality is not a truth floating "out there," but rather is an idea particular to our culture (1991: 35). As an alternative, he encourages "a stronger sense of historical contingency so as to empower people rather than to cow them by the understanding that there are no antecedent truths or essential scripts to follow" (Hutchinson 1989: 559). In other words, we will be better off as soon as we can "get out from under inherited contingencies and make [our] own contingencies" (1989: 97).

Although our conception of science and its status in relation to truth requires reworking, Rorty is not suggesting that the discipline, or any of its rigor, should be abandoned. As a pragmatist, Rorty recognizes that the triumphs of science are not just the triumphs of rhetoric; they are triumphs in our ability to interact and cope with our environment. Rorty also argues that science is useful in that it "establishes institutions conducive to democratic exchange of view" (Ramberg 2002). For instance, a successful scientist cannot merely state a theory without engaging her fellow scientists and giving persuasive reasons that the theory should be taken seriously; in the same way, Rorty wants to discourage philosophers from simply taking for granted that certain conclusions are "true" (such as the possibility of attaining a neutral perspective and finding foundations for all of one's beliefs) without at least investigating and acknowledging what leads them to hold these truths.

John Dewey, another important pragmatist, makes a similar argument in his book *Experience and Nature*. He distinguishes between primary (everyday) experience and

secondary (reflective) experience and lays them out within the frame of empirical methodology in order to reunite experience and nature, which traditional philosophy has hitherto depicted as separate. Dewey sets himself against this dualistic attitude by submitting scientific methodology as an ideal model of empirical engagement, which philosophy should seek to emulate. After obtaining reflective knowledge in science, one must always return to one's primary experience in order to render said knowledge at all useful. For example, without acknowledgement of the primary conditions that led to a particular scientific experiment, the conclusion of that experiment has no application. Likewise, Dewey wishes to warn against claims to absolute philosophical knowledge without recognition of the essentially empirical process that leads both to and out of that knowledge. Dewey's emphasis on candor with regard to the commitments and presuppositions that bring about philosophical conclusions automatically elevates the capacity of philosophy (which constitutes secondary experience) to improve everyday human life, or primary experience. This emphasis upon the relevance of primary experience to secondary experience and vice versa is particularly important in philosophy because it ensures that its results will be significant in everyday life and, therefore, prevents philosophers from shunning the material of ordinary experience. In short, it is a sort of check,

> a constant reminder that we must replace [philosophic conclusions], as
> secondary reflective products, in the experience out of which they arose,
> so that they may be confirmed or modified by the new order and clarity
> they introduce into it, and the new significantly experienced object for
> which they furnish a method. (Dewey 1958: 18)

This method guarantees a humility and honesty by which objects of secondary experience cannot be falsely elevated to a level of higher reality or import than those of primary experience. In contrast, Dewey identifies "intellectualism" as the tendency of philosophy

to inadvertently render itself extraneous in light of primary experience, causing its knowledge, which aims at ubiquity, to actually become "inexplicable" (Dewey 1958: 22). There is a subtle paradox to Dewey's distinction: we wish to think of ourselves as able to perceive things as they "really are," capable of separating our experience from *what*, in and of itself, is experienced. Although we may consider that nature exists in and of itself, we must not delude ourselves that we can ever perceive nature as such, for to do so is to deny our own context (or contingency, as Rorty would say) and is thus self-effacing. In other words,

> knowledge that is ubiquitous, all-inclusive and all-monopolizing, ceases to have meaning in losing all context; that it does not appear to do so when made supreme and self-sufficient is because it is literally impossible to exclude that context of non-cognitive but experienced subject-matter which gives what is *known* its import. (Dewey 1958: 23)

When philosophical conclusions are abstracted from the contexts in which the words composing the conclusions have their meanings, the conclusions say nothing. Similarly, Rorty is not saying that we must abandon talk of notions like truth, knowledge, or objectivity. "Rather his point is that our ordinary uses of these notions always trade for their content and point on particular features of their varying contexts of application" (Ramberg 2002). In other words, the assumption that the transcendence of our own context in order to achieve a God's-eye view of the world is a) possible and b) desirable is an idea that must be challenged.

This is not to say that the compulsion of traditional philosophers to seek such transcendence is unreasonable; ironically, Rene Descartes' desire to find an Archimedean point of reference arose from an awareness of his own limited perspective. Since he was only one man, he reasoned, and had cause to doubt even his own observations and beliefs, it would be irresponsible for him to take his personal perspective as

representative of ultimate reality. He was not content to descend into solipsism, however, so he sought to demonstrate that some knowledge is universally affirmable, such as the existence of the material world and of God.

But for Rorty, this mentality (which is representative of the wider philosophic community) relies on a false dichotomy, similar to the distinction between experience and nature about which Dewey is so concerned. Descartes seems to allow for only one of two options: either we are all united within an unchanging reality that contains certain undeniable truths, or we are all hopelessly alone in our own little worlds. Critics of Rorty who place him irretrievably in the relativist camp maintain a comparable assumption: either one must acknowledge certain absolute moral truths, or else give up the right to make moral judgments at all. Rorty describes this dualistic trap that is set for thinkers such as Dewey and himself:

> We must, people say, believe that every coherent view is as good as every other, since we have no 'outside' touchstone for choice among such views…We are suspected of being contritely fallibilist when righteous fury is called for. Even when we actually display appropriate emotions we get nowhere, for we are told that we have no *right* to these emotions. (1991: 42)

Yet the very idea that one can or should have a right to one's emotions presupposes the existence of an objective truth that can be accessed and, subsequently, serve as a standard of comparison. This aspiration to objectivity "boils down to a desire to acquire beliefs which will eventually receive unforced agreement in the course of a free and open encounter with people holding other beliefs" (1991: 41). While such a goal is, indeed, desirable, pragmatists in a given sphere of culture will set the more realistic goal of attaining "an appropriate mixture of unforced agreement with tolerant disagreement (where what counts as appropriate is determined, within that sphere, by trial and error)"

(1991: 41). In other words, it is more useful to learn how to disagree constructively than it is to strive towards never disagreeing.

Rorty's pragmatist spirit guides him to the middle ground between the solipsism (and resulting moral paralysis) of relativism and the fruitless homogeny of foundationalism. He reveals a possible resolution to this standoff by refusing to align himself with *any* absolutist philosophy, whether it claims the superiority of idea to fact and subject to object (relativism) or vice versa (foundationalism). Instead, he recommends

> that we worry only about the choice between two hypotheses, rather than about whether there is something which 'makes' either true. To take this stance would rid us of questions about the objectivity of value, the rationality of science, and the causes of the viability of our language games. All such theoretical questions would be replaced with practical questions about whether we ought to keep our present values, theories, and practices or try to replace them with others. (1991: 41)

We would then be free of the urge to confirm our values, theories, and practices with proof of their objective validity, but neither would we be compelled to cast them away. We would be confident in our languages, ourselves, and our communities (like the foundationalists) while still acknowledging their contingency (like the relativists); accordingly, we would enter into a more constructive conversation that required us neither to abandon our own beliefs nor to dismiss those who held contrasting values.

II.   Liberal Ironism in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*

In *Contingency, irony, and solidarity,* Rorty begins by immediately challenging the traditional notion that truth exists independently of us. Instead, he asserts that truth is a property of sentences *only*, which are composed of vocabularies housed in languages, which in turn are human creations (1989: 21). Since sentences cannot exist "out there" beyond the human mind, truth cannot either, and any way of speaking "in which truth is

thought of as demanding respect from us, respect which we may then think is characteristic of some special type of intellectual activity—science or philosophy or poetry"—is misleading (Diamond 1994: 200). No particular discipline or intellectual activity has a uniquely privileged position with respect to the truth: different disciplines embody different vocabularies, all of which may be true, even if their respective truths cannot be pieced together to form a single, unified picture like a jigsaw puzzle. Rorty notes that "to treat [these alternative vocabularies] as pieces of a puzzle is to assume that all vocabularies are dispensable, or reducible to other vocabularies, or capable of being united with all other vocabularies in one grand unified super vocabulary"—which, once again, presupposes the idea of an absolute Truth (1989: 11).

In order to avoid succumbing to this way of thinking, we must remember that the truths we recognize are completely contingent upon the vocabularies in which they are formulated—but that this fact does not delegitimize them. Despite the fact that we might make vague gestures towards truths that exist separately from our humanly created languages, it is utterly impossible to talk (or even *think*) about a specific truth without identifying a language and vocabulary in which the truth is formulated. Further, the world does not dictate which terms should be used to describe it, so our use of a certain vocabulary is somewhat arbitrary. This does not mean, however, that we can "choose" what truths our sentences will indicate. Once we commit to a particular vocabulary, it is not up to us to decide which of our claims will be true or false. For example, if someone asks me how long a 2x4 is and I say "36," it is only within the context of a particular vocabulary for measuring length that my response can be said to be true or false. Perhaps

I mean 36 inches or perhaps I mean 36 centimeters, but until I have clarified which, my statement is neither true nor false.

Rorty's use of the word "vocabularies," however, refers to more than just units of measurement or concrete lists of terms. Vocabularies are frames of mind that allow an individual see the world in a particular way. One might speak of the vocabulary of metaphysical realism, for instance, or of the vocabulary of Shakespeare. But because vocabularies neither "represent an external reality nor express an internal essence," there is no objective standard by which to rank one vocabulary as superior to another (Hutchinson 1989: 559). That is, all languages and the vocabularies they house are *contingent*: they exist as human creations, but not by logical necessity. They cannot, therefore, be evaluated separately from the context in which they were created.

But this is not to say that we have no means by which to sort one vocabulary from another; it is perfectly acceptable to select a single vocabulary (or term) for use in a particular situation in accordance with a given purpose. "Due to the sociological constraints imposed by any community or subculture, its members converse in the given vocabulary, and there are no theory-neutral criteria for selecting one vocabulary in preference to others" (Gouinlock 1995: 74). For example, if we wish to state the distance between Nashville and New York, it is more convenient to speak in terms of miles than in centimeters. When measuring the length of a caterpillar, however, centimeters are preferable to miles. In neither case is one unit of measurement preferable to another because it reflects the way things "really are" in the world.

As individuals and as communities that share certain experiences and values, we possess what Rorty calls a "final vocabulary." Each of our final vocabularies includes the

ideas to which we are consistently committed and which frame our understanding of other vocabularies. These vocabularies are "'final' in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their users have no noncircular argumentative recourse" (Rorty 1989: 73). Rorty argues that many of the philosophical and religious ideas for which traditional philosophy has long been scrambling to provide foundations are simply elements of final vocabularies. To provide a simple example, many philosophies and religious doctrines have attempted to prove that certain actions are morally wrong by appealing to absolute truths. The approaches are varied: Kant tries to argue against lying and suicide by using the categorical imperative, while the Buddha's evidence for the wrongness of murder included a complex system of karma and reincarnation. In both cases, there appears to be a fear that if an absolute truth is not alluded to, then a person will have no reason not to commit murder, suicide, or lie. Kant and the Buddha assume that the only morally relevant feature of human beings is "their relation to a larger shared power—rationality, God, truth, or history, for example" (Rorty 1989: 91).

But when we consider our day-to-day actions, how frequently do we actually make choices based on philosophical foundations? In the case of Kant and the Buddha, the intuitions against murder and lying came first and *then* came the justification. The same is true for us: I do not abstain from murder because someone has proven to me that I should. I abstain from murder in accordance with my instincts, or perhaps in accordance with examples that have been set for me (which are now part of my final vocabulary). By the same token, murderers are not simply unfortunate souls who have failed to recognize the Truth. They, too, behave according to instinct or in imitation of practice, and it would

be just as hard for them to provide a universal justification for their decision to commit murder as it would be for me to provide a universal justification for my decision not to.

All this serves to illustrate that, even if there are such things as philosophical foundations, they are not fulfilling their intended role. What are foundations supposed to do? Secure the structure upon which our beliefs are built. But which is more certain to you: (A) that murder is wrong, (B) that there are principles of rationality like the categorical imperative that yield the judgment that murder is wrong, or (C) that there is a karmic system in place reinforcing such judgments? (A) is already more secure than (B) or (C), so it is unclear what we would gain from appealing to Kantian or Buddhist foundations.

For this reason, attacking another person's values or beliefs by attempting to prove that his final vocabulary (upon which the beliefs are based) is "false" is a waste of time. If a person does not arrive at his beliefs based on an objective rationale, neither will he be persuaded to change them based on one. For example, if I wished to persuade someone to use miles instead of centimeters to measure the distance between Nashville and New York, I would not tell them that miles are "true" and centimeters are "false." Such statements are nonsensical and groundless, despite the fact that they are intended to provide grounds upon which one should change their vocabulary. Instead, I would strive to provide perspective to the person by demonstrating that miles, compared to centimeters, are much more convenient for measuring long distances. Rorty is no exception to his own rule. At the outset of his book, he says, "Conforming to my own precepts, I am not going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace. Instead, I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favor look attractive by showing how

it may be used to describe a variety of topics" (1989: 8). In other words, Rorty avoids

self-refutation because he grounds his criticism of foundationalism on his perspective that

it is not a particularly *useful* way of viewing the world, rather than on the claim that it is

not *true*.

Rorty continues with his discussion of contingency by pointing out that our

perceptions of ourselves as well as our moral beliefs are shaped by our final

vocabularies—after all, we cannot possibly observe ourselves from any perspective other

than our own. The person that I am (and continue to become) is therefore contingent upon

my context and experience. This is common sense in some ways, since anyone can reason

that they would have been a completely different person had they been born into a

different family or time. But this awareness of the contingency of self dissolves in certain

situations as we are overcome by the desire to transcend ourselves and tap into something

that we imagine is more permanent and important. In order to illustrate this phenomenon,

Rorty cites a Philip Larkin poem wherein the speaker imagines that all the thoughts and

actions of his life are rendered suddenly meaningless on the night of his death (1989: 23).

For him, it is precisely the things that, during his life, provided him with a sense of pride

in his individuality (the art he created, the ideas he conceived) that cause him to feel

insignificant and alone at the end of his life. But is this despair at the final confrontation

with contingency inevitable? Rorty argues that the "public rhetoric" of metaphysical

realism has instilled in us a compulsion to seek "universality by the *transcendence* of

contingency" (1989: 25). That is, we believe that our lives become valuable only when

we succeed in transcending ourselves and achieving a perspective on the world that is

unlimited by particularity. Instead, Rorty proposes, we should learn to embrace our

contingency as an opportunity for "private self-creation" (1989: 25). When we are free

from the assertion that contingency equals insignificance, we can think of ourselves as

makers rather than *finders* of truth. Confrontation with contingency no longer effects a

negative shift from importance to irrelevance, but rather a positive shift from follower to

creator.

Rorty's emphasis on contingency is expanded still further to apply to what he

calls "liberal communities." Members of a liberal community share a key element among

their final vocabularies: the assertion that "cruelty is the worst thing that we do" (1989:

xv). Accordingly, the community eschews the need for philosophical foundations, "for

the attempt to supply such foundations presupposes a natural order of topics and

arguments which is prior to, and overrides the results of, encounters between old and new

vocabularies" (1989: 52). If a "natural order" of topics is allowed to override encounters

between old and new vocabularies, then discourse is discouraged and cruelty can result.

For example, until the Civil War, our country operated under the belief that blacks were

inferior to whites in nearly all ways. So-called scientists even stepped in to provide

biological "evidence" of this fact, with the understanding that such proof justified

slavery. Anyone who disagreed would have to face the daunting task of not only

confronting not the vocabulary of slavery, but also the so-called foundations that were

fabricated in support of that vocabulary. In other words, when foundations are given too

much clout in a community, any new vocabularies that arise (against the norm at that

particular time) are trampled.

A liberal community, as Rorty envisions it, discourages foundations for

assertions, as a way of encouraging abundant encounters between new and old

vocabularies that help to keep rationalizations for cruelty in check. At this point, certain critics might point out that, without a requirement for foundations, individuals could entertain whatever vocabularies they want—including those that support slavery, genocide, and other actions that our culture has determined are unacceptable. In reply, Rorty acknowledges that possibility, as well as the possibility that a community could come to embrace slavery and genocide even without requiring foundations. He says, however, that while this turn of events is surely possible, it is also highly unlikely. Further, this objection presupposes that *with* foundations I place, such things as slavery and genocide would never happen, which is obviously not true. Rorty's reply is grounded in his faith in a few ideas, each of which constitutes part of the final vocabulary of *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*: (A) that human inquiry and life improve when we encourage pluralism and a diversity of perspectives, and (B) that religious and metaphysical foundations have a stifling effect on discourse—they are intended to prevent new perspectives from flourishing. These ideas go hand-in-hand: human life is better when we encourage a diversity of perspectives *because* the alternative, requiring foundations, tends to discourage discourse and therefore suppress human expression. That the suppression of human expression is bad is another fundamental assertion of his final vocabulary that cannot be proven "true" using objective criteria.

The second element of Rorty's positive alternative to traditional philosophy is ironism, which requires that interlocutors have "radical and continuing doubts about the vocabularies [they] use because they have been open to and impressed by other vocabularies" (1989: 73). They must also realize that "arguments phrased in their present vocabularies can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts" and, insofar as they

philosophize about their situation, they "do not think that their vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power" beyond themselves (1989: 73). In other words, ironists strive to view their language and vocabulary as the culmination of previous developments but also as a jumping-off point for new possibilities. This approach contrasts sharply with the way we now operate; both as individuals and as a society, we often view ourselves as at the finish line of a long, uphill race, rather than in the middle of it. This is apparent in the way we perceive the evolution of morality throughout the centuries. For instance, we now take it as evident and indisputable that slavery and lynching are wrong, whereas, at the time, many people took it as evident and indisputable that slavery and lynching were acceptable. Wherever we are, we tend to utilize the vocabulary of a Kantian imperative in describing our current values: slavery is not wrong merely because the conversation of our community has evolved to allow the wider adoption of a new vocabulary. Slavery is wrong *inherently*. That is, instead of having made a change between the time that we approved of such practices and now, we say that we have "discovered a fact." We rarely imagine that certain truths that we currently hold as self-evident may one day require reconsideration. This is not to say that we cannot or should not be fully committed to our community's rejection of slavery, but that we should recognize that the series of events and conversations that led to this rejection are contingent. As a result, we may someday come to reject other practices that we now embrace, or embrace others that we now reject.

Rorty clarifies, however, that the practice of ironism is more applicable in the private sphere than liberalism, while liberalism is more applicable in the public sphere than ironism. Because communities self-identify based on certain characteristics that their

members share (being American, female, or Hispanic, for instance), the occurrence of "radical and continuing" self-doubts required by ironism would offset the weight of the particularities that define the community in question. As a result, all communities would be trapped in limbo, doubting themselves as soon as they asserted themselves. On the other hand, communities are able to publicly embrace and uphold liberalism by way of their members' senses of ironism. This is because Rorty's liberalism is not grounded in notions of "universally shared human ends, human rights, the nature of rationality, the Good for Man," but in the human "susceptibility to pain" (1989: 84). Yet many critics worry that, without a common metavocabulary that articulates our universally shared human ends, "we have no 'reason' not to be cruel to those whose final vocabularies are very unlike ours. A universalistic ethics seems incompatible with ironism, simply because it is hard to imagine stating such an ethic without some doctrine about the nature of man" (1989: 88). Rorty, however, sees ironism and the ethic of liberalism as quite compatible:

> [The liberal ironist] thinks that what unites her with the rest of the species is not a common language but *just* susceptibility to pain and in particular to that special sort of pain which the brutes do not share with the humans—humiliation. On her conception, human solidarity is not a matter of sharing a common truth or a common goal but of sharing a common selfish hope, the hope that one's world—the little things around which one has woven into one's final vocabulary—will not be destroyed. (1989: 91)

In other words, Rorty's liberal utopia is based on the common concerns of its individuals for their *own* well-being and desire for *private* self-creation. The selflessness of Rorty's liberalism is the product of the combined perspectives of individual selves, who believe that "without the protection of something like the institutions of bourgeois liberal society, people will be less able to work out their private salvations, create their private self-images, reweave their webs of belief and desire" (1989: 84-85). For this reason, concern

for the private and the public goods can co-occur in the same person (and in the same community) without necessitating a reference to some transcendent truth that serves as a common denominator for both.

Finally, Rorty argues that the novel is a more helpful way to conceptualize liberal ironism than ironist theory is, because ironist theory faces the same problem that it wishes to critique in traditional philosophy: "…the problem of how to finitize while exhibiting a knowledge of one's own finitude…It is the problem of how to overcome authority without claiming authority (1989: 104). In other words, by nature of the concept of "theory," one who theorizes strives to "*see* rather than to *rearrange*, to rise above rather than manipulate," which directly conflicts with the defining features of liberal ironism (1989:104). Writers of novels, on the other hand, do not strive to answer final questions or prove the validity of this claim over that, but instead to create a world that fosters imaginative empathy with others. They connect us, as readers, to the cries of the oppressed and sensitize us to new perspectives by carefully describing the "suffering, homeless, and abused" in such a way that we become naturally opposed to cruelty. Because authors work with characters whereas theorists work with ideas, they do not share the same tendency to presume that they have overcome contingency; the contingency of a certain character in a novel is always obvious, since it is just one person in a specific time, place, and situation. Consider once again Kant's attempt to prove, through the categorical imperative, that lying is wrong. While we might be intellectually compelled by his argument, how much more deeply are we moved by the web of deceit spun by Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*? As we read any novel, we are included in a particular form of solidarity—not solidarity as "recognition of a core

self, the human essence, in all human beings," but rather "as the ability to see more and more traditional differences…as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation—the ability to think of people wildly different from ourselves as included in the range of 'us'" (Rorty 1989: 192).

III.   On the Charge of Relativism

Many critics remain skeptical that Rorty can maintain his staunch dedication to liberalism while retaining his individually ironist mindset. "If you are truly an ironist," they ask, "then how can you stand unwaveringly committed to liberalism?" Assuming that this is impossible, they conclude that Rorty *must* be a relativist and, moreover, a cynic. In her article entitled "Vulgar Pragmatism: An Unedifying Prospect," Susan Haack articulates a complicated version of this critique.

Haack begins by identifying the main contention of Rorty's with which she takes issue. She paraphrases Rorty's position thus: "the idea that criteria of justification should be judged by their truth-indicativeness…makes no sense" (1995: 126). She then states that she will take on this contention with two main criticisms: (1) that Rorty makes assertions without giving arguments in support of his conclusion against traditional epistemology, and (2) that Rorty "fail[s] to grasp that to believe that p is to accept p as true," with the unfortunate result that "the 'edifying' philosophy into which Rorty wants the ex-epistemologist to put his energies makes a cynicism which would undermine not only epistemology, not only 'systematic' philosophy, but inquiry generally" (1995: 127).

As the article proceeds, however, one becomes aware of Haack's tendency to paraphrase Rorty's position in such a way as to leave him wide open for just the sort of

criticisms that she wishes to put forth. For instance, without offering any direct quotes or

even any specific page references, she attributes to Rorty the position that

> we should abandon the conception of philosophy as centered in
> epistemology, as seeking "foundations" for knowledge in "privileged
> representations," and accept that there is nothing more to the justification
> of beliefs than local and parochial convention, our practices of objection,
> response, concession. (1995:127)

While Rorty might tentatively agree with this statement, it would be the conclusion at the

end of a long line of reasoning rather than an unsupported premise, as Haack presents it.

Regardless of how well Rorty might support this claim, however, Haack takes issue with

its dualistic tone; she sees Rorty as relying on the same dramatic dichotomies that he

wishes to fight against. She labels this tactic "This-or-Nothingism": "*Either* we accept

this particular composite, a certain conception of the role of philosophy within

culture…of the role of 'foundations' within the structure of knowledge…*or* we jettison

the whole lot and take 'carrying on the conversation' as our highest aspiration" (1995:

127). Based solely on his observation that *foundationalism* (a term that Haack later parses

out with acute detail but which can be basically defined as the conception that criteria of

justification require proof of their truth-indicativeness) is not defensible, Rorty

automatically jumps to *irrealism* at the opposite end of the spectrum, which states that

truth is simply anything "that you can defend against all comers" (1995: 130; 1995: 133).

Yet Haack points out that he fails to give reasons for skipping over the multitude of

moderate alternatives to these two untenable extremes.

It is important to note that Haack's criticisms in this section are made almost

entirely with reference to a particular section of Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of*

Nature in which he is offering a sort of genealogy of the philosophical desire to provide

foundations for knowledge (and, one can infer, for conceptions of truth). He traces the

evolution of knowledge, starting with Plato, in an attempt to demonstrate the source of

philosophy's tendency to "model knowledge on perception and to treat 'knowledge of' as

grounding 'knowledge that'" (1979: 156). He argues that

> the notion of "foundations of knowledge"—truths which are certain
> because of their causes rather than because of the arguments given for
> them—is the fruit of the Greek (and specifically Platonic) analogy
> between perceiving and knowing. The essential feature of the analogy is
> that knowing a proposition to be true is to be identified with being caused
> to do something by an object. The object which the proposition is about
> *imposes* the proposition's truth. The idea of "necessary truth" is just the
> idea of a proposition which is believed because the "grip" of the object
> upon us is ineluctable. (1979: 157-158).

For example, the geometric figure of the right triangle imposes the truth of the

Pythagorean Theorem—it is a necessary truth that, for any right triangle, the square of its

hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides. The next stage in the

genealogy, Rorty says, is the advent of the "Mirror of Nature," the idea that to know

better is to improve the accuracy with which our knowledge-assertions represent reality.

Next emerges the idea that the way to improve the accuracy of these representations is to

locate "a special privileged class of representations so compelling that their accuracy

cannot be doubted. These privileged foundations will be the foundations of knowledge,

and the discipline which directs us toward them…will be the foundation of culture"

(1979: 163). The theory of knowledge, therefore, is the search for necessary truths—

truths which can serve as "immutable structures" within which everything else is housed.

In this particular section of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, I would argue

that Rorty is simply documenting a matter of fact—that knowledge (and, by association,

Truth) has been defined and identified in different ways at different times by different

people, which no one can contest. His resulting argument is that given this evolution of knowledge and its status and definition, it makes little sense to distinguish between past conceptions of knowledge (which, in retrospect, were quite obviously conventional since they have been challenged and changed) and our current conception of knowledge (which we hope is consistent with "the way things really are" and is therefore *not* another link in the chain of socially justified belief). Haack, however, sees this assertion as too absolute and therefore dangerous. She extracts a single quotation of Rorty's in which he says "We understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it as accuracy of representation," and takes this to mean that since we have no *objective* standards by which to judge between "the differing criteria of different times or cultures or communities," that we have no hope of agreeing about "which standards of defending beliefs are correct" (1979: 170; 1995: 128). Based on this inference, she argues that just because "the problems and projects of epistemology have evolved during a long and complicated historical process, a process involving multi-layered and overlapping shifts and refinements in the ways problems were conceptualized and tackled" does not mean that "'epistemology' is just a term for a bunch of pseudo-problems"—the obvious implication being that Rorty's investigation of the development of epistemology is merely an attempt to demonstrate that it is "just a term for a bunch of pseudo-problems" (1995: 129). In an effort to further decode what she takes to be Rorty's dualistic, "This-or-Nothing" rhetoric, she takes pains to distinguish between three different kinds of foundationalism, which she says that Rorty has left purposely muddled: (1) foundationalism, (2) *foundationalism*, and (3) FOUNDATIONALISM. She defines (1) as the theory of justification that distinguishes between basic beliefs and derived

beliefs, where the former are held to be justified "independently of the support of any other beliefs" and the latter are held to be justified "by the support of basic beliefs" (1995: 130). She defines (2) as the "conception of epistemology as an a priori discipline; of the explication of criteria of justification as an analytic enterprise, of their ratification as requiring a priori proof of their truth-indicativeness" (1995: 130). And she defines (3) as the thesis that "criteria of justification are not purely conventional but stand in need of objective grounding, being satisfactory only if truth-indicative" (1995: 130).

Haack agrees that the first two forms of foundationalism are indefensible, although she quibbles with Rorty over the way he demonstrates this. Her ultimate point, however, is that "the whole weight of Rorty's case against epistemology…rests on the repudiation of FOUNDATIONALISM, which depends on considerations about truth. And here one finds less argument than assertion" (1995: 132). She is particularly suspicious that Rorty is offering us a limited choice between two diametrically opposed conceptions of truth, one which takes "true" to mean "what you can defend against all comers" and one which takes it to stand for the "Unconditioned" (1979: 308). As a way of freeing us from this strict dualism, however, she also offers a strict classification of truth concepts on a spectrum ranging from "strongly irrealist" (Rorty) to "grandly transcendental," with "pragmatist," "minimally realist," "strongly realist" in the middle (1995: 133). In doing so, she wishes to demonstrate that there are a variety of degrees of realism, many of which are more plausible than the two extremes that Rorty gives us.

Haack takes the justification for dismissing the "grandly transcendental" as somewhat self-evident, but argues for the necessity of dismissing Rorty's irrealism, or "conversationalist conception of justification," in this way: if conversationalism is (a) the

goal of all liberal ironist communities and (b) the means by which said communities

arrive at their conceptions of truth, then it takes "justifying a belief to be a matter of

social practice or convention, variable both within and between cultures, and nothing

more" (Haack's words, not Rorty's) (1995: 134). Implicit in this conception of

justification are two separate theses: (1) contextualism, and (2) conventionalism.

Contextualism is a "style of theory of justification" that "contrasts with foundationalism

[because] its characteristic thesis is that *'A is justified in believing that p'* is to be

analyzed along the lines of *'with respect to the belief that p, A satisfies the epistemic*

standards of the epistemic community to which A belongs'" (1995: 134). Haack admits

that this thesis is, in and of itself, a reasonable alternative to the two extremes of irrealism

and radical foundationalism (1995: 133). Unfortunately, however, it necessarily leads to

conventionalism, which she sees as an unqualified disaster:

> [Conventionalism] contrasts with epistemic objectivism, i.e.,
> FOUNDATIONALISM. Its characteristic thesis is that epistemic
> standards are entirely conventional, that it makes no sense to ask which
> criteria of justification (those of this or that epistemic community) are
> correct, which are really indicative of the likely truth of a belief." (1995:
> 135)

(Never mind that Rorty never claims that it makes no sense to ask which criteria of

justification are correct, although he does demand clarification of what we mean by

"correct." I will attend to this objection in the next section.) Given this interpretation,

Haack argues that Rorty is "transmuting the tautological into the tendentious" by

assuming that just because "we judge by the standards by which we judge . . . it makes no

sense to ask what the basis of our standards might be"; or that just because we "can't

describe anything except in language . . . there is nothing outside language for our

description to represent accurately or inaccurately" (1995: 129).

With these basic components of her view established, Haack proceeds to argue that Rorty's conversationalism (as equaling contextualism + conventionalism) is both relativist and cynical. In doing so, she reveals a key element of her *own* final vocabulary—a distinction between "really-truth-indicative justification" and some other, lesser form of justification, between "objective grounding" and, presumably, "subjective grounding":

> [Rorty's conversationalism] is relativist, because contextualism makes justification depend on the epistemic community to which the subject belongs, and, since conventionalism precludes the possibility of any higher-minded conception of really-truth-indicative justification…it must treat the epistemic standards of any and every epistemic community as on a par. And it is cynical, because if one really believed that criteria of justification are purely conventional, wholly without objective grounding, then, though one might conform to the justificatory practices of one's own epistemic community, one would be obliged to adopt an attitude of cynicism towards them, to think of justification always in covert scare quotes. (1995: 136)

In other words, *to believe that p is to accept p as true*—therefore, if Rorty claims to believe in liberalism without holding it as true, then he is engaged in a cynicism that undermines his very belief. Further, if he provides certain justifications for his belief in liberalism but acknowledges that his standards of justification are conventional, then he is simply "abiding by those standards only as a ploy to persuade others less enlightened than himself by playing the game by their rules" (1995: 138). This, Haack argues, leads to an even larger problem in Rorty's liberal utopia; namely, if there are no means to objectively distinguish between "better and worse evidence for accepting this or that proposition as true…then there can be no real inquiry of any kind"—only confrontations between incommensurable discourses (1995: 136; 1995: 139). But what does it mean to distinguish *objectively*? To seek *objective* as opposed to *subjective* grounding for one's beliefs? If it means to seek "really-truth-indicative justification," then how can we ever

find it? If, on the other hand, it means to seek some justification for our epistemic standards, then, presumably, sometimes we can find it and sometimes not.

IV.   Relativism and Foundationalism: "Two Sides of the Same Coin"

When Rorty is charged with relativism, the charge usually centers around some variation of the same question: if we are to reject the need for metaphysical foundations as justification for our commonly-held beliefs about morality and, instead, focus upon the contingency of these beliefs, then what reason do we have to favor our beliefs over anyone else's? Haack's concern with this question is evidenced by her preoccupation with objectivity and the "really-truth-indicative" standards of justification discussed above; she takes Rorty's rejection of these notions as necessitating his treatment of "the epistemic standards of any and every epistemic community as on a par," which would be relativistic. But if Rorty were indeed able to treat the epistemic standards of any and every community as on a par (that is, to overcome the compulsion to regard his *own* epistemic standards as better than others') then he would be surveying all communities from outside the context of his own perspective—the very thing that he would like to demonstrate is impossible. In this way, Rorty rejects relativism for the very reason that he rejects metaphysical realism—just like foundationalism, relativism presupposes the possibility of attaining a "view from Nowhere" and thus of accessing a "higher-minded conception of really-truth-indicative justification" (Haack 1995: 136).

One can argue that it presupposes this possibility in two distinct ways: first, simply by asserting that relativism is true (or "the way things really are"), the relativist seems to be violating his own claim. That is, if one is committed to the idea that truth is always relative to the perceiver and the perceived, then how can any statement be made

about the universality of relativism? On this point, Hilary Putnam asks, "If any point of view is as good as any other, then why isn't *the point of view that relativism is false* as good as any other?" (Putnam 1981: 119) This is not, however, a terribly sophisticated critique; its strength depends largely on which sort of relativism we mean.

Despite the fact that the term is thrown around loosely in all manner of contexts, "relativism" can refer to any position within "a family of views whose common theme is that some central aspect of experience, thought, evaluation, or even reality is somehow relative to something else" (Swoyer 2003). The most important distinction is between cognitive relativism, "which holds that truth and knowledge are relative, not to individual persons or even whole societies, but instead to factors variously called conceptual schemes, linguistic frameworks, modes of discourse…" and moral relativism, which generally asserts the relativity of moral judgments (Meiland 1982: 8). It is important to note that the aforementioned criticism that relativism is self-reflexive and self-refuting makes sense only in the context of relativism concerning truth. For example, if I say that "all truth is relative," then I have made a claim that purports to be universally true and must therefore be applied to itself: thus, it is only a relative truth that "all truth is relative" and the absolutist is free to reject the claim. This charge is ineffective against moral relativism, however, since the statement that "all moral truth is relative" is not, in itself, a moral claim and is not, therefore, self-reflexive. But we must acknowledge that Haack *does* read Rorty as a cognitive as well as a moral relativist, because he holds that "judgments concerning matters of fact are to be interpreted with reference to the context in which they are made…what is relevant is taken to be the intellectual or conceptual

background which the individual brings to his problems from the cultural milieu to which he belongs" (Mandelbaum 1982: 36).

One could also argue that the critique of relativism as self-refuting is fairly useless as a tool by which to do anything but argue—it quickly devolves into one person's word against another's. The realist argues, "X is universally true," while the relativist argues, "X is only true for you," and so on. When it comes to providing evidence for these statements, however, the relativist is in better shape than the realist because the relativist's claim is affirmed in the debate itself: the realist holds a belief in realism while the relativist holds a belief in relativism, two conceptions of truth that are particular to certain points of view. This leads us to distinguish between three different types of moral relativism: descriptive relativism, meta-ethical relativism, and normative relativism (Wong 2002). Although Rorty is generally accused of moral relativism, he is clearly less vulnerable to charges of certain forms of moral relativism than others.

Descriptive relativism is "the doctrine that an extensive diversity of moral judgments exists and that it concerns values and principles central to moralities" (Wong 2002). To a certain extent this doctrine seems to be a truism, by virtue of the fact that basic observation of the world's moral conversations confirms the existence of "a diversity of moral judgments." (This can also be seen as a doctrine of cognitive relativism: as Rorty demonstrates in section discussed from *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, there is an extensive diversity of judgments about truth and knowledge as well as about morality.) The question, however, is whether descriptive relativism leads to the next level of moral relativism, meta-ethical relativism, which is "the doctrine that there is no single true or most justified morality" (Wong 2002). Again, to translate this into

Haack's concern would be to say that because there are a diversity of standards of justification for knowledge and truth, there is no way to determine which standards of justification are "really-truth-indicative" and which are not. This idea calls into question whether we have a "right" to subscribe to a particular system of morality or to particular standards of justification if we admit that our tendency to do so is conventional.

Within meta-ethical relativism, we can distinguish still further between *radical* meta-ethical relativism and *moderate* meta-ethical relativism. The radical form "holds that any morality is as true as any other," while the moderate form "denies that there is any single true morality, but also holds that some moralities are more justified than others" (Wong 2002). Of these two forms, a critic would be most successful in charging Rorty with moderate meta-ethical relativism, for the two key features of this doctrine can be likened to the two partner components of his liberal ironism: "the denial of any single true morality" manifests as ironism, and the assertion that "some moralities are more justified than others" allows him to maintain a commitment to liberalism. His commitment to liberalism, however, should not be conflated with idea that he claims liberalism as an absolute truth. The concept of the "truth" of liberalism applies "only within a community of shared reactions," where said community is a liberal utopia peopled with individuals who share a reaction to cruelty (Meiland 1982: 149).

The third category of moral relativism is normative relativism, which says, "it is morally wrong to pass judgment on or to interfere with the moral practices of others who have adopted moralities different from one's own" (Wong 2002). This is the principal concern that critics like Haack bring up in response to Rorty: that because he disclaims any *meta-perspective* from which to judge others' moralities (or others' epistemic

standards)*,* he has *no perspective* from which to judge others' moralities or epistemic. But what position does he need other than his own? Unlike the radical meta-ethical relativist or the normative relativist, he is under no obligation to acknowledge that other moral views or epistemic standards are every bit as good as his own; he can consistently recommend his own views and standards as true, even though he has no access to intellectual foundations with which to objectively support them.

At this point it will be useful to turn to certain specific claims in Haack's article and explore Rorty's (actual and potential) responses to them. Granted, some of these responses may seem to be mere reiteration of the very points to which Haack is objecting, but perhaps their re-articulation will clarify that Rorty's position and the point that relativism is simply the other side of the coin that bears the face of foundationalism: both views rely on the notion that we can step outside our vocabularies and achieve a standpoint that transcends them and, from that standpoint, either find something in which to ground our vocabularies (foundationalism) or find that there's nothing in which to ground them and therefore that one's own vocabulary is no better than any other (relativism).

Throughout the article, Haack attributes extreme views to Rorty which she fails to back up with sufficient textual proof; there lurks in Haack's article an element of straw-man argumentation, whereby she depicts Rorty's views (which are often quite complicated) in simplistic terms that seem to necessitate her objections. For an example, we may return to Haack's summary statement of Rorty's view:

> We should abandon the conception of philosophy as centered in
> epistemology, as seeking 'foundations' for knowledge in 'privileged
> representations,' and accept that there is nothing more to the justification

of beliefs than local and parochial convention, our practices of objection, response, concession. (1995: 127)

While Rorty would agree with elements of this sentence, Haack's use of the phrase "nothing more" is inaccurate and dismissive. To say that there is "nothing more to the justification of beliefs than local and parochial convention" is to suggest the opposite extreme: that local and parochial convention has *no real relevance* to justifying beliefs. But what is it that drives the determination of local and parochial convention, of our practices of objection, response, and concession? Convention is not merely the sum of a random and chaotic assortment of opinions—rather, it is determined by the very process that Haack fears is lost in Rorty's system: the process by which a community comes to decide on the superiority of a certain standard of justification to others.

I would also like to note that, like his discussion of the evolution of epistemological ideas, Rorty's point that justification of beliefs is based in convention and conversation seems to be a matter of fact. If justifying beliefs were as simple as locating the Truth and then pointing to it, then everyone would agree—and this is obviously not our situation. Granted, this is perhaps Haack's point: that we should continually strive towards the identification of Truth and the commensuration of our standards with that identification. Since we are not yet there, however, justifications for beliefs in Rorty's world and Haack's world do not actually look any different. Rather, what they disagree on is invisible: *why* certain justifications are considered good or sufficient. To Rorty, for instance, Justification A might be considered adequate when a particular community has agreed on it. Further, one can presume that the community has agreed on it for a reason: because it works well for their purposes. To Haack, however, Justification A should be considered adequate only if it is "really truth-indicative." But

this is just putting off the question: who, and within what context, has decided that Justification A is "really truth-indicative"? It is impossible to make such a determination outside of a community or context. Therefore, the very term "really truth-indicative," and how one defines it, is conventional.

To take an actual example of conflicting epistemic standards: one might argue that a belief is justifiable and therefore truth-indicative when it is consistent with other accepted knowledge and beliefs—that consistency is the hallmark of Truth. We must note, however, that this argument presupposes a certain notion of Truth upon which the justification is based: that it is single, whole, absolute (that "Truth is One") and, accordingly, that every justification which points to it will be in harmony with every other. On the other hand, one might have a completely different conception of Truth, one which does *not* necessitate that justifications for beliefs are consistent. Such a conception might even go so far as to say, like Emerson, that

> consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesman and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Speak what you think now in hard words and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said today. (1930: 19-20).

A thinker adhering to Emerson's conception of truth would advise that we construct a framework that encompasses "what might otherwise seem contradictory outlooks, viewpoints, or doctrines" and "accept the clangor and jangle of contrary tendencies'" (Goodman 2005). In other words, the Truth is too massive and dynamic to be delimited by sets of consistent claims.

Rorty's concern is this: when these two conceptions of Truth collide, on what grounds can one appeal to the other? How can the Truth-is-consistent thinker convince

the Truth-is-not-consistent thinker of his basic commitments? It would be impossible to do so without circular reasoning—after all, the former thinker would have to provide justification for his assertion that *his* conception of Truth is the *true* conception of truth. But how could he assert that the justification provided is really truth-indicative, other than by assuming a previously existing notion of Truth and showing how that justification points to it? This is the problem of circularity that leads Rorty to argue that it is useless to require absolute foundations of justifications for beliefs.

Haack, however, remains disturbed that Rorty is willing to give up on an ideal notion of Truth and thus banishes him to the extreme opposite corner of normative relativism. She says that Rorty holds that "the differing criteria of different times or cultures or communities…are 'incommensurable'; no agreement can be expected about which standards of defending beliefs are correct" (1995: 128). Yet her use of the word "correct" can be taken many ways. Rorty would agree that "no agreement can be expected about which standards of defending beliefs are *universally* and *absolutely* true"—that is, which standards are representative of "the way things really are" because they have been endorsed by nature (like the theorem and geometric shape). But Haack seems to conflate this admission with the contention that "No agreement can be expected about which standards of defending beliefs should be used" or even about "which standards of defending beliefs are better"—statements with which Rorty would certainly disagree. Rorty does not claim that we are powerless to make value judgments about vocabularies and epistemic standards, but rather that we can only make these judgments from within the frameworks of other vocabularies and epistemic standards—that we need a *standard* by which to judge between two sets of standards, and this standard will always

be conventional.

In other words, at the same time that Haack criticizes Rorty for fabricating false dichotomies, she creates a false dichotomy that exaggerates Rorty's position in order to prove her point. In her account of Rorty's advice to the epistemologist that he "abandon his efforts to commensurate incommensurable discourses," she oversimplifies Rorty's point (1995: 129). He never says that since we cannot commensurate incommensurable discourses using her precious "objective standards" that we should give up on the notion of knowledge or of reaching any agreement about knowledge. Rather, he suggests that we adjust our unrealistic and strict definition of knowledge as *only* that which is objectively justifiable and, therefore, agreeable to everyone. In other words, he is *not* saying what Haack claims he is in the next sentence: that "it makes no sense to ask what the basis of our standards might be" (1995: 129). And, while he might say something like the next statement she attributes to him, "There is nothing outside language for our description to represent accurately or inaccurately," he would add that even if there is "something outside language for our description to represent accurately or inaccurately," *it is doing us very little good!* For how can we know whether our description is representing the Truth, the world, etc. accurately or inaccurately if we cannot see it—and if we can see it, then why does not everyone agree on one description?

Rorty's response to Haack touches on these very same points. He admits that his view "precludes the possibility of any higher-minded conception of really-truth-indicative justification," and elaborates that it "precludes the idea that we can, or need to, worry about whether our practices of justification are 'really-truth-indicative'" (1995: 148). He further admits that to believe that p is to accept p as true, but he does not

concede that to accept one's beliefs as true precludes the contention that one's beliefs are conventional. The way Haack portrays Rorty, one would think that he claims to see "the way things really are" and is simply playing along with the mistaken ways in which everyone else is describing the world. But this is the very problem with relativism that Rorty objects to—that, like foundationalism, it presupposes the possibility of achieving a God's-eye view of all vocabularies and epistemic standards. He never suggests that he has a God's eye view; on the contrary, he suggests that neither he nor anyone else does and, therefore, that our conversations will be more productive if we admit to this. In contrast, however, by saying that "This is the truth to me, from my perspective, and therefore it is morally wrong to pass judgment on the moral practice of others," the normative relativist implies that he sees the (whole) Truth. He must assume that, from some overarching perspective, the truth to *him* could be objectively distinguished from the truth to *her*, and to speak in these terms suggests that he can put aside his own commitments, moral or epistemic, and see lots of different truths at once. But this is not really possible, and the recognition of this fact is what distinguishes Rorty from the normative relativist: granted, his ironism leads him to recognize that he might be wrong, but recognizing the possibility that he might be wrong is different from actually believing that he is wrong. This is why Haack's assertion that *to believe that p is to accept p as true* is incomplete: the liberal ironist believes that his moral commitments are right (and not just 'right for me') but holding these beliefs does not require that he refer to philosophical foundations in order to justify them. Rorty acknowledges that the realist will view this move is relativist and inconsistent, but only because the realist is

> projecting his own habits of thought upon the pragmatist…. For the realist
> thinks that the whole point of philosophical thought is to detach oneself

from any particular community and look down at it from a more universal standpoint. When he hears the pragmatist repudiating the desire for such a standpoint he cannot quite believe it. He thinks that everyone, deep down inside, *must* want such detachment. So he attributes to the pragmatist a perverse form of his own attempted detachment, and sees him as an ironic, sneering aesthete who refuses to take the choice between communities seriously, a mere 'relativist'." (1991: 30)

To differentiate between his view and relativism while acknowledging certain key similarities, Rorty speaks in terms of ethnocentrism (which Haack refers to as "tribalism"): the idea that truth and "knowledge [are] (only) what *we* agree is justified by *our* standards, *our* methods, concepts, evidence, and styles of reasoning" (Allen 2000: 223). In other words, the ethnocentrist does not pretend to be able to transcend his culture and look down from above. Accordingly, Rorty would never say "This the truth to me," because, after all, who else's truth is there? Instead, he would say, "This is true," but with an ironist's awareness that what she takes to be true at a particular time is different from what she has held true in the past and what she will hold true in the future. Haack, however, denies that this distinction excuses Rorty from relativism and argues instead that it renders his position incoherent:

> …As combining conventionalism and tribalism, Rorty's conversationalism is incoherent. Tribalism requires 'solidarity' with 'our epistemic practices'; 'irony' reveals that Rorty's supposed solidarity is no more than *pro forma*, cynical conformity with those practices." (1995: 139)

Once again, however, Haack's criticism rests with the assumption that the liberal ironist sees the whole picture and, like both the relativist and foundationalist, is *choosing* to adhere to a certain community's conception of justified epistemic standards. However, the liberal ironist's acknowledgement that her epistemic standards, conceptions of truth, and conceptions of morality are all conventional does *not* presuppose that the she must be cynical towards them; for in order to be cynical, she would have to see that they were not

correct, and in order to see that they were not correct, she would have to see them in comparison to others. The liberal ironist does not choose to adhere to certain standards for pragmatic reasons—she simply acknowledges that her standards are not reflections in the mirror of nature.

V.   On the Priority of Pragmatism: The Breakdown of Liberal Ironism?

Although I believe that we can rest secure in our assertion that Rorty is exempt from the charge of relativism—or, at least, that the ways in which he might be construed as a relativist are not a threat to the soundness of his project—one of Rorty's basic assumptions demands questioning. Rorty contends that the abjuring of foundations (liberal ironism) is the most effective way to prevent cruelty, because the aim of a community of liberal ironists is to "let its citizens be as privatistic, 'irrationalist,' and aestheticist as they please so long as they do it on their own time—causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by those less advantaged" (1989: xiv). But in loyalty to his pragmatist roots, Rorty must consider whether it possible that, after all, abjuring foundations is *not* the best way to prevent cruelty? Perhaps, in our conversations across and between communities, we need to feel that we are directing our inquiries towards *something* real and lasting—not just being as privatistic as we please—whether we call that something Truth (with a capital 'T') or something else. For without reference to foundations, even and if only as a tool with which to converse with others, then how do we distinguish between sophists and others? In his epilogue of *Self-Knowledge in Plato's Phaedrus*, Charles Griswold warns that

> the radical separation of human nature from what nourishes it leads to the unavoidability of discursive reminders…and therefore to rhetoric. The problem of distinguishing between warranted and unwarranted persuasion then becomes pressing indeed if truth is to remain our goal. (1986: 231-232)

In other words, by disallowing the notion of a Truth at which to aim and converge with others, we make it difficult to distinguish between Rorty's "redescription" and negative rhetoric. For on what other grounds could we argue that one person's words were better than another's? One could argue that, so far, an agreement upon Truth (or an agreement upon the goal of Truth) is the most successful standard we have found for making this distinction. In order for this point to stand, however, we must determine whether there is evidence to regard the notion of Truth as something that actually nourishes or, at least, has the capacity to nourish, human nature.

I argue that the notion of Truth has fostered the nourishment of human nature just as often as, if not more often than, it has harmed human nature. For instance, for many years a substantial portion of America made reference to foundations and used dualistic language in order to shape the nation's laws in accordance with their racist beliefs. But if civil rights activists had refused to engage in this language of foundationalism, they might have made no progress. Instead, leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. used intensely dualistic language, as evidenced in his "Letter from the Birmingham Jail," and this proved to be an effective tool of rhetoric: with heavy reliance on foundationalism, King asserted,

> An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. (1963: 80)

To concede one of Rorty's points, perhaps the idea of natural law establishing that integration is right was not *prior* to the belief that integration is right, but it was certainly useful in articulating that view. Without it, how would they have revealed the racists' use of foundationalism to support their prejudices as merely a rhetorical weapon? This

evidence suggests that foundationalism may, after all, be more effective than liberal ironism in reducing cruelty. In the spirit of Rorty's ideal of promoting conversation and free exchange of ideas, I do not claim that Rorty has "lost" the debate, but rather that he is obliged to give serious reconsideration to his recommendation that we abjure foundations if we are to take seriously his suggestion that his liberal ironism is more useful than foundationalism.

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