A critical examination of Richard Rorty's liberal lexicon

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**Dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Philosophy
in the School of Philosophy and Ethics,
Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Sciences
University of KwaZulu-Natal**

Supervisor: Dr A.S. Gouws   **December 2010**

DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. I confirm that an external editor was not used. It is being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. None of the present work has been submitted for any degree or examination in any other University.

Julia Clare
December 2010

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines Richard Rorty's liberalism, especially as articulated in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity,* from a perspective which is sympathetic to the broad features of his pragmatism.

I argue that Rorty's liberalism is, in the first instance a moral, rather than a political project and I begin this dissertation by examining in Chapter One, the basis of this moral project in his rejection of any notion of human nature in favour of a focus on the individual as a contingent, self-creating vocabulary. The moral core of Rorty's work is found in the vision of the liberal self who abhors cruelty. His politics extends outward from one variant of this type, the liberal ironist, who tries to balance her liberal commitments with a disposition to radical doubt.

In his attempt to secure society for, and from, the liberal ironist, Rorty constructs a vision of society based in a strong division between public and private. In Chapter Two I argue that we should reject this move, and I argue instead for a vision of society based in conversation.

In Chapter Three, I argue that this conversational understanding offers us an increased chance to attain the sort of cosmopolitan community to which Rorty aspires. In particular, I argue that we should see conversation, rather than imagination and reading, as the best means to develop and extend our sense of solidarity.

One of the biggest obstacles to our increasing solidarity through conversation is the way in which power operates to sustain existing social and political arrangements by setting the conversational agenda. Rorty, unfortunately, says little about the workings of power and so, in Chapter Four, I propose the use of Iris Marion Young's thought on oppression and domination as a means to illuminate the issue of power at work, and to help us in finding ways to deal with it.

In the final chapter I look to the particular role of the intellectual in the conversation. I examine Rorty's rejection of philosophy-as-epistemology in favour of what he calls pragmatism, and how this move combines with a variety of other strategies to apparently silence intellectuals. I argue that in spite of these moves, Rorty's philosophy and his own example actually extend the space from which and through which intellectuals can participate in the conversation and its transformation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Prefatory note

Readers of this work will note that it is written as though Rorty were still alive. I owe the readers an explanation for this, and offer it here.

The full draft of this dissertation was completed in the first half of 2007. Only a few weeks later, on June 8 of that year, Richard Rorty died. It was not Rorty's death that delayed the submission of this work for examination, though. It was the subsequent death of my supervisor, Professor Lydia McDermott. The completed draft lay in limbo on a corner of my desk until the second half of 2010 when Dr. Andries Gouws generously took on the task of seeing it through its final stage of completion.

Any piece of writing is like a piece of knitting and in trying to correct even an apparently small problem there is a danger that the whole work could unravel. For this reason, I took the decision, in consultation with Dr. Gouws, to submit this dissertation for examination in its present form.

It is not in every aspect the same piece that I would write today. I do, however, continue to endorse both the broad thrust of the argument and its central contention that we can learn a great deal about liberalism by reading Rorty.

CONTENTS

Introduction

This dissertation has had a long and turbulent history many of the details of which are irrelevant to its final shape. Nevertheless, since Richard Rorty is not an obvious choice for a work in political philosophy perhaps I can be allowed to offer some personal narrative of its genesis and development.

I first encountered Rorty's work in the late 1980s as an undergraduate student in philosophy where I was fortunate enough to be educated in one of the only departments in South Africa that at that time taught in both the analytic and continental traditions. This should perhaps have suited me well for embracing Rorty, who as Gutting (1999: 5) writes, shares with Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre the virtues of both traditions:

> They offer the conceptual clarity and respect for careful argument of good analytic philosophy, but without numbing technicalities, claustrophobic restriction of topics, and depressing isolation from non-philosophical culture. At the same time, they provide the historical and cultural breadth of good continental philosophy without the pretension and obscurity. Why, I think, can't philosophy always be like this?

Like so many other readers, however, I was underwhelmed by *Philosophy and the mirror of nature* (1980a). While Rorty's indictment of the sterility of analytic philosophy resonated with my own experience, his alternative offered none of the radical cachet of Derrida or Foucault. I quickly learned to ape the easy dismissals of Rorty current then in both the critical responses and the general mood of the times and moved on.

It was the curious political history of South Africa during the next few years that first brought me back to Rorty. One moment we stood on the brink of bloody revolution and a glorious socialist future and then in a few giddy steps we had a negotiated settlement, with not only the promise of a new nation built on the foundations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (1995-1998), but also a liberal democracy enshrined in arguably the most liberal constitution in the world (1996), and a stringently neo-liberal macro-economic policy[1]. Adrift and disoriented I searched for ways to understand this moment that was at once a moral triumph and (so I thought) a political catastrophe. Rorty's *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a) presented itself to me as an easy target with its apparent smug complacency and its naïve American parochialism. If this was

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[1] I don't mean to imply by this that political liberalism and economic neo-liberalism are necessary partners, but simply to acknowledge that this particular mix of the two was the one that post-apartheid South Africa adopted.

liberalism, I was surely right in wanting no part of it; and given the very shallowness of Rorty's vision and the superficiality of his arguments I would no doubt be able to demolish not only Rorty's own brand of liberalism but the tradition of which he was a culmination with a few well-chosen thrusts of the pen.

It was not to be. The more I read of Rorty's work, the less smug, complacent, and parochial and the more sincere and thoughtful he appeared. The more I tried to attack his ideas, the more useful at least some of them became. The more I offered a quick and easy rebuttal to one of his arguments and scored a couple of points, the more I was humbled by the generosity and humanity that Rorty brought to his own readings of others. Instead of defeating Rorty I found myself persuaded by him.

This work, then, is the result and now public record of a sustained private conversation with Richard Rorty. To be sure, that conversation has been an odd one since Rorty has been an unwitting participant in it. It has been, perhaps, the sort of private conversation which many of Rorty's critics deride: a process of self-formation through engagement with texts rather than people. At least three important features of the shape of this work itself follow from this conception of it as a record of a private conversation and I will speak to those briefly here.

Firstly, the idea of a private conversation captures in some way that this dissertation is not, and is not intended to be, an exhaustive survey of the immense secondary literature to which Rorty's writings have given rise. Certainly, other thinkers have been invited into the conversation but only those contributions which I have found to be particularly useful in formulating my own response to Rorty have made it into this record.

Secondly, this dissertation is not even an exhaustive exegesis of Rorty's own writings. It is instead, an engagement with what I take to be the central ideas that Rorty brings to the debates in political philosophy and with what I take to be the core arguments in support of those ideas, and focuses most particularly, but not exclusively on *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a). The ideas around which this dissertation takes shape include the notion of the self as a (final) vocabulary, the reconstruction of public and private, the concept of solidarity, the reformulation of pragmatism, and above all, perhaps, the very idea of conversation itself. I have tried to capture this facet of the work by entitling it a critical examination of Rorty's liberal *lexicon.*

Thirdly, because this is a conversation I have tried to engage with Rorty on his own terms, adopting the very vocabulary which is under examination. I have tried so to speak, to "wear" Rorty's lexicon with the predictable result that I have had to reshape and remake it to fit me. It may well be the case that the "Rorty" that emerges from this process is not one that the philosopher of

that name would recognise as himself. Indeed, he might find my Rorty an impostor and a fraud. If that is so, I make little apology for it since it is an inevitable consequence of the process of redescription by which, as Rorty himself acknowledges, conversation proceeds. Moreover, this very reappropriation of a thinker through redescription is a strategy of which Rorty himself is master.

It should be evident, then, that this dissertation is a form of apologetics. It *is* critical of Rorty's account, but rather than simply rejecting Rorty's philosophical assumptions and opposing some alternative framework to Rorty's own, it offers a sympathetic reading of the key ideas which make up Rorty's political thought, and it does so by "trying on", so to speak, Rorty's lexicon, his words and metaphors, and exploring what results – what gains – can be made by thinking in these terms and also what important aspects of our lives might thereby be occluded. It attempts, then, to engage philosophically with Rorty in the mode of philosophy which Rorty himself advocates – one which focuses on redescription and interpretation rather than pure argument, one which treats the engagement as a type of conversation and an opportunity to expand each other's horizons, rather than a battle which each side seeks to win through the entrenchment of their own position, and the obliteration of that of their opponents.

It is not only my own opinion of Richard Rorty that has changed in the period since the publication of *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*. In the intervening period Rorty has come to be widely viewed to be one of today's leading thinkers. He has been called: "one of the most widely read and controversial of contemporary philosophers" (Festenstein 2001: 1);   "one of the most original and important philosophers writing today" (Brandom 2000a: ix); "one of the most important and influential thinkers of the late twentieth century: (Kuipers 1997: 1); "one of the world's most provocative and influential thinkers" (Malachowski 2002a: vii) and, even, "the most interesting living philosopher in the world today" (Harold Bloom quoted in Bouveresse 2000: 132).   Guignon and Hiley (2003a: 1) describe Rorty's impact as follows:

> No American philosopher in the second half of the twentieth century has generated such an intense mixture of consternation, enthusiasm, hostility, and confusion. His controversial positions in debates about the nature of mind, language, knowledge, truth, science, ethics, and politics have been regarded by some as opening fresh new possibilities for thought and by others as undermining the very possibility of meaningful inquiry. His more recent praise of American democratic culture and 1930s progressivism is seen by some as a needed antidote to the academic left and by others as politically naïve.

Guignon and Hiley (2003a: 1) further note that Rorty's influence extends beyond philosophy and even the academy:

He has reestablished the philosopher as public intellectual and has been no less controversial in that role.

Despite this, however, his political thought has not, on the whole, received due recognition from other political philosophers and theorists. His work tends to be treated by them as marginal to current projects and concerns, if it is treated at all; as John Horton (2001: 15) writes: "the leading liberal political theorists for the most part studiedly ignore him". It is the central contention of this thesis that Rorty's political ideas are worthy of serious attention and that what emerges from Rorty's political thought is an original and distinctive conception of the self, society and community, and their interactions.

In saying that Rorty's work has been largely ignored by political philosophers, I do not intend to imply that they have been remiss. There are reasonable grounds for their refusal, by and large, to engage with Rorty. Rather, I want to offer some insight both into why that may be the case and why instead of ignoring Rorty it could be useful to draw his work into thinking about liberalism. It is not my intention here to draw anything more than a sketch of the terrain of contemporary liberalism. I will simply outline the core commitments of liberalism as generally understood, as well as the lines of fissure and debate. I will argue that Rorty has little to contribute directly to the on-going debates within liberal theory and show why this is a result of the nature of Rorty's own project and his beliefs about the limits of philosophy. I will show that Rorty's own brand of liberalism, while consonant with the broader features of liberalism, sits uneasily within that rubric and will argue that this uneasy fit suggests that Rorty's liberalism is attempting something innovative and interesting. The purpose of this section, then, is to situate Rorty's philosophy within the debates among liberals in order to show that by taking Rorty seriously we can add a new dimension to our political thinking.

Lawrence Cahoone (2002: 1) defines liberalism in the broad sense as:

> the view that political society serves the value of individual liberty, requiring the restraint of forms of power, governmental or otherwise, that would coerce individuals.

Within the broad area defined here there is, of course, space for divergences of belief, policy, and practice. Beneath these differences, though, are certain general values and commitments which might be said to characterize liberalism. These include toleration, support for the rule of law, a belief in (some form of) equality, a belief in the perfectibility of man and society (Welsh 1998: 1-2), a preference for reform over revolution, and support for some strong distinction between public and private. These commitments in many cases arise directly out of the more fundamental concern with individual freedom.

According to Cahoone (2002) two of the most important axes of differentiation between strands of liberalism are the egalitarian-libertarian and the proceduralist-substantivist axes, and this is, I believe, a useful schema for outlining the general terrain of debate. Egalitarians and libertarians (as well as the variety of possible positions in between) are distinguished by their economic beliefs as well as their beliefs about the role of government. Egalitarians (Rawls, for example) support high taxation, some form of welfare state and activist government; libertarians (like Nozick) support low or no taxation and minimalist government (obviously precluding thereby and *inter alia* welfarist policies). Proceduralists or neutralists (Rawls, again) and substantivists (such as Taylor) differ as to whether it is desirable, or even possible, for the state to be morally neutral.

Rorty has little to say, at least directly, on the topics which divide egalitarians and libertarians, proceduralists and substantivists. And this, no doubt, is one reason why Rorty has found so little favour among liberal political theorists – the controversies and debates which most interest them are hardly addressed by Rorty at all. Instead, the liberalism to which Rorty appeals is a general one, one which embraces any and all sides of the debates in which liberals set themselves against each other. It is a liberalism which, while characterized by the general values and commitments of liberalism adumbrated above, is less concerned with the political organization and institutions of the liberal state than with the nature of citizenship. Rorty's liberalism is, I will argue in this dissertation, an articulation of a moral rather than a political vision.

One way of reading Rorty's liberalism is as a twentieth-century social constructivist rethinking of nineteenth-century Millian liberalism. Although I do not pursue this line in the body of the dissertation, I believe that unpacking this claim, looking at the parallels with J S Mill, provides a useful way to frame the arguments that do follow. It is also clearly a way in which Rorty himself, at least sometimes, conceives of what he is doing (1989a: 63; 1999e: 272).

Like Mill, who argues that society should encourage a multiplicity of experiments in selfhood (1859: 69-91), Rorty too thinks that each self should be (and indeed is) a unique experiment in being human. In the first chapter I suggest that this, that each self is a unique experiment in being human, is the best way to make sense of Rorty's otherwise muddled, albeit insistent, claim that there is no human nature. Rorty offers his vision of liberalism as a moral rather than, in the first instance, a political ideal. This ideal takes the form of the liberal self, a self who is appalled by and committed to reducing cruelty, a characteristic which Rorty attempts to persuade us to incorporate into our own experiments with selfhood and humanness.

Rorty recognises that being a liberal self, of this sort, is no straightforward matter for those whom, like himself, have adopted the social constructivist (or as he prefers, ironist) strands of twentieth-

century culture. From the perspective of such a person, the recognition of the arbitrariness (Rorty prefers, contingency) of one's beliefs and values militates against one's being able to take them too seriously. To such people, Rorty offers himself as an example of a type of self which he calls the liberal ironist, someone who is committed to the moral core of his liberalism (the abhorrence of cruelty) while being simultaneously sceptical of (Rorty prefers, ironic about) that commitment. Again we might draw a parallel with Mill who while a committed utilitarian, and one of utilitarianism's most respected advocates, remained deeply sceptical of the possibility of procuring happiness (1861: 18-20).

Rorty's greatest error, in my opinion, is that he then attempts to construct a politics out of, and from the perspective of, the liberal ironist. For Mill there is irreconcilable tension between the moral and the political due to the fact that a utilitarian society with a commitment to increasing pleasure and decreasing pain might in the hands of zealous adherents lead to enormous intrusion into people's lives. The best that he can do to resolve this is to insist on a dual set of distinctions between private and public, and between words and actions. The state and society may regulate citizens' public behaviour in order to ensure that no-one is harmed by another but private behaviour is to be unregulated (Mill 1859: 15-18) and words are to be unregulated except in the most extreme cases (1859: 22-68).

For Rorty a similar tension arises in that our liberal commitment to reducing cruelty may also involve massive regulation and intrusion into people's lives. It might require, as Kekes (2002: 81) claims:

> curtailing the autonomy of cruel people, and that, in turn, depends on reducing their plurality of choices and actions, restricting their rights, diminishing their freedom, not showing equal concern and respect for cruel and decent people, and not providing the goods cruel people need to pursue their pernicious activities.

In seeking to resolve this tension Rorty cannot employ Mill's distinction between actions and words however, since for him words are not merely surface phenomena but in some deep sense all that we have. He insists as a corollary that the self is simply a vocabulary, and that the worst form of cruelty is humiliation – the destruction of, or trivialisation of, someone else's vocabulary. Moreover, the liberal ironist with his powers of redescription is most likely of all to run the risk of humiliating others. All Rorty can invoke in response is the distinction between private and public and an insistence that ironists keep their irony private. In Chapter Two of the dissertation I look at Rorty's attempt to draw and maintain this distinction, and argue that it is untenable.

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I argue that instead of trying to reach politics from the moral standpoint of the liberal ironist, Rorty would do better to approach politics directly, as does Mill. I advocate that in thinking through Rorty's political thought we should emphasise not the distinction between the private and public as he does, but the notion of conversation. This emphasis on conversation should not be understood as an attempt to reinvoke the Millian distinction between words and actions, however. For conversation, as I understand it, is not merely about talking but about living together. The ideal conversation is one which, as Rorty insists, is open and free (core liberal values). It is also one which is self-regulating, though not, as Rorty sometimes seems to dream, unregulated.

Although, Rorty does portray himself as a liberal in the Millian mould, he also portrays himself as a leftist or progressive or social democrat. The most obvious facet of this leftist slant is his attempt to incorporate into the overwhelmingly individualist brand of liberalism which has come to dominate at least America, the value of solidarity. Rorty hopes for something more than a mere society, something very like a community. Unfortunately, despite Rorty's (1981b: 207) claim that:

> liberalism seems to me the best example of [human] solidarity we have yet achieved,

this attempt to take seriously the value of solidarity gives rise to another set of tensions. Just as the liberal ethic of reducing cruelty seems to be in tension with the need for individual freedom, so too is it in tension with the ethic of solidarity. This tension arises because, Rorty claims, we always start from our own communities and work outward and in seeking to extend our communities to make them more inclusive of others, we always run the risk of patronising, and even dehumanising them – as was the case with the British Empire of which Mill was an officer, and even of Mill (1859: 15-16) himself at moments. I do not want to suggest that there is some easy resolution to this problematic, nor even that there is necessarily a resolution to it at all. In Chapter Three, I do argue, though, that having recognised the problem we have more resources to deal with it than Rorty thinks. This is because Rorty attempts to incorporate solidarity into a society already shaped by the distinction between public and private and so has only the individual resources of imagination and reading to draw on. I, however, advocate the conversational model of society as one in which we build community by living together and by confronting the problems as they arise rather than in the abstract and alone.

One factor that most certainly impacts on the ways in which attempting to build solidarity (or community) can be perceived to involve, and can actually involve, cruelty is the effects of power. The lack of any serious attention to the workings of power is, I believe, an important lacuna in Rorty's thought. If the conversational model which I advocate we draw from Rorty is to have any hope of being taken seriously it must address this problem and demonstrate that what is on offer is not simply an apologetics for the *status quo*, as many critics of Rorty's think. I take up this issue in

Chapter Four and use Iris Marion Young's work to shed light on these issues in a way which I believe does justice to Rorty's liberal as well as his leftist moral commitments. I will reiterate that it does not fully resolve the tension between these two commitments because I do not believe that anything can. Sometimes we really do have to be pragmatic and muddle through, trading off our values and commitments against each other as best as we can.

Given that Rorty's name is almost synonymous with pragmatism (except perhaps among other competing pragmatists); it is perhaps surprising that I have said so little on that topic. This is in part the effect of attempting to read Rorty from the "inside" rather than trying to pigeonhole and classify him through attempting to see how his pragmatism is similar to and different from rival versions. Like Daniel Conway, I have little patience with those criticisms of Rorty which amount to little more than suggesting Rorty has misread his pragmatist predecessors (especially John Dewey). As Conway (2002: 210) contends:

> Rorty-bashing may pay modest academic dividends; it may even be entertaining in certain circles of resentful, disaffected intellectuals; but it contributes nothing to the progress of pragmatism itself … .

Nevertheless, Rorty's ideas about politics are deeply embedded in a set of metaphilosophical positions which he collectively labels pragmatism (whether others agree with him or not). These metaphilosophical positions play a particularly important role in Rorty's thinking about the scope of philosophy (and theory, in general) and the role of philosophers (or intellectuals, in general). In order to address two underlying anxieties that, in my opinion, fuel much of the criticism of Rorty's thought, I must address the metaphilosophy – his pragmatism – and I do so in the final chapter. The two underlying anxieties are: firstly, that in taking Rorty's political philosophy seriously we are somehow committed to taking all of his metaphilosophy on board; secondly, that Rorty leaves no political space for theory, no social role for the intellectual. I think that Rorty does much to fuel those anxieties but nevertheless contend that as with the politics, so, too, with the pragmatism: where Rorty goes too far we have no obligation to follow him, where he does not go far enough we can extend his thought, and where he goes just about the right distance we can acknowledge and use his ideas.

Before engaging with the substance of Rorty's political and social thought, however, it is necessary, I believe, to say something about Rorty's unique style of writing philosophy, including his preferred argumentative strategies, and also to indicate how my own approach compares with that of others.

However sympathetic to Rorty, few readers can fail to agree with Horton (2001: 16) that he "can be an exasperating and frustrating writer to read". Charles Taylor (1994: 219), for example, expresses the frustration that even a patient attempt to understand Rorty, sustained over many years, can give rise to, when he writes:

> It seems so hard to get a final, clear fix on just what is at stake between us. There are passages where I find myself nodding in agreement, but then suddenly the text veers off on to a terrain where I can't follow.

It is difficult, though, to diagnose precisely what the cause of this slipperiness is. With a different sort of writer one could easily blame the difficulty of the style but in the case of Rorty style is less obvious a target because, as Horton (2001: 16) says:

> he writes in such a plain, non-technical, straightforward, almost folksy prose that the tensions, inconsistencies, contradictions and even occasional ill-considered remarks in his works are readily apparent. He refuses to make his ideas more "sophisticated" either by lapsing into abstruse technicalities or by employing the mystificatory style which sometimes passes as profundity in philosophy.

Certainly, Rorty's style plays a role in alienating those who are unsympathetic to its general position; what MacIntyre (1990: 710) writes in his review of *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a), applies equally well to his other works:

> Rorty's impressive themes plainly need long and detailed spelling out. They do not receive it in this book, written as it is in intellectual shorthand whose compressions, allusions, and flag-waving, signposting rhetorical style make it too easy a victim for any initially unsympathetic reader. Far too much work is left to the reader: there are argumentative gaps to be filled, places where everything turns on the detail, but detail is absent, incoherences to be resolved.

And Connolly (2002: 229) dismisses Rorty in the following slogan:

> Heidegger questions and illuminates; Foucault disturbs and incites; Rorty comforts and tranquillizes.

Other readers are more sympathetic though, commending, as with Guignon and Hiley (2003a: 2-3), his "self-effacing charm", his "quick and biting wit", his "dizzying capacity for broad analogies", or, with Greene (1980: 1389), his "light touch".

If style is an important factor in understanding the reactions of various readers to his thought, however, it does not explain the way in which his ideas resist being pinned down – what I have

called his "slipperiness" – because, style is too general a rubric. It is not Rorty's *style* in general that allows him to resist being pinned down but particular rhetorical strategies which he deploys. Among those strategies are several which Rorty uses so often and in so many contexts that they are worthy, I believe, of having some sort of name. I offer below a list of the most important of these, noting where they are first encountered in this dissertation:

- The sideways shuffle (Chapter One): a crucial term is left undefined and suspended between several interpretations, allowing Rorty to shift between them as necessary to his argument and without overtly signalling those shifts in meaning;
- The hyper-inflationary claim (Chapter One): a straightforward claim is dressed up so as to seem extravagant or grandiose;
- The badge of commendation (Chapter One): criticisms are deflected and critics disarmed by Rorty's adopting the pejoratives used in the framing of criticisms as a sort of positive accolade;
- Guilt by association (Chapter Two): claims are undermined by being associated with positions which Rorty expects his readers to reject but without actually establishing any significant links between the claims and the positions.
- The all-inclusive package (Chapter Two): contradictory positions are combined and thereby the need to choose between them is avoided;
- The shifting dichotomy (Chapter Two): a number of dichotomies (often themselves problematic) are set up and Rorty moves from one side of one dichotomy to a side of another without clearly relating the various positions being set up to one another and so avoiding having to take a single coherent position on a matter;
- The neutraliser (Chapter Four): Rorty's own more *outré* ideas are presented by him as being simply commonsensical;
- The leveller (Chapter Five) – the use of non-technical language to blur or obliterate distinctions which are both clear and important in the technical jargon of a discipline.

It is the deployment of these multiple strategies in various combinations with each other, rather than any one of them alone that makes it so difficult to pin Rorty down. Rorty, of course, is unapologetic for any confusion that this may cause in his readers, preferring to side with the position he attributes to Dewey, namely that "muddle, compromise, and blurry synthesis are usually less perilous, politically, than Cartesian clarity" (1990: 210).

This tendency to muddle and compromise is further exacerbated by Rorty's facility with moving from one perspective to another. This is a point which Guignon and Hiley (1990: 359-60) note, arguing that Rorty moves between the "insider's" and the "outsider's" perspective, which they claim gives him "a suspicious facility in evading objections". In a later work, Guignon and Hiley (2003a:

31-33), demonstrate this same slipperiness in the way in which Rorty responds to certain lines of criticism:

> Standard criticisms try to show that Rorty, despite his avowed intentions, is committed to a number of substantive claims, and that these commitments subvert his entire attempt to simply sidestep mainstream philosophical discussions ... . What is surprising and often annoying to philosophers who try to formulate such objections is Rorty's tendency to evade them by undercutting the entire line of argument. So, in dealing with the problematic nature of his apparent commitment to physicalism, Rorty might respond in a number of different ways. He might contend that his arguments on behalf of nonreductive physicalism are only meant to show that, while physicalist descriptions are viable options for use when it suits our purposes, physicalism is merely one contingent vocabulary among others, even if it is the "default setting" (as Dennet calls it) for "we" scientifically minded members of today's academe. Or Rorty might say that his goal is to make propaganda for a new physicalist way of speaking that might suit the purposes of the future better than older vocabularies that are now going extinct. The important point behind such evasive maneuvers is that there is, in Rorty's view, nothing that philosophy can say that gives us good reasons to adopt one of these views of the situation over the others.

This shifting of perspective can leave a reader unsure as to the perspective from which any particular claim that Rorty asserts is being made. More annoyingly, even where one is pretty certain as to the perspective being adopted at any given point, Rorty, it would seem, always reserves the right to shift his perspective when responding to the criticisms one makes.

In the face of Rorty's slipperiness the reader must make some judgement calls. Is Rorty merely attempting to confuse and bamboozle us? Is Rorty himself just hopelessly confused? Answering yes to either of these questions would give us sufficient motive to abandon the quest to understand him in favour of reading another philosopher whom one deems to be less manipulative and/or more coherent. The philosophical profession, as anyone who attempts to introduce Rorty into conversation knows, contains many erstwhile readers of Rorty who fall into this category. Even among those who continue to engage with Rorty there are many who adopt an approach to reading him which in Horton's (2001: 16) formulation focuses on the inconsistencies and contradictions in order that:

> we can ruthlessly seek them out and use them as a stick with which to beat Rorty: we can make him an easy target for finely honed analytical and argumentative skills.

Kuipers (1997: 1) notes that this approach is applied all too often, when he writes of a:

growing sense in the philosophical community that Rorty has achieved a certain stature such that his work is "fair game" for rather cheap and often unfair criticism. Evidence of patient reading is to be found in far too few of the many philosophers who feel compelled to respond to his work.

I, on the other hand, persist in believing that Rorty is neither a fraud bamboozling his way through, nor a victim of hopeless confusion. Instead I believe he is sincerely attempting to state and defend a set of beliefs which are run through with tensions precisely because they are the beliefs of a human being attempting to make sense of a complex world rather than the artificially coherent and defensible statements of a clear position on some relatively simple matter. One can, in other words, *qua* philosopher, make a successful career out of taking some stance on one of the standard problems and then defending it against all criticism. Rorty himself did this in his early career as an eliminative materialist. Or one can engage in the much more messy business of trying to figure out what one actually believes about a host of issues and then try to see how to make those beliefs coherent with each other. Rorty's shifting perspectives and the irresolvable tensions in his thought I take to be evidence of his engagement in this latter task. If as Horton (2001: 16) remarks:

> Rorty seems at times to be trying to say something which it is not obvious can be coherently stated.

There may be good reason for this, namely the newness of what he is trying to say. As such Rorty exemplifies what Herwitz (1997) calls the "neo-natal" condition of philosophy – that it is always too early and is a matter of constructing concepts for a practice which is at best embryonic. Believing this to be the case I adopt an approach, which Horton (2001: 17) advocates, which begins from the assumption that "there is something persuasive in the story Rorty has to tell and in the lessons he draws from it". This approach, according to Horton (2001: 16):

> involves treating Rorty in a more receptive spirit. One which involves giving him the benefit of the doubt and which genuinely seeks to understand what it is that he is trying to say and why. It means treating Rorty in the spirit in which he often treats others – taking up what is useful, pursuing what looks promising and rejecting or passing over what look to be his less impressive lines of thought. To be clear, this does not require one to abandon all critical standards or simply to ignore the internal difficulties of his work, and any serious reflective engagement with his work cannot eschew criticism. But it does mean not making refutation the immediate objective of one's engagement. It also means not trying to assemble all of Rorty's scattered remarks into a comprehensive and coherent system.

This is what I have tried to achieve in this dissertation: to read Rorty sympathetically in order to understand what he is trying to say, while reserving the right to disagree with him. The fact that so many of the philosophers whom I regard highly such as Bernstein, Brandom, Conant, Dennett, Davidson, Taylor, to name but a few, also read Rorty in this way suggests to me that it is a course worth pursuing.

Chapter One: The liberal self

Rorty asserts that his politics rests not on a theory of human nature but on a denial that such a theory is to be had. I however, would rather defend the more consensual view that any vision of the sort of society which is desirable must make reference to ideas of what it is to be human; since what we believe people are, and what we believe they can be, must inevitably place limitations on the sorts of political organisation which we advocate.   In section 1.1 I look at Rorty's proclaimed anti-essentialist denial of human nature and show that it is little more than smoke and mirrors, and propose that Rorty is best understood if we impose on his discussion a heuristic distinction between humanness, personhood and selfhood. In section 1.2. I look at what Rorty has to say on the topic of the self and use the heuristic to unpack the vision of the self to which Rorty is committed. In section 1.3 I focus on the particular ideal of the liberal self which is, I argue, the moral core of Rorty's thought. Finally in section 1.4 I turn to the particular conception of a type of self which stands at the centre of Rorty's political thought – the idea(l) of the liberal ironist. I will assess the extent to which this is a desirable or even plausible view of selfhood.

1.1   Human nature

Arguably the best discussion of Rorty's denial of any human nature is that by Norman Geras (1995: 47-70) and I will be drawing from it in my own discussion. Geras (1995: 48 and 65) notes that talk about human nature may involve any one or more of four broad categories of claim: (1) the claim that there are some universal human characteristics that hold across all cultures and history; (2) the claim that there are certain characteristics which differentiate human beings from other species; (3) the normative claim that there are some (broadly moral) characteristics which we must exhibit in order to be fully human; and, (4) the claim that there is some sort of human destiny or *telos.*

Geras argues that in his discussion of human nature Rorty endorses the following six claims, each of which finds multiple expression in his work and all of which can be found on a single page (page 177) of *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a): (a) there is nothing to human beings beyond their socialization (including their ability to use language); (b) humans have a shared capacity for feeling pain, which they also share with other animals; (c) humans, because they use language, have a shared susceptibility to feel a particular kind of pain – humiliation; (d) humans share no characteristic or shared interest which can serve as a moral reference point; (e) the worst thing a person can do is to humiliate someone to the extent that they cannot reconstitute themselves; and (f) to be a human being is to be a particular person with a particular history, in a particular cultural community.

Once we see all of these claims put together in this way it is evident that Rorty is in fact committed to certain ideas about human nature after all, namely that all human beings cross-culturally and universally share a capacity to feel pain, to be socialised and to use language (human nature in Geras's sense 1); and that all and only humans share the capacity to be humiliated (human nature in Geras's sense 2). Rorty also seems to be committed to a claim of Geras's type 3 – that we have a particular human obligation to avoid behaving towards others in humiliating and cruel ways. Rorty's denial of human nature is, ultimately the outright denial of only claims of Geras's type 4 – that there is some sort of human telos or destiny. This, though, is a pretty uncontroversial claim; both modern secular humanists and postmodern antihumanists are agreed upon the denial of any human essence in this sense. While Rorty seems to suggest that he is making a more interesting claim, that he is denying human nature in one of the other three senses, this turns out, on further scrutiny, to be just sleight-of-hand.

Geras (1995: 65) contends that Rorty employs two strategies in his arguments in order to disguise the contradictions and tensions between these claims, and to hide his commitment to some idea (less than Geras's type 4) of human nature. The first strategy is to shift the grounds of discussion so that at different times he denies human nature in one or more of Geras's senses 1-3 while simultaneously affirming it in some other sense(s) – this is a variant of the argument type which I have called the sideways shuffle. The second strategy, a variant of what I have called the hyper-inflationary claim, is to define human nature in such a way (i.e. in something close to Geras's type 4) that it would be preposterous to believe in it because it would require one to ignore any cultural, historical, or even individual particularity.

Rather than merely dismissing what Rorty has to say on this question as muddle or deception, though, I think there is some way out of the confusion by distinguishing between three sorts of claims: claims about humanness, about personhood and about selfhood.

When I talk of claims about humanness I mean those claims that are purportedly true of all members of the species *Homo sapiens* regardless of time, location or context. Claims about humanness are the sorts of claims that Geras above classifies as types (1) and (2). By claims about personhood, I mean claims about the features – universal or otherwise – which are used in deciding whether a particular member of the species *Homo sapiens* is someone who falls into a category which makes them morally relevant to us. In Geras's terms these are claims of type (3). To be a self is simply to be a unique exemplar of the category *Homo sapiens*. These three types – humanness, personhood, and selfhood – are not intended to be drawn as rigid categories; hence I have attempted to define them as minimalistically as possible. Indeed, the history of political and social thought might be read as an attempt to draw and blur the boundaries between these three

sorts of claims in different ways. So, for example, proponents of human rights suggest that all human beings are persons, while more communitarian perspectives hold that personhood is conferred only by being a member of a (particular) community. And at the other point of division, some, like Charles Taylor (1989) seem to suggest that to be a self is to be a person (to be oriented in moral space). Despite the fact that all three categories – human, person, self – and the dividing lines between them are contestable, I maintain that using them can help shed light on what Rorty has to say regarding the self.

Despite his protestations, and his dubious arguments, Rorty is committed to some idea of humanness. Human beings are animals who share with all animals the capacity to feel pain. Given also that human beings are animals who have the ability to use language and thus to be acculturated, they share a capacity as humans, namely the capacity to be humiliated. In addition to marking a distinctive terrain of humanness this capacity for language (and with it for humiliation) also underlies the possibility of human beings becoming persons since it can be argued that this capacity places on people a moral imperative to avoid causing others pain and humiliation. Hence, Rorty is also committed to an idea of personhood. It might be suggested that these entail a quite minimalist conception of personhood from which little follows but it will be shown in section 1.3 that Rorty's brand of liberalism flows directly out of these commitments.

It should be noted that demonstrating that Rorty is committed to some view of human nature, and of personhood and selfhood, does not in any way undermine Rorty's project. What Rorty is ultimately committed to is not that there are not any views of human nature to be had, but the rejection of the notion that such views can provide any justification or foundation for our politics. As Rorty (1988a: 178) puts it:

> the philosopher of liberal democracy may wish to develop a theory of the human self that comports with the institutions he or she admires. But such a philosopher is not thereby justifying these institutions by reference to more fundamental premises, but the reverse: He or she is putting politics first and tailoring a philosophy to suit.

A model of the self is an optional extra which will, Rorty suggests, be of interest only to philosophers. First of all, Rorty (1988a: 192) tells us no theory of the self can provide a basis or foundation or ground for political theory, or at least not for liberal theory:

> But for purposes of liberal social theory ... one can get along with common sense and social science, areas of discourse in which the term "the self" rarely occurs.

Secondly, Rorty (1998a: 192) suggests that providing such models is a philosophical, and private pursuit:

> If, however, one has a taste for philosophy – if one's vocation, one's private pursuit of perfection, entails constructing models of such entities as "the self," "knowledge," "language," "nature," "God," or "history" and then tinkering with them until they mesh with one another – one *will* want a picture of the self.

Thirdly, Rorty (1988a: 192) suggests such pictures of the self, being as they are private, are also idiosyncratic and self-serving:

> Since my own vocation is of this sort, and the moral identity around which I wish to build such models is that of a citizen of a liberal democratic state, I commend the picture of the self as a centerless and contingent web to those with similar tastes and similar identities. But I would not commend it to those with a similar vocation but dissimilar moral identities – identities built, for example, around the love of God, Nietzschean self-overcoming, the accurate representation of reality as it is in itself, the quest for "one right answer" to moral questions, or the natural superiority of a given character type. Such persons need a more complex and interesting, less simple-minded model of the self – one that meshes in complex ways with complex models of such things as "nature" or "history".

Rorty wants to suggest, then, that acceptance of his view of humanness and personhood (or indeed of any other views of these topics) tells us little about what it means to be and become an individual self – a particular and unique exemplar of humanity and personhood. The subject of selfhood, then, has to be looked at on its own terms, distinct from a discussion of humanity and personhood. This discussion, and Rorty's own particular elucidation of selfhood, is taken up in the next section.

1.2   The self

The distinction I have drawn between humans, persons and selves is a matter at some level of focus on sameness and difference. What makes us human is what we share with all other members of our species – in Rorty's terms, our capacity for socialisation, acculturation and language, together with our capacity to feel pain and humiliation. What makes us a self is a unique constellation of attributes and valuations, "our accidental idiosyncrasies" (1986c: 148), what Rorty calls in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* he calls our private final vocabulary.

It is the in-between category of personhood which is in some sense undecided. Personhood would seem to involve an individual's belonging to some group, but how big a group? Just my tribe or all

of humanity? I wish to emphasise, again, that the distinction between humans, selves and persons is not one which Rorty himself draws. On the contrary, when he makes claims of Geras's type (f) above (cf. page 14) – that to be a human being is to be a particular person with a particular history, in a particular cultural community – he seems rather to conflate humanness, personhood and selfhood. I believe, however, that if we resist that conflation and use these distinctions as a heuristic a great deal of clarity can be shed on Rorty's own ideas. Having drawn the distinction I will leave it in abeyance for the moment as I turn to look at Rorty's own vocabulary before showing how the imposed new distinction helps to clarify what is important in his ideas.

In this section I begin with Rorty's first substantive accounts of selfhood, the communitarian account first articulated in a series of articles written in the 1980s (especially 1983a). I look at the criticisms levelled at this early conception and then go on to argue that in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* Rorty develops a conception which deals with many of these criticisms. The new conception is rooted in an idea of a final vocabulary which gives rise to new problems with some of the older problems still hanging on in there.

Rorty's view of the self is most bluntly stated in "Inquiry as recontextualization" where Rorty (1991d: 93) says the self is a self-weaving web and then immediately restates that claim in case we miss the point, or take it to be a mere metaphor:

> there is no self distinct from this self-weaving web. All there is to the human self is just that web.

A possible reason for his being so emphatic on this point is that Rorty (1987a:123) thinks that ordinary language, or "common speech", suggests a picture of the self which "has" mental states, including beliefs and desires, and stands in some way distinct from them choosing between them. While we cannot avoid common speech and so, Rorty suggests, must always seem to be committed to some distinct "I", we can learn ways of rethinking that "I" so that at the very least we do not imagine that we are committed to some "True Self", some inner unchanging core. We can rethink this "I" in the way that Rorty (1987a:123) does in relation to Kant:

> Kant's argument that the "I think" must accompany all my representations can, on this view, be construed not as an argument for a quasi-substantial background for beliefs and desires ... but simply as a way of pointing out that to have one belief or desire is automatically to have many – that to have a belief or desire is to have one strand in a large web. The "I" which is presupposed by any given representation is just the rest of the representations which are associated with the first.

Placed into the context of debates in political philosophy Rorty (1983a: 199) argues that we should think of the self as:

> not one of Rawls's original choosers, somebody who can distinguish her *self* from her talents and interests and views about the good, but as a network of beliefs, desires, and emotions with nothing behind it – no substrate behind the attributes.

Rorty goes further, however, in situating this network self communally. So, for instance, Rorty (1983a: 199) says of rationality:

> rational behavior is just adaptive behavior of a sort which roughly parallels the behavior, in similar circumstances, of the other members of some relevant community. Irrationality, in both physics and ethics, is a matter of behavior that leads one to abandon, or be stripped of, membership in some such community. For some purposes this adaptive behavior is aptly described as "learning" or "computing" or "redistribution of electrical charges in neural tissue," and for others as "deliberation" or "choice".

Since the rationality of the self is essentially a social matter it is not difficult to see how Rorty would get from here to a communitarian conception of human dignity. Arguing that we cannot understand ourselves apart from our loyalties and convictions and that those inevitably tie us to communities, Rorty (1983a: 200) contends that the community alone gives moral force to our convictions:

> There is no "ground" for such loyalties and convictions save the fact that the beliefs and desires and emotions which buttress them overlap those of lots of other members of the groups with which we identify for purposes of moral or political deliberations, and the further fact that these are *distinctive* features of that group, features which it uses to construct its self-image through contrasts with other groups.

As a consequence of this, human dignity comes to be a matter of belonging to a group with dignity, which is itself a matter of favourable comparison with other groups. Thus in so far as, and only in so far as, one belongs to a community which compares favourably with other communities, one has human dignity. The basis for such comparison is to be found not in philosophy but in the arts which Rorty (1983a: 200) says:

> serve to develop and modify a group's self-image by, for example, apotheosizing its heroes, diabolizing its enemies, mounting dialogues among its members, and refocusing its attention.

In this first attempt to offer an account of the self which fits with his ideas about society and political institutions Rorty understands the self as, in my terms, a person.

While personhood is the only category by which Rorty understands the self at this stage, his formulation of his ideas in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a) leaves, it would seem at first glance, no space for the category of personhood at all. In *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a) Rorty offers us a picture of two competing tendencies – those of the poet and the philosopher. Philosophers seek to escape contingency, to find some universal truth(s) about humanness; poets on the other hand seek to find in contingency their own individuality and to find some language in which to express their own uniqueness as a way to establish that they are something more than a mere copy or replica or instantiation of a type. Put another way, Rorty sees philosophers as seeking humanness above all, while the poets strive only for selfhood.

Rorty views these tendencies as competing across the culture, rather than, as I would suggest might be more appropriate, competing within individuals. So, for example, he associates the first tendency with thinkers like Plato and Kant and the second with thinkers like Nietzsche. Rorty (1989a: 35) then suggests that Freud offers a way out of any impasse between these two tendencies:

> It has often seemed necessary to choose between Kant and Nietzsche, to make up one's mind – at least to *that* extent – about the point of being human. But Freud gives us a way of looking at human beings which helps us evade the choice. After reading Freud we shall see neither Bloom's strong poet nor Kant's dutiful fulfiller of universal obligations as paradigmatic. For Freud himself eschewed the very idea of a paradigm human nature, an intrinsic set of powers to be developed or left undeveloped. By breaking with both Kant's residual Platonism and Nietzsche's inverted Platonism, he lets us see both Nietzsche's superman and Kant's common moral consciousness as exemplifying two out of many forms of adaptation, two out of many strategies for coping with the contingencies of one's upbringing ... .

Freud, Rorty thinks, gives us a way of seeing everyone as a poet engaged in the act of creating their own way of coping, their own story, their own self. What is crucial in this way of looking at the self is imagination. And it is imagination which, for Rorty, fuels change. From this perspective, not only is everyone a poet but philosophy, science and any other human activity is itself a form of poetry – a creation of a new, and ultimately idiosyncratic language, to make sense of the contingency. This is something which Rorty emphasizes in an interview with Ragg (2002: 370):

> Politicians and theologians and engineers think imaginatively just as much as literary people do.

In this new reading the crucial direction of flow of beliefs and language is not from community to individual but from individual to community. The languages we speak, Rorty claims (1989a: 37) are simply literalised metaphors springing originally from personal pursuits:

The difference between genius and fantasy is not the difference between impresses which lock on to something universal, some antecedent reality out there in the world or deep with the self, and those which do not. Rather, it is the difference between idiosyncrasies which just happen to catch on with other people – happen because of the contingencies of some historical situation, some particular need which a given community happens to have at a given time.

Those who have this effect on culture Rorty labels "strong poets" and in the interview with Ragg (2002: 371) Rorty clarifies this notion:

Yes, it's just a term I picked up from Harold Bloom and extended a bit. It seemed a handy piece of terminology to use when emphasizing the fact that people like Plato and Galileo and Marx, people with great imaginations, people who altered the vocabularies with which we think about various matters, were no more offering conclusive arguments, or indeed anything much in the way of argument at all, for their views than poets. They just put their new visions on the table and made it possible for us to occupy a different perspective. So I adopted the term strong poet to denote anyone with a lot of imagination who has the courage to try to make everything in his or her field new, to change the way we look at things.

Trembath (1989: 172) notes a curious ambiguity in Rorty's metaphors – he "attempts to pass off his own metaphors as inventions and common-sensical insights simultaneously". Trembath (1989: 173) thinks that this points to an incipient realism in Rorty's work – the point is made with respect to Derrida but might be any other thinker:

If Rorty really thought that Derrida was just setting up old metaphors to qualify deconstructive ones – if he really felt that philosophy dealt with *tropes* instead of *issues* – he would not bother to disagree with Derrida. He might encourage us to use metaphors more like his own for the sheer love of affecting how his readers think, but he would never allow himself to imply that his metaphors were less "artificial" than Derrida's. He would thus truly conceive of metaphors as "ways of speaking" and not as means to obtain what he implies should be *genuinely* useful descriptions of things.

Putting this together with what Rorty had said earlier suggests the following sort of feedback loop: we are born into a language community, but each of us will employ the words of that language in idiosyncratic ways to describe, explain and justify ourselves, to give ourselves and our world meaning. Most people's personal and idiosyncratic uses will remain simply that – personal and idiosyncratic – while those of others (Rorty's "strong poets") become generalised and part of the background language into which future generations are born.

Reeves (1986: 353) argues that thinking in this way with Rorty gives us no way to understand what motivates historical change:

> For the only motive conceivable on Rorty's Kuhnian/language-game analysis is the desire for poetic variation, for a new blockbuster trope. Human beings, with what so long had appeared a variety of interests, values, motives, really desire nothing so much as undifferentiated novelty, strangeness, a good defamiliarizing tingle. The aspiring scientist, philosopher, littérateur, or cultural commentator will succeed only to the extent he fulfills this desire on the part of his audience.

I think Reeves is wrong here. The novelty Rorty identifies is a consequence of, rather than a replacement for, our attempts to understand ourselves and our world. Novelty in any field – private or public – is necessary in so far as existing language, based as it must be in consensus and common usage, seems to leave aspects of the subject matter unaccounted for. A new metaphor or language will, despite Rorty's (1989a: 37) claim, succeed not simply by virtue of being new, but by virtue of at least seeming to its audience to say something both new and interesting about the matter at hand. Novelties that do not have that feature will remain eccentric and particular. Rorty's (1987c: 172) point is merely that, as he puts it, we have no way of knowing "prospectively" whether any particular metaphor will turn out retrospectively to have found a use or to be mere "babble" or "idle paradox-mongering" .

If we take our heuristic grid of humanness, personhood and selfhood and attempt to fit it over what Rorty says, we find something like the following. The self is that unique set of idiosyncratic descriptions and words or metaphors to which Rorty refers. The self is shaped by its experiences, including its experiences of other selves, other words, descriptions and metaphors. The self is born into a language community and will share some, though not all, of its language with that community. Since a self simply is a language or vocabulary and there is nothing more to the self than that, the most it can share with others is a language, and since there is no universal language there is nothing universal for all humans to share. Thus there is no distinct humanness to be had. Rorty does not seem here to even have a concept of personhood since although the self is part of a community, that community has no moral force. Moral descriptions are simply one possible and contingent component of some selves' language, they are not in any way necessary. All we have then are selves.

Despite the loss of any necessary moral content to the self (i.e. through the denial of personhood) Rorty's selves are nevertheless evaluative beings at some deep level. For what is inescapable for every self is what Rorty calls its "final vocabulary". Rorty (1989a: 73) defines a "final vocabulary" as follows:

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

This is "final", Rorty (1989a: 73) claims, because:

if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse. Those words are as far as he can go with language; beyond them there is only helpless passivity or a resort to force.

Although Rorty is here caught in the language of common sense and it might seem that there is a self who has a final vocabulary, I think we must take seriously Rorty's earlier point and recognize that the self simply is that final vocabulary; if the words in my final vocabulary change I become a different self; if they are lost to me, I lose myself. Williams (2003: 72) brings out the force of the finality of this vocabulary:

a final vocabulary is one whose worth cannot be defended in a noncircular way. Since circular justification is worthless, commitments articulated with the aid of one's final vocabulary cannot be justified at all. In particular, they cannot be justified in the face of alternative final vocabularies.

Of course, it is not the case that every word I use has this force, many words I will use carelessly and conventionally. Rorty's point is only that some sub-set of words will matter for each of us in that they will in some real sense be who we are, and that those words are in that sense "final".

Hollis (1990: 254) has expressed deep concern about this way of viewing the self: the idea of an I distinct from my beliefs and desires (or, we might add, final vocabulary) is, Hollis argues, not just a metaphor but an expression of how we actually experience the world and thus what is required, according to Hollis (1990: 254), is some idea of an active agent directing behaviour.

There is certainly something to Hollis' claim. Evidence suggests that we are all innately common sense dualists who distinguish a self from its body and actions and see the self as directing the latter. But as Bloom (2004) points out, the fact that we are common sense dualists does not mean that dualism is true, only that there must have been some adaptive evolutionary consequence of our getting it wrong in this way. And, we might add, the fact that we tend to see ourselves as *using*

words may not entail that we are not *qua* selves simply words, the "I" may turn out to be a metaphor, after all.

But if we are to give up common sense, if we are to understand selves as final vocabularies, then it appears that Rorty must give us some detailed account of final vocabularies and their genesis. In other words, Rorty owes us some account of self-creation. Unfortunately he does not do so only offering us tantalizing hints in that direction. I want to try to spell out what Rorty might say by investigating what I take to be the crucial term in his account of the self – contingency. In so-doing I hope to dispel a number of criticisms to which Rorty's account has been subjected and which I think can be demonstrated to be spurious.

No self arises *ex nihilo*; it arises in a pre-existing set of circumstances, which impose on it a horizon of possibility. These circumstances include physical and biological constraints as well as political, economic, cultural and linguistic ones. As Elshtain (2003: 150) reminds us:

> The development of the individual is, of course, contingent in many ways: no one selects his or her parents, place or culture of birth, and so on, but it is not arbitrary. Development has a teleological thrust; it bears within it the seeds of possibility. That possibility is best understood as an attempt to work out what it means to be free and to be responsible in the light of predeterminations of an embodied sort and determinations of a cultural sort.

A self creates itself against this background and uses the resources available to it. It is for this reason that I think Bromwich (1998: 589) is simply wrong when he argues that one of Rorty's limitations is that:

> Rorty's pragmatism is to some extent antipsychological, and he is reluctant to think that capitalism, or any other system of life, can deeply change people's habits of mind.

Dews (2002b: 259) is likewise wrong, I would argue, when he offers the following account of Rorty's stance on tradition:

> For Rorty, thought is not inextricably interwoven with the movement of tradition, for which one should therefore try to acquire as much sensitivity as possible. Rather, on his account we need to develop our awareness of the tradition only in order to come to the conclusion that we can consign it to the scrapheap without any major loss.

According to my reading of Rorty, he recognises that all sorts of factors shape our thought. He does not, however, it must be admitted, spell out in detail how any particular background feature –

be that capitalism or human physiology – constrains self-creation; he merely bundles these features together under the rubric of contingency.

Lom (1999: 449-50) notes that in contrast to earlier thinkers like Nietzsche and Heidegger, Rorty's recognition of contingency comes with no feeling of despair or meaninglessness. In fact, profound anxiety about contingency has a much longer history than this. The modern political project – as exemplified, for example, by Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and Marx – might be read as an attempt to overcome contingency because it results in unfreedom. For Rorty, on the contrary, contingency is something not to be overcome or even merely accepted but perhaps to be celebrated. For as Lom (1999: 449) notes, Rorty, far from understanding contingency as a source of unfreedom, thinks of freedom in terms of contingency:

> Richard Rorty characterizes freedom as the recognition of contingency, a recognition that human beings no longer are beholden to any higher natural or divine order and so are free to live however they may desire.

Rorty's account of contingency is, I contend, deeply unsatisfactory because it is ambiguous. Shusterman (1994: 398), for one, points to Rorty's equivocation on the notion of contingency:

> Rorty's argument conflates contingency as what is "not logically or ontologically necessary" with contingency as what is "entirely random and idiosyncratic"; it reflects the false presumption that we have either necessity or random chaos.

And Topper (1995: 958-9) expands on this when he notes that Rorty uses the term contingency in two ways that are perhaps contradictory and certainly in tension:

> First, he uses it in a way that links it to notions of novelty, innovation, originality, and creativity. In these instances ... *contingency* is meant to pinpoint some domain or space that is devoid of any immanent nature or logic and therefore also open to innovation, transformation, and redescription … . Understood in this way, Rorty's invocation of contingency moves between a restatement of the undeniable fact that human beings and human history are something more than the combined effects of culture and nature and a voluntarist notion that the only impediments to human change and transformation are those set by the human will itself.

> On the other hand, Rorty frequently uses the term *contingency* in a quite different manner, identifying it not with the powers and possibilities of human innovation but with notions of chance, luck, accident, randomness, and fortuitousness ... it implies uncontrollable and unpredictable forces or events that shape our lives in decisive ways.

It would seem, thus, that Rorty uses the term contingency, to point to three different features of human life. The first of these is what we might characterise as the randomness of fate, or luck, what Rorty himself, borrowing from Philip Larkin, calls "blind impresses".   Elshtain (2003: 149) is surely right, in this regard, when she draws out the implications of Rorty's invocation of the "blind impress":

> One way or the other, Rorty is depicting conditioning – conditioning that he doesn't sort out into the biological and historical, although "blind impress" suggests both.

It is recognition of contingency in this sense that led many existentialist thinkers to feelings of angst and dread. It is the attempt to overcome contingency in this sense which motivates the modern political project. The second feature is the recognition that sheer luck never fully determines who we become, that human beings are more than mere puppets of the gods, and that human agency can affect the world. The third feature is a suggestion that anything is possible; that human beings are freed from any constraint, except their own determination.

An example may clarify these three uses in the contingency of a single life. Imagine, Ntombi, a girl born to a poor family in rural KwaZulu-Natal. Her life is contingent in the first sense in that she is a victim of bad luck.   Her chances for decent healthcare, education, and employment are all compromised by her being born into this family at this time. Nevertheless, because of contingency in the second sense, we need not despair about Ntombi's fate. There are things we as a society can do to ameliorate her social conditions and enhance her life chances – invest in rural clinics and schools, offer free and compulsory education, give Ntombi first place in the affirmative action stakes, and there are things she can do – work hard at school, abstain from unsafe sex, form or join some kind of grassroots activist movement.   Contingency in the third sense, however, obliterates our concern for Ntombi; it alleviates us from any responsibility for her condition. We simply acknowledge that she has a hard row to hoe, hope she has the determination to succeed despite her background, and leave her to make the best (or worst) of her life according to the choices she makes with the resources she has. Ntombi is no longer hostage to fate, but she is a hostage to herself.

Given the overall tenor of Rorty's liberalism I think it would be extremely unfair to attribute this last reading of contingency to him without further investigation. Certainly Rorty holds that contingency in the first sense is simply a given. But it is his belief in contingency in the second sense that gives his philosophy its sense of optimism and hope. To buy into contingency in the third sense would be a form of cruelty. Is it one of which Rorty is guilty? Numerous critics think so and point to a tension in Rorty's view of agency between determinism, on the one hand, and voluntarism, on the other.

Elshtain (2003: 148), for instance, suggests that Rorty is left with only the first and third forms of contingency:

> the absence of an "intrinsic" human nature or of moral obligations that are preprogrammed leads Rorty into a world that is at one and the same time too open and plastic ("any and every dream") or too constricted ("blind impress").

Topper (1995: 959) concurs, arguing that Rorty's equivocation on the question of contingency has its corollary in a further ambivalence about human agency which locks Rorty into a "dichotomy between voluntarism and determinism". Topper claims that:

> Rorty vacillates between an "anything goes" vision of human agency in which our capacities for personal or social transformation are limited only by the powers of our individual or collective imaginations and a vision in which efforts to shape one's self and one's world are every bit as uncontrollable as in the most deterministic and totalizing philosophical systems.

Mounce (1997: 201), too, suggests that Rorty's position is contradictory in trying to combine determinism and voluntarism:

> Thus he affirms, on the one hand, that our activities are the product of chance or blind causation, and, on the other, that it is we who make our values … . The idea seems to be that since human beings have no metaphysical nature, they are free to make of themselves what they wish, and are enabled to do so by the power of language and of art in general. But in order to make themselves what they wish, human beings would need to be free, not simply of all metaphysical constraints, but also of all natural ones.

Kuipers (1997: 86) makes a similar point, from a slightly more charitable position, by contrasting Rorty's position with Derrida's:

> Rorty has a stronger sense of the self as agent than does Derrida. Many read Rorty to say that we pick and choose between various vocabularies for different purposes. For Derrida, on the other hand, it is more true to say that we are at the mercy of the differential play of language, than it is to say that language is at our disposal ... . The kind of agency that Rorty here ascribes to the individual sits in tension with his description of the self as "a centreless web of beliefs and desires," and the human as an animal that is socialization all the way down.

I think Topper is correct in linking the ambivalence about human agency to the ambivalence about contingency. I think all four of these statements of the criticism that Rorty is caught between determinism and voluntarism, miss the point, however. In each case we can make an association

with determinism and contingency in the first sense, on the one hand, and voluntarism and contingency in the third sense. The apparent tension in Rorty's thought disappears, though, if we focus on the second sense of contingency. The picture that emerges then is one that Topper (1995: 959) espouses, one which recognizes that neither voluntarism nor determinism reflect our actual condition:

> Our capacity for self-creation or imagination is *not* unlimited; it is instead partly constituted, and therefore also partly constrained, by past and present social, cultural, and linguistic practices. These practices not only privilege certain imaginative and creative efforts over others but also partly constitute the categories of "novelty" and "originality," thus distinguishing them both from eccentricity, insanity, silliness, the quixotic, and so on ... . Conversely, it may be true that there are countless unanticipated and uncontrollable events that in one way or another shape the course of our lives, but precisely *what* effect they have on us and *how* we respond to them is neither fully predetermined nor entirely a matter of "chance." Rather, these things are delimited both by material forces and by the horizons of our individual and social self-understandings – horizons that, importantly, simultaneously make meaning possible and limit the possible domain of meaning.

Topper offers the above as a response to Rorty. I want to argue that it is better understood as a restatement of Rorty's position, albeit a clearer statement of it than Rorty himself makes. Understood thus, the self (*qua* final vocabulary) emerges from the interplay of the individual and its social and physical world in a way that is not determined although it may be determinate. The project of self-creation can be understood as the conscious efforts of an individual to understand the forces that shape it and to direct the shape it will take in the future. Self-creation is thus best understood as a form of the aesthetic ideal, as Shusterman (1994: 396-7) points out, for Rorty:

> Realizing oneself is not a matter of fulfilling any fixed general essence of human or citizen, conforming to a predetermined moral or social formula legislated by nature or society. It is rather a particularized creative project of individual growth, a Nietzschean project of becoming what you are, by using one's particular conditions, talents, inclinations, and opportunities to mold oneself into a richer, more attractive person who will enjoy more satisfying and rewarding experiences with greater frequency and stability.

Put this way Rorty's idea of the self seems to be purely self-directed, and it has been criticised, as indeed are all forms of the aesthetic ideal, for failing to take morality sufficiently seriously. Surely, it seems, at least to many, that some values are more worthy than others, in particular it seems that purely self-regarding values are less important than other-regarding ones. Should we not have some way of ensuring that all selves are – in my terminology – persons, too? Thus Shusterman (1994: 397) points Rorty in the direction of Dewey, one of Rorty's heroes, who while sharing an

aesthetic ideal of self, insists that self-realisation has an irreducibly public element:

> For Dewey, self-realization requires active participation in the public sphere and in the business of government ... . Since the individual is always affected by her environing conditions, she must take an active interest in the managing of her community and in the common good of her fellow citizens who interact with and impact on her.

Shusterman (1994: 399) thinks that without such a public element Rorty's notion of the self may be somewhat incoherent and certainly lacking in character:

> Rorty's view of the self as a random composite of incompatible quasi selves constantly seeking new possibilities and multiple changing vocabularies seems indeed the ideal self for postmodern consumer society: a fragmented, confused self, hungrily enjoying as many new commodities as it can, but lacking the firm integrity to challenge either its habits of consumption or the system that manipulates and profits from them.

Aside from the fact that the idea of the self as "a random composite of incompatible quasi selves" sounds a great deal more like Nietzsche's view than Rorty's, Shusterman's complaint amounts to saying that on Rorty's vision of self-creation we may end up with a society filled with selves that he personally (and perhaps we too, if we share Shusterman's preferences) would not like. I think Rorty can simply bite the bullet on that one. Yes we may end up with such a result but having a theory of self-creation that insisted that selves had moral content and a public orientation, would not make more human beings become the sort of people that Shusterman admires, it would simply make fewer human beings qualify as selves. This is the consequence, for instance, of Charles Taylor's (1989) view: having insisted that to be a self is to be oriented in moral space, he simply has to admit that many of the people we meet in our societies are not selves, by his lights. Such a dismissal of tracts of the human populace seems a high price to pay for a purely theoretical gain.

More serious are criticisms to the effect that without some moral content self-creation cannot meaningfully occur. This line of thought underlies Guignon's (1986: 413) criticism that Rorty makes choice meaningless:

> For Rorty's pragmatist, whatever *seems* good *is* good. There can be no reason for eliminating poverty rather than eliminating the poor, for exploring space rather than playing Space Invaders, for preferring conservationists to conservatives, other than our temporary and transient values. Since ends and means are always in the same bag, up in the air, ready to be shifted with the next free invention of a vocabulary, there is no way to reflect on whether what we want is what we *should* want. And, as a result, there seems to be no room for a stable vision of what is important in life, or for a sense of enduring demands for our allegiance. The Enlightenment

ideal of final autonomy and self-determination leaves us in a position, as Philip Rieff says, of "being freed to choose and then having no choice worth making".

There is, of course, an irony here in seeing Rorty's view as simply one more expression of a generalized Enlightenment picture, but I will not pursue that line since there are two more serious claims to be evaluated in what Guignon says. The first is the claim that from Rorty's perspective "whatever seems good is good", the second is that without enduring and stable visions and values individuals' choices are meaningless. The second of these is the sort of view that Rorty rails against consistently. We simply do not have enduring and stable visions and values, a glance at history and anthropology is enough to assure us of that. But the lack of such enduring values is precisely what makes our own choices matter so much – we are creating our world as we create ourselves. Moreover that we do not have stable and enduring values does not entail that we do not have a background of values against which to choose, merely that those values are not universal, absolute or anything more than contingent. That is why the individualised claim that what seems good is good is incorrect. Individuals are already subjected in their society and culture to certain norms and values, if their vision of the good life differs substantially from that of their surrounding culture they will find themselves in a position of having to justify it, if only to themselves, and in so doing they will no doubt be forced to separate out the seeming and the being and resolve the tension in some way. Guignon wants us to sort out the difference for them and to force them to make the right choice: DO explore space; DON'T play Space Invaders. On what conceivable basis do we do that other than through our own contingent social and individual preferences? As was the case with Shusterman we can enforce our choice either practically (with some form of totalitarianism) or theoretically (but with no actual effect). What we cannot do is both take individuality or selfhood seriously as a good and a goal and then insist that it take forms that we approve of.

Another variant of this sort of criticism is the following from Mounce (1997: 201):

> Indeed Rorty's view that a human being in this [the private] sphere may recreate himself seems to ignore the very nature of good and evil. For example, if I recognise in myself a moral deficiency, I recognise a deficiency in *myself*. This may be contrasted with my recognising a deficiency I have in some skill or accomplishment. Suppose, to take a trivial example, that I recognise my swing in golf is in some way deficient. Still, if I change my stance and keep practising I can reasonably hope to overcome it. That presupposes, of course, that I want to do so, that I approach my task with undivided will. Now if I recognise in myself a moral deficiency, precisely what I recognise is that my will is not undivided. For example, suppose that I recognise in myself certain malicious tendencies. It is not that although I do not want to hurt other people, I find through some deficiency that I often happen to do so. What I recognise is

that I *do* want to hurt other people. It is not that I am a human being with a deficiency; I am a deficient human being.

Now, it is by no means clear what is meant by the ability to recreate oneself but it suggests an ability to be found only amongst those whose faults are so incidental to themselves that they stand on the very verge of perfection. In that case, however, what Rorty says is of no use to the rest of us; the problem for the rest of us is how to get into that condition.

There are two problems I think, with what Mounce says here. The first is that he misdiagnoses the causes of evil. Baumeister (1997) argues (and provides considerable empirical evidence to support his argument) that the idea of evildoers taking pleasure in their cruelty is more myth than reality; that most evil is done in response to a perceived slight or hurt which the perpetrators consider explains and perhaps even justifies their response. To the extent that they admit their response is an overreaction, they see their behaviour as isolated and incidental to who they are. Thus good is not simply a matter of single-minded will, nor evil of a divided will. Even if we were to accept the idea that a person might in some sense, for whatever reason, come to see themselves as a deficient human being it is not at all clear that there is any theory of self which would tell them how to get beyond that to a position being on the "verge of perfection", nor is it at all clear that a theory is what such a person needs rather than something like behavioural therapy.

What the criticisms of Shusterman (1994), Guignon (1986), and Mounce (1997) share is the fact that they are directed not so much against Rorty as against the fact that not all human beings are good, nice and decent (in ways that they would recognise). What they seem to want from Rorty is either to change human reality so that "bad" or "deficient" humans could not exist in the future, or more plausibly to offer some moralising comfort through explicitly labelling such selves as "bad". But the fact that certain people want such a moralistic approach, and the comfort that comes with it, does not place any obligation on Rorty to provide it. Moreover, the fact that he does not take that approach has much to commend it, in that he is not caught in tight theoretical corners or tied into some totalitarian project of perfectionism.

Although Rorty does not moralise, he does offer us a moral ideal of the self – the liberal self, which is the focus of the next section. What he does not do, and his critics would like him to, is to try to make that moral vision universal. He offers the picture, acknowledges the fact that it is in some deep sense merely optional, but then tries to persuade us that it is worth pursuing through his descriptions of it. This, Rorty thinks, is all anyone can do.

1.3 The liberal self

Rorty (1989a: xv) defines liberals as "the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do". He claims to borrow this definition from Judith Shklar, but it is not clear that he does. The relevant passage[1] from Shklar (1984: 8-9) reads as follows:

> To put cruelty first is to disregard the idea of sin as it is understood by revealed religion. Sins are transgressions of a divine rule and offenses against God; pride – the rejection of God – must always be the worst one, which gives rise to all others. However, cruelty – the wilful inflicting of physical pain on a weaker being in order to cause anguish and fear – is a wrong done entirely to *another creature*. When it is marked as the supreme evil it is judged so in and of itself, and not because it signifies a denial of God or any other higher norm. It is a judgment made from within the world in which cruelty occurs as part of our normal private life and our daily public practices. By putting it unconditionally first, with nothing above us to excuse or to forgive acts of cruelty, one closes off any appeal to any order other than that of actuality. To hate cruelty with utmost intensity is perfectly compatible with Biblical religiosity, but to put it *first* does place one irrevocably outside the sphere of revealed religion. For it is a purely human verdict upon human conduct and so puts religion at a certain distance. The decision to put cruelty first is not, however, prompted merely by religious skepticism. It emerges, rather, from the recognition that the habits of the faithful do not differ from those of the faithless in their brutalities, and that Machiavelli had triumphed long before he had ever written a line. To put cruelty first therefore is to be at odds not only with religion but with normal politics as well.

It is not at all clear that Shklar is offering a definition of liberals here. It is true, that Shklar (1984: 32-5) goes on to argue, later in the same chapter, that putting cruelty first leads to liberal consequences – the opening of a gap between morality and politics and with this an emphasis on securing an inviolate private sphere – but it is surely the consequences and not the motivation which mark out liberalism for Shklar. Indeed, in the introduction to *Ordinary vices* Shklar (1984: 2) writes: "Cruelty ... is *often* utterly intolerable for liberals, *because* fear destroys freedom" (emphasis added). Note the qualifying "often" which suggests that either there are occasions on which a liberal might find cruelty tolerable, or that there are some liberals who do not find cruelty intolerable. In either case, it is not their abhorrence of cruelty that defines liberals here, but the reason they give for that abhorrence, namely their attachment to freedom.

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1 We have good reason to believe that this *is* the relevant passage because David Owen (2001:94) quotes the passage and in his response to Owen's article Rorty (2001:111) remarks:

> I particularly appreciate the extensive quotation from Judith Shklar, which helps bring out the connection between liberalism and the renunciation of religious and metaphysical sources for moral convictions. I wish that I had quoted at similar length from those pages of Shklar's in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*.

Manifestly, liberals cannot be defined by a belief that cruelty is the worst thing we do. Liberals of a religious persuasion may well fall into Shklar's category of hating cruelty without putting it first, and yet remain committed liberals; at the same time, among those who do, on reflection, rank cruelty as the worst of our "ordinary vices" may be those who consider themselves conservatives or socialists, without for that reason changing their basic political commitments.

This line of criticism – that politically-speaking liberals cannot be defined by their aversion to cruelty – misses the mark, though, because, I would argue, in defining liberals in terms of cruelty Rorty is demarcating not a political but a moral space. This is a space in which allegiances to particular parties and policies and isms (even liberalism) count little since what is at stake is not these but a particular way of being oneself and being with others. As Cochran (2001: 185) puts it:

> Rorty is interested in the question of the scope of moral relations, but not necessarily the institutional form which that scope takes.

Support for this reading is can be found in Gander (2002: 83) who offers a different citation from Shklar as Rorty's source, namely:

> It seems to me that liberal and humane people, of whom there are many among us, would, if they were asked to rank the vices, put cruelty first. Intuitively they would choose cruelty as the worst thing we do (Shklar 1984: 44).

If Gander is right, and Rorty misremembers the role that *this* passage played in shaping his view then it seems plausible that the "liberal' usage that Rorty is drawing on refers to a character trait rather than a political affiliation.

Why, then, does Rorty misleadingly write of a "liberal" utopia and of "liberal" ironists throughout *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a)? One reason might be a matter of Rorty's style, in particular his use of what I call the badge of commendation. Rorty often adopts this "*geuzennaam*" strategy of identifying the positions he endorses with unpopular, even derogatory, terms. Thus in *Philosophy and the mirror of nature* (1980a) he identifies his ideal philosopher as a "dilettante" (admittedly a polypragmatic and Socratic one), likewise he has embraced labels such as "postmodern" (1983a), "ethnocentric" (1986b) and "fuzzy" (1987b) which his critics have attempted to use to smear him. This is a strategy which seeks to disarm or deflect criticism by turning an intended pejorative into a term of approbation. His adoption of the stance of "liberal" in the hostile American environment of the Reaganite 1980s might be seen as simply another example of this strategy at work. "Liberal" in this context would not stand against, but embrace, "progressive" and "left", as perhaps American, though not British-influenced, readers would take as read. Certainly,

in *Achieving our country* (1998a) where Rorty moves from a vocabulary of "liberals" to one of "leftists" it becomes self-evident that for Rorty the differences between socialists and liberals matter less than their common project to reduce cruelty and increase justice.

This is only part of the story, however, and it must be admitted that Rorty's ideal is ultimately liberal in some more definite and political sense, only a liberal would see Mill as offering "the last word" (1989a: 63) on social organisation, or speak of the creation of a Millian utopia as his "highest hope (1999e: 272). The political aspects of Rorty's brand of liberalism will form the focus of the next two chapters, but it is worth noting in passing that it is difficult to pin Rorty's political liberalism down. As Baker (2002: 222) argues, when Rorty uses the term "liberal" in relation to society we must see it has shorthand for a society "that realizes Rorty's three hopes" which are, according to Baker (2002: 216): the diminishing of suffering and cruelty; the maximising of freedom; and the equalizing of chances for self-creation.

These aims are broad enough, though, to give rise to a diversity of readings.   So for example, Arneson (1992: 476) suggests Rorty's aim is not to defend any particular political views but simply to reconcile liberalism with ironism. Bernstein (2003:125-6), on the other hand, sees a distinct politics at work in Rorty's writing:

> when Rorty speaks of liberalism, it is this image of progressive, reformist politics that is always the background informing what he cherishes and wants to foster. What is most needed today is not "theorizing" or "problematics." but a return to the tradition of reformist Left liberal politics in which intellectuals and workers join together to effect social change. "Return" is not quite accurate, because Rorty isn't backward-looking. He is calling for a new alliance of progressive intellectuals and workers to deal with the horrendous problems of racism, economic inequality, and poverty that still confront our country.

Norris (2002: 351), too, sees a distinct politics in Rorty's work but a very different one to that which Bernstein discerns, arguing, instead, that Rorty's is a "conservative liberalism" based on three ideas, namely: "a mistrust of programmatic theories which claim to transcend and criticize the culture they spring from", emphasis on "the cultural rootedness of ideas and values" and "a kind of intellectual free-market outlook which wants to have done with all restrictive or legitimating checks and controls". These, Norris thinks, must lead Rorty to simply embrace currently existing (rich, North Atlantic) liberal democracies. Norris concludes that:

> Rorty uses the word "liberal" in a sense more akin to current economists' parlance than to anything the mainstream humanist is likely to understand by it.

Whatever the particular political shape of Rorty's liberalism, the focus in this chapter is on the liberal as a moral ideal of selfhood and thus on the nature and avoidance of cruelty. I am suggesting then that we keep distinct two ideas – the liberal (a moral ideal) and liberalism (a political system and ideology).

This separation of the liberal and liberalism will be easier said than done, however, for the secondary literature is rife with cases in which discussions of Rorty's valorisation of cruelty are intertwined with and indistinguishable from critiques of liberalism. This mode of (mis)reading Rorty is exemplified by Baruchello (2004: 305-6). Baruchello aligns himself with conservative thinker John Kekes' two central criticisms of the "liberalism of fear" espoused by Rorty and Shklar. The first criticism is that defining liberalism as opposition to cruelty is mere sloganeering. The second criticism is that it defines away the space for those who oppose cruelty but also oppose liberalism. Kekes, according to Baruchello (2004: 306) wishes to hold on to that space because:

> Liberalism, by defending and promoting freedom as the fundamental value, digs the grave for peaceful coexistence, and, in fact, allows for more open spaces in which cruelty can occur.

Baruchello (2004: 306-8) also points to the work of 18th-century philosopher and penologist Cesare Beccaria's recognition that in both the penal and economic spheres liberalism is ineradicably cruel:

> the institutions of penal justice and the right to property cannot but foster cruelty: the former by adopting it instrumentally, the latter by creating circumstances in which the former must be applied.

The point, though, is that Rorty does not define liberalism as opposition to cruelty (which would indeed be mere sloganeering), instead he defines liberals as individuals who oppose cruelty. Of course, Rorty himself does endorse a version of liberalism, and of course, any individual who opposes cruelty will likely seek its amelioration in our social life; but in and of itself being a moral liberal does not entail endorsing any version of liberalism, much less endorsing the cruel aspects of any particular liberal system of socio-political organization.

This intertwining of cruelty and liberalism in readings such as those of Baruchello and Kekes is made easier by two facts. The first is that Rorty does not adequately draw the distinction between liberals and liberalism, which I think is so crucial to understanding his work. The second is that Rorty leaves the notion of cruelty itself quite vague and no more fully defined than implying that it means to cause pain or suffering.

In order to appreciate the moral quality of the liberal ideal, though, it may seem that we need to be able to give some substance to the notion of cruelty which according to Rorty is the worst thing we can do. This is a point articulated by Horton (2001: 25) who writes:

> Standardly what people think makes the difference to whether or not I am being cruel (or if it is preferred whether the cruelty is okay) is whether or not I am justified.

Horton (2001: 26), himself, thinks that Rorty can deal with this problem simply by offering a greater specification and typology of cruelty:

> One does not need to be a liberal to agree that cruelty, if not literally the worst thing we do, is none the less very bad. It is only that the behaviour that non-liberals think is cruel would, in some instances at least, differ from what a liberal would regard as cruel ... . So what Rorty needs to say more about is the content of cruelty ... . But I see no reason that Rorty could not say more. We simply need a "thicker" description of what it is to be a liberal.

Rosenberg (1993: 209), however, suggests that a greater specification of cruelty simply will not do the trick:

> sometimes the worst thing we do is nothing, and sometimes "cruelty" doesn't even *begin* to describe the worst things we do ... To put a point on it, cruelty, will be the worst thing we do only if "cruelty" is very broadly drawn indeed, only if "cruelty" expands to subsume all the ways we have of behaving immorally or indecently toward one another. As one would expect, then, Rorty puts "cruelty" ... through his patented distinction-obliterating sense-expander.

In Rorty's defence it might be argued that Rorty really does want us to pay more attention to "all the ways we have of behaving immorally or indecently toward one another". He certainly would resist defining cruelty too tightly lest new cases of immoral and indecent behaviour came to light which we felt we were entitled to ignore on the grounds that they did not qualify as cruelty. Such considerations do not necessarily offer Rorty much support, however. They suggest rather that Rorty needs a more detailed, textured and distinction-filled account of immoral behaviour that allows us to recognize it in its multiplicity of forms and that a blanket opposition to cruelty will not do the job.

Rosenberg (1993: 210) offers two different cases in which immorality occurs but cruelty does not seem to be the best description of the situation. The first concerns someone who seeing starving children on television responds by admiring their "delicate bone structure". In such a case, Rosenberg argues:

"cruel" seems somehow off the mark. "Callous" comes closer, or "heartless", "cold", "unfeeling". Its not that they don't *notice* the suffering. They simply don't *care*.

Rosenberg's (1993: 210) second example is the fictional story of *Brave New World* in regard to which he points out that:

surely the Alphas weren't *cruel* to the Deltas. For weren't the Deltas *happy*? Of course they were. And yet, for all that, hadn't *something* horrible been done to them?

I think these two examples are particularly illuminating and do indeed point to a limitation of Rorty's notion of the liberal self and its single-minded concern with cruelty. What we have in both cases is behaviour that strikes us as abominable, but Rosenberg is correct in suggesting that neither case is one of cruelty. The aesthete is indifferent to the suffering that he observes, but he does not cause it, and so is not cruel; the Deltas do not experience pain and suffering and so judge that no cruelty has been done to them by the Alphas. Though we, the readers, recognize that a wrong has been done in this latter case, cruelty does not seem to capture that particular kind of wrong.

The first of Rosenberg's examples, that of the callous aesthete, is the sort of case that Shusterman (1994), Mounce (1986) and Guignon (1997) (section 1.2 above) have in mind when they argue that a theory of self is not enough, that some account of personhood is necessary. Rosenberg (1993: 210) focuses primarily on the second example but draws from it the same conclusion:

Unless there's a way people *ought* to be, something that human beings *ought to be able to become*, that is, [there is] no way to object to making a happy pig out of every potentially unhappy Socrates. Why not simply freely distribute crack in the ghettos or, hey, isn't there something we could slip into their *drinking water*?

I argued above that simply insisting that all selves become persons won't change human behaviour, and will simply result in there being fewer humans who qualify as having a self. It might seem, though, that Rosenberg's objection, directed as it is not merely against the notion of the self but against the liberal self, carries more weight. The liberal self, after all, is integrally a moral self. Is the liberal self not then Rorty's ideal of personhood? It is not. It is not an ideal of personhood in the sense that Rosenberg wants, nor in the sense that I use it. It is an ideal which Rorty espouses which he tries to persuade us to adopt, but it is not an ideal which he thinks tells us about the way people "ought to be" or even what they "ought to be able to become". It is simply an ideal offered for our consideration and described by Rorty in ways that he thinks will make it attractive to us. It is, nevertheless, at the end of the day only one option among many. Nor would offering an account of personhood help us out of the problematic for all of the reasons adduced in section 1.2 above.

What is required, I think, is what Rosenberg originally suggested: namely, a more substantial account of cruelty itself, and more distinctions among the ways in which we behave badly without being cruel; in other words, a more diverse and substantive moral vocabulary. Unfortunately this is something with which Rorty does not provide us. Indeed the only significant way in which Rorty adds substance to his notion of cruelty is to draw attention to one particular form of cruelty – namely humiliation.

As Rorty describes it, humiliation is a sort of cruelty which hangs on the use of language and in particular our powers of redescription, most significantly our powers to redescribe each other. As Rorty points out (1989a: 89):

> most people do not want to be redescribed. They want to be taken on their own terms – taken seriously just as they are and just as they talk ... the best way to cause people long-lasting pain is to humiliate them by making the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete, and powerless.

No doubt Rorty is correct in reminding us of the power of words to harm us in very acute ways. Moreover, since the self is on Rorty's reading, a set of descriptions, words, a final vocabulary, the wounds inflicted by words can go very deep indeed – it is the very self that is threatened. This is a point that I think Margalit, for example, misses. Margalit (1996: 9) defines humiliation as "any sort of behaviour or condition that constitutes a sound reason for a person to consider his or her self-respect injured". And using that definition Margalit (1996: 120) points to the following paradox:

> [If] the humiliation is merely justified criticism, then it should change the way people evaluate themselves without damaging their self-respect. And if it is unjustified, then it should not even diminish their self-esteem, let alone damage their self-respect.

This is also the sort of case Horton (2001: 25) has in mind in giving us the example of our interacting with white supremacists. Perhaps in challenging such people's views we run the risk of being cruel, humiliating them, and thereby causing them to suffer. He points out that:

> [T]here is a gap between cruelty ... and causing other suffering ... . [T]here are occasions when causing others suffering is not being cruel at all, and when the liberal is likely to be in favour of it ... . It is perhaps a virtue of Rorty's position that he reminds us that however much we detest the white supremacist's views we should not forget that he too has feelings and can suffer. But this can hardly be an argument for refusing to challenge his views.

When Rorty talks about humiliation, though, his paradigm case is not criticism which does indeed point to issues of self-respect, but something more like a total dismissal, a suggestion that the others' vocabulary, their beliefs are not even worth the dignity of criticism. In such a case it is not merely self-respect which is at stake but the whole value of the self.

One does have to wonder, though, how often humiliation is really an issue. The answer is probably more often than we ordinarily think, but less often than Rorty's overemphasis on this one form of cruelty may lead us to suppose.

Rorty's paradigm case of humiliation is O'Brien's treatment of Winston in *1984.* This and cases like it are an extreme (though still too frequent) form of cruelty. In such instances we are dealing not merely with cruelty but sadism and such sadism has two features: the first, of which Rorty says nothing, is that the sadist gets pleasure from the cruelty which he inflicts; the second, of which Rorty makes a great deal, is that such sadism employs the means of inflicting physical pain to cause humiliation so profound that the self is destroyed. As Rorty (1989a: 177-8) vividly claims:

> the worst thing you can do to somebody is not to make her scream in agony but to use that agony in such a way that even when the agony is over, she cannot reconstitute herself. The idea is to get her to do or say things – and, if possible, believe and desire things, think thoughts – which later she will be unable to cope with having done or thought.

It is in light of this claim that James Conant (2000: 288) remarks that:

> Beneath the surface one glimpses … the thought that what is really the worst thing you can do to somebody is (not cruelty *per se*, but rather) to bring it about (by whatever means) that someone is unable to reconstitute herself (cruelty simply being one extremely effective *means* of achieving this end).

The danger with pursuing this line of thought is that we may lose sight of cruelty altogether and imagine that our moral obligations are only at stake when the very worst of the worst is happening and the totality of someone's self is at stake. An advantage of keeping the idea of cruelty vague is to try to stop us from becoming fixated on trying to work out precisely which cruelty is the worst, rather than trying to become more sensitized to the myriad forms of cruelty small and large. And so, I would argue that the most appropriate response to Rosenberg's (1993) criticism discussed above – that we need a more diverse moral vocabulary than merely the single word, cruelty, if we are usefully to explain, understand, and change our behaviour towards others – is to acknowledge its validity, while also recognizing that the provision of such a vocabulary is possible and even encouraged within a Rortian framework (we simply need more, and more detailed descriptions and re-descriptions).

Rosenberg (1993: 211) draws a more troubling conclusion from his examples, namely that even taking cruelty seriously cannot tell us how to act. Should we ameliorate suffering expansively by increasing solidarity and working together to stop the causes of suffering or do we keep the in-group small and simply work to stop the masses experiencing or feeling their pain (soft oligarchy)?

> Soft oligarchy has a long and distinguished history, dating back at least to the Romans' "bread and circuses". ... Another way of putting its central theme is that there's no danger that free speech will lead to emancipation if all that people are interested in and capable of speaking freely *about* are television personalities, sports scores, and horoscopes.

Rorty clearly does not favour soft oligarchy and Rosenberg (1993: 212) recognises this but suggests that Rorty must by his own lights give us reasons for choosing to be "nice" because:

> doing things for reasons ... is already built into the constitutive ideology of a liberal democratic polity and the practices correlative to it.

On the one hand, this is simply another case of a critic conflating the moral liberal self with political liberalism. Perhaps, though, there is a similar point to be made even if we distinguish between the two. Rorty surely does need to give us reasons to be nice, not because that is how liberalism works but because he wants to persuade us to take up the option of becoming a liberal self. What sort of reasons would work though? In effect, Rorty is in the position of all teachers of virtue from Socrates to Nietzsche's Zarathustra and if there is a general lesson to be learned from them it is that virtue is not something you teach through argument but through exemplification (Conway 1988). Rorty is thus surely correct in resisting the futile attempt to give us reasons to be a liberal self, to attempt to ameliorate cruelty and other forms of hurt and harm.

Precisely here, though, we may have hit upon an intractable problem. Although Rorty offers the liberal self as an ideal for the populace in general, it is not one he exemplifies. Instead, he is an instance of the more esoteric type of the liberal ironist. Moreover, although he exemplifies the liberal ironist he does not wish to promote this type in general, preferring it to remain esoteric. In order to assess whether this problem really is intractable we need to examine the liberal ironist self. This is the subject of the next section.

1.4   The liberal ironist

The idea of the liberal ironist has its roots in Rorty's autobiography as is detailed by Rothleder (1999: 43-54), and documented by Rorty (1993b) himself. It emerges from his attempt to reconcile

within himself the social concern of his family background and his personal love of the purely aesthetic. It is within this context that his ideal should first of all be understood, if not evaluated.

The liberal ironist is someone who combines the moral commitments of the liberal with an ironic disposition. Before looking more closely at the liberal ironist, then, it will be useful to understand something more about Rorty's general conception of ironism. The ironist, as Rorty (1989a: 73) describes her, fulfils three conditions:

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

It should be quite clear that ironism is an intellectual condition. It stands in contrast, for Rorty, to both common sense and metaphysics. The common sense person takes for granted their own final vocabulary and the vocabulary of their society; while the metaphysician thinks that any doubts which arise in relation to those vocabularies are really questions which can be answered by finding out the truth of the matter. Taken at face value this distinction between the ironist, common sense person, and metaphysician seems to invoke a worrying elitism – there are the happy masses who have no concerns about the nature of cruelty or goodness or justice or freedom or science (or any other item you care to list) and then there are intellectuals who do worry about these things. Rorty (1989a: 87) reinforces this elitism when he says things like:

> In the ideal liberal society, the intellectuals would still be ironists, although the nonintellectuals would not.

This sort of claim leads Guignon and Hiley (1990: 357) to argue that:

> Rorty's view is not only undemocratically elitist; it is naïve in its faith that poets and intellectuals will serve us well if they are given enough rope.

Provided we do not draw the line around intellectuals too tightly – including only middle-class academics – and take into consideration a group like Gramsci's organic intellectuals, this elitism need not worry us too much, I think. I prefer to read Rorty more charitably and take him to be saying not that ironism is too good to waste on the unwashed masses, but thank goodness for common sense folk who get on with the job of living, and keeping the economy going, and the government working, while allowing poets and intellectuals the space to read and write without

having to be socially responsible and accountable. Even so, the sense of elitism persists and I think Flathman (1990: 311-2) is right when he notes that in Rorty's utopia there is some sense in which those who are not ironists may be tolerated, and we might add even be necessary, but they are unlikely to be "esteemed" and respected.

There is a way of defusing the elitism altogether, though. Rather than seeing irony, common sense and metaphysicality as attaching to types of selves, I suggest we merely think of them as attitudes which each of us exemplifies to different degrees on different issues. So it is perfectly plausible to be for instance commonsensical about numbers, ironic about justice and metaphysical about (scientific) truth. Despite Rorty's tendency to talk about "the ironist" and "the metaphysician", I hope to demonstrate that my depiction does greater justice to his position.

Even if we understand ironism in my looser sense, though, it is not at all clear that we can make sense of it under Rorty's description. Rorty describes irony in terms of doubt but as Visker (1999: 27) points out these are two very different notions:

> In doubt, the unhappiness of the subject is that the object continually eludes him, in irony the enjoyment of the subject lies in realizing at every moment that the object has no reality.

In so far as Rorty defines irony in terms of doubts Mounce (1997: 206) and Williams (2003: 74) are surely correct when they identify Rorty's ironism as a sort of scepticism.

Rorty insists, however, that he is not a sceptic. He argues that scepticism depends on my recognizing that I may have in some sense "got it wrong" but the force of this depends on my having a conception that it is possible to "get it right". Rorty's philosophical project is to deny that very possibility. As Mounce (1997: 205-209) notes, Rorty comes to this conclusion in a variety of ways. Rorty sometimes argues that scepticism is without any basis – a mere illusion caused by the expectation that our beliefs should correspond to something independent, if we recognise the absurdity of the correspondence idea then we will not feel scepticism. Rorty also sometimes argues that the loss of a metaphysical foundation for our beliefs will have no effect on our practice. At yet other times Rorty argues that since we do not get to our beliefs through foundational reasoning, the recognition that there are no foundations will come as no loss.

Against such a background, then, to what extent can the ironist be said to entertain radical and continuing doubts about her final vocabulary? Rorty (1989a: 75) tells us that the ironist worries that "she has been initiated into the wrong tribe, taught to play the wrong language game ..., [been turned into] the wrong kind of human being" but since, as Rorty goes on to tell us "she cannot give a criterion of wrongness" it is difficult to know why she worries quite so much. Indeed, it can begin

to seem that ironism of this type is nothing more than a symptom of neurosis. This is the sort of reading that Pittman, for example, gives. Rorty's ironist, Pittman (1997: 263) argues, is:

> clearly entangled in high-literate forms of anxiety: such a being might be described as suffering from a chronic philosophical twitch-reaction to contingency. Of course, she is reacting not to contingency as such, but to a particular high-literate description of contingency.

Pittman (1997: 263-4) suggests that the "situation of the ironist is grounded in the carpet of the seminar room" and argues that he turns contingency into a "figment of the vocabulary" and irony becomes merely a "cure for metaphysical sickness". Pittman (1997: 264) adds:

> This is not just to say that what ironism cures is a cultural affliction, or that the culture in question is distinctly ivy-league. This affliction is not taken by the ironist as a "real" problem; nor is the cure a "real" solution, in the sense that ironism "leaves everything as it is."

Blackburn (2002: 271), too, thinks that it is not clear that exposure to the other, a different vocabulary, will very often lead to irony or "destabilization":

> Suppose we do believe that there is a way of looking at practical life that is different from ours, root and branch. How are we to react to this discovery? ... [T]he right reaction is surely that these encounters are essentially opportunities for moral thought. Sometimes we can dismiss the rival attitudes as the unfortunate or even evil product of various defects. This is how we should react on learning that there is some audience that presents the Holocaust to itself in a way that makes it seem harmless or admirable. Sometimes, our old opinions may be destabilized, but only as they evolve into something else that commends itself more. We have learned something, and can incorporate the improvement. Sometimes, however, we may not know what to think, and we may withdraw from previous commitments into a kind of scepticism. In other words, a rival approach represents a challenge, and there will be different ways of meeting it. To anyone except the bigoted or prejudiced, it has to be met. But it is only sometimes that it causes destability in our views.

Even if we were to allow that the notion of ironism as doubt could be made sense of, as something more than highly intellectualized anxiety about pseudo-problems as a means of avoiding genuine problems, there is a question about the extent to which vocabularies are appropriate objects of doubt. Does doubt not attach to individual beliefs rather than the language game as a whole? Of course, Rorty's holism commits him to the view that beliefs simply do not exist as individual entities, that to start doubting at any particular point may sooner or later take us around the whole web of beliefs.

I want to argue that it is this holism which underlies *both* Rorty's characterisation of irony as being the distinctive characteristic and preserve of someone called the ironist, *and* his mischaracterization of irony as doubt – with that description's consequence of turning the ironist into a neurotic. The fact that beliefs come as a whole web seems to mislead Rorty into thinking that we can only take one attitude to the entire web and so one is an ironist, or a metaphysician or a commonsense person. The latter simply does not follow from the former, though. Moreover Rorty himself recognises that fact. In an interview, Rorty (Ragg 2002: 369) claims that:

> I think of holism as just the view that people change their beliefs in such a way as to achieve coherence with their other beliefs, to bring their beliefs and desires into some sort of equilibrium and that that is about all there is to be said about the quest for knowledge. There are no rules for which beliefs you sacrifice in order to accommodate other beliefs, or which desires you change to accommodate changed beliefs.

This suggests that depending on how we proceed in relation to our beliefs we may hold very different epistemic attitudes towards different parts of the web. Rather than characterise ironists as those with radical doubts it would surely be more accurate to think of ironists as those who are highly sensitive to the fact that there are no rules for achieving coherence in the web, and are constantly aware of the (contingent, idiosyncratic and perhaps even random) ways in which they are reweaving their own web to achieve coherence without ever finding nor even particularly wishing to find some part of the web which can finally and for always be settled and taken for granted.

Redescribing the ironist in this way does little to relieve it of another charge levelled at it by Pittman (1997: 265) who argues that ironism will hold little attraction for members of minorities:

> While the ironist spends a lot of time posing to herself the problem of "the possibility that she has been initiated into the wrong tribe," socialized into the wrong kind of human being, for some of us the problem America poses is of being born into the wrong color of skin. Now this problem *might* be redescribed by saying that a whole bunch of people – those in the white supremacist mainstream – have been socialized into the wrong kind of human being. But that, again, would be missing the point: for what is at issue here is not those people at all, but *our* experience, and the ways we have devised for describing *and* coping with it. We are consumed not with the contingency of self *as a theoretical problem* ... but with the contingency of black skin *as a day-by-day practical problem* in the (institutional) form of American white supremacist ideology and practice.

From Pittman's perspective the highly sensitive, articulate, and self-conscious reweaving of a particular web of beliefs must seem obtuse and self-absorbed. Rorty is aware of the dangers of

ironism – he acknowledges that there is "something right about the suspicion ironism arouses" (1989a: 89). This is because with its emphasis on the powers of redescription, ironism always borders on cruelty and humiliation in refusing to take others "seriously just as they are and just as they talk". Rorty (1989a: 90) does remind us, though, that this is part and parcel of the intellectual enterprise and unavoidable, and that the only difference between a metaphysical redescription and an ironic one is that the former disguises itself by "telling its audience that they are being *educated*, rather than simply reprogrammed", thereby offering its victims the comfort of an illusion; ironism thus has the virtue of honesty but this simply means leaving its (potential) cruelty open to view.

It is in an attempt to have irony without cruelty that Rorty proposes his ideal of the liberal ironist. The liberal ironist is beset by tensions. On the one hand, she is committed to the moral outlook of the liberal; on the other hand, she is acutely aware of both the contingency and the subjective nature of that commitment. On the one hand, she abhors cruelty; on the other hand, she is sensitive to the apparently unavoidable cruel consequences of her practices. If Rorty is to persuade us that the liberal ironist is a worthwhile sort of self he will need to convince us of two things. The first is that it makes sense to be both ironic and committed at the same time. This is something about which Horton (2001), for instance, is doubtful as he signals in the title of his piece "Irony and commitment: an irreconcilable dualism of modernity". The second is that we can avoid the cruel consequences of ironic redescriptive practices.

I have tried to state the first problematic in terms of my own redescription of ironism rather than in Rorty's formulation. It is worth noting, however, that if Rorty were to reject my formulation and insist on the idea of "radical and continuing doubts" he would have more severe problems to deal with since it is inconceivable that one could be committed to beliefs about which one really did have radical doubts.   At least it is inconceivable if that option is supposed to be a sane and useful option rather than a definition of madness. What could it mean to doubt one's commitments?

To speak of commitment implies something rather different from the usual epistemic qualifiers that we apply to beliefs (warranted assertibility, truth, soundness, and so on) in that being committed to certain beliefs implies one must, on penalty of incoherence, act in certain ways. One way in which Rorty articulates this behavioural component of commitment is to speak of being willing to die for those beliefs. This way of thinking about commitment though, is both melodramatic and facile. It is melodramatic in that while there have undoubtedly been individuals who have been called upon to prove their consistency by paying the ultimate penalty, that is not a common occurrence nor something that most of us ordinary largely invisible citizens will realistically be called upon to do. And even intellectuals with their greater profiles will probably be free of such a call within the sorts of wealthy democracy that Rorty envisages. But if commitment resides merely in asserting a

hypothetical willingness to die for a belief then it becomes facile – this is commitment without consequences, without meaning.

If commitment is understood to be, ultimately, a matter of behaving in certain ways, then the possibility of being simultaneously committed to a belief and having doubts about it is less absurd than it might immediately seem. It is perfectly intelligible that one might act in particular ways, consistent with a set of beliefs without being in fact sure that those are in any deep sense the correct beliefs. However, in so doing we run the risk of simply being sophisticated hypocrites. If the liberal ironist is to avoid that risk then Rorty must allow that there is more to commitment than simply behaving in certain ways.

If we stick to a definition of irony as doubt then the only way to relieve the liberal ironist of the charges of madness or hypocrisy is to accept that the liberal ironist is simply not ironical about some parts of his or her vocabulary. To accept, in other words, that some parts of the vocabulary are not subject to doubt, in particular that the belief that cruelty is the worst thing we do, is simply a commitment and not subject to ironic redescription.   This is the line that Flathman (1990: 311) takes and which is also articulated by Critchley (1998: 812) when he argues that Rorty's pragmatism cannot go all the way down since liberals cannot, Rorty thinks, be ironic about cruelty.

Visker (1999: 30), too, believes that this is the consequence of Rorty's formulation:

> Whereas doubt drives the ironist *theorist* in the wrong direction and seems to do no harm to the ironist *novelist*, there appears to be no doubt whatsoever in the ironist *liberal*. He, at least, is perfectly able "to take himself seriously". The point is, of course, that he is not an ironist at all.

This sort of reading, although generally offered as a critique of Rorty, need not worry him too much if he at least accepts my suggestion that irony (like metaphysics and commonsense) is not something that attaches to the whole web of beliefs but only to certain parts of it. It does seem to suggest that the label "liberal ironist" is something of a misnomer, for the liberal part is precisely what the ironist is not ironical about.

I want to argue, though, that Rorty could get rid of the problem altogether by jettisoning the notion of doubt and accepting my redescription of ironism. On my reading (and I think for all his talk about doubt, on Rorty's, too), we do not have to think of the liberal ironist as either mad or a hypocrite, on the one hand, or only a part-time ironist on the other, because she is not committed to acting on beliefs she actively doubts but is simply aware that the commitments she has, the beliefs and words by which she lives, can never be taken for granted, let alone taken to be set in stone. From this perspective the liberal's belief that cruelty is the worst thing we do is not irrational,

it is not a pretence, nor is it something that is off-limits to redescription, it is simply one of the beliefs that is most resistant to her reweavings.

This way of resolving the issue does not necessarily get rid of all the problems, though. Surely there is something to Mounce's (1997: 207) assertion that to be ironic is to view one's values "somewhat at a distance" and that this is the very opposite of commitment in which the values are seen to be "part of [one's] very being". I think Blackburn (2002: 272) expresses a similar line better, pointing to the value in the ironism ("nobody ought to belittle the flexibility and humour that an appreciation of one's own peculiarities can engender") while also reminding us that irony "is the privilege of those for whom action is not a priority". Rather than reading Mounce and Blackburn as offering a criticism though (which is what they intend) we might see this as a useful way of expressing what Rorty means by being both committed and ironic. Which way the balance tips depends on the perspective of the moment – when we are simply being and acting, our commitments are simply "part of our very being" but when we reflect and think about them we view those same commitments "from a distance" and notice the various contingencies which caused them to become part of our being. Noticing that fact, imagining what might have been had we been born in another tribe at another time, does not, however, stop those commitments being the core of who we in fact are. Or as Williams (2003: 73) puts it:

> Ultimate commitments, though they may lack a foundation in reason, are not the result of arbitrary choices because they are not the result of choice at all.

The second problem confronting the liberal ironist was that of how to avoid cruelty in her redescriptions. Rorty has a simple answer to that question: she does so by keeping her irony private. I will look at this private/public split in detail in the next chapter and show how Rorty attempts to turn this personal choice of a type of self into a general rule for the liberal polity and all of its citizens. I will argue that Rorty cannot sensibly make this move for the polity, but that it does make sense as a personal choice.

Before turning to the discussion of Rorty's version of a liberal society, however, I offer a recap of this chapter's discussion of the self. I began the chapter by arguing that Rorty's rejection of the idea of human nature amounts to nothing more than an uncontroversial denial of any *telos* or destiny. I proposed that in order to understand Rorty's view of the self we distinguish, though he does not, the question of selfhood from those of humanity and personhood. The self that emerges is, for Rorty, a self-weaving web, an idiosyncratic set of descriptions and metaphors that is both an expression of, and response to contingency. Rorty hopes through his redescriptions to persuade us to adopt a version of selfhood that is liberal (in a moral rather than political sense). This liberal self is someone who abhors cruelty in all of its myriad forms, and takes this abhorrence of cruelty

to be central to their descriptions of who they are (to be, in Rorty's terms, part of their "final vocabulary"). For those of a more intellectual bent Rorty offers a variant of this basic type – the liberal ironist. This type will be a useful possibility only if there is some way to limit the potential cruelties that ironic redescription involves. Rorty attempts to do this by invoking a radical form of the public-private distinction, which I argue in the next chapter is untenable.

Chapter Two: The liberal society

At the end of Chapter One I pointed out that if Rorty wishes to persuade us that the liberal ironist – the type of self that Rorty exemplifies – is a worthwhile type of self, he must persuade us that it can resolve the tension between, on the one hand, such a self's love of ironic redescription with its ever-possible threat of cruelty and humiliation, and, on the other hand, the liberal abhorrence of cruelty in all its forms. His attempt to resolve that conflict, I indicated, lies in his insistence that the ironist keep her irony private. Rather than taking this private/public split to be a merely personal choice which liberal ironists make, however, Rorty attempts to make such a division one of the premises of a liberal society. The highly problematic way of thinking about society which results, is the subject of the first section (2.1) of this chapter. I argue that in trying to articulate a personal choice as a social rule Rorty offers us a highly peculiar and completely untenable way of thinking about the public and private. Consequently, I argue that this particular model of society should be resisted, and replaced with a more useful tool for understanding society that Rorty offers us, namely his idea of conversation. The idea of conversation arises, of course, out Rorty's (anti)epistemology and is most closely associated with *Philosophy and the mirror of nature* (1980) but, I will argue, it is implicit (and sometimes explicit) in Rorty's social and political thought as well. The second section of this chapter (2.2) takes a deeper look at the notion of conversation itself and uses it to rebut the charges of relativism, subjectivism, irrationalism, and nihilism that have been levelled against Rorty. I argue that the idea of conversation underpins much of what Rorty has to say on socio-political topics and is the key to understanding the liberal society which Rorty proffers. I note that a conversational model, in contrast to apparently similar models from other liberal thinkers such as John Stuart Mill, John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, rejects the idea that talk should have consensus as its end or goal, and, moreover, that this makes Rorty's model better placed to deal with multiculturalism and difference than its liberal competitors. In section 2.3 I look at the way in which the private/public split and the ideal of conversation are incompatible and show that many of the criticisms of Rorty's understanding of the liberal society can be rebutted if we emphasise the notion of conversation as the key to Rorty's thinking.

2.1   Private and public

The distinction between the public and the private is one of the cornerstones of liberal thought. It is Rorty's insistence on this distinction that marks him not merely as a moral liberal but an advocate of political liberalism, too. The terms "public" and "private" are, as Nancy Fraser (1997: 85-6) notes, subject to many interpretations. Moreover, the boundaries between them are, as Judith Shklar (1984: 242-3) reminds us, both shifting and negotiable. Guignon and Hiley (2003a: 26) suggest that:

> In the face of the essentially contested nature of private and public life, the temptation is either to redraw them in a less problematic way or to try to fuse them into an overarching theory. Rorty resists both of these temptations.

I disagree. If Rorty does indeed resist the temptation to draw the distinction in a *less* problematic way, he does so by drawing it in a *more* problematic way. I would not necessarily go as far as Bernstein (2002: 27), who claims that Rorty's public/private distinction embodies the "logic of apartheid", and warns that it may well lead to "violent consequences". However, I *will* argue that Rorty's way of drawing the distinction is deeply misguided, and is a disappointing abrogation of an earlier promise to offer us "a full-scale discussion of the possibility of combining private fulfilment, self-realization, with public morality, a concern for justice" (1981a: 158) .

We might expect that a philosopher who calls himself a pragmatist would offer a defence of the distinction between public and private on pragmatic grounds. We might expect Rorty to endorse the distinction on the grounds that it works in practice to inhibit tyranny, to protect citizens from the state, to protect the weak from the powerful. These sorts of pragmatic concerns are those traditionally favoured by political liberals – they are, for instance, the sorts of reasons advanced by Judith Shklar with whose version of liberalism Rorty aligns himself, and they are surely the most powerful reasons for accepting the need for a division between public and private. If those are our expectations, however, Rorty disappoints. His defence of the division is powered by a theory of self, not social and political practice.

I have called Rorty's version of the public/private split "peculiar". In order to show why I have chosen that epithet and in order to substantiate it, I want to look closely at the opening pages of *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a) in which Rorty draws the distinction. I argue in section 2.1.1 below that Rorty's distinction between public and private does not flow out of his anti-essentialism with regard to human nature, as he suggests it does. In section 2.1.2, I then show that his attempt to draw this distinction on the basis of claims about the nature of language and theory is also incoherent. I further argue that the distinction as Rorty draws it is politically both undesirable and untenable, and that it has value only if we recognise that the distinction is simply one drawn by a certain type of self in order to reconcile for itself its own quests for self-creation and justice.

2.1.1 Private/public and human nature

Contingency, irony, and solidarity (1989a) begins in a way that suggests that Rorty believes that the public/private distinction is a political concomitant of the rejection of any idea of human nature. The text opens as follows:

> The attempt to fuse the public and private lies behind both Plato's attempt to answer the question "Why is it in one's interest to be just?" and Christianity's claim that perfect self-realization can be attained through service to others (1989a: xiii).

This is, of course, neither an argument for nor against the private-public distinction. Rorty does, however, use this passage to suggest that in some sense all "right-thinking" people would draw such a distinction, since failure to do so would reveal one to be guilty of the sorts of metaphysical errors from which Rorty's philosophy aims to liberate us. Rorty does not give any reason to believe that there is any strong correlation, still less a logical entailment, between metaphysics and the attempt to "fuse" public and private, he merely imputes guilt by association.

The next sentences add a third element to the mix:

> Such metaphysical or theological attempts to unite a striving for perfection with a sense of community require us to acknowledge a common human nature. They ask us to believe that what is most important to each of us is what we have in common with others – that the springs of private fulfilment and of human solidarity are the same (1989a: xiii).

It is supposedly the belief in a "common human nature", itself an example of metaphysical thinking, which provides the link between metaphysics and the erasure of the public-private distinction. But, again, we are offered merely guilt by association rather than an argument as to why the link is necessary; in particular, the association seems to be achieved through a simple slippage in the passage quoted above between believing in a common human nature and believing that public and private have the same source. In order to establish such a necessity, Rorty would have to show that: (a) there are no examples of thinkers who believe in a common human nature but who hold to a distinction between public and private; and, (b) there are no examples of thinkers who reject belief in a common human nature but who continue to fuse public and private. And even if he were able to establish both of these, he would need to show that (c) the belief in a common human nature in some sense causes or underpins, rather than merely correlates with, the fusion.

Rorty attempts to make this argument by introducing examples of non-metaphysical thinkers who, he asserts hold a somewhat different position on the relation of private and public and do not attempt to fuse the two. The first set of such thinkers are the "skeptics":

Skeptics like Nietzsche have urged that metaphysics and theology are transparent attempts to make altruism look more reasonable than it is. Yet such skeptics typically have their own theories of human nature. They, too, claim that there is something common to all human beings – for example, the will to power, or libidinal impulses. Their point is that at the "deepest" level of the self there is *no* sense of human solidarity, that this sense is a "mere" artefact of human socialization. So such skeptics become antisocial. They turn their backs on the very idea of a community larger than a tiny circle of initiates (1989a: xiii).

Such thinkers then hold on to the notion of human nature and while they do not "fuse" public and private they do reject the public altogether and therefore supposedly add evidentiary support to claim (a) – that there are no thinkers who believe in both a human nature and the distinction between public and private. A second set of thinkers seemingly add support to claim (b) – that the rejection of human nature goes hand-in-hand with the realisation of the importance of distinguishing between public and private. These are the "historicists" who in Rorty's description:

have denied that there is such a thing as "human nature" or the "deepest level of the self." Their strategy has been to insist that socialization, and thus historical circumstance, goes all the way down – that there is nothing "beneath" socialization or prior to history which is definatory of the human (1989a: xiii).

Despite getting rid of the problematic view of human nature which seemed earlier to be the cause of the fusion between public and private, such thinkers, it soon transpires, are divided among themselves on this question:

Historicists in whom the desire for self-creation, for private autonomy, dominates (e.g., Heidegger and Foucault) still tend to see socialization as Nietzsche did – as antithetical to something deep within us. Historicists in whom the desire for a more just and free human community dominates (e.g., Dewey and Habermas) are still inclined to see the desire for private perfection as infected with "irrationalism" and "aestheticism" (1989a: xiii-xiv).

Rorty thus offers us a typology of four different kinds of thinkers, each with a different position on the relation between human nature and the public/private. Since none of these positions is Rorty's own (as I will show in section 2.1.2 below), what we have in effect is a description of four different ways of getting things wrong. These positions are those associated with:

1. the metaphysicians and theologians who are committed to a belief in a common human nature and who blur or erase the distinction between private and public;
2. the skeptics who believe in a human nature and who deny the value of the public;

3. historicists who reject the idea of human nature and who value the private over, or even to the exclusion of, the public;

4. historicists who reject the idea of human nature and who value the public over, or to the exclusion of, the private.

This articulation of the various positions, however, does not give Rorty the means by which to make the argument that I have said he must make, namely that:

(a) there are no examples of thinkers who believe in a common human nature but who hold to a distinction between public and private;

(b) there are no examples of thinkers who reject belief in a common human nature but who continue to fuse public and private; and,

(c) the belief in a common human nature in some sense causes or underpins, rather than merely correlates with, the fusion, of public and private.

We can simply refute (a) by pointing to our own examples, such as any figure in the history of liberalism, from Locke through to J.S. Mill who have some belief in a human nature and who use that belief to bolster if not actually support their belief in a necessary political distinction between public and private. Alternatively, we could refute (b) by pointing out that the (pragmatic) effect of excluding either the public or private (as with at least some of the historicists) is the same as fusing the two. In neither case will it be necessary to enter into debate about (c). It is notable that Rorty does not engage with claim (c) either, which suggests that the discussion of the metaphysicians versus the skeptics versus the historicists seems to have been a red herring, a case of shifting dichotomies. The notion of human nature, it seems, has in the end little relevance to the topic of private and public after all; any connection between the two topics is tenuous at best.

If there is no necessary connection between anti-essentialism and the invocation of a strong distinction between public and private, then what is the basis for the distinction? In order to answer this question we must turn to Rorty's own position. According to Rorty there is no human nature, and the public and private are equally valuable. As he says:

> This book tries to do justice to both groups of historicist writers. I urge that we not try to choose between them but, rather, give them equal weight and then use them for different purposes. Authors like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Proust, Heidegger, and Nabokov are useful as exemplars, as illustrations of what private perfection – a self-created, autonomous, human life – can be like. Authors such as Marx, Mill, Dewey, Habermas, and Rawls are fellow citizens rather than exemplars. They are engaged in a shared, social effort – the effort to make our institutions and practices more just and less cruel. We shall only think of these two kinds of writers as

> *opposed* if we think that a more comprehensive philosophical outlook would let us hold self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity, in a single vision (1989a: xiv).

In this passage the connection between a belief in human nature and the failure to recognise the distinction between public and private falls out of the picture. Indeed the whole careful typology of positions that Rorty had built up collapses. Nietzsche, previously cited as an example of a sceptic, now emerges as a particular type of historicist, as do thinkers such as Mill and Marx, both of whom, at least on most readings, have some commitment to a belief in human nature. Rorty may indeed believe *both* that there is no human nature and that there is a distinction between public and private but these two beliefs do not go hand-in-hand, they are simply two of Rorty's beliefs. What now appears to be the argument in favour of the public/private split is that we cannot hold the two in a "single vision", they are incommensurable. In the next section I will look more closely at this second argument and argue that it is ultimately incoherent.

2.1.2 Private/public and incommensurability

In this section I first outline what I take to be the core of Rorty's argument that public and private are incommensurable and then, using Nietzsche and Marx as paradigmatic cases of the private and public, respectively, argue that we cannot make sense of Rorty's argument with respect to incommensurability even on his own terms.

The argument that the public and private are incommensurable is articulated by Rorty in the following stages. First there is the general claim that we cannot hold private and public in a single, comprehensive vision; then there is a slightly stronger version of the claim:

> There is no way in which philosophy, or any other theoretical discipline, will ever let us do that ... there is no way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory (1989a: xiv).

Rorty's argument for a separation of public and private is not the result of an account of the nature and limits of theory, though; rather a "fact" about language:

> The vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument. The vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange (1989a: xiv).

It is out of this argument, this understanding of language, that Rorty draws what is otherwise a fairly standard understanding of the private-public distinction, as a necessary (from a liberal perspective) political tool:

> The closest we will come to joining these two quests is to see the aim of a just and free society as letting 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. There are practical measures to be taken to accomplish this practical goal (1989a: xiv).

How convincing is this argument though? How precisely does Rorty get from a "fact" about languages to a "fact" about theory to a "fact" about political arrangements? Consider the following alternative line of argument that a political liberal might run: In modern societies people have different conceptions of the good life; there is no general and objective way to decide between these conceptions; therefore, the state should remain neutral between them and allow citizens to pursue their own conception unimpeded so long as they do no harm to others. This seems in the end to be what Rorty is claiming – but, I would argue that it is not, and that the peculiarity of Rorty's argument would be lost if we attributed such a traditional liberal argument to him, in the supposition that he is making the argument in a particularly obscure and obtuse way. Unlike Rorty's, this standard liberal argument requires no critique of metaphysics, no digression on human nature, no commitment to different kinds of vocabulary. The question is, then, if Rorty is really making a political claim, why does he not simply use the fairly straightforward political arguments already to hand? I want to argue that Rorty is not making a political claim, *per se*, but that he is generalising into a claim about political organization what is in the end simply a personal choice made by liberal ironist selves – to keep their irony private.

In order to make this argument I begin by demonstrating that Rorty's own particular way of drawing the distinction between public and private is not merely unnecessarily complicated but incoherent in terms of his own philosophy. Given Rorty's understanding of language, I will show, he can neither draw the distinction in the way that he wants to, nor maintain the claim of incommensurability. In order to pursue this line of argument I will look at each of three claims in turn. First is the claim that there are two types of thinker whom we generally think of as opposed but who are not – they are simply speaking different vocabularies; second is the claim that each vocabulary has its own characteristics – the private is "unshared" and "unsuited to argument", while the public is "shared" and "a medium for argumentative exchange"; and, third is the claim that these two types of vocabulary are "forever incommensurable".

The first claim is that there are two types of thinker, with two types of vocabulary. It might seem, at first glance, that the distinction Rorty draws between two kinds of thinker is the familiar one between literary figures or "poets" and theorists or "philosophers". This is not the case; Rorty includes both types in each of his groups. Private thinkers include philosophers such as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard as well as authors such as Proust, while Dickens is a member of the public group,

along with Marx and Rawls. Rorty (1991g: 80) had elsewhere formulated the distinction as one between "the theorist and the novelist" but he seems to have abandoned this formulation quite quickly. Rorty's suggestion then is that while we can use both literary and theoretical forms to clarify, explain, and elucidate notions of either selfhood or justice, we cannot use either of these forms to explicate both notions at the same time – any particular thinker, Rorty seems to be saying, can offer an interesting view of only one, but never both, of the human quests.

While it is true that we can, for some purposes, broadly distinguish between these two sets of thinkers in this way, Rorty's claim seems to be stronger. If Rorty were simply to say that some thinkers focus on more public questions of justice and citizenship, while others focus on more private questions about what it means to lead a worthwhile life, his claim would not be puzzling at all. But Rorty does not say this. He claims that we are dealing with incommensurable ways of thinking and speaking about human life. He suggests, through his insistence that these two types use two distinct types of vocabulary, that his way of classifying texts and writers is not one among many, but in some sense the right one. Of course, Rorty cannot be saying that! His anti-essentialism means that he cannot hold that any distinction is one which gets the world right – only that it is a way that it is a useful tool for some specific purpose. But he cannot get from that way of thinking of *this* distinction to the claim of incommensurability. The status of Rorty's claim is thus puzzling.

Even more puzzling is his suggestion that we think of these two groups of thinkers ("private" and "public") as opposed. Are we not more likely to think of Marx and Mill as opposed, than, Habermas and Baudelaire? Which is to say, does the idea of *opposition* not come into play only within groups rather than between them?

The first claim – that there are two kinds of thinkers using two different types of vocabulary, if taken seriously, leaves the reader more perplexed than enlightened. Perhaps light will be shed on this claim by turning to the second claim, namely that these two types of vocabulary have different characteristics. It is worth noting that, beyond saying that public vocabularies are shared and suited to argumentation while private vocabularies are not, Rorty gives no account of the vocabularies in question. I want to begin, then, by contrasting these vocabularies. What do they look like? And in answering this question I am not satisfied with general and vague characteristics but seek some actual content – some detailed and concrete proposals.

Taking a hint from a remark of Rorty's that "no theory . . . is going to synthesize Nietzsche with Marx" (1989a: xiv), I propose to use Nietzsche's vocabulary to exemplify the private and Marx's the public. Nietzsche's vocabulary centres on terms like: Superman, eternal recurrence, will to power, affirmation, Zarathustra, Dionysus, strength/weakness, health/sickness, base/noble, the herd, the

Antichrist and so on. Marx's vocabulary centres on terms like: alienation, exploitation, ideology, false consciousness, class struggle, base and superstructure.

In what sense, then, is Nietzsche's vocabulary private? Patently Rorty does not intend to imply that vocabularies like this are private in any Wittgensteinian sense, nor by "unshared" does he mean to imply that they are unshareable – for how then could the authors of those vocabularies function as exemplars and inspiration? He might simply mean that Nietzsche's vocabulary is his own creation, that it is idiosyncratic; that Nietzsche is creating new metaphors and descriptions rather than merely employing those already sedimented in our language. But that seems to be a much more limited claim. Perhaps Rorty's idea is that each of us being (and becoming) uniquely ourselves, has a different set of ideas, concepts, words, a different set of beliefs and associations, a different narrative from anyone else. This is necessarily and uncontroversially true, but it would again amount to the weaker claim that our vocabularies are in some sense idiosyncratic and particularistic. That, however, does not make them unshared or unsuited to argument.

Certainly Nietzsche's vocabulary is idiosyncratic and particularistic. But there is nothing private or unshared about it. In the first instance, it is not private and unshared in the obvious sense that Nietzsche wrote for publication, to share his ideas with others. More than this, though, his vocabulary is public and shared in the sense that the concepts he employs, though given a personal spin, are cultural elements. The vocabulary as a whole is Nietzsche's but its elements are public domain. The same holds true of Marx's vocabulary, supposedly a paradigmatically opposite case. In each case, the thinker, takes words from the common stock, gives them an original spin, and then offers those reformulations back to us so that they have become part of the, now altered, common stock.

Rorty asserts that a large part of what matters in separating out these two sorts of vocabulary is the claim that some vocabularies are suited to argument and others are not. But consider the following two passages:

> Wandering through the many subtler and coarser moralities which have so far been prevalent
> on earth, or still are prevalent, I found that certain features recurred regularly together and were
> closely associated – until I finally discovered two basic types and one basic difference.
>   There are *master moralities* and *slave morality* ... (Nietzsche 1886: 204).

and:

> The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.
>   Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guildmaster and journeyman, in a
> word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an

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uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes (Marx and Engels 1848: 3).

It would be difficult – I think impossible – to locate some difference between these two such that it renders the latter suited to argument and the former not.

Rorty's assertions aside, it does not seem that we are dealing with two types of vocabulary separable from each other on the basis of intrinsic characteristics. The idea that some vocabularies are suited to argument and others not sits uneasily, in any case, with what Rorty says about final vocabularies. Rorty (1989a: 73) says that what makes such vocabularies final is that:

> if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse. Those words are as far as he can go with language; beyond them there is only helpless passivity or a resort to force.

As noted in Chapter One, Rorty, in his discussion of final vocabularies, suggests that we can be called upon to justify any part of our vocabulary – private or public – and that in such cases the only alternatives to argument are silence or force. But in his discussion of private and public he suggests that we can only be called upon to justify some aspects of vocabularies and that other aspects fly free of such calls. At the very least there is an apparently unresolved tension here in that Rorty seems to have two seemingly contradictory ways of thinking about language. In the face of this he cannot offer any clear account of what it is that separates private vocabularies from public ones.

Given that we cannot make sense of the idea of there being two types of thinker with two types of vocabulary, what then, are we to make of Rorty's claim that the vocabulary of Nietzsche (or Kierkegaard or Heidegger) is forever incommensurable with that of Marx (or Habermas, or Rawls); that no theory will let us hold them together in a single vision?

A first attempt to answer this question leads us to Rorty's definition of commensurability:

> By "commensurable" I mean able to be brought under a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue on every point where statements seem to conflict. These rules tell us how to construct an ideal situation, in which all residual disagreements will be seen to be "noncognitive" or merely verbal, or else temporary – capable of being resolved by something further. What matters is that there should be agreement about what would have to be done if a resolution *were* to be achieved. In the

meantime, the interlocutors can agree to differ – being satisfied of each other's rationality the while (1980a: 316).

Schwartz (1983:57-9) points out the crux of Rorty's (1980a) appeal to incommensurability:

> Rorty wisely refuses to avail himself of the popular thesis that adherents of conflicting paradigms cannot understand one another. Marxist and Freidmanite economists understand one another; they just don't agree. Incommensurability is due not to untranslatability but to a lack of rules for resolving disputes. ... Rorty seems to hold that within normal science pretty much "everybody agrees on how to evaluate everything everybody else says. Assuming this view of normal science, the contrast with conflict resolution between paradigms will naturally seem stark. But, of course, there are no algorithms for settling most "low-level" scientific issues, even within a paradigm. And once one moves to the forefront of research or to questions of interesting theoretical significance … Rorty's suggestion that there are fixed or established practices that will always be able to render unique decisions about who is correct, is not very realistic. Moreover, even within a tradition, standards of evaluation are themselves continually in flux ... . Still Rorty is right that workers in a given field often operate as though complete standards of evaluation exist ... . Rorty is also right in that, as differences between theories grow more profound, there will be less common ground from which to hammer out conflicts. ... What's more, by time the disputants reached common ground, it is likely there would not be enough of substance remaining to provide the needed background against which to evaluate significant conflicting hypotheses.

What might form the basis for such a set of rules for rational agreement between the vocabularies of public and private thinkers? To the extent that we can make sense of Rorty's deep commitment to the public and private as the fundamental categories into which thinkers are to be sorted; to the extent that we can support his claim that certain thinkers, call them exemplars, cannot be theoretically reconciled with others, call them citizens, it is, I would argue, because we take them to be talking about different kinds of things. In other words, the claim of irreconcilability makes most sense if we take it to be a claim not about vocabularies *per se* but about the objects of discussion.

Stating the issue as a matter of talking about different things, rather than talking in different ways has at least two advantages. In the first place, it is a much clearer and more straightforward claim. In the second place, it is also renders the claim that these thinkers are incommensurable more plausible. If these thinkers are talking about different things then there is no more need for us to "commensurate" them than there is to "commensurate" Egyptian history and quantum mechanics, or the various items making up a news broadcast.

If this statement of the issue is clearer, more straight-forward and more plausible then why does Rorty not employ it? I think that one reason for Rorty making the claim in the way that he does is

his commitment to a thorough-going antirealism. Rorty holds that beliefs, though in some sense caused by the world, do not represent the world but are merely tools for coping with it. In this view, objects, referents, can play only a secondary role, the real work is being done by descriptions of objects, descriptions which are not caused by the world. Given this perspective Rorty cannot say that it is the objects of language rather than language itself which is at stake. He cannot say that thinkers are talking about different things, only that they are using different languages for it is only within the terms of a language that objects exist.

There is, however, another reason. The claim that these thinkers are talking about different things is, despite its initial plausibility, patently untrue. Consider again the case of Nietzsche and Marx. I argued earlier that whatever the source of their difference it is not that they use different kinds of vocabulary. I add to that here that it is not that they talk about different things either. Despite the differences in their terminology, their diagnoses and their conclusions both are deeply concerned with the modern experience of nihilism and alienation, both propound a vision of individual human flourishing based in a radical reordering of society. Neither can be seen as purely a thinker of the private or the public, for both recognise that justice and self-creation, the social and the intimate are bound together. What makes Nietzsche and Marx irreconcilable (though not incommensurable) is that their visions of justice and their visions of human flourishing are diametrically opposed. They are irreconcilable for the simple reason that they make incompatible claims about the same things; or as Dews (2002a: 327) argues, in a different context:

> the crucial problem is posed not by rival vocabularies, but by rival construals of the *same*
> vocabulary. And this is not an "abstract" philosophical problem, but one which is central to the
> texture of social relationships and social conflicts.

As this quote from Dews makes clear, this is not merely a fact about Nietzsche and Marx. We all can, must, and do, reconcile the private quest for self-creation and the public quest for justice in practice, as even Rorty admits. This suggests that we know intuitively what Charles Taylor (1989) has detailed so rigorously, namely, that our selves are inexorably bound up in a vision of the good. Both our moral vision and our identity (understood as, in fact, the same) are created in dialogue with significant others and so our acts of self-creation always transcend the merely personal, the selfish, and encompass the requirements of justice too. As Kuipers (1997: 72) puts it:

> the fact that we are social beings means that in life we must always negotiate between the two,
> and there is not a sphere in which they do not overlap and affect each other.

Dianne Rothleder (1999: 78) points out that Rorty must draw the same conclusion from his own premises:

If we take seriously, as Rorty claims to, the notion of the social construction of the subject, then the private making of the self is inherently a social phenomenon, and not actually a private one. If the political is that which is concerned with how the social functions, with regulating the social, then construction of the subject is political as well as social.

By formulating the difference between thinkers of the private and public as one of incommensurable vocabularies Rorty is able to avoid having to choose between them. He avoids making a choice by denying that there is any choice to be made. Rorty is notorious for making such moves. He attempts to combine contradictory positions in many aspects of his thought – he is, or tries to be, both a determinist and a voluntarist (Mounce 1997), a liberal and a communitarian and a socialist, a positivist empiricist and a constructivist, a cosmopolitan and ethnocentric, a pragmatist and a romantic (Fraser 1990), a communitarian and an existentialist (Guignon and Hiley 1990) and now he seeks to articulate a position which encompasses and accommodates both Nietzsche and Marx, both Derrida and Habermas. Rorty, it would seem is willing neither to admit the contradictions between the various positions he espouses and risk being labelled irrational nor to sort through the contradictions and create a new and coherent unity.   Instead, he plays ostrich and uses the talk of different kinds of vocabulary forever incommensurable to create a sophisticated mask of intellectualism behind which to hide his denial.

Perhaps that is too hasty and harsh a conclusion, though. Perhaps we can make greater sense of Rorty's claims. One line of thought in that direction might be that somehow the facts might form the basis of commensurability in this and other cases. But Geras (1995: 142-3) points out that this cannot be the case for Rorty:

> For this is how things would appear to stand. Either – (1) – incommensurability goes all the way down and even the so-called "facts" in dispute between competing vocabularies or language games cannot be adjudicated except by the competing standards of each one. Or – (2) – incommensurability goes only some of the way down: so that there are no neutral standards by which to judge the vocabularies or language games themselves; but at a lower level as it were, with the brute facts, these ride free of the effects of incommensurability. However, (2) here simply succumbs to a paradox of self-reference. In the account it must give of itself, it could not possibly have the status of a lower-level brute fact. That things break down in just this rather two-tone way (up there and about so far, incommensurable, down here in the lower reaches, simply brute), that none of the hardness at the bottom should extend, for its part, all the way *up* and give you something against which to lean while you contemplate higher theories – this would have to have, when fully articulated and explained, the form of a quite complex and sophisticated conceptualization of the universe it purports to be about. Within (2) in other words, (2) itself, along with (1), is of that kind, namely, opposed vocabularies or language games, to which incommensurability is held to apply. Which means that, according to

(2), there *are* brute facts in matter of detail; but, according to (2) simultaneously also, the view that there are brute facts has no greater intellectual authority than the view that there are not, since it cannot be rationally adjudicated against it. It can be, only, preferred, the way you prefer one flavour of ice cream to another.

If commensuration for Rorty cannot be based in an appeal to facts it must amount to getting the interlocutors to use the same vocabulary, to speak the same language, in order that they might ultimately come to agreement with regard to their claims. There are three ways in which this might be achieved. In the first instance, a reductive strategy might be adopted in which one language (be it private or public) is assumed to be basic and the other either abandoned or translated into it. A second strategy would assume that both sets of interlocutors already share a language though they emphasize different aspects of it, and would seek to find how the aspects fit together. A third way would be to abandon both vocabularies in favour of a neutral and quite different third. In his discussion of language in the first chapter of *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a) Rorty seems to recognize the existence of all three strategies, although he tends to conflate them. He writes for instance that:

> To treat [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 (1989a: 11).

His insistence on the incommensurability of public and private amounts to a denial that any of these strategies can work in our particular case. But why should we accept this? We might be charitable and take Rorty to be saying that the discourses of private and public are not merely pieces of the same "jigsaw" (1989a: 12) which we might one day fit together. Or we might join King (2002: 208) in reading Rorty as saying that:

> Our self-image as citizen (or as revolutionary) does not depend on our self-image as private self. There is no more contradiction here than between describing a person as a citizen and describing him or her as a collection of molecules. Different descriptions fit different purposes.

What is of concern, however, is that Rorty seems to rule out the option of commensurability *a priori*. His broader commitment to the contingency of language, however, suggests otherwise. If language is as contingent, as open to chance and change, as Rorty himself would have us believe, then on what basis could he simply assume that the quests for perfection and justice are forever incommensurable, incapable of being brought together in a single language game?

In fact, Rorty (1989c: 127), seems to indicate that he allows for the very possibility of such commensuration, claiming:

> Nominalists see language as just human beings using marks and noises to get what they want. One of the things we want to do with language is to get food, another is to get sex, another is to understand the origin of the universe. Another is to enhance our sense of human solidarity, and still another may be to create oneself by developing one's own private, autonomous, philosophical language. It is possible that a single vocabulary might serve two or more of these aims.

Why does he move from this position to allowing the possibility of a commensurating vocabulary to the absolute rejection of it? Rorty seems to have two reasons for rejecting, or more accurately ignoring, the possibility of commensuration. The first line of argument would parallel his (1982b: xvii-xiv) argument against the possibility of a theory of truth or goodness. There he argued that we should reject the search for such theories on the grounds that two thousands years of looking have resulted in naught. Likewise, he might ask us to induce that the similarly long attempt to commensurate public and private has achieved nothing and should be abandoned.

If that is Rorty's line of thought it is not particularly convincing, however; the more so since he allows that we can and do find individual ways to resolve the tension between public and private in practice. This would suggest, perhaps, that the problem lies in our use of language games which are dissonant not only with each other but with our actual lives, and suggests an urgent reason for pursuing new vocabularies which fit our experience of the two quests as part of the same whole, i.e. in order to render them meaningful. I think here of Lyotard's (1988: 142) claim that:

> One's responsibility before thought consists ... in detecting *differends* and in finding the (impossible) idiom for phrasing them. This is what a philosopher does.

Guignon and Hiley (1990: 358) concur:

> It is not clear such a distinction ... even makes sense. An individual's self-descriptions are realized in his or her agency in the public world, and public practices and institutions impact on the individual's capacities for self-fulfilment. It is the task of moral and social philosophy to clarify these bonds between civic responsibility and meaningful freedom.

A second reason Rorty might have for rejecting the commensuration of private and public is his belief that what would be required to effect it is the acceptance of a theory of human nature. This certainly seems to be the line of argument in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a). His assumption then would be that only some sort of essentialism could form the basis for commensuration. Perhaps Rorty is worried that Greene (1980: 1389-90), for example, is right when he says:

suppose we are able to make paradigms commensurable with one another by changing them. Suppose further that we can do this by using some of the traditional metaphysical concepts. This would be the opposite of the sort of "Whiggish" view of intellectual history ... call it the "Tory" view, the idea that there is something valuable in the past we have overlooked.

Perhaps, that is to say, Rorty is simply worried that the only way to commensuration is through the very vocabularies that he rejects, and that acknowledging the possibility of commensuration would undermine his entire philosophical project. But again that is a questionable assumption. Might it not be possible to reject essentialism and foundationalism while maintaining the hope for a theoretical space which would allow us to discuss the full complexity of our lives? Such a theory would be pragmatic and self-reflexive and would lay no claim to disclosing the final truth. It would allow us to hold private and public together not by finding essences to serve as a foundation for reduction or synthesis but by employing a new vocabulary which avoids any rigid division between the two.

Brandom (2000b: 179) articulates a similar position. While he is willing to agree with Rorty that vocabularies are incommensurable in so far as they are not intertranslatable, he argues that they are commensurable in the sense that they can be brought together at the level of theory by translating both public and private vocabularies into a metavocabulary. Brandom (2000b: 179-80) gives the following case:

> To pick two examples not entirely at random: either the causal vocabulary or the vocabulary vocabulary can be used to encompass both [private and public] sorts of vocabulary. Though one surely does not learn *everything* about them by doing so, one can sensibly discuss the social and economic conditions that causally occasioned and conditioned, say, Wordsworth's poetry or Dalton's atomic theory, and the effects those new vocabularies then had on other things.

Brandom (2000b: 180) argues that this attempt to make a metavocabulary – "to craft by artifice a vocabulary in which everything can be said" – need not invoke a "maniacal" metaphysics which rejects everything that cannot be translated into the metavocabulary, but only a more modest metaphysics whose aim is that of:

> constructing a vocabulary that will be useful for the purposes of the contemporary intellectual: the one who by [Rorty's own] definition is concerned with seeing the culture whole, trying to make the vocabularies it now seems useful to employ to get various sorts of practical grips on [how] things hang together (Brandom 2000b: 181).

This is also a lesson that Rorty ought to learn from Hegel's recognition of the limitations of every position that we take up. Hegel's dialectic through its subtle dynamics reminds us that every perspective has its blind spot, every standpoint its exclusionary moment.

Rorty, I am sure, would say that he has learnt this lesson well. He would argue, perhaps, that in advocating that we hold, so to speak, private thinkers in one hand and public thinkers in the other, both simultaneously in our view, together but apart, that he is motivated precisely by the recognition that each has its limitations. But Rorty's response to the private and public is wholly analogous to that which Hegel (1807: 18) criticises when he writes:

> Subject and object, God, Nature, Understanding, sensibility, and so on, are uncritically taken for granted as familiar, established as valid, and made into fixed points for starting and stopping. While these remain unmoved, the knowing activity goes back and forth between them, thus moving only on their surface.

Hegel urges that we move beyond the surface to recognize the identity within the movement of the oppositions. His view, summarized here by Charles Taylor (1975: 80), is that:

> each term in [our] basic dichotomies, when thoroughly understood, shows itself to be not only opposed to but identical with its opposite. And when we examine things more deeply we shall see that this is so because at base the very relations of opposition and identity are inseparably linked to each other. They cannot be utterly distinguished because neither can exist on its own, that is, maintain itself as the sole relation holding between a given pair of terms. Rather they are in a kind of circular relation. An opposition arises out of an earlier identity; and this of necessity: the identity could not sustain itself on its own, but had to breed opposition. And from this it follows that the opposition is not simply opposition; the relation of each term to its opposite is a peculiarly intimate one. It is not just related to *an* other but to *its* other, and this hidden identity will necessarily reassert itself in the recovery of unity.

Hegel's assurance of the reconciliation (or synthesis) of our dichotomies (thesis and antithesis) is, of course, underpinned by an elaborate metaphysics of *Geist*. This metaphysics is to the contemporary temperament incredible, and Rorty correctly rejects it. In rejecting the metaphysics, though, Rorty also rejects the possibility of reconciliation or commensuration of oppositions.

Hegel warns us repeatedly in the preface to the *Phenomenology* not to treat ideas as fixed, not to reduce the dialectical movement of thought to a mere formalism. For Hegel, knowledge is a dynamic process fuelled by contradictions in which ideas themselves develop through opposition and competition. If ideas are ultimately synthesised it is because the ideas themselves have

changed in the course of their history and in response to a process which has exposed their limitations.

Now we can surely hold on to this insight while jettisoning the idealism and necessity with which Hegel imbues it. Could we not invoke the Rortian conversation as the perfect setting for a contemporary version of this? The ideal conversation would be one in which opposing and apparently contradictory ideas about perfection, on the one hand, and justice, on the other, might be put forward and played off against each other in an atmosphere of tolerance and openness to change. Of course, without the metaphysics of *Geist*, we cannot be assured of reconciliation before the fact, but as Rorty (1980a: 318) acknowledges "the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts." Rorty's rigid division of public and private, however, would stop precisely this process. Rather than putting ideas of perfection and justice into dialogue with each other, he would keep them hermetically sealed off from each other.

Rothleder (1999: 64) notes that this is a Kantian moment in Rorty: Rorty identifies (like Kant) an antimony and like Kant he deals with it by relegating each side of the antimony to a separate sphere. And Nancy Fraser (1990: 305) warns that:

> compromises based on partition are notoriously unstable. They tend not truly to resolve but only temporarily to palliate the basic source of conflict. Sooner or later, in one form or another, the latter will out.

Compare this approach with that which Derrida, who occupies what John Llewelyn (1987: 87) has called a "point of almost absolute proximity to Hegel", offers us in his deconstruction which can be seen as a rethinking of Hegel's dialectic within a postmodern context. The crucial notion of deconstruction as it concerns us here is that of *différance* which Derrida (1982: 17) elucidates in the following:

> philosophy lives *in* and *on différance*, thereby blinding itself to the *same*, which is not identical. The same, precisely, is *différance* (with an *a*) as the displaced and equivocal passage of one different thing to another, from one term of an opposition to the other. Thus one could reconsider all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed and on which our discourse lives, not in order to see opposition erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the *différance* of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same.

As with Hegel, Derrida emphasizes the dynamic movement of thought. Unlike Hegel, however, Derrida does not seek some grand resolution of the contradictions but rather an awareness of how the oppositions in our thought are bound together. Rorty's insistence on the incommensurability of

the discourses of public and private may seem to be in tune with Derrida's view that oppositions cannot be erased. Derrida, though, responds to oppositions not by insisting on separation but by working at the margins to transgress in so far as it is possible the limits and distinctions which philosophy sets up.

Why would Rorty deny us this option? His assertions aside, there is nothing in what he says about either so-called public or private vocabularies or about incommensurability to suggest that we are actually dealing with incommensurable vocabularies. Moreover, Rorty elsewhere explicates a similar set of tensions in different ways that do not invoke the problematic at all. In one formulation it is posed as a tension between "trying to change the world or change ourselves" (1995e: 220); while in a second it is a tension between wanting to change reality and being "continually tempted by the urge to sit back and grasp our time in thought" (1988c: 184); and in a third, it is a tension between "sublime ways of detaching oneself from others' interests" (by finding words, or ways of using words, that are not part of anyone else's vocabulary or language game), and "beautiful ways of harmonizing interests" (1984b: 176). In none of these formulations does Rorty insist that there is any incommensurability at work. What becomes evident from looking at these alternative formulations, though, is Rorty's own ambivalence with respect to the value he places on the two sides of the tension. He is undecided between thinking them "equally laudable motives" (1984b: 176) and devaluing acts of self-creation because "we grow abashed" if we spend too much time on them, thinking it "selfish, unhealthy and decadent" (1995e: 220). It is perhaps as a consequence of his own ambivalence towards the pursuit of the purely intellectual, the aesthetic, the sublime, the self-regarding that Rorty offers *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a) as an attempt:

> to show how things look if we drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and the
> private, and are content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally
> valid, yet forever incommensurable (1989a: xv).

To show this from what perspective, though? In *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a) Rorty is less concerned, on the whole, to offer a general picture of the just or good society than to make society safe for and safe from the liberal ironist.

Rorty's attempt to turn a personal choice – "I will keep my irony private" – into a general rule – "ironists should/must keep their irony private" – is motivated by his desire to protect society and ironists from each other. On the one hand, there is Rorty's desire to protect individual freedom from social interference: people should be free so far as possible to pursue their own ends and interests without acceding to the demand that they justify those ends and interests in terms of social results and relevance. As Kuipers (1997: 69) puts it:

In order to protect individual freedom as far as possible, he drives a deep wedge between the public and private aspects of human life. Public concerns for justice should intrude as little as possible into private pursuits.

On the other hand, Rorty is only too aware that irony can be dangerous to society: not only can it result in cruelty and humiliation; it can undermine trust and faith in social institutions and can result in social retreat and quietism. More than this, though, irony is by its nature parasitic, the ironist needs something (common sense) to be ironic about. Thus it seems that both irony and common sense stand in need of our protection.

Rorty's way of attempting to provide this dual protection, though, results in an oscillation throughout the work between the general political questions and the way moral, social and political life looks from the particular perspective of the liberal ironist. This constant fudging of the two levels of description (personal and political) makes *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a) a particularly exasperating book to read for two reasons. The first is the obvious fact that the reader is never altogether sure which level of description Rorty is employing at a given point. As a consequence it becomes difficult to evaluate any of his claims. A claim which if read as being at one level of description may seem false (even obviously so), may seem persuasive if read as being at another level. The second reason is a corollary of this: claims are made, justifications are offered, but often (as in the case of the public-private distinction) conclusion and premises operate at different levels and so stand in an unobvious relation to each other.

This oscillation is particularly evident in the case of the private/public distinction. Rorty tries to offer a political solution to what is ultimately an individual dilemma – how do I reconcile my commitments to myself (the demands of self-creation and autonomy) with my commitments to others (the demands of justice and solidarity), when I often experience those commitments as conflicting and opposed? Rorty is surely correct to say that no theory will give us an answer to this question. But that is not because the two demands speak different languages, are incommensurable. Instead, it is because the question is a personal one, the reconciliation is necessarily individual whereas theory is necessarily general. It is for this same reason, however, that no political answer to the question will suit either.

The insistence that some vocabularies be kept private is not actually a political rule but a personal choice. Liberal ironists, because they are concerned about the cruelty that their redescriptions may cause for others, choose not to be ironic in the public sphere. But that is just their choice; there is no way for Rorty to insist that others make the same choice, much less to insist that society make it for them.

How then should we understand Rorty's claim that there are both private and public vocabularies? What does he mean by those terms? What connotations do they have for him, and for us? Nancy Fraser (1997: 85-6) offers the following interpretations of public and private:

"Publicity," for example, can mean (1) state-related; (2) accessible to everyone; (3) of concern to everyone; and, (4) pertaining to a common good or shared interest. Each of these corresponds to a contrasting sense of "privacy." In addition there are two other senses of "privacy" hovering just below the surface here: (5) pertaining to private property in a market economy; and (6) pertaining to intimate domestic or personal life, including sexual life.

Clearly Rorty's distinction between public and private vocabularies relies on understanding these terms in the fourth of Fraser's senses. This sits well with Brandom's (2000b: 172) suggestion that we can most profitably see the distinction as being one between the public and private *use* of vocabularies. On Brandom's reading each vocabulary articulates different norms:

Public vocabularies articulate the norms that govern our answering to each other; private vocabularies articulate the norms that govern our answering to ourselves (2000b: 172)

The vocabularies also express different purposes: "public discourse corresponding to common purposes, and private discourse to novel purposes" (Brandom 2000b: 172).

Brandom (2000b: 172) further suggests that:

The novel vocabularies forged by artists for private consumption make it possible to frame new purposes and plans that can be appreciated only by those initiated into those vocabularies. … By contrast, the overarching goals that structure and orient the public vocabulary Rorty envisages are common to, or at least intelligible in the terms of, a wide variety of vocabularies.

I think this way of reading Rorty allows us to make greater sense of his claims of incommensurability. There may indeed be moments of real incommensurability within the clusters of thinkers that Rorty identifies. The problem, then, is not that Rorty has incorrectly diagnosed incommensurability but merely mislocated it. Rorty attempts to persuade us that it is ideas about private perfection that are incommensurable with ideas about public justice. I have argued that that is not the case. What we may find though are thinkers who disagree widely about what private perfection is, or about what public justice consists in. In cases where it is the public question of justice which is at stake, we are constrained to use a commonly intelligible vocabulary and therefore we have the potential to argue our way to some resolution. In cases where different visions of the self are at stake, though, no such constraints exist – we are answerable only to ourselves, and the best we can do is to exemplify the virtues we stand for since there is no way to

persuade someone else to accept them. Here, and only here, do we have real potential incommensurability.

But this sympathetic attempt to make sense of Rorty need not blind us to the fact that the distinction as he actually draws it is much stronger. This stronger claim not only makes for bad philosophy but it makes for bad politics too. The costs to social life are, I would argue, too high. The private-public distinction in Rorty's rendering of it is shorn of its moral underpinnings. Its goal is no longer to protect the weak from the strong, the citizen from the state, but simply to allow people to embrace contradictory beliefs without the embarrassment of admitting it. Rather than forcing us to confront the ways in which our selves, our beliefs, our values are bound up with those of others, that our private choices have public consequences and *vice versa* Rorty gives us a way of avoiding those issues by telling us that we cannot talk about them.   As Guignon and Hiley (2003a: 29) point out:

> There is a deep tension between the existential and pragmatic strands in Rorty's thought –
> between the private project of self-elaboration and the public project of reducing suffering and
> expanding solidarity. For it seems that my capacity for recognising the many forms cruelty can
> take and my ability to empathize with the many ways that others suffer is not independent of the
> kind of person I am trying to become. Some projects of private perfection are more likely than
> others to expand our sympathies. In a similar way, it is not unreasonable to think that the kind
> of person I wish to become is closely bound up with the kind of community that is worthy of my
> loyalty. And it is not unreasonable to think that, as important as the reduction of cruelty and the
> expansion of freedom are, more is needed of public institutions than that if we are to create
> conditions in which individuals can experiment with meaningful, as opposed to trivial, self-
> elaborations. Rorty's bifurcated way of thinking about public and private life seems unable to
> support his liberal utopian hopes.

More charitably we may read Rorty as agreeing with Schwartz (1983: 59) and worrying that public discussion of our private choices may invariably lead to a form of humiliation:

> Perhaps even more important than disputing someone else's hypotheses is not to take their
> projects seriously – to see the other's tradition as uninteresting and its central tenets trivial or
> without meaning ... . Disagreement between paradigms will center less on matters of truth or
> proof than it will on evaluations of significance.

As Schwartz emphasises, however, in such cases it is not incommensurability *per se* which is at stake, but rather a certain kind of attitude towards the other.

I want to propose that instead of thinking about society in terms of a strict separation of private and public, we would do better to look to the idea of conversation as a model of society. Rorty

originally invokes the notion of conversation, in *Philosophy and the mirror of nature* (1980a), as a way of dealing with discourses in which there is a lack of agreement on the rules for engagement. That is to say, that Rorty first employs the notion of conversation to deal with incommensurability in philosophy. There is something of an irony, then, in the fact that Rorty in his political thinking invokes incommensurability as a way to avoid conversation. This is made doubly ironic when Rorty elsewhere denies that incommensurability is a problem at all. For instance, in an interview with Ragg (2002: 374-5) Rorty says:

> Well, I think what Davidson is talking about is incommensurability and denying that it's a real phenomenon, something we have to worry about. Unlike a lot of followers of Derrida and De Man who make a big deal out of the failure to commensurate, I agree with Davidson about that.

The deep tension, if not outright contradiction, between the private/public distinction and conversation will be discussed further in section 2.3. First, though, I will outline, in section 2.2, the model of conversational society which I think we should adopt from Rorty.

2.2   The conversation and society

In this section I want to look at what it might mean to see society itself as a kind of conversation. Although the idea of conversation is not always explicit in Rorty's social thought it is I think implicitly present and so to invoke it as a model is not to do an injustice to Rorty but to bring out the features of his own thought which he tends to underplay. In suggesting that we take seriously the notion of society as a kind of conversation, we should be careful not to overplay the aspect of talking which is only one part of what conversation means. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* lists the "talking" definition a lowly seventh (my bold) in its listing, giving, in their actual order:

1. The action of living or having one's being *in* and *among*.
2. The action of consorting with others; living together; commerce, society, intimacy.
3. Sexual intimacy.
4. Occupation with *things*; intimacy with a matter.
5. Circle of acquaintance, society.
6. Behaviour, manner of life.
7. **Interchange of thought and words; familiar discourse or talk;**
8. An "At Home"
9. A kind of *genre* painting representing a group of figures.

It must be admitted, nevertheless, that Rorty introduces the idea of conversation as a way of thinking about discourse and so the notion as Rorty uses it does prioritize the notion of talking. I

would argue, however, that Rorty leaves his notion sufficiently vague and undefined that it is amenable to extension. In order to argue that we should look to the idea of conversation as a way of thinking about society more generally then, I will proceed as follows. I will begin by looking at the notion of conversation as discourse and look at two particularly prominent strands of criticism to which this idea has given rise, namely that it ignores the role of argument and reason, and that it is a pointless sort of practice. Having rebutted these strands of criticism I will outline a way in which we can extend the notion of conversation to society as a whole, and I will do this by debating with critics who see Rorty as privileging language over the more material and institutional aspects of society.

It is most famously in *Philosophy and the mirror of nature* (1980a) that Rorty talks about conversation. He introduces the notion there as a way of elucidating the post-epistemological role of the philosopher. Such philosophers he suggests should become good conversationalists and rather than seeking to adjudicate others' contributions or translate all contributions into a neutral framework, the philosopher should use hermeneutic strategies to keep the conversation going. The notion of conversation itself remains, it must be admitted, vague and commentators attach different associations to it. Rebecca Comay (1986: 123) suggests that Rorty's society looks very much like "a 'better' liberal arts college with a commitment to interdisciplinary studies. Fischer (1990: 235) is reminded more of a visit to "a pre-school playroom". Bouveresse (2000: 142) sees Rorty as describing something like the current state of French philosophy and worries that that way of doing philosophy has, in practice, increased the isolation of philosophers from each other. And Bernstein (1982:351) finds in it:

> a profound moral-political vision that informs his work and suggests what our society and culture may *yet* become.

Given the amorphous quality of the idea of conversation which allows it to be viewed so variously it is crucial that I offer some reading of the notion of conversation in order to show why, like Bernstein, I take it to be a valuable moral-political vision, before attempting to extend the model further.

Since Rorty introduces the idea of conversation in the context of extending Kuhn's ideas of normal and revolutionary science to the more general notions of normal and abnormal discourse I will use those notions as a framework but in so doing I will draw on Nancy Fraser's recognition that we find in Rorty's writing attention to three types of discourse – normal, polylogical, and monological. Fraser (1990: 313) explains polylogical (abnormal) discourse thus:

It is the simple negation of the discourse of normal science, that is, of discourse in which interlocutors share a sense of what counts as a problem or question, as a well-formed or serious hypothesis and as a good reason or argument. Abnormal discourse, then, is discourse in which such matters are up for grabs. It involves a plurality of differentiable if not incommensurable voices and it consists in an exchange among them that is lively if somewhat disorderly.

Fraser (1990: 313-4) associates monological (abnormal) discourse with the discourse of the strong poet or ironist theorist:

It is a discourse that consists in a solitary voice crying out into the night against an utterly undifferentiated background. The only conceivable response to this voice is uncomprehending rejection or identificatory imitation. There is no room for a reply that could qualify as a different voice. There is no room for interaction.

Conversation, as I understand it, involves all of these types of discourses, even the monological. In particular, conversation does not stand in contrast to normal discourse as so many criticisms of Rorty's views presuppose, rather, conversation includes normal discourse as one, but just one, of its moments. This interpretation of conversation is not universally accepted, conversation is often seen as standing against and replacing normal discourse, and is therefore seen as potentially irrationalist, relativist, or even subjectivist or nihilist, with the result that critics who take such a view find themselves pleading for the role of reason and argument.

The flavour of this line of criticism is exemplified by Fischer and Williams. Fischer (1990: 235) seeks to defend the rationalist against what he takes to be Rorty's (perhaps intentional) misunderstanding:

Far from hoping to put an end to conversation ... rationalists wish it to continue. The desire to defend criteria, objectivity and progress in this tradition stems from a fear not that discussion will begin but that it will end by degenerating into a shouting match or power struggle among incommensurable perspectives.

Bernard Williams (1990: 35), in his turn, defends analytical philosophy against Rorty's criticisms on the grounds that it embodies:

a very abstract example of certain virtues of civilized thought: ... it gives reasons and sets out arguments in a way that can be explicitly followed and considered, and ... it makes questions clearer and sorts out what is muddled ... analytical philosophy asserts important freedoms, both to pursue the argument and, in its more imaginative reaches, to develop alternative pictures of the world and of human life. It is both a creative activity and an activity pursued under

constraints – constraints experienced as, among others, those of rational consistency. ... Both in this philosophy and in the sciences, the ideal is the old Socratic ideal that mere rhetoric and the power of words will not prevail.

Both Fischer and Williams suggest that Rorty leaves no space for giving reasons, using and defending criteria, clarification and argumentation. I, on the other hand, think that Rorty is well aware of the virtues of reason and argumentation but is also aware of their limited utility. Argumentation can proceed only on the basis of some agreement about assumptions and premises. Where there is such agreement, argumentation can be an invaluable tool. Where there is no such agreement, though, we may have to use other persuasive tools such as story-telling and narrative construction. Sometimes we may have so little in common that all we can do is keep on talking until we build up sufficient familiarity with each others' vocabularies that we can begin to tell stories and perhaps even argue and thereby build up new conventions and possibilities for agreement. All of these modes are important and have their place; each has its own utility and its own virtues.

The notion of conversation, then, includes a variety of modes in which different sorts of approaches may be appropriate (by which I mean, may work). Just as it is a problem for game theory that we may be mistaken about which game we are playing so it is a problem for this notion of conversation that we may not know in which mode of conversation we are participating. Are we fruitfully disagreeing, or merely talking past one another? Are we disagreeing about some matter of substance or merely semantics? If we are mistaken about the mode of conversation in which we are engaged, we may choose the wrong tools, we may try to argue from Darwinian premises and thus fail to persuade our religious fundamentalist interlocutor; or we may tell the analytical philosopher a story and be met with incomprehension. That we can get things wrong in this way is not a flaw in the notion of conversation though, it is a reason for thinking that we cannot, should not, try to limit our interactions to a single type, but should instead continue our explorations, reaching out to create meaning in and out of the blankness.

We should, I would argue, be careful to take conversation seriously as a kind of talking together rather than as is often the case in practice of a talking against. And we should avoid the tendency to treat conversation as though it were, at its best, a seminar discussion or courtroom examination, or some equally formalized and explicitly rule-governed speech context. This again is to confuse conversation with what is only one of its modes. Conversation is free-flowing, it moves from one topic to another to another (and sometimes back again) in ways which cannot be predicted or controlled. Its informality allows for contributions from anyone at any time and it involves interruptions, incursions and recursions. A conversation may be brief or extend over years, it may even continue when none of the original parties any longer take part in it.

Michael Fischer (1990: 238) recognises this fact but wishes nevertheless to emphasise constraints (constraints, which he implies, Rorty ignores) to which conversation must be subjected:

> Contrasted to a certain kind of argument – a debate, for example, or a scientific paper – a conversation seems loose in structure. Participants are freer to shift topics and to digress. Similarly, the rules of a conversation – when a person speaks, for instance, and for how long – seem more flexible, generated by the discussion rather than prescribed in advance ... . [But] each feature of a conversation – shifting subjects, for example, and taking turns – is governed by procedures that participants have learned. ... Similarly, despite their flexibility and open-endedness conversations have a beginning, middle and an end. There are formulas for initiating a conversation ..., sustaining it ..., and ending it. ... We know when these rules have been broken – when we've been interrupted, say, or lectured. Conversations, then, may not heed the more rigid, external constraints that bind arguments, but they are not for that reason lawless.

Fischer wishes us to think of conversation as a norm-governed activity and moreover an activity whose underlying social and cultural norms can and should be made explicit. It is certainly true that ordinary conversation is norm-governed. There are also good reasons for wanting to make those norms explicit. Perhaps by doing so we will, for example, find ways in which certain voices are systematically silenced and excluded from the conversation or that certain ways of conversing are potentially cruel and humiliating in ways we have not recognised. Nevertheless, in so far as Fischer is suggesting that the norms which govern conversation should form some type of regulative ideal I think we should resist that approach. I take part of Rorty's reason for leaving conversation unspecified to be an attempt to resist the regulative approach.

What does, perhaps, need to be spelled out though is the point or purpose of conversation. Hollis (1990: 250), for instance, makes this point that conversation needs a goal:

> Yet this notion of Socratic, or almost any, conversation is, by itself, absurd. At diplomatic cocktail parties one perhaps passes the platitudes for the sake of passing them; and encounter groups may possibly have the encounter as their goal. But, if "Socratic" has anything to do with Socrates, the goal is wisdom. It may be a goal needing a sinuous pursuit, with some benefits of the hunt immanent in the hunt itself. But without the goal the activity is unintelligible.

Underlying this line of criticism, no doubt, is the fear that without an explicit purpose the conversation may become redundant, as Rebecca Comay (1986: 122) reads it:

> The conversation continues: without interruption or impetus. Sanguine, indifferent to social criticism, it knows itself to be irrelevant and becomes an idle plaything for the sophisticates.

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Rockmore (2002: 440) suggests that the Rortian conversation can, in fact, have no goal because of the metaphilosophical assumptions from which it proceeds:

> For Rorty, either we know how the world is, in which case discussion comes to an end, or we do not and cannot know how the world is, and the discussion is endless and not worth conducting since we finally cannot know anything other than that we cannot know anything.

If Rockmore is correct then it seems there is never any point to talking. Michael Fischer (1990: 238), however, contends that conversation does not need a goal:

> Whereas an argument aims at demonstrating a truth, often by discrediting someone else's position, a conversation is an end in itself, an instance of the interaction that it furthers. Accordingly, whereas we aim at clinching or resolving an argument, we try to sustain a conversation. We consequently praise good conversationalists for their liveliness, wit and imagination, for their ability not to end the discussion but to keep it going.

Rorty himself offers no explicit goal for the conversation; instead it is an exploration driven, he thinks, only by hope – the hope that if we continue to talk to each other we may come to agree or at least fruitfully disagree (1980a: 318). This dual hope may be seen as expressing a deeper tension within Rorty's notion of conversation between what I call an *agonic* conception and a consensual conception. It is one of the strengths of Rorty's philosophy that he does not try to resolve the tension between *agon* and consensus, insisting instead that both models play their role in the conversation.

On the one hand, there is a conception of conversation as agonic, marked primarily by dissent and competition between alternate views. Pushing Rorty in this direction is his general antirealist perspective. His ideas that language does not picture the world but merely gives us tools for coping with it and that the world stands in a causal but not a justificatory relationship to our beliefs (1991d: 97 and 1989a: 5) mean that the world may give rise to our experiences but those experiences are open to interpretation. Different interpretations are not merely possible, but likely, and there is no objective way of deciding between interpretations. We have a powerful mix of ideas leading towards the agonic conception of a conversation in which Fraser's polylogical discourse predominates.

Side by side with this, though, we find a powerful set of considerations in favour of a consensual model of conversation, conversation aimed primarily at finding common ground and agreement. Among the ideas pushing Rorty in this direction is his notion of truth as that which we agree upon. In order for conversation to get off the ground at all, there has to be some minimal agreement in

this sense; only the hope of further and more substantial agreement could keep the conversation going and Rorty expresses this hope himself. There is thus the hope that we can find or create at least moments of normal discourse, and perhaps sustain them.

But where then does the monological fit in? I have said that I consider even the monological to be a form of conversation but the monological certainly delineates the margins of conversation. In some senses it is hyperagonic – the cry of the lone voice, it offers a different way of looking at things but does not actively engage with others. But, perhaps, we should not be too quick to assume that the monological voice – the voice of the lone genius – is antisocial. Lurie (1991: 225) notes that the creation of culture requires two human abilities the first is to follow rules (practices, customs), the second to invent new rules (practices, customs). Both of these activities are social, the first requires "joining in", the second requires "attracting others". The hyperagonic monological voice of the strong poet may thus be seen as an attempt to attract others through exemplification and iteration. The lone voice may not actively engage with others but its very cry calls for a response.

There is a different sort of monologue, though, which is a sort of hyperconsensualism, which rests on the assumption that everyone really is attempting to say the same thing as oneself, and thus only one's own articulation is needed. It is this hyperconsensualism which Comay, for instance, worries about in Rorty's philosophy. Comay (1986: 128) believes that Rorty's conversation "steamrollers all difference and becomes a night in which all cows are black". She further points out that Rorty's own conversational practice is deeply monological and points to the "systematic way in which Rorty has managed to neutralize the potentially radical force of almost every thinker he encounters" (1986: 128). I think Rorty certainly does fall into the traps that Comay identifies, but in so far as we see that as problematic we should treat it as a warning to tread more cautiously in our own conversational practice rather than as an invitation to reject the concept of conversation altogether.

One way, then, to answer the question of the point of conversation, is to view conversation as not only lacking a single set of rules or norms, not only lacking a single set of practices, but also as lacking a single goal. Sometimes, conversation aims at winning an argument, sometimes at "attracting others", sometimes as Roth (1990: 354) notes, at creating solidarity:

> Conversation can lead to a kind of solidarity, one that is based not on some discovery of a common essence, but on an acknowledgment of connections and shared beliefs that tie people together. It is crucial for Rorty that the realization of the contingency of these connections and beliefs need not undermine our willingness to preserve them, even at great risk.

Another way, to answer the question is to note what all of these moments – normal, polylogical, monological, the agonic and the consensualist and the hyper-forms of both – have in common, namely that they are all attempts to persuade. In normal discourse we proceed from some shared basis through argumentation hoping for agreement and consensus; in polylogical moments we employ other forms of persuasion – such as stories – to find common ground; the strong poet offers his own iteration of his metaphors or the example of his life (or those of his characters) as a way of "attracting others", so that it becomes once again a sort of persuasion. Only in the hyperconsensualist moment does persuasion cease to be the goal. But even there Rorty's monological quality is often intended as a type of persuasion – the attempt to show that what might otherwise seem incomprehensible is not so. This is not, however, to deny the very real dangers that Rorty's hyperconsensual moments hold, and these will be discussed in the next section.

It is this idea of conversation as a multivalent persuasive activity in which a variety of forms are encouraged and which has both agonic and consensual moments that I think we should take from Rorty and use in constructing a vision of the liberal society.

If the idea of conversation is, indeed, key to an understanding of society, then the question is to what extent conversation is a plausible and illuminating model for thinking about society. The most obvious objection to thinking of society in this way is that the conversational model is in some sense idealist, it privileges words and thoughts over actions and reality. To what extent is this sort of objection valid?

Given the broader features of Rorty's philosophy – his anti-representationalism, in particular – it is tempting to read Rorty as purely a constructionist unconcerned with the material aspects of reality and the need for social action. Topper (1995: 964), for example, offers this indictment of Rorty:

> Oddly, Rorty's preoccupation with avoiding a return to foundationalism, metaphysics, and Truth have left him so resistant to all forms of systematic analysis that his alternative to foundationalism is in many ways every bit as aloof from the complexities of ongoing social and political issues as the foundationalist philosophy which he sought to replace.

One of the virtues of *Achieving our country* (1998a) is the way it brings into focus, as Rorty's previous work had not, his own commitment to a politics of action, his own dismay with theorists who over-intellectualise political questions. On the other hand, it must be admitted that he does emphasize (even overemphasize) the constructed aspects of social reality and the role of the intellectual, and does give inordinate attention to the place of language.

That Rorty does indeed privilege language over other forms of action does not mean that any society which is premised on conversation need do so, however. Since the idea of conversation models a notion of liberal democratic society, though, we should not ignore language and talking altogether. For what, in the end, sets democratic societies apart is that they involve active participation from their citizens, and this continuous active creation of democratic participation is often a matter of talking. Language is a form of action as both Arendt (1958) and Habermas (1981) make explicit with their respective notions of "political action" and "communicative action".

I have said that conversation is a model for a liberal democratic society; but in what sense "liberal"? Earlier I distinguished between Rorty's moral liberal space which is premised on the abhorrence and avoidance of cruelty, and political liberalism. Rorty's political liberalism in large measure reduces to his insistence on a strong public/private split. We have found that split to be incoherent, and in the next section I will argue it is in any case incompatible with the idea of conversation. I therefore suggest that Rorty's liberal democracy is ideally one in which abhorrence of cruelty is the cornerstone and is thus, provisionally at least (we shall return to the question in the next section), inclusive of all progressive elements in political thought and life. Thus when we discuss a Rortian liberal democracy we are not defending, and should not be read as talking about, actually existing liberal democracies.

A Rortian liberal democracy – one premised on conversation rather than the public/private split – would be a society which welcomed all contributions from all voices, which encouraged argument and anecdotes, old vocabularies and new metaphors, new meanings, extensions of old meanings, and reductions.

Tom Sorrell (1990: 24) also sees this idea of conversation as one to be found in Rorty's work. He forcefully argues that it goes too far:

> To say that liberalism tolerates many forms of persuasion, however, is *not* to say that according to liberalism anything goes. *Not* anything goes, because not all forms of speech can be interpreted as persuasive speech. In particular, it is unclear that the particular *outré* forms of speech Rorty so admires in philosophy can be recognized as persuasive. Rorty confuses the real invitation liberalism extends to different forms of persuasive speech with an imaginary invitation liberalism is supposed to extend to different vocabularies. The latter invitation is far wider than the former, and only the former seems to be derivable from liberalism. "Anything goes so long as it is in the sphere of persuasion" does not mean that anything goes so long as it is in the sphere of words or that any new vocabulary deserves an encounter with a going vocabulary. To put it another way, it is only the upshots of certain linguistic encounters that liberalism takes to matter to truth. Encounters between arguments fit the bill; encounters between language games do not. They are at the wrong level of generality. In any case, it

would have been odd if liberalism had been made for the poetic culture. Rorty's picture of this culture as one in which new linguistic forms are continually killing old ones, seems better suited to a politics of permanent revolution than to liberalism.

Sorrell, then, argues that a liberal society is one which extends an invitation to, and tolerates only, forms of persuasive speech, which he restricts to argumentation, because, he supposes (taking a Millian line) that what matters about free speech is that it results in truth. Rorty he thinks, as do I, envisions a society which extends that invitation and tolerance further to include new vocabularies and fears that this is incompatible with liberalism because, failing to take the goal of truth seriously, it results in instability. What is at stake for Sorrell then is the nature of liberalism and its relation to (the goal of achieving) the truth.

Let us begin with the question of liberalism, which I have already addressed. I take the conversational society to be liberal only in the broad sense that it eschews cruelty and humiliation. Thus it is no argument against the model, perhaps even an argument for it, that it does not fit the actual extant idea of political liberalism. Moreover, the demand that the liberal society take alternative vocabularies, rather than merely claims, seriously is not as unrealistic as Sorrell suggests. Is that not precisely the demand of multiculturalism? Is one way to take this demand seriously not to try out new experimental visions of liberalism rather than the conservative model Sorrell upholds?

Second there is Sorrell's claim that only some types of speech (particularly arguments) are persuasive. Again, this is a matter with which I have already dealt. I have tried to show that even the lone voice in the wilderness is an attempt at persuasion in that it seeks to attract others to it. In any case this is surely an empirical matter and another argument for an experimental approach. It suggests we should let everyone speak and see who persuades, how and why; rather than determining beforehand that only some forms of speech will succeed.

Finally, there is the question of the relation between speech, persuasion and truth. Rorty does not necessarily disagree with Sorrell that truth is an important aim of conversation. They differ, I suspect, in how they understand truth. For Sorrell truth seems to be something we *find* through discursive encounters, while for Rorty it is something we *create* out of them – truth for Rorty is simply whatever, as the result of free and open conversation, we agree upon. It may be that, in fact, we agree upon very little (perhaps even as little as the banal truths of arithmetic) but that is all the more reason to continue talking to find further agreement or fruitful disagreement.

Can the conversation be free and open, though? Kaiser (1990), for instance, worries that Rorty imagines that free conversation is easily obtained. He points to some important differences

between the notion of freedom in communication as employed by Rorty and Habermas in that while for Habermas "undistorted communication" is merely a "regulative counterfactual idea" Rorty seems to retain a belief in its actual possibility:

> According to Rorty, freedom as "undistorted communication" is a *fact* as soon as discourses are entirely freed from any internal (i.e. Metaphysical) or external constraints (such as physical violence; brutal force) (Kaiser 1990: 1074).

I think Kaiser is correct to be worried on this account. I will take this issue further in Chapter Four when I discuss the question of power, and argue that to realise a Rortian conversational society we need to take power much more seriously than Rorty himself does. For the present, having sketched the idea of a conversational society I want to turn to look at the ways in which Rorty's articulation of the liberal society in terms of a strong public/private divide is incompatible with the conversational model.

2.3   The incompatibility of the two models

The purpose of this section is to demonstrate the ways in which the public/private model Rorty invokes damages his own idea of conversation. Thus far I have argued that Rorty's vision of the liberal society, at least as he articulates it in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a), is premised on a version of the private/public split which is incoherent and untenable. I have further argued that the attempt to keep irony private can only be a personal choice which liberal ironists make in order to reconcile their ironic love of redescription and their moral abhorrence of cruelty. In this section I take the argument a stage further by arguing that even if we could find some way of writing this split into the public rules which govern a liberal society, we should resist the distinction for pragmatic reasons. If, as I have argued, our quests for self-creation and justice are not two different things, neatly separable into private and public but are deeply intertwined and quite possibly the same, then any attempt to limit the scope of our public and private vocabularies will have deleterious effects on our attempts to create ourselves, on social theory and on political practice. I will look at each of these in turn.

Before turning to the main argument of this section, in which I argue that the private/public dichotomy functions to stop any public debate, I want to look briefly at a subset of criticisms which focus on Rorty's celebration of the private. Not every critic takes this focus to be a cause for concern. Flathman (1990: 309), for example, adds an approving note to the discussion when he argues that:

Aside from a certain passion for solidarity that wells up in the final chapter, Rorty devotes the preponderance of his attention to the private realm and the opportunities it uniquely affords for self-expression and self-enactment. In elaborating upon these delights, and in debunking philosophical arguments for the superiority of the public realm, he at least seeks to promote a liberalism that celebrates privacy and plurality.

Flathman is, however, distinctly a minority voice on this topic and other critics express concern that by invoking a public/private distinction in the socio-political realm Rorty runs the risk of creating cynical, schizoid, apathetic and alienated individuals.

Mounce (1997: 207), for instance, argues that the liberal ironist has to become something of a split personality, and that rigorously maintaining the division at the level of the individual would undermine political agency:

> The liberal is the same man in both spheres and one of the things he will be ironic about in private is precisely his liberalism ... . Rorty's liberal ... is a person essentially divided, having to suppress in public what he thinks in private. Such suppression can work, but only at the cost of persistent effort. This means that a liberal who accepts Rorty's philosophy is to that extent put at a disadvantage.

I think Mounce is wrong for reasons that I have already adduced in the previous chapter – namely that the liberal ironist is not split because he is, in fact, not ironic about his political liberalism. Nevertheless there is something right in what Mounce says and this is better expressed by Rothleder (1999: 71) who claims:

> Rorty's particular conception of the public/private split puts all of the goodies – empowerment, pleasure, sex fantasies – on the private side and all of the nasty things – humiliation, sacrifice, self-annihilation – on the public side. There is nothing to entice us into the public, and only the fear of humiliation will occasionally drive us there.

Kuipers (1997: 78-9) also expresses concern about this very real possibility that people will prefer, given Rorty's options, to remain cocooned in their private lives, their self-creative activities:

> if we follow Rorty's advice and radically distinguish our private projects from our public ones, we will become so consumed with our private lives that we will fail to tend to the maintenance of the public solidarity that makes such private life possible. In the end, such neglect would destroy the flourishing of both private and public life. ... In times like ours – times in which, for example, the mechanisms of a global economy sustain an oppressive stratification between the "haves" in the North and the "have-nots" in the South – we need a greater willingness to tear ourselves

away from our private concerns, concerns that depend … upon an uncritical acceptance of this state of affairs.

Add to this Fraser's (1990: 312) worry that even if the intellectual is drawn to the public he has no social role left to play in Rorty's society:

The strong poet as heretofore conceived must be domesticated, cut down to size and made fit for private life. He must become the aesthete, a figure denuded of public ambition and turned inward. Thus the intellectual will be king in the castle of his own self-fashioning, but he will no longer legislate for the social world. Strictly speaking, indeed, the intellectual will have no social role or political function.

Rorty's distinction between private and public looks like it would be unattractive even if it were available to us. Moreover, the effects of such a retreat from the public may not merely have serious and negative public consequences, but private ones too. Visker (1999: 40-1) points to a different cruel irony in Rorty's politics and particularly his private/public split:

Liberalism, by making it possible for everyone to be left alone, may well and with the best intentions create the cruellest of all societies in which everyone is locked up with precisely what he or she tries to escape by reaching out to others, hoping for their recognition and their assurance that this Thing which does not recognize us and which we are never sure about, is worth living for.

Note that, while Visker gives this "Thing" that we seek to escape a metaphysical spin, the point applies as much to private obsessions.

In the same sort of vein, Guignon and Hiley (1990: 356-7) point to the growth in contemporary society of "disorders of the self", feelings of emptiness and meaningless, which are rooted in a lack of stable values and cynicism. These disorders, they claim, are not easily treated by psychotherapy and are transmitted from one generation to the next and result in a culture of narcissism with social fragmentation and self-preoccupation. A Rortian society, they argue, would exacerbate this tendency.

The above concerns suggest that Rorty's public/private distinction is one which should be regarded with deep suspicion as a model for society. They suggest that even if we could find some way to make the conversational model fit with the private/public model we have *prima facie* reasons for not making that attempt. I want to take the argument further, though, by showing that the two models are deeply incompatible and cannot be made to fit together.

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I argued above in section 2.2 that Rorty recognises both agonic and consensual moments in the conversation, and that he does not attempt to resolve the tension between those moments. What the public-private distinction does in effect is to separate those two moments out. Conversation around the private is essentially agonic. Many competing visions of the good life are put forward but there is no necessary resolution between them. In this way agonic conversation is effectively neutralized by being restricted to the private.

At the same time, though, the public conversation becomes a consensual one. Consensualism may be effected in two ways: by limiting both the topics of conversation and the participants in it. According to Rorty (1989a: 85), public debate in his utopia would be exhausted by two topics:

(1) how to balance the needs for peace, wealth, and freedom when conditions require that one of these goals be sacrificed to one of the others and

(2) how to equalize opportunities for self-creation and then leave people alone to use, or neglect, their opportunities.

Within these parameters, of course, one can imagine that there would be scope for large differences of opinion. The terms of debate are, however, restrictive in that the questions asked are practical questions of how to proceed within an already given framework.

Those who would question that society's basic needs or goals are "peace, wealth and freedom", those who would not favour equalizing opportunities for self-creation, or would insist that people not be "left alone to use, or neglect, their opportunities" have no forum in which to raise their concerns and questions. In other words, public conversation in Rorty's utopia is open to disagreement only in so far as it is a disagreement among political liberals. This is the concern expressed by Burrows (1990: 332) who argues that there is no real space for the political contender in Rorty's society:

The phenomena that such a contender is likely to be concerned about just do not show up in the liberal scheme of things in ways which match the contender's own conception (and perhaps first-hand experience) of them. For instance, in the favourite liberal models of 'contracts', 'bargaining', 'free markets', and such, unsavoury phenomena like inequality, injustice, and personal greed are either screened out initially or later explained away at an abstract level. And then, the best that seems to be on offer at the concrete level where such phenomena are manifested in poverty, exploitation and worse, is either a patronizing assurance that some such unwelcome phenomena must be accepted as brute facts … or the hypocritical consolation that eventually everything will even out if everyone just keeps "playing according to the rules"

Nancy Fraser (1990: 316) also thinks that this will be the case:

> Political discourse in fact is restricted by Rorty to those who speak the language of bourgeois liberalism. Whoever departs from that vocabulary simply lacks any sense of solidarity. Likewise, it turns out that the adherents of bourgeois liberalism have a monopoly on talk about community needs and social problems. Whoever eschews the liberal idiom must be talking about something else. About, say, individual salvation.

Rorty might argue that in this case he is not being prescriptive but merely descriptive. He might argue that he is not saying that questions about social and individual goals cannot be raised for discussion but that in fact no one would raise those questions. That is to say, since everyone agrees without coercion that peace, wealth and freedom are the social goals, and that individuals should equally choose their own conception of self and shape themselves without interference, no one would have concerns to raise in this regard. Should Rorty endorse such a response, we would have to regard it with a healthy dose of scepticism; at the very least we might expect critics of any existing social order to worry about the ways in which specific patterns of wealth distribution might negatively impact on the possibilities for both freedom and peace.

Kaiser (1990: 1075) notes, further, that even if this restriction were followed through on a voluntary basis any ideal of free communication has been lost. He asks:

> How undistorted can an undistorted communication [be] and how liberal can the projected liberal utopia possibly be, if they demand from the outset the voluntary self-limitation and restriction from discourses which the liberal society excludes from itself as either irrelevant or dangerous?

The most superficial scratching of the surface of the text shows, moreover, that it is not the case that everyone would as a matter of course voluntarily limit their participation in the conversation. Rorty is well aware of the existence of non-liberals. Such non-liberals fall into two groups, ironist and non-ironist, of which Rorty pays heed only to the former. In so far as Rorty does concern himself with non-liberals he adopts two strategies to neutralize their potential attacks: he co-opts the non-liberal left; the non-liberal right he silences.

Marxists and other left progressives, Rorty tells us, are really liberals. As we have already seen, in the previous chapter that there is a certain plausibility in this, at least in so far as we think of the term "liberal" as denoting a moral rather than political space. Given Rorty's vague definition of liberals as people who view cruelty as the worst thing we do, there would be much room to accommodate many of liberalisms leftist critics (and many rightist critics, too) within the ambit of liberalism. As Gander (2002: 86) states: "if we accept Rorty's definition ... there will be *very* few

self-professed nonliberals around". It is this fact that Rorty demarks a moral space that allows the Marxist Norman Geras (1995:3-4) to write:

> If we place in parenthesis some likely differences about the relative virtues and faults of capitalism as a social and economic system, Rorty's values, the values of a radical liberalism, are somewhere close to mine, the values at the heart of the socialist project.

Nevertheless this strategy of co-option when extended to the political sphere might meet with resistance. Kekes (2002: 74), for example, takes umbrage at Rorty's definition of the liberal in terms of cruelty, accusing this definition of "intellectual vacuity" and "specious moralizing":

> It insinuates that nonliberals are less opposed to cruelty than liberals and that those who are appropriately outraged by cruelty have willy-nilly joined the ranks of liberals. It encourages the thought that liberals are right-minded and their opponents are morally insensitive. It helps to create the climate of opinion in which it is difficult to criticize liberalism.

Even more likely to meet with resistance is the public silencing that Rorty would impose on other critics, particularly those on the right. The only rightists that Rorty concerns himself with, with the possible exception of Loyola, are those he labels ironists, thinkers whose writings Rorty enjoys but whose politics he abhors, thinkers like Nietzsche and Heidegger. Such thinkers Rorty tells us have nothing worthwhile to say about public issues, their political thought is either useless or dangerous. Moreover, there is nothing we can say to persuade them to abandon their repulsive political views. Therefore, these thinkers and others like them should be restricted to the private. The value in their work is purely a matter of the vocabularies they offer us in our quests for perfection.

It is certainly the case that we can read these thinkers in this way. It is more controversial to suggest that they would be content to have the political content of their thought completely disregarded or that they would be willing to remain silent on such issues.   In this case Rorty moves from being patronizing to being repressive.

Even if, and it is a big if, right-wing thinkers were sufficiently ironist to adopt a take it or leave it attitude towards their political ideas, it is highly unlikely that non-ironist right-wingers would do the same. For the religious right, for example, such a non-committal attitude and public silence might be viewed as collusion in sin. That is all right, though, Rorty thinks, since such thinkers who are non-ironist and non-liberal can finally be dismissed as mad.

Rorty seems unable to take seriously the views of those who are not liberals. Lutz (1997: 1143) suggests that Rorty's attitude towards Nietzsche illuminates the way in which Rorty's invocation of the private/public distinction is driven by fear. Lutz begins by highlighting certain incoherencies in

Rorty's own thought. On the one hand, he sees Nietzsche as extremely dangerous while on the other he insists that Nietzsche is not dangerous at all, that his views are just private descriptions that have no political consequences. He suggests that Rorty has recognized the truth of Nietzsche's view of the self and its anti-democratic consequences and responds with "moral revulsion" by calling for "a boycott of serious public dialogue about the self".

Lutz (1997: 1145) makes the claim that it is the fear of Nietzsche's being right that causes Rorty to draw the private/public divide:

> It may be in light of such concerns that Rorty wants to relegate philosophy to the perusal of apolitical, ironic aesthetes, lest genuinely Nietzschean insights into self and truth persuade enough of us to pursue "what we want" on a grand scale and without regard for the security, comfort, and dignity of liberal democrats.

But Lutz (1997: 1146) thinks that this approach leaves liberalism weakened:

> But to accept Rorty's melancholy belief that genuine self-knowledge threatens liberalism would not only reflect a disturbing lack of confidence in liberalism, but also would invite its adversaries to assail it on just this point.

Perhaps, an important part of the reason for this is that Rorty is not himself a political ironist – he has no radical and continuing doubts about the vocabulary of liberal democracy. This seems to blind him to the fact that not everyone shares his liberal vocabulary and a commitment to liberal values and beliefs, that not everyone is persuaded by or even comforted by his tale of progress. Another reason may be that Rorty imagines that social critique must take some foundationalist or metaphysical form and in a thoroughly nominalist and historicist society such a critique would be impossible. But why can we not critique from a nominalist and historicist perspective?

His ironist critics, he imagines, would be satisfied to be co-opted or silenced; the rest are simply "mad" (1988a: 187). This inability to take other views seriously is a crucial oversight. Rorty recognises that ironism is the intellectual's prerogative. The vast majority of people take their values and beliefs seriously, and need society to take them seriously, too. Indeed, to do anything less is itself a form of cruelty.

If Rorty ever thought that his vision was plausible, 9/11 must surely have disabused him of the idea that everyone is a liberal at heart. But the sort of consensual conversation he advocates for public life would exclude those who more than ever need to be included; it is repressive of any real critique and in practice would be disastrous. The need for a more agonic vision of conversation in the public sphere is more urgent than ever.

Opposition to liberal democracy can take many forms: it can come from the left or the right, it can come from ironists, from those of a more metaphysical bent, or from those who are as historicist and nominalist as Rorty himself; it can occur at the level of theory and language or at the level of action ranging from localized passive resistance to all out civil war. Instead of offering the very idea of conversation as a means of institutionalising oppositionality through inclusion and contestation, though, Rorty in effect draws back from the notion of conversation through his limitation on the topics of conversation and participation in it with the effect that public conversation is thoroughly domesticated and emasculated.

I think we can best understand why Rorty makes this move if we borrow Margalit's (1996) distinction between bridled, decent, and civilized societies. The bridled society (Margalit 1996:147) "avoids physical cruelty ... but it does not avoid the institutional humiliation of its dependents"; the decent society (Margalit 1996:1) is "one whose institutions do not humiliate people" and the civilized society is (Margalit 1996:1) "one whose members do not humiliate one another." We can view Rorty's invocation of the private/public as a means to founding a civilized society. We can read Rorty's insistence on a strong divide between public and private as arising out of his own concern with the possibilities for cruelty and humiliation. In his attempts to draw a liberal, or civilized, society he must it seems put an end to conversation, for conversation always involves the possibility of humiliation. Hence conversation far from seeming to be the model of a liberal society (as I suggested in the previous section) begins to look like the very forum which will encourage the sorts of encounters which the liberal deplores.

Rothleder (1999: 96) suggests that there is indeed a deep tension between the notions of conversation and Rorty's style of liberalism:

> For those concerned about not inflicting harm on others, one of the preconditions of free discussion must be a means for avoiding the humiliation seemingly inherent in redescribing others. Universal ground, as Rorty himself notes, can function as a way to avoid this pain. But because Rorty does not go beyond tautology in his discussion of what "free" means, he assumes that there can be free discussion without any universal ground, or some other means for ameliorating pain.
>   But it is precisely this pain, and the liberal desire not to inflict pain, that puts the damper on free discussion. One of the risks of substantive political change is the inflicting of pain and humiliation and so if the political sphere really needs to be changed, really needs to transcend the platitudinous, people might get hurt.

The real question then is (how) we can converse with each other on topics that divide us without humiliating each other. The strong public/private distinction is not an answer to this question so

much as an avoidance of it. MacIntyre (1983: 590), for one, suggests that in contemporary society a political conversation of the sort I advocate in Rorty's name may be impossible:

> There are too many rival conventions, too many conflicting anecdotes; and the repetition of assertions and denials does not constitute conversation. What postmodern bourgeois liberalism exhibits is not moral argument freed from unwarranted philosophical pretensions, but the decay of moral reasoning.

MacIntyre is suggesting, then, that real moral and political conversation can only occur within the context of a community. Rorty, too, I believe longs for something like a community.   Unlike MacIntyre, however, I will argue in the next chapter, that Rorty thinks that community is not a (now lost) prerequisite for conversation but something that we create out of polyphony through the activity of conversation.

In this chapter I have argued that Rorty offers two different visions of the liberal society. The first is premised on a strong division between public and private; the second on conversation. These two models are, I have argued, incompatible. I have further argued that we should not attempt to render them coherent with each other but should reject *in toto* Rorty's reconstruction of the public/private distinction as both incoherent and unworkable. Instead, I propose that we adopt, extend and develop the conversational society by thinking about the ways in which we can reconcile free conversation with the liberal's moral commitment to avoiding cruelty. The next two chapters begin that extension and development.

Chapter Three: The liberal community

Rorty's discussion of the self and society leaves him in an awkward position. Rorty clearly espouses a particular moral vision, his own ideal of the liberal self defined in terms of a relation to cruelty. Moreover, this moral commitment is so "deep" that it even, Rorty wants to claim, withstands ironism. While he overtly resists attempts to universalise this particular form of the self – it is just one contingent type among many, the moral self is just one option but so too is the aesthetic or scientific or ascetic, for example – he nevertheless covertly universalises it when he attempts to redescribe his liberal society in terms of a strong division between public and private. I argued in the previous chapter that we should resist his attempts to secure the moral self in this way. The conversational model of society which I propose we adopt from Rorty instead will not, however, provide any sufficient answer to the question of why we should be moral. For those who do take morality seriously, and I think we must count Rorty among them, the question arises as to what the source of morality is, what it is that impels us to care about cruelty. Although I have argued that Rorty is correct to hold his account of self apart from any notion of personhood, he must still, if he is to answer this moral question, give us an account of what it means to be a person. Moreover, I think there is at least an incipient attempt on Rorty's part to provide us with just such an account. Actually, it may be more correct to say that Rorty offers two accounts of personhood. The first is an account of what makes me and those like me a person; the second is an account of how it is that I can come to see those who are unlike me as persons, too. The key ideas in terms of which Rorty conceives of personhood are, in the first instance, the notion of a contingently-given community;   and, in the second instance, the notion of an imaginatively-created community based in ever-widening bonds of solidarity.

In section 3.1 of this chapter I will explore Rorty's two accounts of personhood. In section 3.1.1 I will examine Rorty's notion of the contingently-given community as that which bestows personhood on an individual and demonstrate the ways in which this conception of personhood raises problems for our recognition of others' personhood. In section 3.1.2 I will examine Rorty's attempt to deal with these problems through his envisaging of a more cosmopolitan and inclusive community. Rorty's hopes for our being able to construct such a community revolve around the notion of solidarity. Solidarity is a value to which liberals have paid little attention, focusing instead on the other two guiding values of the modern political identity, freedom and equality, which they have found more amenable to their more individualistic outlook. This defect in liberal thought is one which both its communitarian and socialist opponents have deplored and sought to exploit. It is one of the distinctive marks of Rorty's social thought that he attempts to retrieve this third ideal for

liberalism, finding a way to reconcile it with the more traditional preoccupation with freedom. As Guignon and Hiley (2003a: 24) explain it:

> On [Rorty's] view, our heightened sense of our contingency should lead us to recognize that, like truth, we and our community are made, not discovered. The upshot of this recognition, Rorty believes, will be greater freedom, on the one hand, and increasing solidarity with those like us, on the other.

I will argue, however, that Rorty's notion of solidarity confronts two problems. The first is its apparent ethnocentrism; the second is that it rests on a model of imagination too closely identified with reading *per se*. In section 3.2 I will look at the charges of an apparently unavoidable ethnocentrism which are levelled at Rorty's account and his response to those charges. I will suggest that Rorty is too quick to accept the label of ethnocentrism and argue that he actually has resources to respond more productively by focusing on the way in which his own community is an unstable and ever-changing "we" – sometimes America, sometimes the West, sometimes a community of liberals – and I will argue that this instability is a strength for Rorty's account rather than a weakness, giving him resources which other conceptions of community do not have.   In section 3.3 I will explore the links between solidarity, imagination and reading. I will reintroduce the notion of conversation and argue that this idea rather than the notion of imagination and reading provides a real and useful model for understanding how a "postmodern" community may be realised.

3.1   Persons and communities

To be a self is always to some extent eccentric. It is a particularistic project of creating one's own individuality. To be a person is in many ways a social project of relating to others. To see another as a person is to accord them respect and to acknowledge one's obligations to them. To be a person, which is nothing more than to be recognized by others to be a person, is to be able to command a level of respect, to be able to demand that others treat one decently, or, as we might say, morally. In Chapter One I noted that a number of the criticisms directed against Rorty's view of the self focus on the ways in which it lacks moral focus and force. Those critics would have Rorty offer us a vision not of the self, but of the person. I have argued that Rorty was justified in not acceding to that demand. In this section I want to unpack the vision of the person that I think Rorty does, in fact, have but which he does not conflate with the self.

3.1.1 Contingent Persons in Contingently-given communities

As I showed in Chapter One (section 1.2), the idea of personhood is one that Rorty first, and most fully, articulates in "Postmodernist bourgeois liberalism" (1983a). In that piece Rorty makes six claims which I want to examine here. I will begin by simply listing them:

1. Being moral is simply "rationally adaptive behaviour" of a sort similar to that displayed by other members of a relevant group (1983a: 199);
2. To be immoral is thus a matter of behaving in irrational ways which threaten, perhaps end, one's membership of the group (1983a: 199);
3. The only basis one has to defend and justify any moral conviction or loyalty is that it is supported by beliefs, desires and emotions shared by many other members of the group, and which are taken to be distinctive features of the group – beliefs, desires, emotions that are thought to set this group apart from others and which are taken to be integral to what it is to be this group rather than another (1983a: 200);
4. Human dignity is a matter of belonging to a group with dignity, which is itself a matter of favourable comparison with other groups. Thus in so far as, and only in so far as, one belongs to a community which compares favourably with other communities, one has human dignity. The basis for such comparison is to be found not in philosophy but in the arts (1983a: 200);
5. The distinction between morality and prudence or self-interest is simply a matter of drawing on different parts of the self's web of beliefs, separated only by "blurry and constantly shifting boundaries". Morality draws on parts that are widely shared with one's group (as in claim 3.); prudence on those which are less widely shared and more idiosyncratic (1983a: 200); and,
6. In making moral claims we are not appealing to universal principles but are saying only "WE do not do this sort of thing" (1983a: 200).

Rorty's account of personhood, then, starts from the recognition that, as Margalit (1996: 126) puts it:

> self-respect, although based on one's human worth in one's own eyes implicitly assumes the
> need for other respectful human beings.

According to Rorty's account it would seem that my own personhood, in the sense of being worthy of respect, is derivative of my being a member of a group. Not just any group, but a group which considers itself to be distinctive from (and probably superior to) at least one other group in ways which confer on *it* the right to respect – I will call such a group a community. Note that the

community's claim to respect rests not on some objective fact (some quality or qualities that it possesses) but on its self-description – its claim to both have such qualities and its claim that those are precisely the qualities which are worth having. Note also that such claims are always made comparatively – *we* have those qualities but *they* do not, that is both what makes us distinctively us and makes us "good". Since my own personhood is derivative of membership of a particular community, it follows that any other member of this community also qualifies as a person.

Within the community our behaviours towards one another are respectful; we recognise our moral obligations towards each other and act on them, in so far as we behave in accordance with the rules and norms, the habits, of the community. Moreover, our personhood is contingent on us behaving in those ways which count as moral, for should we break those rules we may find ourselves outside the group and as a consequence, no longer a person (though still a self). In so far as the need arises for me to justify my actions within the group I will do so by appealing to the vocabulary, the beliefs and the desires I share with the group on the basis of the cultural transmission of our ongoing conversation.

The more interesting questions arise in my interactions with members of other communities. For it is here that we encounter morality in a sense in which it is less close to prudence as Rorty himself notes with his comment (1999d: 73) that:

> Morality and law ... begin when controversy arises. We invent both when we can no longer just
> do what comes naturally, when routine is no longer good enough, or when habit and custom no
> longer suffice.

When there is no agreement as to how to behave, the important moral questions arise, and when I encounter members of another community I must confront those questions. What are my obligations to them? Are they persons at all if they don't belong to my community? How do I interpret their behaviours since they do not fit with the customs and habits of my community? How do I explain and justify my behaviours if we do not share a (moral) language? Rorty does not address these questions in "Postmodernist bourgeois liberalism" (1983a) although it is a primary focus of *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a). Before looking at how he answers the question in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a) though, I want to pursue the logic of "Postmodernist bourgeois liberalism" (1983a).

Although Rorty does not answer the question of how I do and should interact with members of other communities directly, there is an implicit answer along the lines that follow. The suggestion seems to be that members of other communities are themselves persons, a fact which is derivative of their belonging to their own community with its own habits and customs, its own self-description

about the distinctive qualities it possesses and the value of those qualities. If members of other communities are persons, and I recognise that fact, then I should behave respectfully and morally towards them. According to what notions of respectful and moral, though – mine or theirs? In behaving morally and respectfully according to my own lights (the lights of my community) I may well offend the other person but their ways of behaving may strike me as disrespectful and even immoral and so offensive to me. Thus even in seeking to treat another well inter-communally, I may fail. Worse still I may fail to recognise the other as a person at all. What if the other is a member of one of the groups against which my groups defines itself as good? If the very point of my humanity is a share in the distinctive qualities which per definition the other group lacks then a member of that group *cannot* qualify as a person for me.

Rorty (1983a: 201) avoids these difficult questions by looking at what is, in effect, an easier case:

> on my view a child found wandering in the woods, the remnant of a slaughtered nation whose temples have been razed and whose books have been burned, has no share in human dignity.

He thinks that this sort of case need not matter very much because:

> it is part of the tradition of *our* community that the human stranger from whom all dignity has been stripped is to be taken in, to be reclothed with dignity (1983a: 202).

But here precisely we do not have contrasting and inconsistent views of personhood, because we no longer (tragically) have different communities. The conception of the stranger as a child also works to ease out the tensions by allowing us to assume that the stranger is not fully socialised and so will learn and adapt to our language, norms and self-descriptions without antagonism and trauma.

It is in recognition of the fact that the other rarely appears to us in this guise of the remnant child, that Geras (1995: 75) expresses deep concern about the implications of Rorty's view of personhood:

> If an individual's moral status, whether as the bearer of human dignity or of personhood, or as the beneficiary of moral prohibitions against being hurt, is to rest only on the going sense of community, this will surely serve to underwrite every discourse of exclusion under the sun.

Rorty himself is not, I believe, selling a discourse of exclusion. Despite the charges of ethnocentrism levelled at his position and his acceptance of those charges under some descriptions (points that will be taken up in section 3.2) and despite a certain blindness to the exclusionary moments of his own position (an aspect of his thought that will be dealt with at length

in Chapter Four), Rorty is as troubled as Geras by discourses and practices of exclusion. Although the logic of "Postmodernist bourgeois liberalism" (1983a) seems to leave Rorty no way of dealing with the problem of others' personhood, he does attempt to offer us an antidote in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a) in the imaginative project of solidarity.

3.1.2 Solidarity: A cosmopolitan community imagined

I say that Rorty *proposes* his account of solidarity as a means to explain how it is that I may come to see others (humans who are not members of my own community) as persons and thus treat them morally. I shall argue that the account he gives of solidarity is, however, deeply flawed in three ways – it is internally incoherent, apparently ethnocentric, and caught up in a mistaken identification of imagination with reading. In this section I will give a brief account of what Rorty claims with regard to solidarity and focus on the first of these three lines of argument against it – that it is incoherent; the second and third lines of argument will be taken up in sections 3.2 and 3.3, respectively.

The crucial ingredients of Rorty's explication of his notion of solidarity are, I would argue, his claim that we need thick moral motivations; the idea that solidarity is not found but created through the imaginative project of seeing the other as one of us; and, the universal nature of humiliation and pain and with this the ever-present possibility of cruelty. I will show that while Rorty focuses our attention on the first two of these elements it is the third which really carries the weight, leaving an unresolved tension in Rorty's understanding of solidarity between its surface denial of universalism and its covert invocation of it. I will suggest that this tension is further complicated by an implicit subjectivism.

The problem that the introduction of solidarity is intended to solve is the question of how, given the fact that my own personhood is a matter of belonging to a particular community with its own norms of behaviour, I can recognise others as persons and behave in appropriately moral ways towards them. This problem, as we saw above, has two elements. The first is whether having recognised another human being from a different community as a person, behaving morally towards them requires me to follow either my own norms or theirs. The second is whether I can recognise (some) others as persons at all. In brief, Rorty's answer to these questions is that the other's personhood is derivative of my coming to see them as a member of my own community, as "one of us". As such my behaviour towards them will be moral in so far as it conforms to the norms of my own community. Moreover, given human fallibility there is always the possibility of my failing to see the other as "one of us", as a person.

Rather than argue for these propositions in an abstract way Rorty tells a story. Rorty (1989a: 189-91) notes the differential chances of a Jewish person in Nazi Europe being hidden by gentiles in Denmark and Italy, on the one hand, and Belgium, on the other, and speculates that if asked to explain their actions the Danes and Italians would answer in terms of some shared identification: that the particular Jewish person saved was:

> a fellow Milanese, or a fellow Jutlander, or a fellow member of the same union or profession, or a fellow bocce player, or a fellow parent of small children (1989a: 190-1)

and that Belgians, for whatever "historicosociological" reasons by and large failed to articulate such identifications which outweighed the sheer difference of the others' Jewishness. This story is intended by Rorty to demonstrate not some peculiarity of Europeans in the 1940s but a general fact about how it is that we act, or fail to act, morally towards the other.

The first thing to note about this story is that it will not do the work Rorty wants it to. The most significant problem with the story is that, as Norman Geras (1995) points out in detail, the evidence shows that Rorty's supposition is simply wrong. Based on the meticulously collected archival accounts of their actions by the "Righteous" themselves, he demonstrates that overwhelmingly they explain their actions in terms of the universal and thin appellation of a fellow human being rather than any thicker or more parochial identification. Geras (1995: 36) concludes that:

> a universalist moral outlook appears to have had a very significant part in motivating Jewish rescue. Many rescuers give voice to it and few do not. At the same time, no rescuer I have come across overtly repudiates it. To be sure, there were such people about also, at that time. They seem not to have been heavily involved in helping Jews at all. We know what some of them were doing.

Rorty's claim that an abstract notion like humanity is too thin to function as a motivation to act morally, that it is only our smaller and more parochial identifications that can perform this task (1989a: 191), is thus unsupported. More than this, though, Rorty's account of moral progress is one in which we constantly expand our community in a universalising direction. While noting that we always begin from some community, Rorty (1989a: 196) also argues that we expand (or fail to expand) solidarity outwards from there:

> The right way to take the slogan "We have obligations to human beings simply as such" is as a means of reminding ourselves to keep trying to expand our sense of "us" as far as we can. That slogan urges us to extrapolate further in the direction set by certain events in the past – the inclusion among "us" of the family in the next cave, then of the tribe across the river, then of the tribal confederation beyond the mountains, then of the unbelievers beyond the seas (and,

perhaps last of all, of the menials who, all this time, have been doing our dirty work). This is a process we should try to keep going. We should stay on the lookout for marginalized people – people whom we still instinctively think of as "they" rather than "us".

As our original sense of "us" is imaginatively expanded in this way, to become more inclusive and cosmopolitan, it stands to reason that our sense of "us" comes to rest more and more on thinner rather than thicker identifications. In this way, by viewing solidarity as something we seek to expand, Rorty's own vision pushes him in the direction of all of humanity. It is for this reason that Geras (1995: 78-9) thinks that Rorty's assumptions about how thick or thin our identifications can be are faulty. Rorty does allow national identifications – "we Americans" – that include hundreds of millions of people, but then it is difficult to see why we can't get from there to 6 billion (the entire species) at simply another few steps of abstraction.

Such a vision of a cosmopolitan community extending to the entire species need not commit us, as Rorty fears, to any belief in an essential human nature. I can see the other and myself as persons simply by virtue of our membership of this cosmopolitan community and all the while acknowledge that this community is something which we aim towards, and are in the process of constructing, rather than something which pre-exists us and which places demands on us. Unfortunately, reading solidarity in this way will not greatly help us to solve the problems of morality with which I have argued it must deal. In particular, in such a cosmopolitan community there are no shared norms of behaviour, and so while this picture tells me why I should see the other as a person and thus imposes certain moral obligations on me, it can tell me nothing about how to behave towards them in ways which meet their criteria of respect. A second problem is that such a "community" can never count as a community because it lacks the reference to specific distinctive goods and qualities which are constitutive of communities, which is why, as Hollinger (1993: 323) points out:

> Along with the new prominence of community comes a new centrality for the old question of membership. *The less one's raw humanity is said to count for anything, the more important become one's affiliations.* The more epistemic and moral authority is ascribed to historically particular communities, the more it matters just who is and is not one of "us".

This is the basis of Geras' (1995: 77) fears that Rorty's position, in holding that personhood is conferred by community, must always lead to anti-democratic conclusions (that exclusions are always, possible, necessary, justified). This is because the "we" always takes its sense from some contrasting "them". Moreover, that "them" cannot be non-human since Rorty also insists that the "we" is always less than the entire human species. At some point, therefore, however far down the line, however extended our notion of the solidarity, however inclusive our "we" becomes; an anti-democratic moment of exclusion must kick in.

Like Geras (1995: 85-91), I believe that Rorty attempts to avoid this conclusion by smuggling in a covert universalism. This universalism Geras thinks takes two forms. The first is that Rorty allows that in "our" tradition we include strangers, and also that we are heir to the Enlightenment and Judeo-Christian traditions which do appeal to all of humanity. In effect, what Rorty does, Geras claims, is that he holds on to the universalism of the tradition but jettisons the reasons which motivate it leaving only an empty appeal to authority ill-suited to democratic society particularly in a multicultural context.   McCarthy (1982: 372) concurs, arguing that worldviews are more integrated than Rorty allows:

> For moral and political ideas cannot really be divorced from larger contexts of ideas in considering their social and cultural importance. Social norms are typically anchored in larger worldviews – whether mythological, religious, cosmological, enlightened, humanistic, or whatever. One cannot simply skim off certain "values of the Enlightenment", as Rorty wishes to do, and throw out the dross of such notions as "reason", "autonomy", "truth", "reality".

The second form of universalism, Geras (1995: 89) argues, consists in the fact that Rorty all the while holds onto some notion of a human nature:

> Notwithstanding his many denials of a common human nature ... Rorty does put forward a universalist basis for extensive liberal solidarity. For he relies on the existence of some common characteristics in human beings. His emphasis in this may change: resting now upon characteristics common both to human beings and to other animals, as with the susceptibility to pain; and now upon characteristics common only to human beings, as with the susceptibility to humiliation or the capacity for language and poetry. But setting his face, either way, against cruelty and the countenancing of avoidable human suffering, he falls back on the fact of human beings having a nature, both animal and human.

Rorty insists that solidarity cannot be grounded in any form of human nature. We saw in the Chapter One that Rorty denies any human nature. We also saw that it is not clear that he can coherently hold that position. For all of his denials there are strong universalising elements in Rorty's idea of solidarity. The implicit universalism of the notion of solidarity may, perhaps, go even deeper. For Rorty, at the centre of our interactions with each other is the ever-present possibility that we may be cruel and humiliate the other. Margalit (1996: 112), for instance, suggests that a key feature of humiliation is "rejection from the human commonwealth" and points out that this rejection is a matter of behaviour rather than merely of attitudes or beliefs:

> The rejection consists of behaving as *if* the person were an object or an animal. Such rejection typically consists in treating humans as subhuman.

It would seem, then, that solidarity aims at and depends on universalism while at the same time denying any empirical or moral grounds for that universalism. Rorty, thus, seems to be caught on the horns of a dilemma – either he must acknowledge some universal human nature, or he must accept the charge of ethnocentrism. Rorty himself, as we shall see in the next section, prefers to accept the second of these options. I will argue that he is wrong to do so. Before turning to that discussion, though, I want to note that Rorty's account involves a further complication.

This further complication is a result of the fact that solidarity, as Rorty describes it, has not merely unresolved universalist strands but subjectivist strands working in it, too. By this I mean that Rorty implies that the project of increasing solidarity is ultimately an individual one, and optional at that – the liberal self may take the project of social justice seriously, the liberal self may be subject to strong moral motivations, but the liberal self is only one type of self. Rorty places the project of solidarity on the private side of his public/private divide. He reduces the issue of solidarity to imagination and, it will be argued, imagination to a matter of reading the right books. I will take up this issue of the link between reading and imagination in section 3.3 and argue that it is a deeply problematic model which is more usefully replaced with the notion of conversation. Before taking up this issue, however, I will turn to the charges of ethnocentrism which have been levelled at Rorty's account of solidarity.

3.2   Ethnocentrism

As we have seen, according to Rorty's account we come to see the other as a person by adopting them as a member of our own community, by seeing them as "one of us". This process of adopting the other, rather than "merely" recognising their personhood seems to commit Rorty to an ethnocentric morality. By the term "ethnocentric" I mean to denote two aspects: (a) the belief in the superiority of one's own community; and (b) the judgement of others' according to the standards and norms of one's own community. Underlying this belief in the superiority of one's own community, and the taking for granted of its standards, is a belief in the sameness of the members of one's community and a belief in the difference of those who do not belong. It is this set of twin assumptions about sameness and difference that I want to discuss here. Both ethnocentrism and appeals to universal human nature may be seen as attempts to avoid rather than facilitate our seeing the other in this simultaneously dual way. Appeals to universal human nature require us to focus solely on the sameness between ourselves and the other, rejecting the differences as merely accidental and incidental, this I take it, is at least in part, why Rorty wants to steer clear of claims about human nature. Ethnocentrism functions similarly by pushing us to treat the other as one of "them" (and therefore different and irrelevant). The question that confronts us in thinking through solidarity can be phrased as a question as to how we may come to see others

as being the same as "us" while also recognising and respecting what makes them different. Can Rorty's conception of solidarity allow for this, or is it inescapably either universalist or ethnocentric?

I have said before, and I shall repeat here, that I do not believe Rorty intends to offer a discourse of exclusion. I agree with Geras that he attempts to avoid the exclusionary implications of his thought by covertly depending on some idea of human nature. I disagree with Geras that he needs to hold on to and make clear this account of human nature and further, I believe that Rorty can offer an account of solidarity which is not ethnocentric.

In developing this claim the greatest difficulty is Rorty's own statements of his position. Rorty is, at least in some instances, committed to both aspects of ethnocentrism, as we can see for example in Rorty's (1983a: 202) response to charges of relativism:

> there is a difference between saying that every community is as good as every other and saying that we have to work out from the networks we are, from the communities with which we presently identify.

Moreover in "On ethnocentrism: a reply to Clifford Geertz" (1986b) Rorty overtly embraces the label of ethnocentrism. His acceptance of this label, however, amounts to little more than a restatement of the claim that we always have to start from somewhere, and that somewhere is the communities to which we belong. He does little to engage with Geertz's (1985:2 61) reminder that "[f]oreignness does not start at the water's edge but at the skin's". Nor does Rorty address the really substantive aspect of Geertz's (1985: 261) criticism of Rorty's approach that it obscures what otherness in reality involves, it may prevent us from really seeking to understand the other, and ourselves:

> it obscures the power of such diversity, when personally addressed, to transform our sense of what it is for a human being ... to believe, to value, or to go on.

I think Hollinger (1993: 328), is correct when he points out that Rorty's embrace of ethnocentrism means nothing more than a repeated disavowal of any commitment to human nature:

> The extremity of Rorty's ethnocentrism turns out to be a disagreement with other philosophers over the terms on which human solidarity should be affirmed. As soon as the Kantians are disposed of, Rorty's vision of human solidarity takes on ... a decidedly anti-ethnocentric cast. … The circle of the "we" thus embraces diversity; it is not a uniformitarian construct, predicating sameness.

The position that Rorty is best seen as trying to articulate is, I would argue, close to Hollinger's own position which he labels "postethnic". This position which Hollinger (1993: 329-30) develops begins from the recognition of the diversity of the communities to which we belong.

> Our communities are various in their structure and function: not all entail the same mix of voluntary and coerced affiliation, nor do all require the same measure of internal agreement, the same sorts of demands on the individual member, or the same degree of clarity in external boundaries. Deciding who is "in" and who is "out" is rather different depending on whether the salient "we" is understood to consist of Chicanos or of Texans, of particle physicists or of scientists, of Presbyterians or of Christians, of Skull and Bones or of what Rorty calls "the conversation of the West." Recognition of the vitality of the ethnos need not – as metaphorical references to "tribes" and "clubs" can imply – demand the dividing up of the world into an expanse of internally homogeneous and analogically structured units. We are better able to resist such reification if we attend carefully to the overlapping character of many of these communities, to their internal diversity, and to their differing size, scope, and purpose.

In support of my claim that Hollinger's postethnic position is close to Rorty's own, I would point to a seventh claim from "Postmodernist bourgeois liberalism" (1983a) to add to the six I gave above (page 85). This is the claim that modern societies are not monolithic and that each of us belongs not to a single community or group but to a number of them and we are "equally reluctant to marginalize ourselves in relation to them" (1983a: 201). I have felt justified in omitting this crucial claim from the discussion so far because Rorty himself does not make enough of it. It does, however, give him much more leeway in which to manoeuvre and provides us with a crucial ingredient in our development of the notion of solidarity.

How does the addition of this recognition that we each belong to numerous overlapping and diverse communities help us to resolve the dilemma of solidarity? Firstly, it means that my own personhood is not tied to membership in any particular community. This is something Hollinger (1993: 330) points to when he writes that:

> the carrying out of any person's own life-project entails a shifting division of labor between the several "we's" of which the individual is a part. ... It is this process of consciously and critically locating oneself amid these layers of "we's" that most distinguishes the postethnic from the unreconstructed universalist. The latter wants to build life-projects outside of, rather than through, particular communities. The willingness of the postethnic to treat ethnic identity as a problem rather than a given also helps to distinguish the postethnic from the unreconstructed ethnocentrist, for whom ethnic identity is a more straightforward proposition, a matter of affirming and developing something frankly parochial.

Secondly, the other, too, belongs to a number of communities. It may well be the case, then, that someone who is a stranger, an outsider, to one among the communities to which I belong, may be an integral part of another community. I take this to be the point that Rorty means to make with his story about Nazi Europe – that the outsider "Jew" may yet be a "fellow Milanese".

Thirdly, it may be the case that even where I cannot find a common community to which we both belong I have no reason (given my recognition of my own and others' multifarious identities) to assume that the other is either like or unlike me. To draw on Hollinger (1993: 330) once more we can build in the recognition that any of the communities to which I and the other belong may or may not share any particular feature:

> Kiev and Kokomo have less in common than Wilkie supposed, but that need not mean we have
> no basis for theorizing about, and acting on, needs and interests found to be shared by some
> inhabitants of these two sites.

I take it that this is what Vandevelde (2001: 56) means when he argues that ethnocentrism can only be a *starting point* if indeed our aim is to find the "widest possible intersubjective agreement". I take it, too, that when Rorty embraces ethnocentrism he does so only in this way – as a starting point.

In summary since neither my own nor the other's personhood is something given there is greater space to negotiate, find, or as Rorty prefers, create, shared identities and ways of behaving morally towards each other. These three different ways of stating the case – negotiate, find, create – point to what is at stake perhaps between Hollinger, Rorty and myself. Hollinger thinks we find commonality. Rorty thinks we create it through imagination. I prefer to think we negotiate it through conversation. In the next section I will argue at some length that my own version of personhood as negotiated through conversation is a better way of understanding Rorty's ideal of solidarity than his own emphasis on creation and imagination. In focusing on how solidarity might be successfully negotiated/created, though, we should not lose sight of the fact that the encounter between groups or communities can, as Vandevelde (2001: 70) suggests, be one in which both parties are "mutually challenged and enriched by their encounter" but it can also be "a devastation" if one group "replicates itself in what is encountered or annihilates what is encountered". This sort of failure of solidarity has its basis in (ever-present) power relations. This question of power and its effects, a topic which Rorty ignores altogether, will form the basis of the discussion of Chapter Four.

3.3   Community and conversation

I turn in this section to a more detailed discussion of the role of imagination in constructing a more cosmopolitan community. I argue that Rorty offers an understanding of imagination which grounds it in reading. I show that this is the consequence of his introducing the notion of solidarity within a socio-political space strongly divided into public and private. I then attempt to show that the notion of conversation can perform the task of creating solidarity much better than can imagination and reading. I make this argument in four stages. Firstly, I look at the role reading plays for Rorty in the development of the self's moral capacities, including imagination. Secondly, I look at the role he advocates for the use of books and stories in our public deliberations about social justice. Thirdly, I argue that conversation is a better method than reading for developing and extending solidarity. Finally, I demonstrate that Rorty is forced to overvalue the role of reading, narrative, and imagination in social and communal life because of his introduction of the notion of solidarity into a social world he has already rigidly carved up between public and private. In other words, the basic claim to be made is that solidarity is, indeed, the right way to think about community but that Rorty introduces the concept into a context already shaped by the public/private conception of society. We need the conversational model of society to make the concept of solidarity do its work properly.

Rorty conceives of solidarity as something we create through a process of coming to "see as", rather than something we find. As such, solidarity is fundamentally a task of the imagination. The moral self, the liberal self, the self who, in other words, is concerned to extend its notion of solidarity confronts two moral tasks. The first of these is to develop its own imagination and with it its capacity for empathy and fellow-feeling. The self's second task is to persuade other members of its communities and society to join it in this quest. Rorty, I shall argue, sees the first of these tasks as being closely tied to reading books and the second to telling stories. My argument with Rorty is not that he finds a social role for reading and writing and narrative, which I too favour, (though I think Bernstein (2002: 27) correctly sees the irony in Rorty's emphasis on reading at a time when fewer people read) but that he focuses too narrowly on these aspects.

In arguing that Rorty ties the individual's development of imagination too closely to reading, my quarrel is not with Rorty's explicit pronouncements on the topic but with his focus – with the fact that he ignores other ways of coming to understand each other, through unmediated interaction, for instance. That other readers of Rorty are left with the same feeling is evident, for instance, from Rothleder's (1999: 66) comment that the liberal ironist's life seems almost devoid of real human contact, and that for Rorty it seems as if a self learns to behave morally and socially not through interaction with other people but through reading:

> [The liberal ironist] sits alone and reads about humiliation and this is how she learns not to call people nasty names. She does not learn from parents, nor friends, nor even from neighborhood bullies. As a matter of fact, there are no parents, friends, or bullies anywhere to be found. All there is for Rorty is a library card and stacks and stacks of novels to be read well into the night. And there is an ethical duty to read all of them. Carefully.

A similar concern apparently drives Geertz's (1985: 261) criticism that Rorty's brand of ethnocentric thinking seems to make being other a matter of practical choice:

> it suggests that to have had a different life than one has in fact had is a practical option one has somehow to make one's mind up about.

The imagination we develop through reading encourages us to take up precisely this sort of stance – to think ourselves into an entirely different life with different choices taken. But as Geertz points out this is not always the case in practice. No matter how much I read about the experiences of African people under colonialism and apartheid I cannot become such a person. Nevertheless, I would argue such reading could well make me a better, or at least different sort of person in respect to the attitudes I hold and my empathy for those of my fellow citizens who have lived through and been shaped by those institutions. As such I would suggest that Geertz, though he is certainly right that some possibilities remain closed, underestimates the possibilities for changing the course of a life that reading does inspire and make possible.

This close identification of the development of (the moral capacities) imagination and sensitivity with reading is one that we even find Rorty explicitly avowing, as for instance in an interview with Ragg (2002: 372-3):

> I don't think texts are best approached with criteria in mind; unless you know exactly what you want to get out of the text in advance. If you're reading a training manual that is explicitly written to enable you to perform a certain task then of course you have criteria to bring to the text: you have tests to apply which will tell you whether it was what you wanted. But when we read literary texts, typically we don't know in advance what we want. So we're not in a good position to bring criteria to bear on the text. We read in order to enlarge ourselves by enlarging our sensitivity and our imaginations. For that purpose applying criteria isn't really a relevant technique. ... You certainly can't avoid approaching it without a certain set of expectations. But a lot of the time what you're hoping for, if only subconsciously, is to have those expectations upset. You would like to be swept off your feet. You would like to be plunged into doubt about a lot of things which you hadn't previously doubted. So I would prefer to say that although any reader comes to a text out of a background, the good readers are those who try to let the text dominate the background rather than vice versa.

This quotation shows, though, precisely why the identification of imagination and sensitivity with reading is so potentially dangerous. Rorty admits here that we read in order to "enlarge ourselves" and that process is only incidentally directed towards the other (and more often than not, an unreal other). As such, reading is not necessarily the best, or even a good, way to come to learn how to deal well with the actually existing other in one's presence.

Indeed, as Mounce (1997: 208) argues, literature cannot teach us empathy and morality because the line of causation works in the opposite direction:

> Someone, in real life, who enters into the sufferings of others may thereby be enabled, easily enough, to do so in literature, but someone who enters into the sufferings of others in literature is not thereby so easily enabled to do so in life. For example, those who enter into real suffering feel committed to do something about it. But those who do so in literature have only to *imagine they* would do something about it. That is why literary sympathy so easily evaporates when the reader puts down his book. This is not to deny that literature can have an effect on life; but the effect normally takes the form of reinforcing already existing tendencies. In other words, the main line of causation runs from society to literature rather than the other way around. The quality of a literature depends on the quality of the surrounding culture, there being no example in history of a society, otherwise rotten, which has been transformed by the quality of its literature.

Even if we accept that reading literature only plays a secondary and supporting role in developing imagination and sensitivity, though, there is still a lot of work to be done to explain how it performs this function. This is something that Stow (1999: 72) points to in his discussion of Rorty's views which he places within the context of a debate between Nussbaum and Nehamas about whether literature can teach us to be good citizens. Nussbaum thinks literature can perform this role, Nehamas disagrees. Stow agrees with Nehamas against Nussbaum.

I take Stow's criticisms of Nussbaum to be threefold. Firstly, he claims that Nussbaum despite her avowals to the contrary does not trust literature to speak for itself but rather suggests through her practice that the moral lessons to be found in literature must be explicated by the intellectual. As Stow (1999: 72) puts it:

> Instead of simply assigning texts to students and sitting back to watch as democracy flourishes, Nussbaum feels obliged to point out the moral lessons we should take from the texts that she assigns.

Secondly, Stow (1999: 72) points out that Nussbaum does not give an account of how reading literature develops moral capacities:

Nussbaum … nowhere sets out a convincing account of the mechanism by which this capacity to empathize is engendered.

Thirdly, Stow (1999: 72) draws on Nehamas to make the claim that capacities like imagination and sensitivity can be used as weapons against others:

"There are plenty of examples of exquisitely sensitive torturers, discerning sadists, perceptive tormentors – many of whom were excellent readers as well," noted Alexander Nehamas. "To be able truly to see the world from another's point of view may be the greatest weapon one can wield in a war against another".

In his discussion of Rorty, Stow (1999: 73) focuses on Rorty's particular vulnerability to the first criticism. That is to say that Rorty, like Nussbaum, vacillates between the idea that literature speaks for itself and that it must be interpreted for us. Stow notes, though, that Rorty cannot – given his particular set of metaphilosophical commitments – make the first sort of claim:

for a theorist whose philosophical views would appear to commit him wholeheartedly to the sort of reader-response theory espoused by Stanley Fish, Rorty writes an awful lot like somebody who believes that the texts themselves are doing the work, and that those texts are endowed with only *one* possible interpretation. ... [W]hy is there such a conflict between Rorty's philosophical views and his approach to the texts? And why, if Rorty believes that the texts themselves are doing the work, does he, like Nussbaum, feel obliged to offer an account of the moral lessons we are supposed to derive from them, itself bolstered by a reifying claim about authorial intent?

Stow (1999: 73-4) answers those questions by pointing to the elitism in Rorty's political society:

there is a hierarchical divide in Rorty's liberal utopia between those who are to be trusted with the secret of liberalism's lack of foundations, and those – the majority – who should be encouraged to continue to believe in quaint ideas such as Truth and metaphysical certainty. "In an ideal liberal world," Rorty asserts, "the intellectuals would still be ironists, although non-intellectuals would not" (*CIS*, p. 87). Whether or not this – which is at best a restriction of information to, and at worst, a duping of the masses – constitutes a form of cruelty is of course, a question for another paper. What this willingness to be less-than-honest in his approach to the population at large does explain, however, is the impetus behind Rorty's apparently non-ironic readings of literary texts.

Although Stow draws attention to the parallel between Rorty and Nussbaum with respect to the first line of criticism, I think it is the weakest line of argument. It may be that in order to learn the moral

lessons of literature, to develop our moral capacities, we need to be taught and guided by other better readers. It is the second and third lines of argument, which hold equally well for both Rorty and Nussbaum, that carry the real weight. If there really is some moral development to be gleaned from reading we need an account of how the moral capacities develop (perhaps an account of education) and how moral capacities – sensitivity, imagination, empathy – translate into moral action. Rorty certainly does not provide us with such an account; instead he simply relies on the assumptions which Peter Ackroyd (cited in Blacker 2000) dismisses with the comment:

> The good writer is rarely a good man – and only the vagaries of literary humanism once taught in universities would lead anyone to believe that "moral values" are to be found in literature.

Perhaps this assumption that reading (the right) books (in the right way) will make us better people is, as Seaton (1996: 35) suggests in his contrast of Rorty with Trilling, symptomatic of a greater underlying simplification of morality:

> Whereas Rorty's liberals are defined by a simple, humane opposition to cruelty, Trilling's intellectuals are more complicated beings, whose noble aspirations are linked to morally questionable impulses. ... The moral task that Trilling requires of literature is considerably more difficult than Rorty's simple evoking of sympathy, but then Trilling believes that politics involves considerably more difficult moral dilemmas than the straightforward Rortian choice between cruelty and compassion.

I argued at the beginning of this section that Rorty's liberal self is confronted with two moral tasks: the first being developing his own moral capacities; the second persuading others to join in his quest to extend solidarity. Rorty emphasises the role of reading in the first of these tasks. The arguments put forward by Stow *et al.* suggest, however, that the capacities of imagination and sensitivity which reading engenders may have little direct relation to moral action. I will argue below that it is better to look to conversation for the development of the requisite moral capacities. Before doing so, however, I want to note the role that Rorty gives to literature in the fulfilling of the second moral task – the task of persuading others to join the quest to extend solidarity.

Rorty clearly believes that a great deal of this sort of persuasion is indeed accomplished by literature – for example, consider the emphasis he places on the role of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the abolition of slavery, as well as his claim that "most of the work of changing moral intuitions is done by manipulating our feelings" (1993a: 172). Looked at in this way the relationship between literature (and reading) and solidarity is much more direct than in the first case where reading merely develops certain moral capacities. Literature, stories and narratives, Rorty suggests, function in the first instance to persuade us to extend our notion of solidarity, to see the other as one of us by, for example, appealing to our emotions. This task may be accomplished even if

Rorty is wrong to think that we learn to be moral from reading. While the persuasive capacity of literature depends on at least some people some of the time being sufficiently moved by the particular story of an imagined individual actually to behave differently (more morally) towards existing individuals and groups, it does not require that morality itself is grounded in reading.

Geras (1995: 97-98) worries that in emphasising the persuasive power of literature Rorty leaves us only with appeals to emotion and sympathy whereas Geras himself (while recognizing the importance of sentiment) argues that we have greater resources for moral argument than Rorty allows in that all moral codes aim at the reduction of suffering and so there is some basis from which to begin a reasonable and rational discussion about morality and politics which takes us beyond mere sentiment and subjectivity. This worry is shared by Hickman (2002: 264) who believes that the emphasis on literature too quickly does away with the social sciences:

> That novels, plays, and drama can and do set social agendas, motivate enthusiasm for social action, and promote common vocabularies is both undeniable and a source of great good. But to assert, as does the liberal ironist, that amelioration depends solely, or even principally, on the "awareness of the power of [literary] (*sic*) redescription," that the methods that have been so effective in the natural and social sciences have no special place in social inquiry, is to amputate one half of the method which has been tested and urged upon us by the social reformer.

I think Geras' and Hickman's worries are unfounded on two counts. The first is that Rorty need not claim that narrative and appeal to emotion are the only mode of persuasion; rather they are simply one mode, sometimes successful, sometimes not. Although he need not make the stronger claim – that narrative and appeal to emotion are the only mode of persuasion – it must be admitted that Rorty does make it at least once (1993a: 167-185). The second is that stories (and arguments for that matter) may not merely seek to appeal to our emotions but, Rorty insists (1994b: 204) to change those emotions. I would argue therefore that we should agree with Rorty that literature can play a persuasive role that – in Mounce's words, "literature can have an effect on life". In playing this role and having this effect, though, we should note that it is not reading which is doing the moral work but the conversation, of which the stories and narratives (and the social sciences, too) are part.

I have argued, then, that reading is not likely to be important in learning to be moral. Moreover, I don't think Rorty thinks that it is, either. Rather, I would contend, he thinks that morality is simply behaviour we learn in communities (1983a: 199). What Rorty does think reading can do is persuade us to think of unlikely subjects and groups as persons. He suggests that the mechanism at work here is that in reading we come to see these unlikely others as part of our community, as "one of us". I want to argue, instead, that reading literature is one way in which marginalized

voices are brought into the conversation. Perhaps in the end there is little difference between these two positions; it may simply be a case of "tomahtoes" and "tomaytoes". Nevertheless, I think there are important elements which formulating the issue in terms of conversation adds or at least makes more explicit. The worry underlying the charges of ethnocentrism levelled at Rorty is that he does not take the other's differences seriously. He simply appropriates the other. But the conversational model – which emphasizes activity – can see the process of seeing the other as "one of us" as more dynamic. Not only can it recognise that the other is similar and different, it allows for the possibility that the very "us" of whom the other is seen as part is itself changed. That in acknowledging and interacting with others I too may be compelled to renegotiate my own personhood, my own moral identity.

In suggesting that we think about the extension of solidarity as best occurring in conversation it is helpful to clarify what that may mean by looking at MacIntyre's contention that for Rorty in particular (and modernity more generally) the basic conditions in which moral conversation could occur do not obtain. MacIntyre (1983: 591) outlines what he thinks would be necessary for a real moral/political conversation to take place as follows:

> Any particular piece of practical reasoning has rational force only for those who both have desires and dispositions ordered to some good and recognize that good as furthered by doing what that piece of practical reasoning bids. Only within a community with shared beliefs about goods and shared dispositions educated in accordance with those beliefs, both rooted in shared practices, can practical reason-giving be an ordered, teachable activity with standards of success and failure. Such a community is rational only if the moral theory articulated in its institutionalized reason-giving is the best theory to emerge so far in its history. The best theory so far is that which transcends the limitations of the previous best theory by providing the best explanation of that previous theory's failures and incoherences (as judged by the standards of that previous theory) and showing how to escape them.

For MacIntyre a high level of homogeneity is a prerequisite of conversation. Persuasion, he suggests, can only occur in the domains of normal discourses, and moral discourse, in modern society, is characterised by abnormality. We saw in the previous chapter that the Rortian notion of conversation seeks to extend persuasion beyond the realms of normal, argument-based discourses to abnormal polylogical and even monological types of discourse. I will not reiterate those arguments here. What I want to point out instead is that while MacIntyre believes we need to share a great deal before we can talk productively, the model of conversation which I draw out of Rorty and want to extend here to the notion of solidarity is one in which we may come to share beliefs and dispositions by sharing in the practice of conversation itself. It is this coming to share though that requires me to be open not merely to changing the other but to being changed myself.

Martin Hollis (1990: 252), however, counters that conversation will not do the work that I think it can:

> Communities gain and retain their identity by exclusion as much as by inclusion. In-groups define themselves against out-groups, whose existence they therefore need and may even fabricate. I see no reason to suppose that "conversation" is, in itself, a countervailing force. It takes a special sort of conversation to encourage a broadening franchise, one with rules of discourse which have this effect ... I cannot see why talk in itself tends to blur human difference, unless it has rules of discourse which emphasize human sameness, suitably enforced. Socratic or liberal rules work in this way. They are discreetly enforced, with the (disputable) warrant that they govern the process without prejudice to its results. But they embody a definite idea of Reason, of its advantages for civilized living and of the criteria for including someone (anyone) in the fellowship of rational persons. ... The fellowship needed for a broadening franchise is precisely one of beings who recognize a common essential sameness in others.

Conversation, I would argue, can be a "countervailing force" against exclusion precisely because it is so much more than a matter of talking. Conversation imaginatively creates and constitutes the more inclusive society which stories and other forms of persuasion, like arguments or science, seek to persuade us to join. It is a democratic form and process which requires no essential sameness and Eze (1997a: 321) further adds:

> The only "consensus" primary to democracy – democracy's most privileged moment, if any – is the initial, formal, agreement to play by a set of rules that allows the institutions and respect of dissent as much as its opposite.

But given that conversation is democratic in this way those rules and conventions are, of course, themselves also constantly up for renegotiation in our encounters with new participants and their understandings of good and fair procedures and rules.

From the other direction we might note Mounce's concern that conversation might change us too much. Mounce (1997: 204) poses the following case:

> In any dispute between a fascist and a liberal there can be no appeal to independent standards. Liberal values are defined by liberal standards; fascist values are defined by fascist ones. These standards are incommensurable. Consequently, any dispute between a fascist and a liberal can proceed only by redescription. Each party redescribes his opponent's position, with the aim of winning him over to his own side. Now suppose the fascist wins. Rorty is converted. From his present point of view he would regret this; but he would no longer have his present point of view and presumably would be glad that he had changed. Is there nothing more to be said?

Of course, as we saw in the previous chapter a similar worry underpins Rorty's attempt to silence the fascist (in the person of Heidegger or Nietzsche) by insisting that they relegate their views to the private. In adopting the conversational model, though, I think we have to accept that it has its possible dangers, and one of those is that if I really engage in conversation I may be changed in ways that seem to my present self to be repugnant. That is simply the price I pay for wanting to challenge and change the beliefs of the fascist, or white supremacist, or anyone else.

What MacIntyre, Hollis, and Mounce all assume from their different positions is that conversation is a kind of argument to be won, a practice that aims at consensus. But on the Rortian model of conversation consensus is only one possible outcome. More important than agreement is conversation's democratic nature which typifies Eze's (1997a: 320) understanding of a democratic process as one which:

> is defined not by achievement of ideological or practical/pragmatic consensus on specific decisions (or decisional representation), but simply by the orderly securing of a *means* or a *framework* for initiating, cultivating, and sustaining disagreement and oppositional political activities which are nurtured and cherished for their sake and benefits as much as agreement and consensus are nurtured and cherished for their sake and benefits.

Moreover, as Vandevelde (2001: 67) points out, in the contemporary globalized world the contingent and empirical lack of isolation means that this sort of conversation is unavoidable since no community can be purely justified on internal grounds:

> intellectual, social, political, and economic constraints on particular groups of people are such that ... they cause the communication or the conversation that takes place in one community to link to an ongoing transcultural communication. ... [I]f a particular community wants to be part of the world order, it has to legitimate itself toward other communities.

Vandevelde (2001: 68-9) further notes that this process of widening scrutiny may not merely change our understandings of ourselves and others, but improve our understanding of what it means to be a human being:

> The more comprehensive understanding that has resulted of, for example, what a human being is and deserves (the notions of moral and civic right, equal treatment, etc.) is "better" not in the sense that this understanding comes closer to what human beings are or deserve "in themselves". It is "better" because the point of view regarding what a human being is has expanded. "Better" is thus not primarily a qualification of the materiality of the claim, but a qualification of the procedure or the process through which the qualification has been made.

Thinking of solidarity as something we extend through conversation reminds us that it is an active process in which our understandings of ourselves and others, of our shared social and natural world, and the terms of our engagement with it and each other are constantly subject to recreation through negotiation. It brings back into the picture that crucial recognition that Damico (1986: 95) attributes to Dewey and which he sees Rorty as having lost, namely that the public and private are strongly intertwined, that "individuality and community are twin aspects of the same phenomenon". It also takes us away from the passivity and quietism of which some of Rorty's critics accuse him, and which Rothleder, at least, sees as being tied to Rorty's emphasis on imagination and reading. Rothleder notes (1999: 12), for example, that this emphasis on reading has political consequences:

> Reading is the consumption of the already existing, and even if all that one reads is synthesized, the product of the synthesis cannot be radically new. Rorty's scheme, then, limits the possibility for change. In the place of the maniacal, creative, underground revolutionary is the calm, liberal, above-board politician who proposes rule changes.

While I do not think Rothleder is correct, or even necessarily fair, to Rorty here, I think she expresses a frustration common to Rorty's more progressive political readers. The link is not straightforwardly from reading to the political *status quo*, however. The problem is that Rorty wants to limit revolutionary creative activity to the private realm. What the emphasis that I have tried to place on conversation in both society, generally, and in building solidarity, in particular, seeks to emphasise is that there is political space for both the calm liberal and the maniacal revolutionary. As Rothleder (1999: 12-13) reads Rorty, though, any potential for real creation and change is subverted:

> The ironist incites not rioting but adoption of a "partially neologistic jargon." ... [B]ecause this jargon is only partially neologistic, its revolutionary possibility is limited. The new is always spoken of in terms of the old and is hence limited by the old. Because the old always exerts conservative force, the possibility of revolution is forestalled.

The conversational model that I advocate we adopt from Rorty will not satisfy Rothleder on this count, for any new contributions must always connect to the existing conversation and so must appeal to what we already think and do. The only space that Rorty leaves for radical change, Rothleder (1999: 14-15) argues, is with the genius who revolutionizes our way of thinking. But even here she sees problems:

> The notion that men of genius provide our only chance for major breaks in history is fundamentally antiradical in that it forces us to wait, as if for the messiah, until there is some kind of consensus about this newly emerged thing.

Again, the conversational model would allow that real (though probably not immediately radical) changes happen at all sorts of moments in the conversation. Some of these may be earth-shattering creations by great geniuses, others may be a matter of individual people changing their beliefs, values and feelings as a result of individuals interacting, telling stories, and putting forward arguments. The changes are always possible; revolutions are (thankfully) few. Hence, with the conversational model in mind, I think we need not worry that this model of genius may serve to stop radical change altogether as Rothleder (1999: 15) suggests when she writes:

> The attempt to identify genius and simultaneously to avoid looking foolish acts as a restraint on radical change. We cannot think of ourselves as geniuses – genius is always other, and we cannot recognize genius because of its status as other. What is genius we do not know. The genius model, then, is a check on creativity, on all attempts to break away from the old.

Change, and the possibility for change, is ever-present in the conversation. The sort of radical change that Rothleder desires is unlikely but not impossible. What Rothleder seems to long for is some grand rupture with old ways of thinking and doing, some ahistorical moment. What she does not tell us is how that would be possible, nor why it would be desirable.

I suspect that underlying Rothleder's passionate but unsupported defence of revolution is the more sensible concern that Rorty leaves insufficient space for the political. Her concern is not that there is no space for revolution but no space for critique. This is a point that Rothleder (1999: 60-61) makes herself:

> Rorty takes it as nearly given that liberal institutions are within reach and that they will maintain themselves with little or no active upkeep. It is this hope that allows him to withdraw from the public sphere without qualms, and it is this withdrawal of philosophy and irony from the public sphere that is worrisome. Institutions by nature have a conservative moment and this conservative moment needs to be constantly challenged and constantly shown in its true light. It cannot be left to its own devices.

Lutz (1997: 1138), too, worries on this account:

> [Rorty's] ideal liberal democracy seems to avoid rather than to enrich political dialogue or political life. The desire for "dialectical linkages" which makes us Socratics shall be satisfied in the shared agreement not to redescribe one another in humiliating ways. The wish for this safeguard would neither demand nor inspire political participation.

Flathman (1990: 311) expresses a similar concern when he notes the certitude with which Rorty tends to pronounce on the political and draws a stronger conclusion arguing that these moments:

> cannot but create suspicion that, at least regards public life and hence politics, Rorty craves a
> fixity, a closure, and a discipline reminiscent of thinkers he says he wants to leave behind and of
> the societies he most disdains.

Again these criticisms take their strength from the fact that Rorty introduces the strict division between public and private and in this way circumscribes the very possibility of conversation. Although I have argued that we simply reject the private/public divide in order to regain conversation, Shusterman (1994: 404) offers a sympathetic defence of Rorty against this sort of criticism which makes use of the public/private distinction:

> The best way to defend Rorty's privatization of philosophy is to argue that by directing
> philosophy from public problems to private perfection, we are more effectively redirecting it from
> means to ends. For Rorty, as for Dewey, the ends or consummations that make life worth living
> are realized only in individual experience. Liberal democracy and its public institutions are thus
> not ends in themselves, but means to provide individuals the freedom and wherewithal to enjoy
> their chosen ends and realize themselves as ends in their own preferred ways. If philosophy
> can serve these ends directly by providing vocabularies and exemplars of self-creation, Rorty
> argues, why should it have to serve them indirectly by worrying about the public means?

Shusterman (1994: 405) elucidates this further:

> It is not that public means are less important than private ends. It is rather that, realistically
> speaking, philosophy today can do very little to improve those means, while it can do much to
> realize private ends. ... [A]s marginalized intellectuals in a bafflingly enormous and complex
> society, we philosophers simply lack the practical means to transform public life and improve
> solidarity, so to theorize vaguely about such transformations would be a far greater sin of
> separating theory from practice, means from ends.

Of course, in Shusterman's reading, public and private have undergone a subtle shift. They are no longer incommensurable and utterly separate; instead both politics and philosophy are the means to the end of human self-realization. I see Shusterman's suggestion as entirely compatible with the conversational model. The conversation has many topics, many participants, and each contributes where they are most able to make a pragmatic difference. The philosopher's retreat from politics is not thus an inevitable consequence of being a liberal, a liberal ironist, or an intellectual, but simply a reasoned choice as to where one can *qua* philosopher most fruitfully direct one's attentions and energies in order to make a difference. What we do not have is any reason to suppose that all philosophers, let alone all ironists, liberals, or liberal ironists, will make the same choice. Nor do

we have reason to suppose that even philosophers who make that choice professionally will not still maintain an interest in society and the conversational community that extends into talking about a range of subjects where they do not speak as professional but only as citizen or self.

To be part of the conversation in any capacity is to be part of a society and a community which both maintains itself and mutates through the introduction of new voices and topics. To be part of the conversation is thus already to engage in politics; but politics broadly understood not merely as an interrogation of existing institutions and ways of maintaining and/or changing them but as being a participant in the institutions, maintaining/changing them as one goes along. It must be admitted, however, that this is a possibility which Rorty's emphasis on the private and public undermines. This is a consequence, Fraser argues, of the monological conception of discourse increasingly dominating, for Rorty, even in the political sphere, as Rorty associates radical theory with poetry and hence privatizes it. This, Fraser (1990: 314) argues, has two consequences:

> First, there can be no legitimate cultural politics, no genuinely political struggle for cultural hegemony; there can only be Oedipal revolts of genius sons against genius fathers. Second, there can be no politically relevant radical theory, no link between theory and political practice; there can only be apolitical ironist theory and atheoretical reformist practice. Thus both culture and theory get depoliticized.

Fraser (1990: 314-5) further notes that this results in a peculiar construction of the political:

> In Rorty's hands, politics assumes an overly communitarian and solidary character, as if in reaction against the extreme egotism and individualism of his conception of theory. Thus, we can supposedly go straight from objectivity to solidarity, from the metaphysical comfort of traditional philosophy to the communitarian comfort of a single "we". Here, Rorty homogenizes social space, assuming, tendentiously, that there are no deep social cleavages capable of generating conflicting solidarities and opposing "we's". It follows from this assumed absence of fundamental social antagonisms that politics is a matter of everyone pulling together to solve a common set of problems. Thus social engineering can replace political struggle. Disconnected tinkerings with a succession of allegedly discrete social problems can replace transformation of the basic institutional structure. And the expert social-problem-solver and top-down reformer can replace the organized social movement of people collectively articulating their own interests and aspirations. ... Moreover, with no deep rifts or pervasive axes of domination, practice can float entirely free of theory. If there are no mechanisms of subordination inscribed in the basic institutional framework of society, then *a fortiori* there can be no need to theorize them. Thus politics can be detheoreticized. … Rorty's conceptions of politics and of theory are obverses of one another. If theory is hyperindividualized and depoliticized, then politics is hypercommunalized and detheoreticized. As theory becomes pure *poesis*, the politics approaches pure *techne*. Moreover, as theory is made the preserve of pure transcendence,

then politics is banalized, emptied of radicalism and of desire. Finally, as theory becomes the production *ex nihilo* of new metaphors, then politics must be merely their literalization; it must be application only, never invention.

What I take Fraser's main line of argument to be is that Rorty effects the transformation of the political in two ways. The first involves invoking the private/public divide and increasingly marginalizing non-monological modes of discourse. The second is by ignoring the role of power in shaping our social world. The emphasis which I place on conversation as the basis of society and community is intended as an antidote to the first of these manoeuvres. This will not, however, solve the problems of power and so I will turn to this question in the next chapter.

I have argued that many of the problems that critics have with Rorty's idea of the political result from his introduction of the emphasis on a strong divide between public and private rather than from his emphasis on imagination, poetry, narrative and reading. I have argued that placing these modes within a social understanding based instead on conversation can overcome those problems to a significant degree, though this will need to be supplemented with an account of power relations within the conversation. Before turning to a discussion of the topic of power in the next chapter, however, I want to look briefly at the way in which the private/public divide is itself in tension with the notion of solidarity.

The first, and most important, point to note is that the notion of solidarity is introduced in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a) into a socio-political imaginary already shaped by the strong public/private divide. It is the constraints of this already extant structure I surmise that leads Rorty to overemphasize the role of reading and imagination in extending our understanding of the other, increasing our circle of the "we". At the same time, the public/private divide is intended at least in part to solve the same problems that give rise to the notion of solidarity. For both concepts the underlying moral worry is that we may be cruel to, even humiliate, others. Stow (1999: 67) reminds us of the links between cruelty and the division into public and private when he points out that both public and private books teach us about cruelty and how to avoid it:

> Rorty draws a firm distinction between the public and private realms arguing that certain books, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in England* are useful for reducing cruelty in the former, and others, such as *Lolita* or *Pale Fire*, are useful for reducing cruelty in the latter by showing us the dangers of a certain sort of blindness which comes from excessive pursuit of our own obsessions.

It is my contention that the two concepts – public/private and solidarity – work against each other. According to the private/public model when it is fully unpacked, we seem to avoid cruelty by simply avoiding talking to each other; according to the solidarity model when it is fully unpacked, we can

best avoid cruelty by talking more. In some sense, then, the two concepts try to solve the same problem but in contradictory ways.

Roth (1990: 355), in particular, points to the contradictory nature of these two demands:

> We do not need arguments explaining why we *should* feel solidarity; Rorty is the first to agree that it is more than a little absurd to think that these feelings are created out of syllogistic reasoning. But we certainly can use narratives (historical and otherwise) which explore what happens to people who count for us when solidarity breaks down in the face of evil, and what can happen (or what has happened) when solidarity and hope in the future combine to reduce cruelty. These narratives will often have to do with questions of pain and our reaction to it. That is, they will belong to Rorty's public domain. But they will often also have to do with "the purpose of life," or the "adequacy of our current vocabulary," and hence belong to his private domain. Indeed, the problem of separating public and private in regard to these narratives will probably be as hopelessly difficult as separating content and form. There may be occasions in which we wish to talk about these aspects separately, but keeping the separation clean and rigorous seems about as likely as finding more-than-contingent criteria for deciding whether politics is more important than art.

Roth (1990: 356) further points out the implications of this for education:

> How could decisions about education which would effect overcoming a certain blindness be redescribed as private without just encouraging a new blindness to one of the crucial facets of liberalism? Surely the overcoming and the social tolerance which [William] James describes has everything to do with avoiding cruelty and reducing pain.

Roth, in effect, demonstrates that taking solidarity seriously puts serious pressure on the very notion of the public and private. This is why Roth (1990: 357) advocates that Rorty should pay more attention to feminist critiques of the public/private distinction:

> If the slogan "the personal is the political" is extraordinarily problematic as a prescription of the way things should be, it is a powerful redescription of how the category of the personal has done much cruel political work against women. "The personal is the political" can also make a claim to (re)appropriate certain kinds of experience as valuable, as worthy of value. Recognizing the contingency of the private/public distinction means recognizing that it can work and has worked against important aspects of the culture of liberalism which Rorty is trying to promote, even if it might still be used (in conditions of equality) in the service of this culture.

Topper (1995: 962), too, suggests that we subject Rorty's insistence on a strong divide between public and private to scrutiny from a pragmatic perspective by asking questions such as:

> What is the practical benefit of this redescription? Does it illuminate social or political questions? Does it ... help us to determine ... which social practices we must preserve, cultivate, or extend and which we must refashion or jettison?

Such an approach makes evident, Topper (1995: 962) thinks, the impractical nature of Rorty's suggestion, for in actual political debates (around for instance abortion or education) in a liberal society, the question is not whether there should be some private space but "where, how, and on what basis that distinction is to be drawn". Ideological debates between political opponents Topper (1995: 962) argues are also often precisely about whether for instance the economy, or culture, to take just two examples, are private or public. Topper (1995: 963) takes this further, by suggesting that Rorty is not even really engaged in redescription:

> Rorty's distinctions between autonomy and justice, self-creation and human solidarity, private narcissism and public pragmatism are better understood as restatements of positions that both conservatives and liberals endorse, the difference being that they interpret these distinctions in very different ways.

Topper acknowledges that Rorty may respond, as indeed I would respond, by saying that there is no way to draw the boundaries of private and public except through contestation within the conversation.   Topper (1995: 963), however, is unpersuaded, arguing that Rorty's lack of detail once again lets him down:

> This response might be credible if Rorty either convincingly demonstrated that "undistorted communication" or "free-and-open encounters" were indeed accurate descriptions of current political discourse in America or if he offered detailed analyses of current impediments to such encounters, along with proposals for curbing or remedying them. ... Instead, he offers vague suggestions that circumvent entirely the difficult practical issues.

What both Topper and Roth point to is that the private/public distinction is both political and contingent. Rorty's attempt to turn it into something strong appears to be little more than a desperate attempt to escape that fact. To turn the public and private distinction into a "fact" about incommensurable languages precisely seems to deny of the contingency and the political contestability of the distinction. Rather than making more of the claim that private and public are distinct, as both Topper and Roth suggest, I think Rorty would do better to make much less of it, even to abandon it.

In the previous chapter I looked at some of the reasons we should abandon the strong private/public distinction, in this chapter we have another distinct reason – that it cannot do the job

of minimizing cruelty and further runs counter to those aspects of Rorty's thought (solidarity and conversation) which have the greatest chance of performing that task.

This chapter has focussed on Rorty's notion of solidarity, an ideal to which other liberal thinkers pay too little attention, in my opinion. Although I argued that Rorty's formulation of the ideal of solidarity is not as ethnocentric as his critics suggest, I did concede that it is subjectivist. This subjectivism can be overcome, though, if we rethink solidarity in terms of the conversational model of society rather than trying to fit it into, as Rorty does, a society already shaped by the strong public/private divide. In order to be persuaded that conversation is the appropriate mechanism through which to realise Rorty's ideals of self, society and community, however, it is necessary to look at the issue of how power and power relations shape and limit the possibilities of conversation. The issue of power is one which Rorty rarely addresses, and never gives a positive account of. Without such an account, though, Rorty may be seen as simply offering us an apologetics for the American *status quo*, much as Topper suggests above. It is to this lacuna in Rorty's thought that I turn in the next chapter.

Chapter Four: Power and Politics

In this dissertation I have persistently argued for a reading of Rorty's political and social thought which puts the notion of conversation at its centre.   But as Lentricchia (2002) points out, conversation alone is not a panacea; for conversation is just one way of organising, maintaining and justifying power. Lentricchia (2002: 364) levels against Rorty the charge that he misconceives conversation precisely because he ignores power:

> You cannot jump into this conversation and do what you please. It is hard to get into; harder still to speak on your own once you do get in; tougher yet to move the conversation in any particular direction that you might desire. For this conversation has mainly been propelled and constrained by collective voices, socio-historical subjects, not private ones, and not by "autonomous" intellectuals. The involvement of cultural conversation in the social has always borne purpose, but the rhetoric is generally masked and the telos, the exercising – channeling, influencing, distributing, imposing – of a form of social power, generally invisible.

I agree with Lentricchia that the absence of any account of the workings of power within Rorty's liberal utopia is a serious shortcoming in his work; I agree further that without such an account the conversational model loses much of its attraction. This chapter, then, is an attempt to articulate a way of reading power back into Rorty's liberalism in a way which is consistent with his overall perspective. The chapter has four sections.

The first section (section 4.1) investigates the reasons why an account of power is needed. I will argue that two reasons stand out, namely: to simultaneously account for obstacles to inclusion in the conversation and to justify exclusions from the conversation; and, to explain how we can possibly increase solidarity without being cruel. I look at Rorty's reasons for his explicit rejection of the Foucauldian account of power (perhaps the most influential contemporary such an account), and demonstrate why one traditional way of addressing the question – through distinguishing between "good" authority and "bad" power – is not open to him. The option of invoking institutional arrangements which limit power is suggested as a solution to at least one of Rorty's problems – that of how to ensure the conversation is as inclusive as possible, i.e. how to keep hegemonic asymmetries to a minimum in a context in which, it will be argued, the elimination of such asymmetries is practically impossible.

The second section (section 4.2) focuses specifically on issues of inclusiveness and exclusions from the conversation, and suggests that if we do invoke institutional arrangements to solve the problem, then we need to be quite specific and practical in both our assessment of the obstacles to inclusion and the measures needed to overcome them. Iris Marion Young's (1990) work on

oppression and domination, I argue, provides a useful way of looking at the hindrances to participation, and therefore provides some concrete sense of how power currently operates and what might be done to counteract it. I propose a synthesis of the ideas of Young and Rorty which I believe "empowers" and improves upon Rorty's own position.

In section 4.3 I argue that Young's notions of oppression and domination in general and her ideas about two particular forms of oppression, namely cultural imperialism and powerlessness, also provide us with a way to approach the issues of power arising in connection with Rorty's account of solidarity. In the final section of this chapter (section 4.4) I defend the conversational model as modified through the chapter against charges that it cannot help, and may hinder, us in our attempts to transform society, so as to make it freer and more just.

4.1   The need for a new account of power

Numerous critics (e.g. Hollis 1990; Norris 2002; Fraser 1990) of Rorty's politics have accused him of simply offering an apologetics for current American (or North Atlantic) political practice. The flavour of such criticisms can be seen in what Comay (1986) says with regard to the lack of a space for social criticism in Rorty's thought. She argues that this lack of social critique has a dual aspect. On the one hand, Comay (1986: 125) maintains, Rorty marginalizes philosophy, and consequently:

> precisely where Rorty's hermeneutic pragmatism, if pursued rigorously, could and should have led philosophy in the direction of a general social and political critical project, Rorty shrinks back from the potentially subversive or utopian implications of his own undertaking and retreats to safer ground.

On the other hand, Comay (1986: 123) argues, Rorty idealizes society and politics through "his one-sided emphasis on discursive practices (to the neglect of, e.g., work and power)". The result of this is that, according to Comay (1986: 125):

> Society, in Rorty, takes the place where Nature once stood. Contemporary social practice – the final context and last court of appeal – congeals into a performed and reified essence, frozen in its contingency, immune from philosophical criticism, invulnerable to real change. The "community," unproblematized, becomes the ultimate given: opaque, inert, in no need of justification, and lacking the means to interrogate itself. The "conversation" has the homeostatic regularity of a smoothly functioning machine – without beginning, without end, without contradiction, without crisis: effortlessly reproducing itself, commanding our assent.

As a result of these moves, Comay (1986: 127) argues:

Rorty only *occludes* what were the real contradictions in classical liberal thought (the gap between its theoretical premises and the social practices it sanctioned, between its universalist promise and its exclusionary requirements, between the formal egalitarianism it preached and the material inequalities it legitimated). By promoting a liberalism which need no longer even pretend to loftier "principles," Rorty ends up shielding classical liberalism from all the embarrassments which had typically plagued it. As such he deflects all criticism of an immanent or dialectical sort and thereby seals off the liberal tradition from realizing its latent hope and promise. ... Rorty simply dissolves the tensions within liberalism as such, relieving it of the pressure to "complete" or "sublate" itself. His version remains purely affirmative, which is to say, conservative: a liberalism without apology, without tension, and without the means to negate or transcend itself.

Supposing as *I* do, however, and as I hope to have demonstrated thus far in this dissertation, that Rorty's is a new, interesting and critical perspective on liberalism, there are two reasons this can be so easily missed.

The first reason for Rorty's apparent apologetics is his rhetorical strategy of neutralizing his own ideas. Rorty often attempts to persuade us to accept his ideas by suggesting that they are nothing more than common sense (albeit a highly articulate, thoughtful and critical common sense), which we would accept, if we were not enthralled by pernicious philosophical abstractions. So, for instance, Rorty suggests that the problems of epistemology would simply disappear if we could rid ourselves of certain ocular metaphors, for instance: seeing the mind as a mirror (as in the extended argument of *Philosophy and the mirror of nature* (1980a)). In the case of epistemology and metaphysics, Rorty's critics have recognized this strategy at work and have argued that Rorty is not simply dissolving philosophical problems into common sense but propounding new (and often, in their opinions, dangerous) perspectives.

Readers of Rorty's political thought have, perhaps, not been quite so vigilant in recognizing this strategy at work. They have been happy to take Rorty at face-value when he claims, for example, that his philosophy is an example of "weak thought", that is:

philosophical reflection which does not attempt a radical criticism of contemporary culture, does not attempt to refound or remotivate it, but simply assembles reminders and suggests some interesting possibilities (1991e: 6).

They have taken such neutralizing and self-effacing comments as evidence that Rorty is not saying something new but simply articulating certain already dominant political ideas and themes. It surprised many of them, therefore, when Rorty's liberalism (which they had so easily dismissed as

bourgeois posturing) turned out, in *Achieving our country* (1998a), to have a strong progressive and workerist bite to it. I have been arguing in this dissertation so far that we should indeed read Rorty as saying something new and significant about liberalism, and I will add to that, that a good place to look for Rorty's radical moments is precisely in those places where he tells us he is saying nothing new at all.

Rorty's persuasive strategies and a lack of what Nietzsche would call "good readers" only takes us so far, however, in explaining the apparent lack of critical and oppositional "bite" in his political writings. A more important factor, I would argue, is Rorty's failure to examine the way in which power (that most central of political concepts) works both in contemporary society and in his own utopia. An examination of the topic of power is made all the more important if we read Rorty as advocating a conversational model of society, as I have urged we should,.

If we adopt the conversational model of society and culture, we need an account of what mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion are at work in such conversation, but Rorty does not address this issue. We know from our own experiences of ordinary conversations that, despite their spontaneous and free-wheeling appearance, they are governed by implicit norms and that all sorts of factors shape who speaks and when, how long they speak for, how they express themselves, and the extent to which they are listened to. Thus even in the most everyday and innocuous of communications power plays an important role. If, as I think Rorty advocates, we see all of society and culture as a kind of conversation, then we must expect power to be a significant feature of that conversation. Our status and material wealth, our renown and network of relationships, the extent to which our opinions accord with prevailing ideas may all shape the extent to which we can speak effectively and be heard in the social conversation, as too may our understanding of appropriate justificatory frameworks, our appeals to the "correct" authorities – such as, for example, science in the Western framework. Given that we know that power does in fact operate in the present cultural context and indeed within ordinary conversations, the absence of an account of how it operates and how it might be counteracted in a utopia must leave Rorty open to the charge of ignoring or perhaps even masking power and therefore of simply offering an apologetics for current practice. It is no response to this to say that in his utopia the conversation is truly free (i.e. unfettered by the workings of power) if this has not been shown to be the case, or even possible. Nor is it a response to say that the conversation is in principle open to all-comers, because we need some way to turn the "in principle" into "in fact" or else Rorty's critics are correct and he is offering us nothing new here. Moreover, Rorty does acknowledge that there are in fact in his utopia moments of exclusion – he speaks of our dismissing a Nietzsche or Loyola as mad (1988a:187). If these exclusions are legitimate then on what basis are they justified, who makes the decisions and how do they make them, and who else might be excluded if only we stopped to

ask? Thus, even in describing his utopia Rorty admits that power is operational at some level and we need some account of this.

The task of providing an account of the operations of power, including the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, is made all the more urgent in Rorty's case by the fact that one traditional mechanism of using rationality as the criterion (in principle if not in practice) is not open to Rorty. His rejection of the notions of Truth and Rationality leave him exposed on this front, and certainly without any obvious stance from which to adjudge others "mad". All in all, we are left with a serious cause for unease as to whether Rorty's conversation is a liberal ideal or simply a way of silencing his critics. For all of these reasons, Rorty needs to offer an account of power if he is to persuade us that his conversational ideal is workable or even desirable.

A second moment in which a need for an account of power within Rorty's politics arises is in relation to the question of solidarity. Rorty, as was discussed in Chapter Three above, redescribes solidarity as something which we create through imagination rather than simply *find* in a common human nature. Rorty suggests that we increase solidarity by coming to see others as being like ourselves, as "one of us" (1989a:190ff), and I have argued that conversation is the best model for understanding how this can happen. On the one hand, and at first glance, it might seem that this notion of solidarity can offer us a way out of the power games which seem implicit in the social conversation. Seeing others as like us might in theory mean abandoning the sorts of judgements such as "too junior to have a worthwhile opinion", "the wrong sort of background", "mad", and so on which would underpin exclusions from the conversation.

On the other hand, however, the idea of solidarity which Rorty advocates brings with it its own problems. If solidarity is a matter of seeing others as "one of us" then our descriptions of ourselves are left unchallenged by another's otherness; indeed their otherness far from being recognized is simply ignored or described away. Our norms stand unquestioned and our efforts at solidarity turn out to be nothing more than a quite simple and clear operation of our power. Now Rorty might respond that our interlocutors are not passive in this interaction – they employ exactly the same power over us as we potentially do over them. They redescribe us as one of them. In other words, Rorty might argue that we meet as equals and thus power is not a factor. This is not, however, persuasive, it shows only that *if* we meet as equals we have no power problem to contend with; the problem then becomes how to ensure that we meet as equals and that we agree that we meet as equals, how to negotiate and demonstrate this recognition of equality in practice? In other words, how do we manage power to ensure that we continue in the persuasive practices of the conversation – through, for example, mediating asymmetries through humour, or recognising the shifting levels of relative expertise and ignorance required to facilitate our conceding a point to the other – rather than resorting to force?

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This problem is even more pressing in the social (rather than merely individual) case. In seeing others as like us (as modern westerners), our seeing is backed by economic, military, socio-political, cultural and linguistic hegemony. In this way our claims of solidarity are laid open to charges of ethnocentrism. These are charges which Rorty does not deny. If the charge of ethnocentrism sticks, however, then it seems that once again there is an operation of power at work here and that by remaining silent on that subject Rorty once again opens himself to the charge that he is simply masking power by ignoring it.

When we add to this the moral tension at the heart of Rorty's notion of solidarity – namely, that any redescription runs the risk of humiliating the other and thus our attempts to be moral (in increasing solidarity) may cause us to be immoral (cruel) – any masking of power becomes particularly egregious.

We are left, then, with three questions that Rorty must address:
1. How do we ensure that marginalized and unpopular opinions are heard in the conversation?
2. How do we legitimate our exclusions of certain voices and opinions – how do we explain our dismissal of Nietzsche and Loyola as mad? How do we insist that ironists keep their irony private?
3. How do we engage with others at all without potentially humiliating them?

Any attempt to read Rorty as offering a worthwhile brand of liberalism will have to account for power in these three particular instances. But, it must do so in ways which are consonant with Rorty's broader commitments. We cannot, that is to say, take Rorty's liberalism and simply add our pet theory of power onto it. This is a serious constraint because, as noted above, Rorty explicitly rejects the most widely discussed of contemporary theories of power – namely, Foucault's – and his commitments rule out another pervasive way of dealing with the problem of power – the appeal to authority. I will briefly discuss each of these two conceptions of power as well as the reasons neither can be appropriated by Rorty. Finally, I will look at institutional arrangements as a way of limiting (though neither eradicating nor legitimating) power and suggest that this option may well solve some of Rorty's problems.

4.1.1 Power and Foucault

Although Rorty is generally silent on the question of power it is an issue he takes up in *Achieving our country* (1998a). Here, he does not offer an account of power but does give his reasons for rejecting a currently influential understanding of power – namely, Foucault's. By looking at this critical line of thought we gain insight into what lies behind Rorty's general silence on the topic.

Rorty's critique of Foucault's conception of power is part of a more general attack on what he terms the "cultural left". *Achieving our country* is a searing indictment of the social sterility of the contemporary intellectual left and a plea to rediscover an earlier engaged intellectual left in the reformist politics of John Dewey (1859-1952) and William James (1842-1910). In contrast to practical engagement Rorty believes the cultural left offers only "attempts to subvert social institutions by problematizing concepts", and accuses such thinkers of scholasticism and sterility:

> The authors of these purportedly 'subversive' books honestly believe that they are serving human liberty. But it is almost 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. Even though what these authors 'theorize' is often something very concrete and near at hand – a current TV show, a media celebrity, a recent scandal – they offer the most abstract and barren explanations imaginable (1998a: 93).

This "disengagement from practice", Rorty (1998a: 94) claims, results in "theoretical hallucinations" and a "Gothic" vision of society "haunted by ubiquitous specters, the most frightening of which is called 'power'".

He continues:

> In its Foucauldian usage, the term 'power' denotes an agency which has left an indelible stain on every word in our language and on every institution in our society. It is always already there, and cannot be spotted coming or going. One might spot a corporate bagman arriving at a congressman's office, and perhaps block his entrance. But one cannot block off power in the Foucauldian sense. Power is as much inside one as outside one. It is nearer than hands and feet. ... Only interminable individual and social self-analysis, and perhaps not even that, can help us escape from the infinitely fine meshes of its invisible web (1998a: 94).

Rorty (1998a: 95) likens this idea of power to the idea of original sin, equally ubiquitous and inescapable, and argues that "in committing itself to what it calls 'theory,' this Left has gotten something which is entirely too much like religion".

It is not merely the metaphysical overtones to which Rorty objects, however, but rather the resultant quietism:

> To step into the intellectual world which some of these leftists inhabit is to move out of a world in which the citizens of a democracy can join forces to resist sadism and selfishness into a Gothic world in which democratic politics has become a farce. It is a world in which all the daylit

cheerfulness of Whitmanesque hypersecularism has been lost, and in which 'liberalism' and 'humanism' are synonyms for naiveté – for an inability to grasp the full horror of our situation (1998a: 95-6).

Rorty's rejection of Foucault's reading of power does not, and cannot – given his (anti)epistemology – amount to saying it is false. Instead, Rorty is arguing, that the implications of Foucault's view of power for human agency in general and political action in particular – namely, that it renders them meaningless or even impossible – are unpalatable, and that when confronted with such an account of power we would do better not to engage with it but to change the topic of the conversation.

Can we change the topic of the conversation, though, without losing sight of power? Would we not do better to offer other descriptions and definitions of power which do not lose sight of human agency? This is what I would suggest Rorty should do and it is what I will attempt to do here. I would further suggest that in seeking to clarify the notion we should look to Stephen Lukes's seminal monograph *Power: a radical view* (1974).

Lukes (1974: 27) defines power in the following way:

> A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests.

Lukes further distinguishes between three kinds of accounts of power: a one-dimensional view, which he associates with liberals; a two-dimensional view associated with reformists; and, a three-dimensional view, which he himself endorses, and which he associates with radicals. What distinguishes these conceptions, according to Lukes (1974: 34-5), is not their definition of power but their understanding of what constitutes a person's interests.

The one-dimensional view understands a person's interests to be their conscious preferences which guide their behaviour. From this perspective power is at work only in decision-making processes which involve an overt conflict of interests (Lukes 1974: 11-15). The two-dimensional perspective recognises that power is already at work in setting the agenda for the decision-making process. Proponents of this view point to the fact that many conflicts of interest are suppressed – that the rules of the game work to secure the vested interests of certain groups or elites by not allowing other interests to be heard at all (Lukes 1974: 16-20). The three-dimensional view proposes that power is at work even when there is no conflict of interest – power is systemically at work in shaping what people want (or think they want). Lukes (1974: 24) writes:

> [I]s it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeble, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial? To assume that the absence of grievance equals genuine consensus is simply to rule out the possibility of false or manipulated consensus by definitional fiat.

To clarify this I will use an everyday, rather than a political, example. Imagine a young couple organising their (standard, heterosexual, monogamous, western-style) wedding. Power in the first dimension comes into play when the bride and groom disagree about some aspect of the wedding, perhaps how many people to invite. The bride wants a large wedding with 250 guests; the groom favours an intimate ceremony with only immediate family present. In this instance we have a direct conflict of interests which may be resolved in any number of ways, through compromise, for example, or with one party giving way. The negotiations are of course fraught in that one party runs the risk of losing face by losing the argument with the ever-present possibility that the relationship itself could be seriously compromised if the parties become entrenched in their positions, and so the potential for hurt is great, depending on the personalities involved and how the matter is handled. Power in the second dimension is present in this instance in that other interested parties may be excluded from this conversation. This may include the families and friends of one or both parties. Here too, there is great potential for hurt – if the bride's family is included in the conversation but not the groom's the latter may feel resentful, friends who have an interest in the larger wedding to which they would be invited may feel that they should be given their say. Power in the third dimension is present in the fact that what is being organised is a standard, heterosexual, monogamous wedding. Here the power is the power of society and culture to shape people's expectations of what the appropriate way of life is, namely one of a nuclear family. In this case there is little cause for concern with people being hurt or humiliated.

Lukes's three-dimensional view of power runs close to a Foucauldian one, and I suspect that Rorty would reject it for similar reasons – in *Achieving our country* (1998a), Foucauldian power is after all, for Rorty, just one incarnation of "the system" which is what Lukes ultimately invokes here. The one- and two-dimensional understandings of power are, however, I would argue, sufficient to allow us to articulate the moments of blindness in Rorty's thinking. Having rejected the very idea of the third Lukesian dimension of power Rorty appears to think that he is not required to talk about the first Lukesian dimension of power because he is not concerned with actual decision-making. It is the lack of any understanding of the second dimension of power, the ways in which the conversational agenda is set and participation regulated, however, which is Rorty's blind-spot.

4.1.2 Power and authority

In neglecting the topic of power, and particularly its second dimension (the way in which the rules of the game already embody and secure a set of interests), it might be argued, Rorty is simply continuing in the liberal tradition. That most thinkers in that tradition have little to say on the topic of power *per se* is undoubtedly true. That same tradition, however, is strongly invested in a notion of authority and authority is understood as being the legitimate use of power. Liberals, that is to say, have been both historically and contemporarily concerned with the question of how rules and institutions may be legitimated and given authority and thus have been intimately and deeply invested in the notion of power.

Such treatments, of course, see power as one-dimensional. Critics of liberalism have, of course, argued strenuously at least since Marx that any attempts to legitimate power into authority rest on norms which are themselves not neutral but merely expressions of certain, usually hegemonic, male/western/capitalist/heterosexist/modern, ideas and practices. These critics, thus, invoke, power in its third dimension and work to undermine the distinction between power and authority.

Despite his rejection of this third dimension of power Rorty seems to accept this line of criticism of authority. Indeed, Rorty's philosophy involves the explicit rejection of anything that might give us any basis for a distinction between authority and power. Rorty's anti-foundationalism and rejection of notions of Truth and Reason leave him without the resources to be able to articulate a distinction between "good" and "bad" power, except in terms of a distinction between persuasion and force (1989a: 51-2) which, I will show, is inadequate to the task.

The persuasion/force duality is particularly strained in thinking about the issue of how to engage with others without being cruel to them and potentially humiliating them. Humiliation is for Rorty precisely a linguistic matter. It is a matter of robbing someone of their core vocabulary and we achieve this through our own words, our redescriptions of their world and beliefs. We run this risk whenever we speak to another and not simply when, as in *1984,* we set out to reprogramme them. We are as likely to crush another through thoughtlessness or carelessness as through deliberate intention to harm them. If the avoidance of humiliation is our goal then the persuasion/force duality is even more inconsequential in this case than the rhetoric/logic duality Rorty sought to displace, for force while more openly cruel than persuasion actually runs less risk of humiliating *its* victim – I think, for instance, of rape survivors who hold onto the "fact" that the rapist may have violated their bodies, but could not touch their selves, this way of experiencing or interpreting a physical attack is always available to us, but it is never a possibility in the case of humiliation in which it is always the self, and not merely the body, which is harmed. This is not, of course, to argue that force is good,

that might is right; but, rather to demonstrate the emptiness of the persuasion/force distinction in this particular case.

Rorty does not, in fact, draw on that particular distinction in his discussion of solidarity but does in his discussion of the conversation. But even if it were to help us in the case of conversation, an important aspect of power would remain untouched and in need of being accounted for. What is required here if the force/persuasion distinction is to tell us something useful about human interactions is some third term such as "manipulation". What separates "manipulation" from persuasion is the awareness on the part of the object of being "overpowered". We need to distinguish between those persuasive strategies – whether they be logical or rhetorical – which involve such an awareness, an element of "emotional blackmail" and those which do not. It is where manipulation or some correlate is effected that humiliation results and not merely in every case where someone is persuaded to concede some point in an argument, or buy a product, or even change their mind. Not every persuasive act humiliates us but persuasion by manipulation does. Moreover, the persuasion/force distinction, as we shall see, cannot even perform its function in the case of the conversation.

In the first instance, it is far too simple-minded to imagine that people are excluded from the conversation simply by force (unless we intend by force something so wide that it is practically meaningless – every aspect of social reality that is not purely linguistic, for instance). Freeing the conversation from force won't suddenly ensure that the poor, weak and downtrodden, those lacking economic and cultural resources will suddenly speak and be heard. Indeed, if anything, those currently silenced voices might insist that some measure of force is necessary to ensure their inclusion in the first place – is this not, after all, the argument of many militants and "terrorists"? If we are to defuse that line of thought then we need something more powerful than a mere assertion of inclusiveness and a restriction on the means used within the game. We need some programme to ensure that the game is truly open to all, that everyone has some stake in talking rather than fighting.

If the persuasion/force distinction performs any useful function it would be to legitimate exclusions from the conversation. Those who would disrupt conversation because they do not accept the rule that only non-violent means can be used to pursue their ends, could be legitimately excluded in terms of this distinction; as could those who have had the opportunity to speak and be heard but who have not won their case persuasively and so turn to force and violent action purely out of pique. If this is a worthwhile reason for employing the distinction, however, it is not one that Rorty does in fact use when actually specifying exclusions from the conversation. Rorty admits two cases in which voices are excluded in his utopia. The first is when ironists cross the public/private divide and employ their irony in the public sphere to cast doubt on a public vocabulary rather than

merely their personal ones (1989a: 65); the second is when we dismiss certain ideas and thinkers as "mad" and thereby legitimate our refusal to engage with them (1988a: 187ff). In neither of these cases, however, is force (on the part of the excluded) the reason Rorty gives for his excluding of these voices and their ideas from the conversation.

The ironist intellectual who refuses to keep his irony private is very far from imposing it on the conversation by force (indeed, in *Achieving our country* Rorty criticizes these intellectuals under the rubric of the "cultural left" not for their forceful disruption of the conversation but for their refusal to act at all). Likewise, sick scholarly Nietzsche never resorted to force to impose his ideas; in fact, he never sought to impose his ideas at all, exhorting us only to become ourselves (and not replicas of himself or anyone else). Loyola did, of course, resort to force – but that is not the reason Rorty gives for excluding him.

What legitimates these exclusions according to Rorty's own account of them is that the excluded threaten to undermine confidence in the conversation and thus end it. They (Nietzsche and Loyola, and public ironists such as Foucault and Heidegger in certain moments) undermine that confidence not through force but through questioning the terms of the conversation or through bringing in alternative perspectives which we cannot outwit – neither our arguments nor our stories can persuade them to see things our way; they will not accept the rules by which we want to play; they seek to change the game (rather than merely the topic), and Rorty cannot accept any of this. He is left, though, without any resources to meet the challenges of exclusions. We must keep the conversation going and must exclude that which threatens it, Rorty insists; but, if that is the case, then a simple distinction between persuasion and force gives him nothing to work with and his exclusions look like a simple case of autocracy. What gives Rorty the right to rule – he does. On whose authority does he wield power – his own. Rorty cannot even effect these exclusions without himself employing force or humiliation.

Perhaps, though, there is something more to Rorty's utopia than his attempt to describe a society in which only those who agree with him are allowed to play. What this requires, then, is some understanding of power in the second dimension.

4.1.3 Power and Institutional arrangements

One way in which liberals, in particular, have acknowledged and attempted to deal with the problem of power is through invoking a set of institutional arrangements which are intended to limit power and disperse it. Included in such a set would be: individual freedoms and rights (not least freedom of speech), separation of powers amongst arms of government together with a system of

checks and balances, constitutionalism, and an insistence on a strong distinction between public and private.

Although such institutional arrangements may be justified in terms of the distinction between authority and power (i.e. there is no strict logical distinction between this strategy and the previous one) it need not rely on such a distinction. We could in other words simply accept that power is a fact of (social) life, that it can neither be eradicated strongly legitimated, but that it can be limited. This, I would argue, is the line of justification employed by Judith Shklar in *Ordinary Vices* (1984). Starting from the same premise as Rorty – namely that cruelty is the worst thing we can do – Shklar argues that we must (as a matter of moral obligation) organize society and its institutions to protect the weak from the strong and, in particular, appeals to the private/public distinction as crucial to achieving this.

Given that Shklar and Rorty start from the same premise, it might seem that Rorty can simply "piggyback" on Shklar's entire line of thought. I will argue, however, that he cannot. Suppose we accept this as Rorty's preferred way of dealing with the question of power in general, it would not help Rorty to deal with the specific moments in which power arises as a problem for his own particular account of the liberal society. Rorty, it will be recalled, needs to account for two things: how we ensure that all-comers are included (really included) in the conversation of society and how we justify the exclusions that we do make; and, how we ensure that in including others in the conversation we avoid humiliating them. I would argue that these different sets of problems do not allow of a single solution. The question of inclusion is most straightforwardly dealt with through an attempt to limit power through institutional arrangements. It is not at all clear, however, that institutions which would make exclusions along Rortian lines are either liberal or desirable. Moreover, the questions of power arising out of Rorty's account of solidarity do not seem completely amenable to institutional solution.

Institutional protections such as legal and constitutional guarantees of free speech may seem sufficient to deal with the matter of the conversation, but they will serve neither to ensure that the currently voiceless speak and are heard, nor to support either of the two kinds of explicit exclusion which Rorty insists upon in his utopia. Such protections are in place in many states and yet many citizens continue to experience exclusion. To give one such example from my own country: the South African constitution recognizes eleven official languages and guarantees their protection. Despite this protection English is used as the *lingua franca* in much of the political, policy-making and economic life of this country; thereby those who are not sufficiently competent in English are excluded from or marginalized within the most crucially influential institutions. At the same time those excluded in cases like this, namely the most socially, politically, and economically vulnerable, are not the same group that Rorty apparently would exclude. Indeed, the voices Rorty would

exclude – such as Nietzsche, Foucault and Heidegger in their political moments – are included and protected by current institutional practice.

It might be argued then, that Rorty, far from offering an apologetics for the *status quo*, as critics have suggested, is indicting it. Rorty might then be seen as arguing along the lines that we need to reform and refine our institutions so that they make the right sorts of inclusions and exclusions. He may be able to do this by invoking the second dimension of power and it should be noted (since Lukes associates two-dimensional power with reformism) that this would certainly sit well with his vigorous defence of a reformist left in *Achieving our country*. Rorty needs, however, to do more than simply state this. He needs to offer concrete proposals about how to make institutions more inclusive. He also needs to offer some defence of his exclusions and to show how in practical terms we can effect them without resorting to simple *diktat*. Only if some such practical steps are put forward can we begin to see how power might be controlled in the conversation.

I propose that rather than trying to work out a programme of reform as suggested above, we look to the work of Iris Marion Young (1990) and in particular her extension of the notion of oppression. I shall argue that Young gives us a great deal of insight into the power relations at work in society and, therefore, gives us a starting point for turning Rorty's ideal of conversation into a practical and desirable aspiration. In particular, Young alerts us to moments of exclusion and therefore to ways in which we must reform in order to ensure that the conversation is in fact open to all. (This matter of power and inclusion will be the subject of the next section – section 4.2 – of this chapter.)

Young's emphasis on difference will also take us some way, it is argued in section 4.3, to dealing with the issues of power arising in connection with Rorty's account of solidarity. In dealing with this set of issues, however, the institutional solution will take us only part of the way and some re-thinking of the concept of solidarity itself will be necessary.

4.2   Power and Inclusion

In section 4.1 it was argued that Rorty needs an account of power for two reasons: to account for obstacles to inclusion in the conversation and to justify exclusions from the conversation; and, to explain how we can possibly increase solidarity without being cruel. It was further argued that the particular sort of account Rorty needs is one which is, in Lukes's terms, two-dimensional; that is, an account of power which takes cognizance of the ways in which institutional arrangements support and entrench the interests of some people and ignore those of others. In this section I will show how Iris Marion Young's (1990) understanding of oppression and domination can help Rorty construct the account of power that he needs, and how this will help him to ameliorate obstacles to

inclusion within his utopia by offering the basis for a programme for reforming current institutions and practices.

Iris Marion Young, while not perhaps an obvious choice in this regard, seems to me to be worth looking at for two reasons. The first is the importance of her ideas in their own right; the second is their overall consonance with Rorty's project. While Young and Rorty exhibit important differences in approach and temperament they share some very important commitments among which I would include in particular their sympathetic reading of poststructuralism, their antiessentialism and their rejection of theorising, as well as their shared commitment to a broadly leftist reform of society.

Despite these moments of similarity, however, the attempt to synthesize Young's perspective into a Rortian account of power is not without problems. The two most important of these are, in my opinion, Young's development of her ideas of domination and oppression as part of a conception of justice (rather than an account of power) and her tendency to think in terms of "the system", and so appearing to be wedded to a three-dimensional account of power at odds with Rorty's own politics. I will briefly touch on these moments of dissonance, before turning to the two particular aspects of Young's work which I want to bring into Rorty – the ideas of oppression and domination – showing what I think we gain by reading Young and Rorty together.

As the title of her book (*Justice and the politics of difference*) implies, Young (1990) sees herself as offering an account of justice rather than of power. She argues that contemporary thinking about justice tends to focus too narrowly on distribution but that this model is ill-suited to non-material goods and that attempts to extend the "distributive paradigm" beyond the material (to things like rights, and self-respect) do not work. She is not alone in finding the distributive account of justice limited. Young (1990: 34-5) notes that thinkers such as Seyla Benhabib, Charles Taylor and Michael Sandel have similar concerns about the distributive paradigm that dominates contemporary political theory. Each of these thinkers suggests that there are other goods which stand outside justice but which need to be taken seriously; that justice is merely one socio-political project among many which we should pursue. Young, on the other hand, argues that we should not limit the concept of justice to one good among many but rather extend it.

Drawing, she claims, on Jürgen Habermas and Agnes Heller, Young (1990: 34) argues for a conception of justice which:

> shifts from a focus on distributive patterns to procedural issues of participation in deliberation
> and decisionmaking. For a norm to be just, everyone who follows it must in principle have an
> effective voice in its consideration and be able to agree to it without coercion. For a social

condition to be just, it must enable all to meet their needs and exercise their freedom; thus justice requires that all be able to express their needs.

What Young (1990: 34) proposes, she admits, is that we extend the notion of justice to include all of politics:

> As I understand it, the concept of justice coincides with the concept of the political. Politics ... includes all aspects of institutional organization, public action, social practices and habits, and cultural meanings insofar as they are potentially subject to collective evaluation and decisionmaking.

I suggest that we do not follow Young down that road. She gives no compelling reason for her extension of the notion of justice and without such a reason there is little purpose in reducing our political vocabulary to a single cardinal value – justice. I would argue that we should aim for a plurality of socio-political goods and so propose that we follow the Taylor-Benhabib-Sandel approach – take a distributive model of justice as basic, but recognise that justice is itself only one good among many. What is relevant for the purposes of this chapter is that Young, irrespective of her account of justice, does tell us a great deal about power.

Even if we simply focus on the account of power which we can distil from Young we run into problems in that, as mentioned above, her understanding of power is apparently close to a three-dimensional view, which Rorty rejects, rather than a two-dimensional one which, I have argued, Rorty needs. This is a serious objection which needs to be met. It has been argued that what Rorty must offer us is an account of the workings of power in his society, particularly, in so far as this section is concerned, of how power operates to exclude voices from the conversation, and the reforms necessary to ensure their inclusion. It has been argued further that Rorty particularly needs to take cognizance of the second dimension of power, namely, the ways in which power is already at work in setting the agenda for the decision-making process and in ensuring that the rules of the game work to secure the vested interests of certain groups or elites by disallowing that other interests are heard at all. If Young is offering only a three-dimensional account of justice then it seems she cannot help Rorty.

Despite her talk of the system, though, I do not think that Young believes that the system determines our interests and deprives us of agency. I think Young would resist such conclusions herself – her very ideas demand that we can meaningfully change the system so that it does recognise and take account of our interests. I think, therefore, we will find in Young an account of power that is very much a two-dimensional one, and therefore precisely what Rorty needs.

The account of power which we can abstract from Young (1990: 37) centres on her ideas of oppression, "the institutional constraint on self-development", and domination, "the institutional constraint on self-determination" (1990: 37). With regard to domination Young (1990: 38) argues that:

> Domination consists in institutional conditions which inhibit or prevent people from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions. Persons live within structures of domination if other persons or groups can determine without reciprocation the conditions of their action, either directly or by virtue of the structural consequences of their actions.

Young (1990:76) is particularly concerned with the new forms of domination that arise within welfare capitalist society in which:

> Increasingly the activities of everyday work and life come under rationalized bureaucratic control, subjecting people to the discipline of authorities and experts in many areas of life.

Key features of welfare capitalist society are bureaucratization and professionalisation. For Young (1990: 77-8) these bring with them benefits:

> There are many advantages to regularized practices of social cooperation guided by formalized rules and procedures, and to the development of professional disciplines. While changing the rules is often more difficult in bureaucratic organizations than changing rulers was in traditional societies, it is still better to subject persons to formalized regulations which at least in principle they can know and anticipate than to subject them to the often arbitrary and selfish whims of individual rulers.

Nevertheless, she argues, the benefits of such a society should not blind us to its costs and, in particular, the ways in which the rules by which we live and work are left in the hands of "experts" whose claim to authority is backed by an ideology of merit (1990: 78-80). As a corrective to these patterns of domination Young (1990: 91) proposes participatory democracy in all facets of life:

> All persons should have the right and opportunity to participate in the deliberation and decisionmaking of the institutions to which their actions contribute or which directly affect their actions. Such democratic structures should regulate decisionmaking not only in government institutions, but in all institutions of collective life, including, for example, production and service enterprises, universities, and voluntary organizations.

Young (1990: 92) points to both the instrumental and intrinsic value of participation:

> Instrumentally, participatory processes are the best way for citizens to ensure that their own needs and interests will be voiced and will not be dominated by other interests. ... [D]emocratic participation has an intrinsic value over and above the protection of interests, in providing important means for the development and exercise of capacities. ... The virtues of citizenship are best cultivated through the exercise of citizenship.

I want to argue that Young's participatory democracy complements Rorty's ideal of a conversational society extremely well. Rorty is not himself concerned with questions of decision-making and deliberation but in so far as his social model is conversational and open to all-comers it would seem that if we want to find a political model that best complements it we could do worse than participatory democracy. Given Rorty's suspicion of claims to any kind of objective expertise in the moral and political spheres, his rejection of theory and foundations, it seems that the best way to proceed is to involve everyone in the deliberations and decisions of society.

The problem, however, is that simply advocating participation does not get us any closer to ensuring that people are included in the process. The idea of domination which we have borrowed from Young shows us one of the ways in which we should reform institutions if we wish to generate a more Rortian society, namely away from hierarchy and towards participation, but it does not answer the question of identifying silenced voices and ensuring their inclusion.

It is in this regard that Young's idea of oppression helps us. On oppression Young (1990: 38) says:

> Oppression consists in systematic institutional processes which prevent some people from learning and using satisfying and expansive skills in socially recognized settings, or institutionalized social processes which inhibit people's ability to play and communicate with others or to express their feelings and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen.

Young (1990: 64) offers a five-fold typology of oppression. These "faces" of oppression are: exploitation (the continual and structural unequal distribution of accumulation and benefits); marginalization (the expulsion from participation in social life); powerlessness (the lack of autonomy in working and consumer-client life and together with this being treated with a lack of dignity and respect); cultural imperialism (the rendering of groups as both different and invisible by the imposition of a dominant culture's values and interpretations on social life); and, violence (the continual threat of violence simply for being a member of a particular group and the tolerance of that threat by society). Young's work in this way reminds us that there is another reason that Rorty should take power more seriously: The moral impetus to be vigilant with regard to cruelty pushes us in the direction of monitoring power closely.

This typology, which we need not adopt as either definitive or exhaustive, does give us direction in searching for ways in which people may be excluded from the conversation, and as such give us some concrete sense of the institutional forms which would be necessary to realize Rorty's vision of a liberal society. The phenomenon of oppression – in all its multifariousness – reminds us that the conversation can break down even where there is no actual use of force, that people can lack the capacity to engage in conversation as a result of a variety of, often disguised, social causes. Young (1990: 61-2) reminds us that even in the case of violence, the oppression goes far beyond actual acts of aggression:

> What makes violence a face of oppression is less the particular acts themselves, though these are often utterly horrible, than the social context surrounding them, which makes them possible and even acceptable. ... The oppression of violence consists not only in direct victimization, but in the daily knowledge shared by all members of oppressed groups that they are *liable* to violation, solely on account of their group identity. Just living under such a threat of attack on oneself or family or friends deprives the oppressed of freedom and dignity, and needlessly expends their energy. ... [Violence] is a social given that everyone knows happens and will happen again. It is always at the horizon of social imagination, even for those who do not perpetrate it.

Being committed to conversation thus would form the basis for a project of actual reform that takes us far beyond the simple commitment to and extension of constitutional freedoms and checks and balances.

Rorty's commitment to a maximally inclusive and maximally free society would seem to commit him to overcoming oppression in all its forms. Programmatically that would commit him to an extensive revision of society – very far from the apologetics of which his critics have accused him. In particular, the economic form of capitalism requires scrutiny as productive of particular forms of economic oppression – exploitation, marginalization, and powerlessness; at the same time, the cultural and social values which tolerate and facilitate cultural imperialism and violence (even as an imaginable social form) need interrogation. The extent of these reforms goes beyond mere redistribution, as Young (1990: 53) reminds us with regard to that most obviously material of the forms of oppression, exploitation:

> The injustice of exploitation consists in social processes that bring about a transfer of energies from one group to another to produce unequal distributions, and in the way in which social institutions enable a few to accumulate while they constrain many more. The injustices of exploitation cannot be eliminated by redistribution of goods, for as long as institutionalized practices and structural relations remain unaltered, the process of transfer will re-create an unequal distribution of benefits. Bringing about justice where there is exploitation requires

reorganization of institutions and practices of decisionmaking, alteration of the division of labor, and similar measures of institutional, structural, and cultural change.

In other cases, mere redistribution may ignore aspects of oppression and even exacerbate them. Marginalization, for example, typifies both of these:

> Material deprivation, which can be addressed by redistributive social policies, is not, however, the [full] extent of the harm caused by marginalization. Two categories of injustice beyond distribution are associated with marginality in advanced capitalist societies. First, the provision of welfare itself produces new injustice by depriving those dependent on it of rights and freedoms that others have. Second, even when material deprivation is somewhat mitigated by the welfare state, marginalization is unjust because it blocks the opportunity to exercise capacities in socially defined and recognized ways (Young 1990: 54).

Only in a society in which oppression is absent can we hope for the sort of freedoms and inclusiveness that Rorty desires. Realizing his utopia, thus, commits us to large-scale change.

Being sensitive to, and working to overcome oppression, would not of itself rid society of power, however, since domination might still be present. On the relation between oppression and domination Young (1990: 38) says:

> I think the concepts of oppression and domination overlap, but there is nevertheless reason to distinguish them. Oppression usually includes or entails domination, that is, constraints upon oppressed people to follow rules set by others. But each face of oppression ... also involves inhibitions not directly produced by relations of domination. ... [M]oreover, not everyone subject to domination is also oppressed. Hierarchical decisionmaking structures subject most people in our society to domination in some important aspect of their lives. Many of those people nevertheless enjoy significant institutionalized support for the development and exercise of their capacities and their ability to express themselves and be heard.

Although there are, as I have stated above, grounds for thinking that Rorty's vision would also commit him to overcoming domination and moving with Young towards participatory democracy, there is no requirement for that. Rorty could allow for hierarchy and domination (in Young's sense) if he could prescribe some grounds for it. That, however, would be difficult for Rorty to do. It would require him to defend those grounds against Young's (1990:192-225) own charge that ideas of merit function ideologically – that they are projections of the biases already present within society, rather than impartial and neutral judgements. Defending any hierarchy against this charge would seem to require an appeal to some sort of objective standards of neutrality and impartiality which are at odds with his own philosophical position. It seems, then, that a Rortian vision of society pushes us to oppose not only oppression, but domination too. We may not know what a society

without these would look like or how it would function in practice, but we do have a direction for reform.

4.3   Power and Solidarity

The institutional solution to the problem of power, namely through vigilant and ongoing reform of society away from domination and oppression, will take us some of the way in dealing with the second moment in which power arises as a problem for Rorty. This is the problem of power at work in the very attempt at solidarity. This problem, it will be recalled, arises both at an inter-individual and a social level. At the inter-individual level there is the need to ensure that power asymmetries do not undermine our attempts to be moral; that in redescribing the other in my interactions with her I do not humiliate her, and for this to be possible we must meet as equals. At the social level, this problem becomes one of ethnocentrism – given the economic, military and other resources of the west and its global dominance, how *can* liberals interact across cultures without imposing their views? These two problematics share much with the "faces" of oppression which Young (1990) labels "powerlessness" and "cultural imperialism" and for this reason Young's ideas provide a concrete starting point from which to address the issues involved in our attempts to converse as equals.

Young (1990: 57) writes of powerlessness that it:

> is perhaps best described negatively: the powerless lack the authority, status, and sense of self that professionals tend to have. The status privilege of professionals has three aspects, the lack of which produces oppression for nonprofessionals. ... Professionals experience progress first in acquiring expertise, and then in the course of professional advancement and rise in status. The life of the nonprofessional by comparison is powerless in the sense that it lacks this orientation toward the progressive development of capacities and avenues for recognition. ... [Professionals] have considerable day-to-day work autonomy [and] usually have some authority over others, moreover – either over workers they supervise, or over auxiliaries, or over clients. Nonprofessionals, on the other hand, lack autonomy, and in both their working and their consumer-client lives often stand under the authority of professionals. ... [T]he privileges of the professional extend beyond the workplace to a whole way of life. I call this way of life "respectability." To treat people with respect is to be prepared to listen to what they have to say or to do what they request because they have some authority, expertise, or influence. The norms of respectability in our society are associated specifically with professional culture.

What is of particular interest here is the notion of respectability. We should, I believe, note two aspects of what Young has to say about respect. First, respect for Young involves listening to the other; listening, like talking, is a crucial part of conversation; but it is an aspect to which Rorty pays

little attention. Second, listening is based in the assumption that the other has some level of "authority, expertise, or influence"; if these features are not present we (in contemporary capitalist democracies) tend to ignore or overlook the other.

These general potentialities for failure to converse – both talk and listen to – are exacerbated by ethnocentrism. Young (1990: 59-60) prefers the term cultural imperialism and says of it:

> Cultural imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm. ... Cultural imperialism involves the paradox of experiencing oneself as invisible at the same time that one is marked out as different. The invisibility comes about when dominant groups fail to recognize the perspective embodied in their cultural expressions as a perspective. These dominant cultural expressions often simply have little place for the experience of other groups, at most only mentioning or referring to them in stereotyped or marginalized ways. This, then, is the injustice of cultural imperialism: that the oppressed group's own experience and interpretation of social life finds little expression that touches the dominant culture, while that same culture imposes on the oppressed group its experience and interpretations of social life.

If we already have a tendency to listen only to those who we recognise as having "authority, expertise, or influence" this can only be made worse by failing to see the experiences and perspectives of some groups as having conversational validity, by marking them out as different and consequently simultaneously rendering them invisible.

Once again, Young offers some concrete detail about how it is that in trying to increase solidarity we run the risk of being cruel and humiliating the other, by detailing how it is that we might fail to meet as equals, or fail to agree that we meet as equals. She also gives us some practical direction in thinking about what it is we need to negotiate with each other to ensure that our engagements are equitable. She facilitates our unpacking of aspects of the power asymmetries that may be involved in social engagements with potential for humiliation – namely authority, expertise, and influence (summarized as respectability) and invisibility and difference (summarized as cultural imperialism). Drawing on Young we might, for analytic purposes, distinguish between a number of contexts in which we might encounter the potential for humiliation. The analytically distinct cases which require discussion are:

1. The case in which respectability but not cultural imperialism is an issue.
2. The case in which cultural imperialism but not respectability is an issue.
3. The case in which both respectability and cultural imperialism are an issue.
4. The case (particularly in the intimate sphere) in which neither respectability nor cultural imperialism is an issue, but the other's otherness is.

In order to give these cases some meat I will imagine a philosophy common room in which we find an example of each. The philosophy common room is a suitable setting because it is simultaneously a space public enough that it might be subject to social regulation and a space intimate enough that, given both the nature of university politics, and the possible subjects of discussion, it is probable that people's final vocabularies may in fact be at stake. In order to provide a baseline homogeneous community, this imaginary common room is in the first instance peopled with straight, white, male academics all trained in the analytic tradition. The two most important members of this community for our purposes are Professor Adams (an epistemologist and – though perhaps he does not know it - a Rortian liberal) and Professor Charles (a philosopher of science).

In addition to being colleagues, Professors Adams and Charles have been close friends since their graduate days. They respect each other and are so similar in background, status, and philosophical approach, that cultural differences can never be an issue. Recently though, Professor Charles, an up until then apparently confirmed bachelor, has married and seems to have changed in a myriad of ways, large and small. Professor Adams is left wondering if he ever really knew Charles, who has become an instantiation of case 4 for him.

Professor Price is the only long-term member of the common room community who does not fit the mould. Although a world-class logician whose expertise, authority and influence are beyond dispute, Professor Price is also a woman. Her respectability rests on the fact that she speaks to this community only as a logician and effaces (and renders invisible) her gender. The norms and descriptions she invokes in her conversation with the others are those of the dominant group and any experiences and perspectives that she might have *qua* woman are considered (by both the group and herself) to be irrelevant. Occasionally her difference is marked out, though, for example when in the face of calls to transform the faculty she is evoked as an example of the programme's underlying equity and the non-necessity for any forms of affirmative action. Professor Price is an example of case 2.

There are two newcomers to this common room community: both graduate students; both working on technical problems in epistemology; and both being supervised by Professor Adams. The first addition is Gerald, a straight, white male; the second is Phume, who is a black woman. Both of their interactions with the faculty are shot through with issues of respectability since they have no recognised expertise, authority and influence. Their experiences differ, however, in that Gerald, being of the same group as the faculty, experiences no problem of cultural imperialism and thus exemplifies case 1; while Phume does experience cultural imperialism and is thus an instance of case 3.

In thinking of these different contexts we should not lose sight of the fact that each of these cases has a dual aspect. On the one hand, there is the (moral) question of what liberals (in Rorty's sense) should do to avoid humiliating others – the question of how Professor Adams should act towards the other members of the common room society; on the other hand, there is the (political) question of what a liberal society should do with regard to the danger of humiliation – whether there is possibility, scope, and justification for legislation and surveillance, for vigilance in seeking out ways to reform society.

It is in those cases which involve cultural imperialism that the social vigilance and institutional solution seems most appropriate. In considering case 2 (the case of Adams's relationship with Price) the particular asymmetries associated with cultural imperialism – namely, the simultaneous obscuring and differentiating of Professor Price's experiences *qua* woman – are the effects of a social domination for which neither Price nor Adams bears personal responsibility and of which both may be largely unaware. Adams may become more sensitive to Professor Price qua woman by listening to her (or, if she has bought into the norms of the dominant culture, by reading more broadly) but ultimately cultural imperialism is eradicable only through concerted social intervention, such as affirmative action – an intervention which a liberal society owes to members of minority groups.

Cases of the first sort (Adams's relationship with graduate student Gerald) – cases in which it is respect which is at stake – are in many ways more amenable to individual rather than institutional or social solution. Asymmetries of expertise, authority and influence are an ineradicable part of our social landscape but Adams can find ways to ameliorate their effects, ways to negotiate these unequal relationships – using humour, perhaps, to puncture his own self-importance, or by ceding areas of expertise and authority to Gerald, or simply perhaps by listening rather than talking. If Adams, or some non-liberal colleague, chooses not to employ such means, however, we have little recourse beyond social approbation. We cannot legislate and institutionally enforce norms of appropriate behaviour – we cannot force individuals to be more caring and sensitive, only encourage and enable them to be so. This fact need not perturb us too greatly, however, since the maintenance of distance, the refusal to negotiate equality with others, can itself serve to protect both parties from humiliation, by ensuring that in our unequal relationships our final vocabularies never come under discussion.

Cases of the third sort (Adams'ss relationship with graduate student Phume) – those which involve both respectability and cultural imperialism – are rather trickier. Attempts to individually negotiate equality may themselves be seen as attempts to enforce and inculcate cultural norms, on the one hand, while, on the other hand, attempts to socially transform through, for example, affirmative

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action, may be obstructed by the refusal of those with authority and expertise to grant the other respect. Since the two forms of power asymmetry are only analytically and not empirically distinct, the continual redirection of attention from one form to the other can serve to paralyse any systematic attempts to enforce equality and participation, and itself become a form of manipulation. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in such cases the potential for humiliation is most apparent.

The potential for humiliation is greatest, though, in instances of the fourth case (Adams's relationship with his close friend Professor Charles) The intimate sphere gives rise to a particular problematic since, given that it is people's final vocabularies that are at stake, the closer the relationship the greater the danger of humiliation. This fact is yet another reason for thinking that Rorty's attempt to solve this problem through the division between public and private and the insistence on the privatization of irony is doomed to fail, because the potential for humiliation is not, I would argue, a superficial and corrigible aspect of our social relations but an ineradicable facet of our attempts to create ourselves in negotiation with others. Perhaps the most we can hope for is that in regulating the public sphere successfully we may help to produce the sort of citizen who would be more aware of the potential for humiliation and regulate their own intimate behaviour accordingly.

For these sorts of reasons I think we must agree with Bernstein (2002: 17) when he warns that we should not read Rorty's "don't be cruel" as an abstraction:

> Rorty realizes that ... [w]hat we take to be cruelty and humiliation will itself be dependent on our historically contingent vocabularies. Even more important, we are frequently unaware of the manifold ways in which we are cruel. The thrust of Rorty's thinking is to direct us away from abstractions, principles, theory, and general pronouncements toward concrete specific descriptions. We need to attend to the details of the springs of cruelty in ourselves and others.

In other words there is no specific way to organise power in such a way that we avoid all forms of cruelty. There is no one answer to the problem of cruelty for there are manifold ways in which it can find expression and the best we can do is to exercise vigilance over our institutions and ourselves. As such Rorty's imperative against cruelty becomes something far more radical than his critics admit. As Gander (2002: 93) writes:

> The avoidance of physical cruelty can be just a matter of tolerance. It does not *require* that we liberals rework our own final vocabulary. And such avoidance of physical cruelty is the only goal of a liberal society. But the avoidance of humiliation may indeed require that we reform our own final vocabulary, our own beliefs and desires, so that those beliefs and desires do not put us at odds with another's final vocabulary.

If all a liberal society can do is pursue the aim of avoiding physical cruelty through tolerance, then the conversational society is not a liberal one, for it does require us to rethink ourselves, remake ourselves, or at least always be open to the possibility of doing so.

4.4 Power and politics

Thus far in this chapter I have argued that Rorty owes us an account of power and that Young's account of oppression and domination can provide us with such an account. I have argued that while cruelty is not entirely eradicable, vigilance to the manifold ways in which power can operate to inhibit the conversation, to impose constraints on participants and topics, should lead in us in the direction of a participatory model of democracy pursued through a vigorous reform of institutions. In this section I want to argue that this way of reading Rorty's political ideal can be used to defend a brand of pragmatist liberalism against one of two broad categories of criticisms levelled against Rorty. These two central lines of critique which my version of Rorty's pragmatic liberalism seeks to overcome are well described by Lukacher (1986: 1288), who though focusing on the response to Rorty's philosophy in general, rather than the political and social aspects of his thought, offers the following:

> From the right, Rorty's efforts will appear nihilistic, while form the left, they will seem in complicity with the decadent liberalism of late capitalism. In other words, traditionalists will resent Rorty's effort to reinvent the vocabulary of philosophy because it will seem to them an abrogation of the central questions in the history of philosophy. On the other hand, socialists will object that Rorty's mode of reinvention is too random, too unsystematic to effectively intervene in the meaningful transformation of society.

In the next chapter I will argue for putting reality and science back into the picture and remaking the space for philosophy (even as epistemology), which I think goes some way towards allaying the worries that Lukacher attributes to the right. My hope, here, is to convince Lukacher's "left" that conversation, while random and unsystematic in many ways, can yet be effective in reorganising society in the direction of greater justice (it is perhaps worth noting in passing that Rorty (1986a: 142) views Davidson and Dewey as coming under similar attacks from the right and left).

In offering this defence I do not want to be understood as trying to show that pragmatism and liberalism/democracy/liberal democracy are somehow "made for each other" – that one is the philosophy and the other the practice. I think this is the mistake that Gouinlock (2002: 188) makes when defending Dewey's pragmatism as a drawing together of science and democracy into a kind of "union of certain moral and intellectual virtues". On this matter I would rather side with Fish (1998: 426), who denies that there are important links between pragmatism and democracy:

> Nor will your pragmatism ... especially fit you for participation in democracy, if only because democracy is not grounded in philosophy ... but in a set of political arrangements ... designed to keep at bay the conflicts that tore English society apart in the seventeenth century. They do that job not by making people less aggressive in holding their beliefs, but by making it more difficult (although not impossible) to use those beliefs as occasion for, and justification of, oppression. Provisionality, openness, and toleration are not what the mechanisms of democracy generate, but what they *enforce* against the inclinations of citizens who remain as dogmatic, closed minded, and bigoted as they were before democracy emerged. These virtues ... are the properties of the system, not of those who live under it.

Rorty (1999b: 23), too, resists the idea that we can get directly from pragmatism to democracy, acknowledging that "there is no reason why a fascist could not be a pragmatist", and suggesting that we give up the hope of "a philosophical view . . . which will lend itself only to good causes".

I do want to argue, though, that a form of pragmatic liberalism – a position which contingently takes up both pragmatism and liberalism as worthwhile – is attractive and worth defending. The attraction of this position lies, I would argue, in its non-prescriptive and open-ended approach to political life. It is an approach which encourages its citizens on the one hand, to explore and develop their own selves by:

> Enhance[ing] the possibilities for individuals to develop their own vocabularies of self-description and self-transformation. (Dews 2002a: 325)

While on the other hand also encouraging in those same citizens:

> the imagination to propose new sorts of social arrangements . . . and the ability and willingness to enter the actual electoral political arena. (Vann 1992: 1174)

The pragmatist liberal society based in conversation, then, is in my view much as Malachowski (2002b: 113) describes, namely a:

> process of creative "negotiation" in which ... the participants come to the table with a strong position *and* the willingness to compromise (without a strong position there is no solid basis for negotiation and without the willingness to compromise, there is no room for progress).

The non-prescriptive and open-ended aspect of this social model which I view as its attraction might also be taken to be its weak point. I think, however, that Menand (1998: 369) is correct when responding to this criticism:

It is sometimes complained that pragmatism is a bootstrap theory – that it cannot tell us where we should go or how we can get there. The answer to this is that theory can never tell us where to go; only we can tell us where to go. Theories are just one of the ways we make sense of our choices.

A potentially more damaging line of criticism is that even when we have decided where to go, pragmatism cannot help us to get there. I think this sort of thinking underlines the various expressions of anxiety that Rorty's work cannot account for justice. Apart from power, justice is perhaps the most crucial aspect of political thought which gets overlooked in Rorty's thinking.

Geras (1995: 107) locates the origins of this oversight in Rorty's metaphilosophical position:

> If there is no truth, there is no injustice. Stated less simplistically, if truth is wholly relativized or internalized to particular discourses or language games or social practices, there is no injustice. The victims and protestors of any *putative* injustice are deprived of their last and often best weapon, that of telling what really happened. They can only tell their story, which is something else. Morally and politically, therefore, anything goes.

Geras's (1995: 132-3) argument is, I take it, that we must have some way of getting beyond the stories to find out what really happened in order for there to be any justice (under whatever interpretation of justice) otherwise we are left with no way to account for, for example, miscarriages of justice. Unfortunately for Geras the facts, the truth, the empirical evidence seems to go against him in that they suggest, as Baumeister (1997: 46-7) documents, that victims and perpetrators of cruelty both distort their accounts equally and so we cannot rely on the victim to tell us what really happened. If Geras were correct in thinking that victims could tell us what happened we would have no need of judicial machinery. The fact that we have highly complex judicial institutions suggests that we do indeed recognize that there is nothing more than the telling of stories together with the adjudication between those stories by highly trained professionals. The judicial machinery itself though is no fail proof guarantee that the truth of the matter will be discovered, for courts and lawyers and judges are flawed and fallible human inventions which we use only because they seem to work better than any alternative. And what is true of the judicial institutions is true of our political institutions generally. In defending Rorty against charges of complacency, Dooley (2001: 48) argues that he is not defending the status quo:

> If anything, he is suggesting that the ideals of democracy are the best we have come up with so far, in that they, for all their flaws, still guarantee the prospect of a life free from suffering and injustice to a greater extent than any competing social experiments. Still, the extension of such ideals demands imagination and plenty of risks. ... For Rorty ... there is no predetermined telos

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> ... only the prospect of making our social experiments more just and more honest. ... [M]oral and political progress is not achieved by an appeal to anachronistic criteria, but is a constant process of trial and error, of muddling through and hoping for the best.

This is why Sarup (1996: 63), who also sees justice as Rorty's Achilles' heel, is both right and wrong in saying:

> Even if we agree with Rorty that providing we take care of freedom then truth and goodness will take care of themselves, the idea that social justice will equally take care of itself is less easy to argue.

He is right in suggesting that social justice is unlikely to take care of itself; he is wrong in supposing that Rorty is committed to its doing so, rather than thinking that social justice is something that we should take care of by a process of negotiation and re-negotiation and a programme of action. As Putnam (2000: 396) points out:

> the conclusion of Rorty's argument [is] that we must turn from philosophizing to political activism.

Among those who think that the emphasis on conversation is a problem for justice are Holówka (1990: 189) who points to Rorty's claim in *Philosophy and the mirror of nature* that the dangers to abnormal discourse come not from science and naturalism but from scarcity of food and secret police. Holówka (1980: 389) responds by saying:

> scarcity of food and the secret police are as inimical to normal discourse as they are to abnormal ones; and as for which kind of discourse may prove more helpful in getting rid of these nuisances, my guess is that normal discourse has better chances.

Holówka's point seems to be the same as that expressed by Volpi (2002) who raises the objection that it is unlikely that an ironic and sophisticated rhetoric will inspire ordinary citizens to action, leaving Rorty's liberal utopia without any practical means to achieve its ends. Rorty's insistence on the privacy of irony seems to indicate that he would agree with this line of thought. Rather than outlawing the political use of abnormal discourse and irony, though, I think we do better to remember that abnormal and normal discourse are both part of the conversation and that the conversation remains our only hope, not of solving the problem of scarcity and totalitarianism but of persuading people to engage in the process of social transformation, that is to do something practical to solve those problems. If abnormal and ironic discourses do not work to aid us in this project then those of us who wish to work for social justice will abandon them for pragmatic reasons, though we cannot prevent others from continuing to use them.

Related to this concern about the efficacy of abnormal and ironic discourse is Cleveland's (2002: 174) anxiety regarding the similarities between the totalitarian world of *1984* and Rorty's views:

> In *1984*, the totalitarian society of Big Brother embraces the ironist stance. The power of language and redescription is key to the realization and continuation of the new order. ... The liberal ironist and Big Brother are ironically playing the same game; the liberal ironist hopes that with enough weapons and luck his rhetoric will seize the day ...

The liberal ironist and Big Brother may be playing the same game, for Rorty perhaps the only game available to us, but they employ very different strategies. Big Brother cynically manipulates description to maintain and exploit a position of extreme power; the liberal ironist sincerely attempts to persuade others to join in the task of creating a freer and more just society. Of course, the line between the two may oftentimes be fuzzy, and we know all too well how easily people (ourselves among them) fall for political propaganda, PR, and advertising. Nevertheless the best we can do is to trust that we and our fellow citizens will be able to detect and withstand such manipulation, since to try to outlaw it will simply drive those who employ the strategy to ever subtler moves.

In this regard, I think Damico (1986: 101) is wrong in drawing the line between Rorty and Dewey as follows:

> Rorty's vision of philosophy as simply seeking to keep the conversation going fits badly with Dewey's insistence that the essential need is to improve the nature and conditions of the conversation.

I think Rorty, too, is committed to improving the conversation, but recognizes that it can only be improved, made freer and fairer, if it is ongoing. Any attempt to stop the conversation – including Rorty's own attempts to exclude public irony, but also the attempt to rule out abnormal discourses or manipulative forms, as his critics suggest – is far more dangerous than allowing everyone to speak in whatever form they choose.

Ball (2002: 317) suggests that under Rorty's own description the citizen is lost:

> One figure ... is notable by its absence from Rorty's cast of characters-types. The missing figure is that of the citizen. The citizen would presumably recognize that cruelty is not only individual but institutional or structural, and that such cruelty can be alleviated only by collective action.

If he is correct, which I am not convinced that he is, then this more conversational reading, places the citizen at the centre of the picture, by incorporating an extensive concern with power. For a large part of conversation is the drawing together of disparate individuals and groups into a community. A community exhibits both of the interlocking aspects identified by Eldridge (2002: 6):

> Deliberations about how to live and about how to know how to live aim at establishing the desirability and the means of achieving two kinds of community: (1) community in practices and pursuits, and (2) community of belief about practices and pursuits. Profitable deliberations about how to live must issue first of all in common practices of distributing goods and funding the arts, common restrictions on the varieties of the pursuit of material wellbeing, and so forth. Or, more modestly, profitable deliberations must issue in common tolerance of some varieties of such practices and pursuits. ... Secondly, profitable deliberations about how to live must issue in common beliefs about which practices and pursuits are worthwhile, or, more modestly, tolerable. The authentic obtaining of each kind of community requires the obtaining of the other kind. Without community in practices or in toleration of practices, community of belief about practices is hollow. Without community of belief about practices, community in practices is accidental and liable to disappear.

Seen in this way – as an on-going attempt to construct, and continually re-construct, while also maintaining, community – we will likely view tolerance as Warren (2002: 333) advocates: as "a political achievement" won by a community out of "the experiences of political contests". Not, as "a minimal, prepolitical condition of political community", which is how Warren thinks Rorty himself conceives of it.

Thus even if Damico (1986: 100) is correct in saying that Rorty's pragmatism:

> cannot provide an orientation to practice when society says different things or when social practices are discordant

the commitment to conversation nevertheless motivates us to seek ways to overcome discord where it inhibits action. As Damico (1986: 100) goes on to complain, this may well have the effect of:

> devalu[ing] principled political action in favor of incremental adjustments in current arrangements.

However, this may simply be the price we pay for seeking to increase participation, to make our community more inclusive. This certainly seems to have been the case in South Africa, for

instance, where the first ANC government which committed itself to a greatly consultative form of democracy was constantly criticised for not moving quickly, and far, enough.

In this chapter I argued that the conversational model requires supplementing with an account of power if it is to be seen as a workable alternative rather than merely an apologetics for current political practice. In particular, I argued, it is an account of power in its second Lukesian dimension that is required – an account, that is to say, of how the conversational agenda is set. While Rorty does not offer us such an account, Iris Marion Young does. Incorporating her theories of oppression and domination aids us, I argued, in thinking about how to make the conversation truly inclusive and less cruel. What results is the sort of conversational model I advocate as expressing the best in Rorty's political thought. It is non-prescriptive and open-ended, highly participatory and vigilant in its monitoring of the workings of power. Far from being indifferent to (or worse, an obstacle to) social justice, it is thoroughly committed to extending justice both through persuasion and political transformation (however slowly).

What the conversational model will not do, and many of its leftist critics apparently want it to do, is to secure for intellectuals a position of privilege and power from which they can diagnose social ills and direct the transformation. Sometimes this desire is quite overt as with Wallach's (1987: 604) claim that:

> Rorty ... denies that collectivities are ... open to knowledgeable critique.

Or Languilli's (2002: 30) exhortations to turn philosophy into the conversation and the conversation into philosophy:

> Let philosophy be! Let it be with all its "poverty," its scars and its welts. Its kitchen is warm enough for anyone and everyone who cares about the essential things. The conversation there is not only interesting, it is serious. In order for the conversation to continue and to be worthwhile, it must be or become philosophical. Philosophy *is* the Conversation of Mankind.

To the extent that Leftist critics are expressing overtly or covertly this desire for intellectual pre-eminence, their concerns align them with Lukacher's "right" who fear that Rorty leaves philosophy behind and runs into nihilism. This set of concerns will be the subject of the next and final chapter.

Chapter five: Pragmatism and Philosophy

Thus far in this thesis I have interpreted and defended Rorty's political thinking without questioning the underlying metaphilosophical commitments and assumptions of his broader pragmatism.   In this chapter I look at this pragmatism more closely and critically by investigating what space the conversational model opens and/or closes for philosophers (and intellectuals in general).   In section 5.1 I sketch an outline of what Rorty's pragmatism consists in qua philosophy, as well as describing what Rorty takes to be the task and role of the pragmatist philosopher. I argue that Rorty is too quick to dismiss both the enterprise of epistemology and the crucial concept of truth, and furthermore, that if the pragmatist philosopher is to do his task some more positive account of a new shape for epistemology and truth must be found., I then suggest that a naturalist epistemology grounded in reliabilism will perform this function. Having begun a rehabilitation of epistemology in section 5.1, in section 5.2 I turn to look at the broader role that philosophy, and theory in general, may play in a liberal society. I argue that Rorty employs a number of strategies to undermine the social utility of theory and with it any useful socio-political role for intellectuals, simultaneously though, Rorty engages in the sort of intellectual practice and takes on the verysort of social role to which he seems to deny space. Using Rorty's own example, then, I seek to rehabilitate the intellectual tasks of critique, justification and explanation, and the utility of theory and argument from Rorty's highly problematic reduction of all intellectual activity to redescription and narrative.

5.1   Pragmatism and philosophy

Since breaking with the analytic tradition during the 1970s, Rorty has styled himself as a pragmatist. It is worth remembering, in this regard, as Malachowski (2002a: ix) reminds us:

> Until Rorty almost single-handedly gave it a place of relevance within the historical progress of modern philosophy, pragmatism seemed consigned to the museum of parochial ideas that were never fated to work out.

He nowhere offers us a clear definition of his pragmatism though, proceeding instead by focusing attention on what he is against, on the one hand, (Platonism, essentialism, the representational view of knowledge, and so on) and, on the other hand, by associating himself with an array of thinkers – Quine, Sellars, Davidson, Wittgenstein and Dewey being the most prominent – in whom he discerns similar antipathies. And indeed, Rorty (1985b: 79) does describe his way of doing the history of philosophy as the creation of a mythology of heroes and villains.   The frustration that this approach can engender in the not so sympathetic reader is well expressed by Palmer (1983: 448) in a review of *Philosophy and the mirror of nature* (1980a):

While there is a constant stream of references to Ryleans, Davidsonians, Whiteheadians and so on, the reader is not encouraged to stop and ask who these people are. In a seminar or symposium it would be appropriate to ask "Did Ryle or Davidson or Whitehead actually say that?" In conversation, of course, such a question would be out of place. So it is with Rorty's characterizations. It is an approach which this reviewer found more irritating that edifying.

Despite this way of proceeding, and despite the fact that "pragmatism" is, as Rorty (1980b: 160) himself claims, "a vague, ambiguous, and overworked word", what emerges in Rorty's writings from 1972 to the present is a consistent espousal of a philosophical view centred on anti-representationalism, anti-foundationalism, anti-realism, anti-correspondence, naturalism, historicism and holism. As might be expected of a philosophy that defines itself largely in terms of what it is against there are a great many "antis" in that list. It must be admitted that Goldman's (1981: 425) early complaint about Rorty's treatment of foundationalism in *Philosophy and the mirror of nature* applies equally well to Rorty's other targets (essentialism, representationalism, realism and correspondence):

> Rorty sometimes interprets the foundationalist doctrine narrowly and traditionally, sometimes broadly and loosely. One frustrating aspect of the book is the shifting nature of his quarry.

Rorty's pragmatism is, in effect, a rejection of a particular – Rorty would insist dominant – way of thinking about the task of philosophy and the role of the philosopher. According to this view, as Rorty reads it, the philosopher lays claim to particular insight into the way the mind works to create knowledge. Based on this insight the philosopher clarifies what can and cannot count as knowledge by offering a theory of knowledge, or epistemology, and then on the basis of this assumes the authority to adjudicate all knowledge claims, both in ordinary life and in the specialist academic disciplines. Rorty (1980a: 5) summarizes the view of philosophy and the philosopher which he rejects, thus:

> Philosophers usually think of their discipline as one which discusses perennial, eternal problems – problems which arise as soon as one reflects. Some of these concern the difference between human beings and other beings, and are crystallized in questions concerning the relation between the mind and the body. Other problems concern the legitimation of claims to know, and are crystallized in questions concerning the "foundations" of knowledge. To discover these foundations is to discover something about the mind, and conversely. Philosophy as a discipline thus sees itself as the attempt to underwrite or debunk claims to knowledge made by science, morality, art, or religion. It purports to do this on the basis of its special understanding of the nature of knowledge and of mind. Philosophy can be foundational in respect to the rest of culture because culture is the assemblage of claims to knowledge, and philosophy adjudicates such claims. It can do so because it understands the foundations of knowledge, and it finds

these foundations in a study of man-as-knower, of the "mental processes" or the "activity of representation" which make knowledge possible. To know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind; so to understand the possibility and nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations. Philosophy's central concern is to be a general theory of representation, a theory which will divide culture up into the areas which represent reality well, those which represent it less well, and those which do not represent it at all (despite their pretence of doing so).

Contra this picture, Rorty suggests, there is nothing to be said about knowledge in general and thus the project of epistemology is specious. If we were to accept the view that the philosopher is merely an epistemologist then we would be have to conclude that there could be no distinctive role for the philosopher to play. Two questions thus arise – is Rorty correct in asserting that there is no epistemology to be had? And if so, is there anything left for philosophers to do? In this section I will offer a response to these questions. Section 5.1.1 comprises a brief account of Rorty's pragmatism viewed as a sort of anti-epistemology while section 5.1.2 discusses what Rorty sees to be the role of the philosopher. I will conclude this section by arguing that Rorty ultimately cannot evade epistemology and owes his readers some account of truth, and I offer a brief description of what such an account might look like.

5.1.1 Rorty's anti-epistemology

According to the account of knowledge which Rorty rejects, to know something is a matter of holding true, justified beliefs (I will henceforth call this the TJB account). Rorty's project is, in effect, to undermine these traditional elements of an account of knowledge, and thereby, he thinks, put the very practice of epistemology into doubt. In order to undermine these traditional elements, Rorty redescribes what it is to have a belief, rejects any substantive account of truth, and renders all justification a purely social practice in which the philosopher has no privileged insight or role.

The first source of the pressure which Rorty puts on the TJB account is his anti-representational view of beliefs. Rorty's anti-representationalism is expounded most famously, and at greatest length, in *Philosophy and the mirror of nature* (1980a). In this work Rorty argues that philosophers have been held in thrall to "ocular metaphors" which have led them, wrongly, to conceive of beliefs as representations of reality. This ultimately gives rise to a particular conception of philosophy as being:

> the attempt to underwrite or debunk claims to knowledge made by science, morality, art or religion. It purports to do this on the basis of its special understanding of the nature of knowledge and mind (1980a: 3).

Rorty conceives of his anti-representationalism as a therapeutic device, designed to free us of this idea of philosophy-as-epistemology by dissolving the hold of the underlying ocular metaphors. Rather than viewing beliefs as representations – whether in the form of mental pictures or sentences in a language – we should think of them, according to Rorty, as "habits of action for coping with reality" (1991c: 1). Following from this Rorty wants us to think of beliefs as not so much something we *hold* but something we *are*.

Rorty's commitment to holism puts further pressure onto the notion of belief. The standard accounts require us to treat beliefs as things that can be separated out not only from ourselves but from each other so that we can meaningfully conceive of a single belief. From a Rortian perspective we cannot make sense of holding *a* belief, because any belief is already enmeshed in a web of other beliefs, and any articulation of a belief is already framed by a language game, or paradigm, or vocabulary. To be in a position to make any meaningful claim of the sort generally accepted to be a belief is already to have been the product of a certain natural evolution and cultural history. In order to really evaluate any belief in the way that epistemologists would like us to be able to in order to pick out the true and justified ones from the rest, would require us not to look at simple and particular claims as they suppose, but to unpack everything that has gone into putting us into the position to utter a sentence. Rorty's invocation of historicism and naturalism are not, then, so much tales about how we came to hold the beliefs that we did but reminders of the impossibility of there being a single, comprehensive and comprehensible tale to be told about any particular belief espoused by any particular person, much less about belief in general.

This way of thinking about beliefs certainly has enormous consequences for the TJB account, since, in particular, it is not clear what "true" can mean in relation to a "habit of action" much less a habit already in part naturally and culturally structured in complex ways. Indeed, Rorty's treatment of the issue of truth is undoubtedly one of the most controversial aspects of his thought, and the one that has brought him the most criticism. It is not simply the rethinking of belief that puts pressure on any attempts to understand and speak about truth, though; there are additional pressures which must be considered.

The primary effect of the move away from a representational understanding of beliefs is that whatever notion of truth that remains will not fit a correspondence account. The correspondence account of truth is, of course, one that is deeply entrenched in both our common sense and traditional philosophical understandings. The notion that beliefs, whether understood as ideas or language, are in some sense pictures of reality, allows us to think that those beliefs are true in so far as they accurately depict or correspond to actual states of affairs. But if beliefs are not representations then the idea of correspondence no longer makes sense. This is what I meant when I said above that it is not clear what "true" can mean in relation to a "habit of action".

While justification and truth are generally understood to be separate requirements that beliefs must meet in order to count as knowledge, the idea of truth is often taken to be integral to the justification of at least some beliefs. In justifying a belief, on these accounts, we appeal to other beliefs and other beliefs and other beliefs until we reach our basic beliefs which are indubitable or incorrigible. These basic beliefs form the foundation of our knowledge and secure our other beliefs – they are the bedrock on which our knowledge stands and here at last we have some certainty about the way the world is. Rorty's holism is, of course, a rejection of this sort of foundationalism. Rorty denies that there are any such basic beliefs to be had. There is nothing we can ever appeal to that is indubitable; there are no beliefs which incorrigibly tell us about the way the world is. Rorty is, in this sense, an anti-realist. Rorty does not deny that there is a world independent of us, nor that it causes (at least some of) our beliefs. He does deny, though, that we can know the world independently of those beliefs, that we can get outside of our beliefs sufficiently to be able to assess the validity of those beliefs.

In an interview with Ragg (2002: 369), Rorty summarizes his rejection of the project of epistemology as follows:

> Epistemology only looks attractive if you think that there is a topic called knowledge whose nature can be studied. The idea is that once you have learned its nature, you might get more of it than you had before. Only someone who thinks that knowledge has foundations located in sense perception, or pure reason, or divine revelation, or something, would take the idea of studying knowledge, its nature and limits, seriously. I think of holism as just the view that people change their beliefs in such a way as to achieve coherence with their other beliefs, to bring their beliefs and desires into some sort of equilibrium and that that is about all there is to be said about the quest for knowledge. There are no rules for which beliefs you sacrifice in order to accommodate other beliefs, or which desires you change to accommodate changed beliefs. Because there aren't any rules, there aren't any methods you can study in order to improve the way you achieve equilibrium. The whole idea of studying how belief is changed is pretty hopeless. It's just too holistic a process to be an appropriate topic of study.

Rorty's pragmatism, as I have outlined it, is premised on four claims:

1. The only possible epistemology is one which rests on the TJB account of knowledge, and which moreover is committed to a representational account of beliefs, a correspondence account of truth, and a foundationalist account of justification;
2. beliefs are not representational;
3. truth is not a matter of correspondence;
4. justification is not a foundationalist practice.

None of these claims is uncontroversial but Rorty does not defend them by offering arguments; instead he simply provides descriptions of how things look if we embrace claims 2, 3 and 4. This way of proceeding is enormously problematic in that the persuasiveness of the descriptions depends too much on the extent to which the reader already shares Rorty's anti-realist, anti-foundationalist, anti-correspondence intuitions. It involves a second level of problem in that even if we are persuaded to accept (at least provisionally) these claims (2-4), it is not at all evident that claim 1 is plausible. There are those who consider themselves epistemologists, and who, furthermore, remain committed to the true, justified belief account of knowledge, who are in favour of coherentist accounts of truth and/or justification; moreover, there are a growing number of epistemologists who reject the TJB account in favour of some variant of reliabilism.

We have some preliminary reason, then, for doubting Rorty's strong claim that the task of the philosopher cannot be an epistemological one because there can be no epistemology. The claim that we *can* do epistemology is logically distinct from the claim that we *should* do epistemology (though of course the claim that the philosopher should not try to do epistemology follows directly from the claim that he cannot do it). It may, therefore, be the case that even if we do not accept Rorty's anti-epistemology, his ideas about the role of the philosopher who does not wish to be an epistemologist are, nevertheless, worth pursuing. Before investigating the claims involved in Rorty's anti-epistemology in more detail and more critically, therefore, I want to say something about the post-epistemological role of the philosopher that Rorty outlines and even exemplifies.

5.1.2 The pragmatist philosopher

In debunking the epistemological role for the philosopher Rorty is particularly concerned with downgrading the (self)perception of philosophy as a special and fundamental discipline granting philosophers a particular right to speak and be heard. That Rorty is taking to task a particular conception of the philosophy as crucially important and the philosopher as therefore necessary is also evident in a variety of claims he has made throughout the years such as his claim that there are no "distinctively philosophical" propositions (1976a: 29); and that philosophy has no essence (1976b: 62); and that we should not try to "sharpen" the "fuzzy philosopher-nonphilosopher distinction" (1997b: 175).

Against this vision of philosophy Rorty has sought to articulate a new perspective on the role that the philosopher could play. It should be noted that the picture Rorty offers of philosophy has changed little over time. His descriptions of it have at various points emphasised different practices for philosophy to adopt and new alliances for philosophers to forge. In *Philosophy and the mirror of nature* (1980a) Rorty first looked outward from the analytic tradition to "continental" forms of philosophical practice. The guiding terms of Rorty's understanding of philosophy in this period are

"hermeneutics" and "conversation", and Rorty (1980a: 317) famously suggests the notion of the philosopher as:

> the informed dilettante, the polypragmatic Socratic intermediary between various discourses. In his salon, so to speak, hermetic thinkers are charmed out of their self-enclosed practices. Disagreements between disciplines and discourses are compromised or transcended in the course of conversation.

In this case it is the interdisciplinary ease with which the philosopher can engage rather than anything more specific to philosophy which allows him to play a still privileged part in the conversation – it is in *his* salon that the conversation takes place. In pursuing this task Rorty (1980a: 318) calls upon the practices of hermeneutics which he contrasts sharply with epistemology:

> Hermeneutics sees the relations between various discourses as those of strands in a possible conversation, a conversation which presupposes no disciplinary matrix which unites the speakers, but where the hope of agreement is never lost so long as the conversation lasts. This hope is not a hope for the discovery of antecedently existing common ground which, perhaps unbeknown to the speakers, unites them in a common rationality. 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. For epistemology, conversation is implicit inquiry. For hermeneutics, inquiry is routine conversation. Epistemology views the participants as united in what Oakeshott calls an *universitas* – a group united by mutual interests in achieving a common end. Hermeneutics views them as united in what he calls a *societas* – persons whose paths through life have fallen together, united by civility rather than by a common goal, much less by a common ground.

Rorty's conception of hermeneutics bears little resemblance to Gadamer's careful and thoughtful elucidation of that term, as Warnke (2002 and 2003) has argued, and Toulmin, in *Cosmopolis* (1990: 10), is dismissive of this conception of philosophy, and writes of it:

> Richard Rorty, surveying the debate from the late 1970s, concluded that philosophers have little left to do except to join in a personal conversation about the world as they see it, from all of their individual points of view. Reading Rorty's essays, we carry off the image of a party of ex-soldiers disabled in the intellectual wars, sharing, over a glass of wine, memories of "old, forgotten, far-off things, and battles long ago."

Very little, however, seems to hang on the notion of hermeneutics, *per se*, though, since later in that same text Rorty (1980a: 369-370) draws a rather different contrast in terms of systematic

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philosophy and edifying philosophy, which suggests that rather than having withdrawn from the world and academic battles, the philosopher remains engaged in both, though preferring more guerrilla-like tactics:

> Great systematic philosophers are constructive and offer arguments. Great edifying philosophers are reactive and offer satires, parodies, aphorisms. They know their work loses its point when the period they were reacting against is over. They are *intentionally* peripheral. Great systematic philosophers, like great scientists, build for eternity. Great edifying philosophers destroy for the sake of their own generation. Systematic philosophers want to put their subject on the secure path of science. Edifying philosophers want to keep space open for the sense of wonder which poets can sometimes cause – wonder that there is something new under the sun, something which is *not* an accurate representation of what was already there, something which (at least for the moment) cannot be explained and can barely be described.

These rather different distinctions between, on the one hand, epistemology and hermeneutics, and on the other hand, systematic and edifying philosophy, exemplify a feature of Rorty's writing which Bernstein (1987: 549) warns has problematic consequences:

> Rorty's fateful, although shifting, dichotomies – the either/or's that structure his thinking – lead him to all sorts of dubious and double-edged claims.

Cull (2000), too, worries about Rorty's tendency to "set up a series of simple oppositions" (Cull 2000: 87), arguing that Rorty's essays "either oversimplify or omit any alternative opinions about metaphilosophical thinking" (Cull 2000: 88) and that his "palette specializes in primary colors" (Cull 2000: 90).

This tendency to over simple (though shifting) dichotomies might be relatively easy to correct for if it were not for an opposite but supporting tactic that Rorty employs simultaneously, what Bernstein (1987: 543) calls the "leveling" effect of Rorty's thought:

> One reason that the "classical" pragmatism of Peirce, Dewey, Mead, and James went into eclipse is because many thinkers began to feel that the pragmatic attempt to soften and blur all philosophical distinctions had the unfortunate consequence of depriving us of the analytical tools needed for clarifying and getting a grip on important differences that make a difference, and resulted in a bland undifferentiated monotonous holism. Rorty ... is guilty of a similar tendency of leveling in his light-minded joshing.

And so we need to be very careful in unpacking what Rorty thinks the role of the post-epistemological philosopher should be, so as to take note of the fact that, as Bernstein (1987: 544) points out:

> the very way in which he structures issues tends to distract us from questions that really do make a difference.

Any attempt to understand Rorty's idea(l) of philosophy is made more complex than "merely" working out what the oppositions "epistemology and hermeneutics" and "systematic and edifying philosophy" include and occlude, how and to what extent the two oppositions are synonymous or even compatible, by the fact that elsewhere Rorty has turned away from these conceptions to draw on models of literary criticism and politics as the appropriate models and allies for philosophy.

Rorty's attempts to ally philosophy with literary criticism, as for instance when he speaks of philosophy as "just one more literary genre" (1984a: 105) have generated a large amount of critical heat, both from philosophers and literary critics. Since it is the turn to politics which is more relevant for the purposes of the argument of this work, I will say little about the turn to literary criticism, except to align myself with Arneson (1992: 477-8) who argues that for Rorty the task of the (literary) critic is to draw out the moral relevance of texts for the public and that in taking this stance Rorty exaggerates both the scope and role of contemporary literary criticism which is merely an arcane academic discourse with little social relevance.

Rorty's more recent attempts to ally philosophy with politics, decisively signalled in "Philosophy as science, as metaphor, and as politics" (1989b: 9-26), is potentially the most illuminating way to understand Rorty's overall project. It draws from the hermeneutic conception the idea that we find ourselves thrown together in society with a group of disparate individuals with whom we share, perhaps, little in common, but with whom we are bound together in the demands of civility and the attempt to understand each other in order to be able to either agree or disagree. It draws from the edifying conception of philosophy that we should react to the particular concerns and practices of our own situations rather than seek to reify abstract universals and absolutes, and that in so doing we should be guided by the desire to keep our society open to novel practices and interpretations rather than entrenching present ones and stagnating. Finally it draws from the alliance with literature the recognition that in performing all of these tasks we need to draw on the resources of imagination at least as much as those of reason. What is crucial to the notion of philosophy as politics, though, is the idea that philosophy is, as Stow characterizes it, a "problem-solving approach". Stow (1999: 66) reads Rorty in the period from *Philosophy and the mirror of nature* (1980a) onward as saying something like:

we should abandon philosophical thinking in favor of a more problem-solving approach to life. Once we do this, Rorty suggests, we can simply give up certain perennial philosophical questions – such as the nature of reality, the existence of Truth, and even epistemology itself – as being unnecessary diversions from the task of coping with the world.

Stating Rorty's project in this way brings us to the heart of Rorty's misdirection. If what we seek, ultimately, is to solve problems, or to cope with the (perhaps "our") world, then the questions of epistemology are not external distractions from that task, nor even peripheral to it. Rather, epistemology and the problems of justification and truth become central to the practice of philosophy-as-politics. In solving a problem we have to confront the question of what justifies our belief that this *is* a problem. If we are trying to cope with the world then we need to be able to measure our success at coping. (Frede (2002: 290) worried by the vagueness of Rorty's "coping" that suggests it is more like "groping"). Rorty cannot escape epistemology, after all. In particular, as Rosenberg (1993: 200-1) points out, Rorty lacks any criteria for success and in defining success as being a matter of enabling us to "cope with the environment" owes us some account of both what "coping" and the "environment" mean – he owes us, in other words, a non-representational account of truth. Choy (2002: 50), too, makes the point that Rorty cannot avoid epistemological questions:

> These are not questions of how we can be guaranteed of knowledge or certainty, but how, in fact, we come by our fallible knowledge of the world. Questions about the nature of evidence and the reliability of our scientific method also fall under this category. These questions need not be construed as ahistorical abstractions or a priori speculations. On the contrary, the question of how we *in fact* come to have knowledge suggests we should investigate actual processes of acquiring knowledge.

I argue that Rorty owes us an account of truth and with it knowledge because I take the pressures for such an account to be internal to Rorty's own attempt to make sense of philosophy and the role of the philosopher. The first pressure towards a non-representational account of truth comes from his own definition of beliefs as "habits of action for coping with reality" (1991c: 1). If beliefs are understood thus, then some incipient notion of truth seems to be already specified internally – beliefs are true to the extent that they enable us to *successfully* cope with the world; in other words, utility suggests itself as a criterion of truth. A similar criterion seems equally available for other definitions of belief that Rorty uses. For instance, in *Contingency, irony and solidarity* Rorty prefers the idea of beliefs as tools. But here, too, there is such a thing as having the right tool for the job – exploring this idea might, again, lead in the direction of a non-representational account of truth. The second source of internal pressure towards a non-representational account of truth comes from his invocation of the idea of (moral) progress. Once again, in using this language, Rorty commits himself to the idea of our getting better, and so we want some account of what

better means, some account that does not merely point to our more inclusive notions of humanity, our becoming less cruel, but offers some explanation of why those are moves in the right direction, of how we can even talk about the right direction. Bernstein (2002: 11) gives a gloss of Rorty's use of "progress" saying that it has an "ironic shading", it is "the achievement of luck, historical contingencies" and is simply a matter of what "liberal ironists approve and favor", suggesting that Rorty cannot and need not give us such an account. I think, however, Rorty does owe us an account that addresses Frede's (2002: 290) concern that the only criterion Rorty seems to have of a description being "better" is that it is "more interesting", which would leave him open to her criticism that: "Boredom, not falsehood, should then make us change our minds."

Why does Rorty not follow up on these ideas? Perhaps because he assumes that it is only representationalism that gives rise to a need to account for truth – evidence, perhaps of the veracity of Taylor's (1990: 271) claim that Rorty himself continues to be enthralled by representationalism and Bond's (2002: 194) suggestion that Rorty is caught in the tradition he seeks to "uproot". Perhaps because he is cynical about the possibilities of theory since he construes theory as a foundationalist enterprise. I think Rorty is wrong on both these counts. Nevertheless, as a sympathetic reader I am open to persuasion on this issue. Such persuasion would, however, require Rorty to discuss this topic in a sustained way. This sustained discussion is what Rorty refuses. Instead he either dismisses truth as:

> not the sort of thing one should expect to have a philosophically interesting theory about (1982b: xiii)

or vacillates, as he frankly admits:

> between trying to reduce truth to justification and propounding some form of minimalism about truth (1995a: 21)

This then is Rorty's dilemma, as I read it: Rorty wants to make substantive claims about things other than epistemology; in order to clear the way to making those claims Rorty rejects the enterprise of epistemology altogether; when he makes his substantive claims in the absence of an epistemology the discussion gets sidetracked (by, for example, Blackburn 1998 or Steinhoff 1997) into questions of truth and justification (i.e. we end up discussing epistemology again); Rorty tries to change the subject by making substantive claims about something other than epistemology. It begins to seem that Rorty is caught in an endless and acutely vicious cycle. This view is shared by Cull (2000: 83-4) who suggests that Rorty's pragmatism "betrays" the central point of pragmatism:

Instead of simply trying to find ways to use ideas in order to accomplish goals, he becomes obsessed with the very epistemological disputes that pragmatists for well over a century have deemed unresolvable.

Given that Rorty is constantly drawn back into the epistemological disputes he seeks to overcome he has inevitably spelt out in quite a lot of detail his own positions on truth and justification. Indeed for someone who seeks to persuade us that these topics are irrelevant and uninteresting, he spends an inordinate amount of time thinking and writing about them.

For Rorty, justification is, as Prado (2002: 198) glosses it, a matter of "language-game propriety, of usage or sanctioned practice". This can seem to imply that justification is a matter of reaching group consensus. This is a view which Guignon and Hiley (2003: 15) appear to endorse when they claim that:

> At any given time, Rorty claims, most areas of culture will share a vocabulary that ensures that their ways of talking have the form of "normal discourse" (the correlate of normal science). This normal discourse will ensure that most people are in agreement about most things at any time.

Gutting (2003: 47) plausibly argues, however that this is not the way to understand Rorty and that it is possible for an eccentric opinion to be justified:

> Justification is social because it is linguistic and because we learn a language only in becoming part of a community. Belonging to a community means coming under the norms that constitute that community, but not every opinion shared by all or most members of a community expresses a communal norm. It is, in fact, quite possible for a single individual to be in accord with a community's norms when the rest of the community is not. For example, I could be the only person who pronounces my name correctly or the only person who knows that the twenty-first century did not begin until 2001. It may also happen that the norms of a community are not all mutually consistent, and an individual may be entitled to assert the claim of one norm against another that everyone accepts. Of course, enough changes in the views and practices of the members of a community will eventually lead to changes in its norms, since norms have no basis outside of the community itself. But this does not mean that norms are changeable at the whim of a group, even if the group includes everyone.

As Haack (1998: 151) points out, however, Rorty is ambiguous and shifting on which language-game, which sanctioned practice, which community, provides the grounds of justification. Sometimes Rorty suggests that it is the criteria of the speaker's own community that must be satisfied, while at other times it is the criteria of *our* community that must be satisfied. Pettit (2002: 56-7) locates the source of this ambiguity in Rorty's inability to distinguish between different types of discourse which we may encounter:

> The normal discourse from which the hermeneutic inquirer starts represents his orthodoxy. There are two ways in which the discourse he investigates can fail to be orthodox: one, it may be heterodox, contradicting his original beliefs; or two, it may be "xenodox", involving beliefs of a different and unfamiliar kind, beliefs addressed to novel propositions. No single discourse can be at once xenodox and heterodox . . .

Perhaps Rorty is happy to remain undecided on this question because he thinks of it as having little relevance to real life – such questions of justification are ones that matter mostly to academics and philosophers, and we can thus afford to take them lightly. Perhaps in Rorty's rich North Atlantic democracies there is sufficient consensus on the rules of the justification-game for this light-hearted approach to suffice. Here in Africa, however, they can become literally (and not as a matter of melodramatic overstatement) a matter of life and death. To give one such example (and unfortunately there are many others to choose from) we had in South Africa (during the Thabo Mbeki presidency) a Health Minister (*the* national Minister of Health) who endorsed a diet high in beetroot, garlic, and African potatoes as a treatment for HIV/AIDS. It matters, then, in debates around this issue, in a country with a massive HIV/AIDS crisis, what would count as justifying her claims. Is the relevant community that of traditional African healers, "modern, western medicine", or a South African community, only in the process of being constructed, which contains both these and other communities (the Ayurvedic practice of sectors of the large Indian population, for example)? Taking the question of justification lightly here, or even leaving it to the philosophers to develop models, seems like a dereliction of public duty; for justification is itself not simply an academic game, but a crucial topic of the public conversation. Moreover, I do not think that Rorty himself takes justification lightly. For example, he speaks of justification ("to convince other people that we are right") as a human need (1992b: 136), and he invokes a responsibility "to our fellow humans to make [our beliefs] cohere with theirs" (1997a: 149).

Blackburn (2002: 274-5) is surely right that in the face of such a diversity of opinions on things that matter, we should not turn to irony but rather should foster the development of judgement:

> Any proposition is given its sense by a set of rules or norms telling us what counts as proper evidence for it, and what are its implications. These norms also tell us that some situations yield better evidence than others. ... If I have better evidence, I should not be destabilized by people who form their opinions on the worse. ... The norms involved are the ones that bring about our understanding of what the proposition means. They are *enabling* norms ... [and to] depart from those norms, whether through self-deception, wishful thinking, political control, or anything else, is to begin to lose your right to be regarded as believing that p, and to depart enough is to forfeit your status as thinking about the topic at all. These norms are not "social" or

"historical" "conditionings" that a suitably light ironist or suitably acute social theorist can somehow fly away from. They are the structures that enable thought to take place.

If justification is a matter of invoking norms then what is required is always an explication and reflexive consideration of what those norms are, whose norms they are, and whether, and to what extent, they are appropriate. The urgency of the need for a conversation about justification is made all the more urgent, if as Rorty believes, there is nothing more than justification, i.e. no truth of the matter to decide between proponents of beetroot and proponents of anti-retrovirals. In the light of this sort of concern we might side with Haack (1998: 21) who argues that justification cannot be "*merely* conversational" (her emphasis), that justification must be connected to evidence and "truth-indication". In line with this, Haack (1998: 19) resists Rorty's attempts to conflate truth with agreement, saying:

> If calling a statement true *did* mean that it is a statement we agree about, to inquire – to arrive at the truth of some question – would be just to try to arrive at agreement with respect to that question. Inquiry would be more like negotiation than investigation.

When the matter is stated this way and in the absence of any conversation about norms, and Rorty often does speak in those sorts of terms, it can start to look as though the choice between beetroot and anti-retrovirals should be decided merely in terms of at best consensus, at worst majority opinion or imposition of views held by the powerful.

Surely though, that is not Rorty's position. As Verges (2002: 133), points out:

> If there is no Archimedean fulcrum outside of language, culture, and history, this is not to imply that rationality is to be replaced by propaganda and brute force. It is rather to recognize that epistemic authority, like moral authority, is entirely embedded within historically conditioned communities of language users. To be sure ... the resulting conception of rationality will be fallibilist to its core. Moral and epistemic justifications will ineluctably be, as in fact they always have been, piecemeal, and any given claim will always be defeasible.

Rorty's point should be understood to be that since justification is a matter of invoking norms which are in whatever sense historically and culturally conditioned, questions of justification are always able to be raised and the conversation can always be turned to that question. In this sense, then, political questions are always in part epistemological. In their turn, claims to epistemic authority can be turned to political ends. This almost certainly is why Rorty resists the invocation of truth – for the claim to truth, as he sees it, is used as a way to side-step this essentially political process of conversation, to play a trump card that wins the argument.

Much as he may try to avoid the question of truth though, it remains there in the background. For one of the ways of justifying our beliefs is that they work better. Forster (1992: 598-9), for example, suggests Rorty is correct in moving from "true" and "false", or "right" and "wrong" to "better" and "worse":

> First, "better" and "worse" are comparative terms, the use of which involves essential reference to a range of alternatives. Furthermore, the sense of these terms is more easily construed as being context-dependent. Talk of better and worse makes sense only after some points of comparison have been articulated; and such comparisons typically presuppose some purpose. Finally, if debate involves assessing the *concrete* consequences of enacting competing alternatives within some shared domain, then claims to truth can be redescribed as claims to improvement in some respect relevant to the practice in question.

As Forster (1992: 599-600) giving a gloss of Rorty's idea of inquiry, suggests, though, this is not to deny truth but to redescribe it:

> The search for truth is better construed as a search for better, richer, more fulfilling and humane ways of relating to our surroundings and better, richer, more fulfilling and humane conceptions of what "better", "richer", "more fulfilling" and "humane" mean. The process is one of perpetual reconstructive bootstrapping in which the criteria embodied in our practices are reinterpreted in light of new examples and our repertoire of examples is amended and reinterpreted in the face of new criteria. In both cases we are likely to speak of progress, but in neither case is progress measured or legitimated by appeal to a final destination or an overarching structure of standards. New theories, by providing new exemplars, give new content to our general vocabulary of theoretical virtues and new interpretations of what theoretical merit consists in. In so doing they at once exemplify and redefine those virtues by extending the application of our evaluative terms to new contexts.

Thinking about it in this way shows us the route to another way of thinking about Rorty's position, one which Malachowski (2002a: xii) outlines in his defence of Rorty's pragmatist notion of truth:

> the pragmatist is not in the business of merely substituting terms in a pre-established representationalist framework – so that a notion of "coping" stands in for one of "corresponding". What the pragmatist urges, is the adoption of a *new framework*, one in which truth is cashed out according to its practical upshot and nobody bothers much whether anything conforms to "truth-independent reality". Within *this* framework, the scope of truth is enlarged rather than reduced. It is enlarged because imagination is then allocated its proper dynamic role.

Thus there is a relatively more independent way of deciding the matter of beetroot versus anti-retrovirals – by looking at the efficacy of diet and drugs in treating HIV/AIDS.   This is a point that Williams (2003: 68-9) expresses when he defends Rorty against the charge of "anything goes" relativism:

> His relaxed version of coherentism, he argues, while it entails that justification is less algorithmic than many epistemologists would like, does not imply the radical conclusion that anyone can (rationally) think whatever he or she likes or that any system of beliefs is as good as any other. Our settled beliefs – those to which we currently see no viable alternatives – together with our involuntary observations and our theoretical and practical interests, function as severe constraints on what we can accept.

This does not return us to the notion of an utterly independent reality though, since our judgements of efficacy will be relative to our aims and interests, and there is no way to escape the essentially conversational, and essentially political, nature of making these decisions.

I suggested above that Rorty is caught in a kind of cycle in which he is constantly drawn into discussions of the types of epistemological questions which he seeks to persuade us are irrelevant and uninteresting. The example of the HIV/AIDS conversation in South Africa is intended to suggest that such questions are not irrelevant and uninteresting, but unavoidable and of crucial importance. Moreover, I would argue that what Rorty has to say on the topics of truth and justification is itself illuminating. Nevertheless to the extent that Rorty is genuinely bored with those topics of conversation and wishes to avoid them I want to suggest that there is a way out of this cycle, after all. What is required is that Rorty tone down his anti-epistemology by aligning himself with those naturalists who reject the TJB account. He can then leave those whose interests are more directly epistemological to work out the details of what a naturalist account of knowledge would look like while getting on with the business of morality and politics. Admittedly, this would leave Rorty's philosophy looking a lot less radical; but, on the positive side, it would look a lot more pragmatic.

Rorty rejects the idea of a naturalist epistemology, of course. I think the HIV/AIDS example rather supports Devitt's (2002: 313) reading that:

> Just as there is a place for a naturalistic philosophy of language, so there is one for a naturalistic epistemology. Rorty rejects the possibility of such an epistemology because, following Quine, he assumes that it will simply be psychology ... but that is not all there is to naturalized epistemology. Such epistemology does tackle the normative question. Using the evidence of our epistemic successes and failures in science and in ordinary life, we theorize

about how best to learn about the world. Learning about learning is an empirical activity, just like learning about anything else.

Adopting such an approach would bring Rorty more in to line with that advocated by Haack (1998: 49) who offers a description of, and plea for, a more Peircian conception of philosophy according to which philosophy should be more "scientific':

> neither the scientific attitude nor the scientific method, as Peirce conceives them, is the exclusive prerogative of scientists ... philosophy should be conducted in the same spirit [as science]. It should be *genuine, disinterested* truth-seeking, a good-faith effort to discover the truth of some question. ... Peirce contrasts the scientific attitude with "sham reasoning," meaning efforts to make a case for some proposition one's commitment to which is already evidence- and argument-proof.

It would also settle Edel's (2002: 162) concern that Rorty goes a step too far, or perhaps not far enough:

> I want to suggest that he has softened the notion of knowledge more than is required to see the continuities of science, philosophy, and poetry, and that pragmatism not only admits of but actually employs, in its working out, a view of the growth of knowledge *and its impact on philosophical ideas* which enables us to judge better and worse in philosophy. Hence instead of looking to overcoming the tradition we had better think in terms of long-range philosophical experiments and criteria for their assessment. In one sense Rorty is himself doing such an assessment for a chapter in epistemology, but not fully enough because he neglects the impact of the growth of knowledge.

Not everyone thinks Rorty should go further in the naturalist direction, of course. Habermas (2000: 52), for example, suggests that Rorty has already gone too far:

> Rorty uses a jargon that no longer permits any differentiation between the perspectives of the participant and observer. Interpersonal relationships, which are owed to the intersubjective possession of a shared language, are assimilated to the pattern of adaptive behaviour (or instrumental action). A corresponding de-differentiation between the strategic and nonstrategic use of language, between action oriented toward success and action oriented toward reaching understanding, robs Rorty of the conceptual means for doing justice to the intuitive distinction between convincing and persuading, between motivation through reasons and causal exertion of influence, between learning and indoctrination. The counterintuitive mingling of the one with the other has the unpleasant consequence that we lose the critical standards operating in everyday life. Rorty's naturalist strategy leads to a categorical levelling of distinctions of such a kind that our descriptions lose their sensitivity for differences that do make a difference in everyday practices.

If Rorty can endorse a naturalist epistemology, then a crucial aspect of such an epistemology is fallibilism. Rorty does, of course, consider himself a fallibilist (at least sometimes) even going so far as to say that we have a "duty" to be "contritely fallibilist" (1983b: 67). Williams (2003: 76), however points out that Rorty is insufficiently vigilant in distinguishing between fallibilism (nothing is certain, every belief is revisable) and radical scepticism (we never have a good reason for believing one thing rather than another), Williams argues, I think correctly, that pragmatism commits us to the former but not the latter and that Rorty "fails to keep the distinction clearly in view". I want to further suggest that in taking this route, we can ameliorate the effects of Rorty's overstated antirealism, which is itself really just a statement of radical scepticism. This would allow Rorty to adopt Stieb's (2005) brand of "constructive realism" (which is essentially the recognition that not just our articulation of experience but experience itself is socially constructed), and also Gutting's (2003:58) "humdrum realism" – the acceptance of:

> truths of common sense (we might even say, of sanity) that express the reality of our world and our everyday knowledge of it.

Such a position would go a long way to alleviating Guignon's (1982:361-2) worry that:

> Rorty's own position seems to undermine this appeal to practical consequences in evaluating our vocabularies and interpretive schemes. For our vocabularies determine what can *count* for us as ends or purposes, so that there can be no point *outside of* our current vocabularies form which we could identify our "true" ends. According to Rorty, we *can* deal with the question, "Are we using the right means to attain our *ends*?" from within our present understanding of reality. But there is no way to answer the question, "Do we have the right ends?" We can never know whether our vocabularies enable us to cope with the world because we can never understand what "coping" or the "world" might be like outside of our currently-used vocabularies. But on such a view there seems to be very little room for rationally reflecting on our ends, as opposed to merely calculating means and their costs of attainment. Since a new vocabulary might irrupt at any moment and totally redefine our sense of ends and purposes, there is no way to talk about the *usefulness* of our current vocabulary with its built-in but unjustifiable ends. And this seems to be an emasculated form of pragmatism at best.

What we need from Rorty, of course, is some indication that he not only *can* but *does* accept realism of this sort; some more sustained elucidation of the claim he makes that we can sometimes (though not always) be "obstinately Oxonian about the word 'real'" (1988b: 161) and of when it is permissible to be so and why. We need from him some recognition that it is not so much a case of, to quote one of his more provocative titles, "The world well lost" (1972: 3) but that the world is something of which we are a part and with which we are in constant practical contact, that we are

never, as Rorty (1996a: xxiii) himself acknowledges, out of touch with reality. Nor are we lost in that world. We are not, as Sleeper (2002: 152) puts it, adrift in Neurath's boat:

> without maps or charts, without compass or sextant, without means of propulsion or anchorage

but, exactly thanks to pragmatism, in possession of these crucial requisites for our journey. As Rouse (2003: 100) points out:

> Practical interactions with our material surroundings are not external to our discursive practices
> but indispensable components of them.

In particular, I would argue this move to naturalism and humdrum realism would ameliorate the tendency within Rorty to reduce everything to language, to become a victim of his own brand of the reification of language which, although different to the one he accuses Heidegger of (1991f: 50-65), is as problematic. This tendency is something that many of Rorty's critics point to, and wish to resist. Among these are Prado (2002), Reeves (1986), Rouse (2003) and Nielsen (2002). This reification of language is a particularly frustrating feature, in this reader's opinion, of Rorty's political thought. In the next section of this chapter I will discuss ways in which Rorty's non-reliabilist version of pragmatism misconstrues the political, and unnecessarily restricts the scope for political thought (and action). I will begin this discussion with a case study of this form of linguistic reductionism at work.

5.2   Pragmatism and political philosophy

It is my contention that Rorty's almost compulsive focus on language – shorn of its connection to reality (social or material) – is not merely problematic in itself, but generates further problems for a Rortian understanding of the political by rendering it non-practical or even impractical, a factor which is most clearly seen in the curious kind of intellectual elitism which infects Rorty's work. I call this elitism curious because while Rorty valorises the life of the mind and intellect he simultaneously strips intellectuals of any theoretical or critical power, thus rendering them impotent. I will begin to demonstrate this by looking at just one rather extended case of this phenomenon at work in Rorty's writing.

In *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a: 60) Rorty describes his ideally liberal society as one in which the difference between revolutionary and reformer is "cancelled out". It is worth looking at this section of the work (1989a: 60-1) in detail for the insight it gives us into Rorty's systematic and often quite subtle shift of focus from material conditions and social agency onto language and intellectual constructions, which he then subtly undermines. The heroes of his liberal society would

be, he says, "the strong poet and the utopian revolutionary" who protest against the society in which they contingently find themselves not:

> in the name of humanity against arbitrary and inhuman social restrictions … [but] in the name of the society itself against those aspects of the society which are unfaithful to its own self-image. (1989a: 60)

It is this redescription of the motive and purposes of the revolutionary which "cancels out" the contrast with the reformer. Such a cancelling out is possible in Rorty's (1989a: 60-1) liberal society because:

> A liberal society is one whose ideals can be fulfilled by persuasion rather than force, by reform rather than revolution, by the free and open encounters of present linguistic and other practices with suggestions for new practices. But his is to say that an ideal liberal society is one which has no purpose except freedom, no goal except a willingness to see how such encounters go and to abide by the outcome. It has no purpose except to make life easier for poets and revolutionaries while seeing to it that they make life harder for others only by words, and not deeds. It is a society whose hero is the strong poet and the revolutionary because it recognizes that it is what it is, has the morality it has, speaks the language it does, not because it approximates the will of God or the nature of man, but because certain poets and revolutionaries of the past spoke as they did.

The first thing to note about this passage is that the distinction it cancels out is not so much that between revolutionary and reformer as that between revolutionary and poet. Revolutionaries are heroes not because of what they did, the changes they effected in the material circumstances of society, but because of what they said, the changes they effected in a society's vocabulary and self-image. In fact, Rorty seems unable to conceive of utopian revolutionaries as anything other than poets. He begins the section under discussion by speaking of "my *earlier* claim that the heroes of liberal society are the strong poet and the utopian revolutionary" (1989a: 60, emphasis added). But in seeking out that earlier claim (on the assumption that it is made in this book) the reader will find only discussions of strong poets and in reference to the French Revolution the Romantic poets. Elshtain (2003: 145) similarly notes that Rorty treats the French Revolution merely as "the mother of all political redescriptions" and that he "wipes the blood off the page". While Rorty, it must be said, does sometimes acknowledge material reality the role of civil disobedience and violence in the history of the fight for social justice (1997c: 255-261) – and even goes so far as to say that "the Marxists were absolutely right about one thing: the soul of history *is* economic" (1992c: 227) – the overall tendency in his work is to emphasise language, metaphors, and redescription. This sort of talk leads Kloppenberg (2002: 323) to worry that Rorty's emphasis

on language, his cutting off of language from experience, has enormous political implications in that it has the effect of "undercutting efforts to confront the hard facts of poverty and greed."

Rorty implies, then, that because there is no reality accessible independent of interpretations in language, to change our language is to change the material conditions of society. It may well be the case that, as Rorty (1996c: 243) suggests, sometimes our vocabularies blind us to injustice, and in such cases changing vocabularies can be extremely productive. But it does not follow that all we need to change is vocabularies, or that it is always our vocabularies that we need to change. The belief that there are facets of our social reality which are not simply ways of describing the world, are not reducible to language, in no way commits us to a belief in Reality and thus some form of metaphysical or epistemological error, any more than we can get rid of such errors merely by changing our language, as Crary (2002: 217) and Gustafsson (2001: 647) point out. Why then reduce revolutionaries to poets, their actions to (re)descriptions? One might impute to Rorty some form of Hegelianism. While Rorty recognises that material conditions change, he often seems to suggest (more by emphasis than direct assertion) that it is ideas (beliefs, languages, vocabularies) that power the change

Perhaps in the end Rorty is simply not that interested in material questions. The story he wants to tell is one of moral, not technological, progress and the people who interest him, who he admires and would like others to admire are those who have bequeathed us powerful vocabularies. This points to the second way in which Rorty neutralises the revolutionary: not content to reduce the revolutionary to a poet he goes on to suggest that in any case poets and revolutionaries all are not nearly as good as those who admire them. It is the latter rather than the former who are Rorty's ideal citizens (1989a: 61).

This passage illustrates, I would argue, a pervasive trend in Rorty's thought.   He focuses our attention away from the material and onto language to such an extent that social practice (understood as something more than talk) is rendered invisible. One effect of this move is to focus our attention away from the ordinary language user and onto the linguistic innovator – the intellectual – and so the elitism which so many critics detect in Rorty's work goes hand-in-hand with the focus on language. His very emphasis on language suggests a version of society in which intellectuals speak and the ordinary people passively admire and listen. However, the intellectual is merely a reader of books, a redescriber, a voice in the conversation; the intellectual, that is to say, has no special power, no method, no priority over the ordinary person, in fact the intellectual is just an ordinary person. As such it remains entirely obscure how it is that change happens and how we might control the direction of that change; politics, it would seem, becomes purely contingent (in the sense of accidental).

The effect of what Rorty says here and elsewhere is to reduce all intellectual life to mere talk. Intellectuals themselves may have pretensions to some greater effect or role in their theorizing and critique, they may see themselves as offering explanations, or justifications, but in fact, Rorty suggests, they are engaged only in a play with language, offering only new metaphors which we can take or leave. In this way the intellectual is simultaneously valorised – he is the master of the conversation, the hero of society – and rendered impotent – he is all talk, he changes nothing.

It is this kind of linguistic reductionism that leads Rorty's readers to suppose that conversation is all talk and no action, that it cannot help us make our world a freer and more just place. While I hope to have dispelled this reading in previous chapters, it must be admitted that Rorty does invite this misreading. A less sympathetic reader might well argue that the disempowerment of the intellectual is no merely accidental feature of Rorty's political thought but that it is instead its aim.

One useful way to try to make some sense of Rorty's attitude towards intellectuals is to compare it with that of Plato, who shares Rorty's schizophrenia on the topic. Like Rorty, Plato also attempts to externalise his schizophrenia though in place of Rorty's public/private distinction, Plato distinguishes between two types of intellectual: the philosophers who rule his Republic and the poets who he banishes from it.

To become a Platonic philosopher-guardian is the task of a lifetime and one is selected into the ruling class according to three criteria. The first criterion is a certain moral capacity and character in that one demonstrates from an early age the ability to see and act in terms of the common good. Those who demonstrate this capacity will be required in addition to dedicate themselves to practical service in the military and bureaucracy. Thirdly, the philosopher must demonstrate the intellectual capacity for training in and facility with the use of reason to find knowledge. So while one sort of intellectual may indeed rule in Plato's *Republic*, it is on the basis of character and experience and not merely intellectual ability that the right to rule is earned.

The price of the right to rule is famously high. The philosophers are prevented from engagement in those aspects of life which might distract them from their contemplation of the Good or their commitment to the common good. In particular, they are prohibited from having families or owning property. Moreover, it is not clear what the philosopher gains in return for paying this price: the Republic has no laws, religion lies beyond the ambit of the state; the philosophers are prohibited from changing the basic structure of society as put in place by Plato himself. All that ruling seems to amount to is overseeing the breeding and training of the next generation and the resolution of disputes between citizens; whatever it involves, it cannot be too onerous since only half of the guardians' time is taken up with ruling with the remainder devoted to philosophy proper. The philosopher then, for all that he "rules", is kept on the outside of society without any real power or

influence. Since the society is already, according to Plato, perfectly ordered any change and any criticism must involve degeneracy.

Plato's second class of intellectuals is the poets. They are Plato's moral degenerates who seduce and subvert with their false stories through which they validate false values (the falsity, here, being a matter of Plato's judgement). They pose a danger to the Republic through their different ways of seeing the world and their society, they embody the possibilities of critique and change, and in order to guard against that danger Plato sends the original poet caste into exile and curtails the teaching of music and poetry to such an extent that no new poet caste is likely to emerge.

There is another kind of intellectual, which Plato does not discuss – Plato himself – who is both philosopher and poet. Possessed of all the philosophical virtues, and destined to be among the rulers, were society only better organised, Plato is nevertheless not a functionary of the Republican system but its visionary creator who throughout does not merely argue and reason for the Republic but writes its founding myths, stories which while admittedly false nevertheless validate and inculcate "good" values.

Rorty, too, distinguishes between two types of intellectual but the basis on which he does so shifts. He distinguishes, on the one hand, between those who teach us about citizenship and justice, and those who exemplify a certain vision of self. He also distinguishes between metaphysicians and ironists. The metaphysician (not the poet) is the sort of intellectual for whom there is no place in Rorty's utopia; he with his promises of "truth" and "reality", of grounding society in some set of "essences" is Rorty's degenerate. The ironist, meanwhile, may play the role only of poet keeping his irony private and restricting himself to models of selfhood. While Flathman (1990: 309) notes the socially important role of the ironist:

> the role of the ironist is to remind him- or herself and us of the contingent, contestable, almost certainly transitory character of our (nonpublic) beliefs and values, hopes and fears. Our convictions and activities are maintained at the cost of rejecting alternatives, often of perpetrating cruelties. At their best ... ironists oblige us to attend to these costs and these cruelties.

Rorty apparently prevents the ironist from performing this task. There is, thus, no political or social space for the intellectual at all. The intellectuals who teach us to be just citizens seem to have disappeared along with the metaphysicians – there are no theories of political and social life to be had, perhaps those interested in those questions could write novels or poetry on the subject but then they would simply be exemplifying a kind of selfhood – the self as citizen – instead of telling

us anything useful about social space. Politics in Rorty's utopia is purely a matter of common sense; the intellectual qua intellectual has nothing to say here.

Of course Rorty, like Plato, reserves for himself a space from which to evade the very restrictions he places on other intellectuals in his society even as he creates those restrictions. The space that Rorty reserves though is merely an architectural one in which he defines the space and the structure of the game that the rest of us must play. The society he defines lacks not only an "essence" but any sort of living detail. Topper (1995: 960-2) is just one of many critics who despairs of the lack of detail in Rorty's account – his "failure to offer any detailed description of the social field or particular social practices, his "reluctance to examine the complicated interweavings of past and present social practices" – suggesting that this robs Rorty of any analytical and critical resources in terms of which to understand and change society. This point is echoed by Bernstein (2002: 25) and by Arneson (1992: 478), who labels Rorty's liberalism "amorphous", and claims that:

> We cannot decide to what extent Rorty's hopes for the future of liberalism are sensible until he
> tells us in more detail what he is talking about.

Rorty, thus, employs a number of strategies in order to eliminate the social and political role of the intellectual. First, he reduces all of philosophy to epistemology and then attempts to render epistemology obsolete. In section 5.1 I argued against the second part of this strategy. It is the first part of it – the reduction of philosophy to epistemology that concerns me here. The second strategy that Rorty employs is to reduce all of reality to language and to make everything, at least everything that intellectuals do, simply a matter of talking, of describing and redescribing. The third strategy is to limit ironic discourse to the private sphere, and to "outlaw" metaphysical discourse, thereby leaving no space for political or social discourse while hiding that fact by suggesting both that there is in fact a space for intellectuals to teach us about citizenship and justice (that is not merely private) and by also himself employing the very space which he proscribes.

It is hardly surprising that the criticisms of Rorty on this front come thick and fast. If there is agreement that Rorty has got something badly wrong, however, there is less agreement as to what he has wrong. For some critics, like McCarthy (2002: 189) and Arneson (1992: 478-9), it is Rorty's hostility to theory that is the problem. Other critics, such as Roth (1990: 347), focus on Rorty's dismissal of argumentative forms and preference for narratives. Yet others focus their attention on the issue of vocabularies and redescription. Among these are Lieberson (1980: 659) and Rosenberg (1993: 196).

These various diagnoses suggest that Guignon and Hiley (2003: 35) are on the mark when they argue that "the real difference between Rorty and many of his critics lies in a deep difference in their conceptions of what philosophy can and ought to do." This is something that is made explicit in the case of Conant (2000: 292) who argues that while Rorty tends to treat philosophy as harmless and irrelevant, this is not the case:

> But what Orwell's work brings out so powerfully is that a stretch of theorizing which, in one context, has a "merely philosophical" import can, in another context, be tied to modes of thought and action which can have substantial and harmful effects on human lives. One therefore cannot tell whether some stretch of philosophically sophisticated theorizing is pretty harmless stuff without looking (a) to the *uses* to which that theorizing is put, (b) to the institutional and political contexts within which those uses proceed, and (c) to the practical consequences that those uses prove to have in those contexts. (If that isn't a pragmatic point, I don't know what pragmatism is.)

The question, then, is whether a pragmatic-liberal, a conversational, society based in Rortian ideas, can allow sufficient space for public intellectual activity in the forms of social critique, argument, and theory-formation. I would argue that it can, that the conversation encourages intellectuals to speak in whatever form they prefer. Admittedly many of Rorty's prescriptions can seem to be attempts to close down the space for intellectuals. Among these are his reduction of philosophy to epistemology together with his attempts to render epistemology obsolete; his tendency to overplay language and downplay reality; and, his insistence on the strong divide between public and private. This dissertation has been in large measure an attempt to resist all of these moves. To resist these moves, however, does not commit us to resisting the rest of Rorty's thought and so I would argue that rather than following the prescriptions of Rorty's theory we should follow his own example as a public intellectual creating new spaces for critique and activism while revitalising old ones. It should be noted, though, that such a conversation does not guarantee intellectuals any right to be heard. While leaving intellectuals free to speak in whatever style they prefer, it accords them little prestige and privilege and erodes their authority and power. To the extent that criticisms of Rorty's philosophy are motivated by anxiety over a loss of privilege and power this reading will do little to ameliorate them. As Rorty (1985a: 34) says, "there is nothing wrong with science, there is only something wrong with the attempt to divinize it". This is a point he restates when he writes:

> moral decisions that are to be enforced by a pluralist and democratic state's monopoly of violence are best made by public discussion in which voices claiming to be God's, or reason's, or science's, are put on a par with everybody else's (1994d: 172).

In order to offer some justification for the claim that intellectuals are free to speak about whatever and in whatever way they choose, I will look to the work of one of Rorty's more sympathetic but critical readers, who I believe, illuminates these issues – Kompridis (2000). Kompridis takes Rorty to be responding to flawed critical practices and misunderstandings of the nature and scope of theory and sees Rorty as offering a viable but flawed alternative; in seeking to fix those flaws he demonstrates the potentialities of thinking through, and exploiting, Rorty's ideas rather than simply dismissing them.

Kompridis (2000: 27-28) reads Rorty as responding to a widespread and influential conception of critique as unmasking. This notion of unmasking, Kompridis (2000: 29) points out, has serious consequences:

> As it is necessarily oriented to unmasking critique cannot help but subvert, and indeed must subvert, our confidence and hope. At its best, this form of critique challenges us to rethink and to reconstruct the basis of our confidence and hope. But when unmasking critique becomes an end in itself, serving no goals other than its own, it erodes, almost compulsively, the trust upon which its own activity depends.

Critique as unmasking, is Kompridis (2000: 29-31) argues, "totalizing" in that it places all standards and practices under equal suspicion, and thereby brings itself into question in two ways. The first is the epistemological problem of self-reference (the critique itself is subject to the same unmasking as that which it unmasks); the second is the moral or political problem of self-reassurance – the undermining of hope and trust in the process of critique to lead to something better. Together these lead to a "crisis of critique" in which the legitimacy of the practice of critique itself is problematized. This crisis, Kompridis argues, is part of a larger crisis of confidence in modernity or Western culture. I think Kompridis correctly identifies at least one of Rorty's targets; certainly this general thrust of argument is at the core of *Achieving our country* (1998a).

Rorty's response to this crisis is, according to Kompridis (2000: 31), the "ironization of critique". What particularly characterises Rorty's irony, for Kompridis (2000: 33), is the emphasis on redescription, and especially Rorty's insistence that redescription is unconstrained by the object. He argues that:

> Obviously if critique is as unconstrained by its objects as the ironist claims, there is really no point in formulating "criteria of choice" between one redescription and another. ... But it is hard to see how we might come to trust any of our vocabularies if we cannot distinguish better from worse.

Kompridis (2000: 36) is, thus, unwilling to follow Rorty into irony, saying that he wants to hold onto the idea of new metaphors and descriptions being better:

> I think Rorty is right to insist that there is something emancipatory about the recognition of contingency. It does allow us to see that things have not always been this way, and that they will not remain as they are ... in this respect, the recognition of contingency opens up our horizon of possibility. ... What I do not hear with equal insistence, however, is that new metaphors, new logical spaces and new jargons are the outcome of critical *insight* that allows us to see the difference between "old" and "new" practices as the difference between better and worse practices.

Kompridis (2000: 38-43) offers his own alternative of "transformative critique", a form of critique that is answerable to certain "normative demands". The first condition requires that critique submit itself to public justification. The second condition, Kompridis argues, requires us to see our own role in making and remaking the social world. The third condition requires us to orient ourselves to the present and the future. The fourth requires that critique result in a gain of understanding. The fifth condition requires that we limit the scope of unmasking critique to that which we can transform. The sixth condition requires us not merely to look to the future but to "generate horizon-enlarging possibilities". The final condition is that we use critique to transform not only the world but ourselves.

Although Kompridis offers his transformative critique as an alternative to Rorty's ironization, it is difficult to see how his position differs from Rorty's in anything but emphasis. All of the criteria that Kompridis requires critique to be answerable to are ones which Rorty explicitly endorses. While Rorty does indeed try to keep the space for self-creation apart from public justification, he always endorses a public space for political and social argumentation aimed at justification and persuasion. The recognition that we play a role in making and remaking the social world, what Rorty calls contingency, is at the very heart of his philosophy, and this has gone hand-in-hand with his emphasis throughout on telling narrative histories (albeit whiggish ones) and paint pictures of a future (albeit vague), thus orienting himself to past and future to reflect on the present. While agreeing with Kompridis that Rorty leaves too unspecified his notion of "better" and of "progress" he nevertheless endorses these notions. I take Rorty's unhappiness with the cultural left, and critique as unmasking, to be exactly a point of agreement with Kompridis that we should worry about what we can change (and I might add Rorty offers his philosophy as an attempt to enable and spur such change). I also take the notion of conversation with its open-endedness, its refusal to settle on a topic to coincide with Kompridis idea of generating new horizons. Finally, I have argued that Rorty's notion of solidarity if taken seriously always confronts us with the possibility, and even the need, of changing ourselves. In other words one way of reading Kompridis idea of

transformative critique is to see it as a description of what Rorty is attempting to do, and what he is by example suggesting to us to do as well.

Just as we can read Rorty, along with Kompridis, as being a social critic, so too we may join with Voparil (2004: 223) in reading Rorty as a political theorist whose redescriptions are:

> a political intervention aimed at revitalizing a moribund and spectatorial contemporary left whose preoccupation with getting it right theoretically has obscured the need to act politically.

Voparil (2004: 227) suggests that we see Rorty as "telling a story designed to move us to action", and (Voparil 2004: 225) highlights the links between imagination and action:

> The action-generating potential of political theory ... is most potent when thinking about society "not as it is but as it might be".

Voparil (2004: 228), like Kompridis, puts redescription at the heart of Rorty's political theory and he says of redescription that it is a political and imaginative task which involves:

> describing our history, our present, and ourselves in alternate vocabularies; sketching possible scenarios, both desirable and undesirable; and offering competing narratives, all are ways of altering the lens through which we view our surroundings and therefore of opening or closing different paths, different avenues of possibility.

According to Voparil (2004: 229), the process of redescription is a matter of changing ourselves and it is this which links it to action – by changing our descriptions and narratives of ourselves, we may change our behaviour, and thereby transform society.

> The weak point of Rorty's political thought, according to Voparil (2004: 233), is that he makes too little use of the critical space which is available to a politics of redescription, in particular by displaying a lack of concern with present actualities, with the result that as Voparil (2004: 235) puts it :

> Rorty's assertions about politics [tend] to be too vague and over-generalized to be of much insight or practical value.

Voparil (2004: 235) suggests that we see Rorty then as not offering a vision, but merely the vision of a vision, which merely arouses "a non-political, emotional attitude" of hopefulness something Voparil (2004: 238) thinks easily becomes a form of quietism:

Ultimately, Rorty fails to recognize that disenchantment and discontent, the feeling that one's country has let one down, can also mobilize people to action, maybe even more so than enchantment and romance.

I think Voparil is wrong to reject the notion of hope in favour of disenchantment and discontent. For Rorty we are not faced with a choice of hope or discontent but with the possibility of combining hope with discontent. The hope that Rorty (1998f: 202-3) expresses is, as he recognises, the same one that fuels both Christianity and Marxism, namely the hope that:

> some day we shall be willing and able to treat the needs of all human beings with the respect and consideration with which we treat the needs of those closest to us, those whom we love.

And the hope for a future in which that is realised depends, Rorty (1998f: 203-4) makes clear, on generating a level of discontent:

> We should raise our children to find it intolerable that we who sit behind desks and punch keyboards are paid ten times as much as people who get their hands dirty cleaning our toilets, and a hundred times as much as those who fabricate our keyboards in the Third World. ... Our children need to learn, early on, to see the inequalities between their own fortunes and those of other children as neither the Will of God nor the necessary price for economic efficiency, but as an evitable tragedy. They should start thinking, as early as possible, about how the world might be changed so as to ensure that no one goes hungry while others have a surfeit.

But, Rorty (1994e: 254) argues, the disenchantment requires the hope to sustain the project of reform: "If we fail in national hope, we shall no longer even try to change our ways." This hope is, as Rorty (1996b: 231-2) makes clear, a function of our being able to both believe that things can get better than they are, and to tell a story of how to get there from here. In this regard Rorty places his hopes not in theory, and certainly not in philosophy – of which he says the "turn toward philosophy seems to me a gesture of despair" – but in education. For the reform that Rorty (1989d: 124-5) hopes for is not simply piecemeal tinkering with the *status quo* but a continual social evolution:

> This is done by helping the students realize that, despite the progress that the present has made over the past, the good has once again become the enemy of the better. With a bit of help, the students will start noticing everything that is paltry and mean and unfree in their surroundings. With luck, the best of them will succeed in altering the conventional wisdom, so that the next generation is socialized in a somewhat different way than they themselves were socialized. To hope that this way will only be somewhat different is to hope that the society will remain reformist and democratic, rather than being convulsed by revolution. To hope that it will nevertheless be perceptibly different is to remind oneself that growth is indeed the only end that

democratic higher education can serve and also to remind oneself that the direction of growth is unpredictable.

Taken together Kompridis and Voparil demonstrate that there is a great deal of space within the Rortian perspective from which to critique, theorize, and transform society. Rorty may not exploit all of this space to the fullest but it is available to others to refine and use. There is no fixed Rortian world but instead the space for a range of philosophical (and other) stances. Together they suggest that the space Rorty delimits is an evolving one, continually in flux as it adapts, and we with it, to ever new contingencies. Moreover, as I have argued, those who are less sympathetic to Rorty and wish to continue with more traditional modes of critique, argumentation, and theorizing, can also find their space within the conversation. Far from closing down the space for intellectual life, as his critics claim, Rorty opens up new avenues for redescription, irony, and narrative, to add to (but not supplant) the more established practices of normal academic discourse, suggesting only that these new ways of thinking may aid us in the pragmatic task of socio-political problem-solving.

In recognizing this, though, we should not overlook Rorty's more moral, and I believe, sounder, reason for playing down the role of the intellectual and the need for theory. This reason is that we do not need to be a philosopher, or theorist, or any other type of highly educated person in order to recognise injustice and formulate programmes of reform. This is a point that Rorty makes repeatedly; for instance he claims that much socio-economic repression is:

> so blatant and obvious that it does not take any great analytic skills or any great philosophical self-consciousness to see what is going on.

And I think Rorty (1991c: 16) is right in saying that:

> contemporary radicals have no ... specific revolution to support. [Their desire for revolution] is, perhaps, the result of an understandable rage at the very slow extension of hope and freedom to marginal social groups, and the frequent betrayals of past promises. But I do not think that the over-theoretical and over-philosophical form this rage is currently taking is of much use.

In developing these alternative routes, however, I would argue that we should heed Grey's (1998: 265) warnings against a too crudely utilitarian assessment of philosophy (or any other arcane academic pursuits):

> Pragmatists ask, in assessing theories, what good they are for anything. But an answer to this question must, pragmatically, take context into account. In the philosophical context, it is enough that a question should provoke wonder or curiosity, and should lead to interesting arguments, explanations, or speculations.

I would also not follow Rorty all the way in viewing philosophy, in particular, as only a problem-solving activity, but rather embrace Fuller's (1982: 374) suggestion that we think of philosophy as a problem-generating activity, i.e. one which raises questions, by refusing to take the world, society, ourselves in any way for granted:

> a "well-formed" philosophical problem does not suggest a means toward its own solution, but, rather, deprives us of the means that we would most naturally turn to in attempting a solution. And here we should recall how, in denying the adequacy of conventional answers to apparently simple questions, Socrates generated the deep problems of metaphysics.

At times Rorty himself comes close to taking this position; for example, when he suggests that:

> we should relax and say, ... that we in the humanities differ from the natural scientists precisely in *not* knowing in advance what our problems are, and in not *needing* to provide criteria of identity which will tell us whether our problems are the same as those of our predecessors (1982c: 218).

This perhaps also lies behind both what Rorty (1994a: 63) calls his attempt to:

> complicate the traditional distinctions between the objective and subjective, reason and passion, knowledge and opinion, science and politics

and his contention that:

> the real social function of humanistic intellectuals is to instil doubts in the students about the students' own self-images, and about the society to which they belong ... [to] ensure that the moral consciousness of each new generation is slightly different from that of the previous generation (1989e: 127).

To my mind this has been Rorty's signal achievement – to generate new problems for politics, philosophy, and pragmatism and in so doing to reinvigorate moribund debates.

Conclusion

My aim in this dissertation has been to defend the basic contention that Rorty's political ideas are worth taking seriously because they offer an original and distinctive conception of the self, society, and community, and their interactions. In order to do this I have sought to examine sympathetically Rorty's pragmatic liberalism, especially as articulated in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a), in order to develop and defend a version of it which overcomes some of its more problematic aspects. In this conclusion I will focus on the key elements of Rorty's liberal lexicon and how they have been examined, interpreted, re-interpreted and added to in the course of this dissertation.

The key lexical elements of Chapter One were: the self (to which were added human and person), vocabulary and final vocabulary, contingency, cruelty and irony. I argued that Rorty is concerned to articulate a notion of the self which resists attempts to subsume it under some other category, such as human being, or person. This self, Rorty proposes, should be seen as a self-weaving web of beliefs, a notion which in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a) he attempts to capture with the idea of a vocabulary. This self-weaving web is, Rorty maintains, wholly contingent, and I argued that we should understand by this that it is influenced, but never determined, by its environment, natural and social. To be a self then, is for Rorty, to be in a state of flux or becoming in which the web of beliefs constantly reshapes itself in response to its environment. Some parts of the web, however, will be more resistant to change than others, and these most resistant parts Rorty calls the final vocabulary. Rorty offers but does not prescribe the liberal self as one to emulate. The final vocabulary of this liberal self includes a moral vocabulary focused on the notion of cruelty, and in particular humiliation. While noting that this focus on cruelty is not without its problems, among them its vagueness and its lack of any clear prescriptive character, I argue that the liberal self, committed to the reduction of cruelty, is nevertheless the moral heart of Rorty's socio-political project. It is from the perspective of the liberal, so understood, that I seek to make sense of the rest of Rorty's work. This task is made difficult, however, because Rorty himself adopts a different perspective, namely that of the liberal ironist. In trying to make sense of this other perspective I argue that irony, under various descriptions, becomes indistinguishable from skepticism, neurosis, and hypocrisy. I argue that even if we can find some creative solution to save the notion of irony, the liberal ironist remains an unstable ideal, and an unsuitable perspective from which to think about the political. This difference of perspective between the liberal and the liberal ironist is the first, and perhaps most fundamental, difference between the Rorty that emerges from my reading of his work and those that might emerge from other readings, including Rorty's own.

The second fundamental difference, which follows from this and emerges in Chapter Two, is that I eschew the strong public/private distinction on which Rorty draws so heavily in *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (1989a), and centralize, instead, the notion of conversation. The important lexical

items in this chapter were, not surprisingly: private, public, incommensurability and conversation. I argued that Rorty's attempt to reconstruct the public/private distinction as being a matter of incommensurable vocabularies is deeply incoherent.   Rorty's formulation of the private/public distinction is an attempt to underwrite and justify the transformation of what is ultimately a personal choice on the part of the liberal ironist – "I will keep my irony private" – into a general social injunction that all irony should be kept private. Rorty is all too aware that the sorts of reasons that would count for the liberal ironist as justifying his choice – the desire to avoid humiliating others through redescription, the desire to keep the public institutions and life of liberal democracy stable – would not count as reasons for a non-liberal ironist. Rorty attempts, therefore, to ground the general injunction in something stronger and more objective, namely the incommensurability of private and public vocabularies. I argued that we have no reason to think that there are indeed two such types of vocabularies, still less that they are incommensurable, and that Rorty can insist on this distinction only on pain of going against his own broader metaphilosophical position.

Starting from the position of liberal, rather than liberal ironist, I advocated that the model of society which best follows from Rorty's metaphilosophical commitments is one grounded in the notion of conversation. I argued that we should resist defining conversation too strictly, viewing it only as a multivalent persuasive activity.   The conversational *society* is one which seeks to extend participation by its members through the welcoming, and even active encouragement, of alternative positions, voices, and forms, while remaining resolutely liberal in its sensitivity to potential moments of cruelty and humiliation within its practices. This ideal of society is, I argued, in sharp contrast to the private/public model which Rorty invokes. The latter seeks to prevent cruelty and humiliation by relegating alternative voices, forms and positions to the private sphere and has the effect of severely restricting, if not ending, conversation. It thereby also reduces the possibilities for a more inclusive cosmopolitan community of the sort to which, I believe, Rorty aspires.

Rorty rests his hopes for the creation of such a cosmopolitan community on the notion of solidarity, which is the key lexical element explored in Chapter Three, along with the related terms of personhood, community, ethnocentrism, and imagination. The conception of personhood we find in Rorty's work might be characterized as communitarian. To be a person, which is nothing more than to be able to demand that others treat one morally, is, according to Rorty's account, derivative of my being a member of a community, or in other words, a group which considers itself to be distinctive from (and probably superior to) at least one other group in ways which confer on *it* the right to respect. If another's personhood depends on membership of my community, though, what of our moral obligations to those who do not belong to it? Rorty proposes his account of solidarity, I argued, as a means to answer this question. In brief, Rorty's answer to these questions is that the other's personhood derives from my coming to see them as a member of my own community, as "one of us". As our original sense of "us" is imaginatively expanded in this way, to become

more inclusive and cosmopolitan, it pushes us in the direction of all of humanity. The question that confronts us in thinking through solidarity can be phrased as a question regarding how we may come to see others as being the same as "us" while also recognizing and respecting what makes them different. At its best Rorty's conception of solidarity opens up a space in which we can begin to think through this very real dilemma; at its worst, though, it simply vacillates between an empty universalism and ethnocentrism. I argued that this "worst" arises out of Rorty's attempts to fit solidarity into a (non-existent) space between his construction of the public and the private with the consequent tendency to over-emphasize the role of imagination and reading. I proposed instead that the conversational model brings out the best features of Rorty's ideal, allowing us to see the other and myself as persons simply by virtue of our membership of a new cosmopolitan community, all the while acknowledge that this community is something which we aim towards, and are in the process of constructing, rather than something which pre-exists us and which places demands on us.   Thinking of solidarity as something we extend through conversation, I argued, also reminds us that it is an active process in which our understandings of ourselves and others, of our shared social and natural world, and the terms of our engagement with it and each other are constantly subject to recreation through negotiation. This emphasis on solidarity as something we negotiate through conversation rather than create through imagination and reading is the third important difference between Rorty and myself, although it is, more than the other differences perhaps, merely a matter of emphasis.

If the conversational model is to do the work that I have argued it is capable of, however, it requires some account of power. Rorty, unfortunately, says little about the workings of power and so, in Chapter Four I offered an alternative account which draws on both Steven Lukes and Iris Marion Young. This is the fourth important difference between us: that I articulate a notion of power which Rorty neglects to do, and so add an item to Rorty's liberal lexicon. The conversational model, I argued, needs such an account of power for two reasons: to illuminate how we may ensure that all comers are included, really included, in the conversation of society and how we may justify the exclusions that we do make; and, to explain how we ensure that in including others in the conversation we avoid humiliating them. I argued that, while these different sets of problems do not allow of a single solution, and while cruelty is not entirely eradicable, vigilance to the manifold ways in which power can operate to inhibit the conversation, to impose constraints on participants and topics, is one of the ways in which we give concrete detail to the abstract liberal injunction to avoid and diminish cruelty.

I used Lukes' seminal distinction between three views of power to clarify what sort of account of power was needed to supplement Rorty's work and I argued that it was the sort of account which Lukes labels the "two-dimensional view", which recognizes the role of power in setting the social or conversational agenda and regulating participation in the conversation, and thereby sustaining existing social and political arrangements. I then turned to Young in whose work, I argued, we can

find a useful starting point for such an account by using her ideas on oppression and domination to illuminate the issue of power at work, and help us in find ways to deal with it. Young's participatory democracy of politics, I argued, complements the conversational model of society and also gives a directionality and concreteness to Rortian reformism.

In the final chapter I looked at the particular role of the intellectual in the conversation. The key lexical items under discussion in this chapter were pragmatism, philosophy and the philosopher/intellectual. I examined Rorty's rejection of philosophy-as-epistemology in favour of what he calls pragmatism, and argued that this move combines with a variety of other strategies to apparently silence intellectuals. I argued that in spite of these moves, Rorty's philosophy and his own example actually extend the space from which and through which intellectuals can participate in the conversation and its transformation. The final way in which my version of pragmatic liberalism differs, at least in emphasis, from Rorty's concerns the greater space I would allow to reality and science, and to normal discourse; thus allowing greater space for intellectuals to feel valued in the conversation, though without guaranteeing to them any privileged right to speak or be heard.

Despite those differences, however, it seems to me that the basic vision is one that I have found in Rorty's writing rather than imposed upon it. It is a vision of a multivalent, multicultural community in which politics is less a matter of institutions and policies, than of the actions and interactions of its citizens. It is a vision which regards selves, societies, and communities as infinitely perfectible, precisely because it rejects any notion of perfection. It is a vision which prizes human agency and the potential of people to change and improve the conditions of their lives, while simultaneously recognizing that the possibilities of agency may be severely constrained and curtailed by those conditions. It is a vision which, because it rejects grand theory and revolutionary change, calls upon each of us to shape our own corner of the world (however large or small) in the direction of greater and more inclusive participation and negotiation. It is a vision which while it prizes the value of intellectual pursuits, including I think philosophy, reminds us of their often limited utility in our pursuit of freedom, equality, justice and solidarity.

The question that remains is: why *Rorty's* liberalism rather than some other form of liberalism? I have had that question put to me, by various colleagues during discussion of Rorty's ideas, in the form: "It is easy to imagine someone else running your own, or similar arguments, and reaching a different conclusion, one which jettisons, rather than retains, Rorty. Why do you not draw that conclusion?" Having taken the liberty of starting this dissertation on a personal note, I will take the liberty, too, of ending by answering this question in its more personal form.

What attracts me to Rorty, what keeps me coming back to him, is that in the end, as in the beginning, his is a moral liberalism. The very factors that cause political theorists to ignore him –

that he has nothing distinctive to say about the fundamental organisation and control of our political institutions – is the very thing that makes him so important, in my own opinion. Other thinkers do aid me in thinking about the big social questions: freedom, equality, social justice, power, proposing solutions which I may embrace or reject but which in the end require little else from me but that I use my vote wisely, and perhaps think about my position on various issues. Rorty challenges me to go a great deal further. He challenges me to think about what it means to adopt the description "liberal" in a context which is as hostile to it as his own, a context in which "liberal" is synonymous with white privilege and a (purposefully?) ineffectual response to the crime of apartheid. He challenges me to worry about being a liberal in a more visceral and extensive way; to think about what I am actually doing to reduce cruelty, to avoid humiliating others, and to enhance solidarity, not in terms of how I vote, or what policies I support, but in my everyday life and ordinary interactions with other persons who make their call upon me as teacher, colleague, student, friend, or fellow citizen.

Seeing society as a conversation means seeing it as something which we do not merely inhabit but something we (the citizens, not the government or the state) constantly create, sustain, or mutilate in our ways of living together, our being, and our becoming. Rorty does not, I think, offer us any solutions to the problems we confront in the task of creating a multicultural global community of free and equal citizens; but to me at least, he gives reason to hope that together we can find pragmatically workable solutions for, at least, this place at this time.

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[Note: the first date is the the date of original publication in English and is the date used in the body of this dissertation. Dates in brackets refer to the collection from which the papers have been sourced.]

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