Richard Rorty and Cosmopolitan Hope:
A Critical Analysis of Rorty’s Ironism and Antifoundationalism and
Consideration of Their Uses in Forging Cosmopolitan Sensibilities

by

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For Italia, Eddie, Renee, Alexander and Nicholas
ABSTRACT


Dissertation Title: Richard Rorty and Cosmopolitan Hope: A Critical Analysis of Rorty’s Ironism and Antifoundationalism and Consideration of Their Uses in Forging Cosmopolitan Sensibilities

Richard McKay Rorty (October 4, 1931 - June 8, 2007) was one of the most interesting philosophers of modern times. Placing himself within the pragmatist philosophical tradition, Rorty was perhaps most famous for his exploration and defense of what he and others called the “linguistic turn” in philosophy. Rorty paired his commitment to the “linguistic turn” (which has cognates outside of pragmatism) with his commitment to pragmatism. This led him to conclude, *inter alia*, that a wholesale rethinking of philosophy, as a field of inquiry with its own subject matter, was in order. Beyond this, Rorty’s philosophical antifoundationalism, his commitment to Western liberalism, and his own version of ironism led him to abjure *a priori*, dogmatic or religious touchstones for settling matters of public policy or morality. Likewise, he criticized philosophical empiricists for overemphasizing the place of the senses in knowledge formation. Knowledge, for Rorty, was a wholly linguistic affair. These conclusions set him at odds with many of his contemporaries, from John McDowell to Richard John Neuhaus.

Nonetheless, Rorty’s thought is useful for cultural and moral deflationists who labor to bring about a greater understanding of (and a greater desire to understand) alterity. This links-up with the ideas and goals of modern moral and political cosmopolitans. Yet, for Rorty’s neo-pragmatism to be put to the best uses, certain excesses and problems in his philosophy must be explored – and excised. Certain critical questions must be put to his versions of irony, antifoundationalism, pragmatism and liberalism. This includes questioning Rorty’s characterization of religion as “a conversation stopper.” This dissertation considers (i) where and how Rorty’s philosophy is quite valuable to modern cosmopolitan thought, as well as (ii) where and how it actually creates needless hindrances to the achievement of the robust forms of cosmopolitan liberalism Rorty hoped would one day be commonplace – if not ubiquitous.
Often, when authors write prefaces that contain warnings to the effect that the pages to follow amount to a “prolegomenon” or something to that effect, I get suspicious. I want to know what’s missing, and why. I must now bear the uneasiness that motivates such authors to say such things as I reflect upon what I have written here. While I did not intend to write a prolegomenon or a sketch, there are certainly philosophical points that could have been argued in more detail, nuances that could have been teased out more thoroughly, and topics that could have been expanded upon. Since I might wish to turn this work into a book I will no doubt have to expand on some things, as some other things go by the boards. But for now I would like to take the opportunity to offer up some preliminary remarks – remarks to help explain some of the things that I left out, and why I left them out (other than my desire to keep this dissertation to a reasonable length).

On Irony. In what follows, there is a good deal written about Richard Rorty’s version of irony. I wrestled with whether to compare Rorty’s version of irony to other versions, such as those of Kierkegaard (who wrote a good deal on the subject - *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates*) and Friedrich Schlegel. Further, Brad Frazier’s *Rorty and Kierkegaard on Irony and Moral Commitment: Philosophical and Theological Connections* (2003), and Claire Colebrook’s *Irony (The New Critical Idiom)* (2004) as well as her *Irony in the Work of Philosophy* (2003) are all interesting
books on irony that I considered playing-off against my own work, and Frazier’s book takes up themes similar to the ones I take up here. I opted, instead, to treat Rorty’s notion of irony in isolation and as he defined it for his own purposes. That definition is not one that seems laden with doubts and worries about whether or how it links to other definitions or views of irony, as penned over the centuries. As it was Rorty’s definition that fascinated me, and as this work was not intended to be a survey of the various treatments of irony and ironism (of which there are many), I put the comparative approach to the side, to be taken-up another day. A comparative treatment would have been interesting, but it would not have been to the pragmatic purposes that guide my thinking whenever I engage in philosophical reflection – purposes that have to do with forging tools and habits of thought that might, if we are lucky, reduce the amount of violence that follows on political, religious and cultural values about which people tend to be unwilling to compromise. Also, I tire quickly of the game of philosophical hair splitting, and find highly nuanced comparisons of, say, Rorty’s version of an ironist and Kierkegaard’s “pure ironist” philosophically interesting, but of little use. So I set these aside.

On Cosmopolitanism. My explication of cosmopolitanism is sketchy. I did not need more than a sketch – a broad, working definition, really. Since my master’s thesis was on cosmopolitanism, and because I have zigzagged the country giving papers on the subject at various universities, I have read a good deal on the subjects of both moral and political cosmopolitanism. I am aware that there are various forms of
cosmopolitanism, that the history is rich and is informed by deep and soulful thinkers such as Diogenes, Chrysippus, Seneca, Epictetus, and Aurelius, and that cosmopolitanism finds expression in the early Christian movement, from the Pauline epistles to Augustine and beyond. I am also aware of the various objections to cosmopolitanism – many if not most of which are communitarian objections – objections similar to objections leveled against Rortian irony. Much of the history and the objections are left out, as they were, also, not to the purpose, although I do address those that I think are to the purpose.

**McDowell, Reasons and Causes.** As I critique some of Rorty’s ideas about language and knowledge, I make some claims about the nature of reason and justification, claims where I simply naturalize reason and assign it to the “plain of causes,” a move that I lay, in part anyway, at the feet of John McDowell, claiming that McDowell’s arguments in *Mind and World* pretty much boil down, in part, to an attempt to perforate the hard distinction between causes and reasons, without exploding “spontaneity.” This demands a good deal of treatment which I opted to omit, although a more detailed argument for this position was contained in earlier drafts. The arguments leveled at McDowell regarding “re-enchantment” of the world are arguments that are both interesting and worthy of more attention – but not here. My interpretation of McDowell’s work is all I opted to put to work – among other tools – in order to poke holes in what I call Rorty’s “linguistic absolutism.” In any event, I decided that this was not the place to wade into that controversial philosophical water (however scandalous my bald claims may sound, especially to Kantian or Hegelian ears).
Bermúdez, et al. Trying to pry Rorty and his heroes (Wilfrid Sellars, in particular) apart so that I could suggest that “knowing” is not, totally, a linguistic affair is the primary reason that I brought in certain other views of knowledge and inference (such as those of philosopher J. L. Bermúdez), as in Chapter I. I wanted to cast doubt on Rorty’s version of inference (i.e., that inference is coeval with language). I wanted to do this because of my belief that Rorty was simply wrong, and also because of my concern that Rorty’s version of inference does violence to the “space” that other thinkers believe should be preserved for intuition and for the “mindfulness” that other philosophical and religious approaches value (Zen Buddhism, philosophical Taoism and Hinduism, and, inter alia, the works of philosophers such as Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani, whose notions of “nothingness” and “emptiness” (Śūnyatā) are positive (useful) ontological and epistemological ideas (Religion and Nothingness, 1983). These approaches do not place the premium on language that Rorty did. In fact, on these accounts language is often seen as getting in the way of very important discoveries about the self and the world.

That, at least, is the primary reason. The secondary reason is that I wanted to show that, despite this, Rorty was correct to point out, continuously, that we live and move and have our being, mostly, in a house of language. A good deal more could have been said about all of this, but the upshot of it was to help prepare a defense against the charge of relativism so often leveled against Rorty – for our lives do indeed play out in a
game of giving and asking for reasons, do revolve around Bildung (or edification)\(^1\) rather than Śūnyatā.

No doubt there are other lacunae. My hope is to address them as I continue to think through Rorty’s contributions and cosmopolitan philosophy.

D.E.M.

*March 26, 2009*

\(^1\) In *PMN* (pg. 360), Rorty replaces “Bildung” (in a discussion of Gadamer’s hermeneutics) with “edification.” He wrote: “Since ‘education’ sounds too flat, and *Bildung* a bit too foreign, I shall use ‘edification’ to stand for [the] project of finding new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking.” I am, nevertheless, content to swing back and forth between *Bildung* and edification depending on the context.
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Introduction

About two hundred years ago, the idea that truth was made rather than found began to take hold of the imagination of Europe. The French Revolution had shown that the whole vocabulary of social relations, and the whole spectrum of social institutions, could be replaced almost overnight. This precedent made utopian politics the rule rather than the exception among intellectuals. Utopian politics sets aside questions about both the will of God and the nature of man and dreams [instead] of creating a hitherto unknown form of society.

- *CIS*, pg. 3

I shall define an “ironist” as someone who fulfills 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 these 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. . . . I call people of this sort “ironists” because their realization that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed, and their renunciation of the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between final vocabularies, puts them in a position which Sartre called “meta-stable”: never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves.

- *CIS*, pg. 73

This dissertation will argue that Richard Rorty’s neo-pragmatism (specifically, its versions of antifoundationalism and irony) makes important contributions to moral and political cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism is, generally put, an approach to moral, cultural and political matters that assumes that one has exigent obligations to one’s own
“community” (country, state, clan) as well as to peoples outside of that “community” – obligations that cannot be elided without the sacrifice of important ethical principles. In order to demonstrate Rorty’s significance to cosmopolitan thought, some ground clearing will be in order. This ground clearing requires a defense of the following sub-theses:

(1) Rortian antifoundationalism is largely epistemologically and axiologically tenable and does not necessarily lead to invidious relativism or to a caustic disintegration of communal bonds, but rather represents a challenge to members of modern, pluralistic and democratic states to deepen their commitments to pluralism and to cosmopolitan deliberation and practice, and to what I will call, in Chapter IV, cosmopolitan soul making;

(2) Rorty’s concept of irony (hereinafter “Irony” or “Ironism”) represents and amounts to more than an attitude; it is also a virtue that has far-reaching and positive moral and political implications, and need not be deemed limited to an elite group of intellectuals within a democratic and pluralist society (as Rorty himself believed it must be);

(3) All areas of culture, and specifically religion (so pervasive in the various iterations in which it is expressed and lived-out), can benefit from a discussion of the challenges that Rorty’s thought represents, challenges that can lead, both directly and indirectly, to (i) novel thinking and approaches to the religious life and to theologies that are rooted within the various traditions
to which they have application, and (ii) to a new and more nuanced understanding of religion and “secularism,”¹ even though Rorty viewed religion, famously, as a “conversation stopper” – as inherently inimical to wide democratic practice. This discussion need not entail agreement with Rorty in his views regarding religion and religion’s place in his pragmatist, liberal utopia; and

(4) These three sub-theses, taken together, can help to inform a kind of cosmopolitan hope that the *Blut und Boden* differences that separate cultures and peoples (invidiously) can be attenuated – or deflated – *without the loss of firm, salutary and existentially orienting moral, cultural and religious commitments*.

While I will argue these points, I will also provide criticisms of Rorty’s thought, including his stumbling into the fallacy of the excluded middle in his criticisms of various forms of foundationalism and of religion in general, and his complete (and I think needless) rejection of any notion of a common human nature, even where construed in minimalist terms. It is the case with Rorty as it is the case with many philosophers, that it falls to those who follow them to work out the excesses and the kinks in their thought so that their more valuable ideas and insights may be rendered more tenable, coherent and

¹ I shall place the word “secular” and “secularism” in scare quotes throughout this dissertation to draw attention to the fact that I do not take the word to stand for a realm of ideas and practices wholly other than religious ideas and practices. This conclusion is rooted in my understanding of the history and meaning of the word “secular,” which is discussed in Chapter V.
useful. There are many other philosophers who seem too quick to jettison Rorty’s contributions as flighty, relativistic, *invidiously* “ethnocentric,” or even just dangerous. I believe a far more charitable reading of Rorty is both possible and profitable when Rorty is read not merely as operating within (or doing violence to, as some have argued) the pragmatist tradition, or as holding forth against his analytic brothers and sisters, but as largely driven by serious *moral* concerns, the very same concerns shared by many if not most of his critics. Philosopher Michael Bacon is correct when he tells us that Rorty’s thought “is not the confused and pernicious folly that many critics take it to be, and that his own refusal to play by some of the rules set down by philosophers in general, and the classical pragmatists in particular, together with a preparedness to break new ground by offering new images, is an important contribution to contemporary philosophy.”

If I were pushed to state what Rorty’s largest errors were, I would say there are three of them, and that they are as follows. His first error is his assumption that language and socialization go “all the way down,” rather than go *very far* down. This use of the metaphor of depth as it relates to language and socialization is significant. Rorty’s rejection of even a minimalist empiricism remains problematic in the view of many philosophers. His second error is a quite common one (for both philosophers and non-philosophers alike). That is, some of his ideas suffer from the fallacy of the excluded middle, as mentioned – the belief that to achieve a certain sort of cosmopolitan future (his

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pragmatist or liberal “utopia”) we are required to pit one realm of thought against another and then choose between them – for example, one realm called “the secular” against another called “the religious” (or, “tradition”). Using this approach “the religious” gets marginalized, or “gotten over” (see Chapter V). A third error is found in Rorty’s assumption that human beings have the potential for an almost infinite array of personal and cultural possibilities, an almost total malleability – a notion that derives from Rorty’s working assumption that is operative in his first two errors, most notably that there is nothing essential that makes us human other than the ability to suffer pain and, perhaps, to weave and re-weave descriptions of the world. The notion that human beings are infinitely malleable is one of the conclusions sometimes reached in writings by many post-modern philosophers, and it is, I believe, demonstrably false. There remains, it seems to me, an important distinction between opening up thought and culture to new possibilities that were once suppressed by bad meta-narratives or repressive regimes, and assuming that humans can fashion themselves anew at will, sui generis. This distinction tracks the distinction between tenable versions of cosmopolitanism, which understand the general constraints placed upon human beings qua human beings, and untenable, velleitous versions. Radical changes are possible, but there are banisters or constraints that limit the range of possibilities. This error is a kind of “luciferian” or “promethean” one, and it is a strand of thought that runs through Rorty’s works since PMN. In part, it derives from the error of thinking that human beings are not “answerable” to anything other than fellow participants in the various language games in which they are involved.
This plays out in, among other things, Rorty’s debate with McDowell. For Rorty’s construal of McDowell’s “minimalist empiricism” misses the larger point I take McDowell to be trying to make, among others. Even where one does not accept all of McDowell’s arguments *tout court or in toto*, one can see their upshot. I take McDowell to be saying that the “cause/justification distinction” (i.e., the world may *cause* us to hold beliefs, but only human beings can *justify* (give reasons for) the beliefs we hold) is too sharp. This distinction tracks another hard distinction that Rorty liked to use, which is what I will call the “Nature/Bildung” distinction.

While Rorty decries “overdramatizations” (*TP*, 145, 319) of certain philosophical distinctions, which he rightly says causes philosophical pseudo-problems, one can emerge from Rorty’s sharp “cause/justification distinction” with the feeling that yet one more pseudo-problem has been created. Such a pseudo-problem can be dissolved by admitting “justification” and “reasons” to the plain (or set) of causes, albeit that they are types of causes that have a certain quality, specific to creatures like ourselves. A “cause,” just as a “reason” (for action or belief), has a certain *function*. Both are what we reference to understand or account for actions and beliefs. (Admittedly, my view here violates certain Hegelians’ and most Kantians’ sensibilities, sensibilities that prefer to insist that a sharp divide should be drawn between nature and reason, or between the causal world
and the noumenal. Given my compatibilism, I have no use for such a sharp divide.)³ For there is not much light to be seen through the space that exists between the notion that our reasons (crystallized in our beliefs) “shape our actions,” as did Peirce,⁴ and saying that our beliefs cause our actions. For some, this is a perverse way to talk about cognition and the mind, but perhaps no more perverse than saying that warranted assertability and justification are just other ways of talking about truth, as does Rorty. Perhaps there is something to be gained in talking this way, rather than in talking as if reasons and causes lie on separate continuums.

³ Human consciousness is an active quality that grasps percepts, slows and alters the flow of cause and effect relations in a certain sense that pertains to or references some image of ourselves as individuals and members of various communities. We experience time durationally, and within that duration ascertain, ponder, deliberate, postpone, reconsider, reassess, dally, surrender, reframe and perform a host of operations on any possible situation with which we are faced, whether that situation pertains to our emotional life or how we respond to the jammed cellar window. Our freedom would seem to consist in – or just is – our capacities to engage in these internal, mental processes, processes that are relatively idiosyncratic with respect to how we will act or refrain from acting regarding any possibility or situation before us, at any particular time, in any particular place, regardless of whether we have a pattern of acting in certain ways when faced with similar possibilities or situations. We have an internal life that is our own, and even where we have characters and tendencies to act in certain ways, what goes on in that internal life leaves open the possibility of radical change in our actions, even in our desires (wills) themselves. Elsewhere in nature, we do not find or expect rocks or trees to respond to events other than as they have responded to them in the past. Freedom, therefore, is the result of our capacity for an internal dialogue with ourselves (ad se ipsum, as was the phrase with which Marcus Aurelius begins his Meditations) that takes us beyond obedience to the call of basic urges and desires. Such an internal dialogue takes us though the Aristotelian patterns of action or inaction that commence with desire, then leads on to deliberation regarding that desire’s fulfillment, to perception of the practicality of that desire’s fulfillment given the constraints that obtain, to choice regarding that desire, to the act itself. Our capacity for this ad se ipsum is what is assumed to be present in all sane persons. It is what is referred to when people speak of “freedom.” One is “free” insofar as one maintains this capacity, and then acts upon its “edicts.”

Be that as it may, we recall that for Rorty the notion of “divinity” is reducible to authority. In that regard, then, Rorty’s attempt to strip the world (the realm of “brute causes”) of its authority over human freedom, to “de-divinize” it by, in effect, “divinizing” reason and Bildung as the only things to which human beings should answer, disappears. Speaking of the lava coming toward us as a “reason” for our moving in the opposite direction or, alternatively, as a “cause” of our doing so may have disparate senses, and even important disparate senses, but these two ways of putting the matter are not as alien to one another as Rorty seemed to think (and as many other philosophers think), and as McDowell struggled, in his own way, to show with notions such as “second nature,” and (pace Sellars) the “logical space of reasons” and “the logical space of


6 An understanding of the German Bildung tradition is to the point here, as it gives us a genealogy of the concept of Bildung, how it came to be that Bildung was thought to refer to something wholly other than “nature.” Philosopher Jim Good tells us, in a paper delivered at the 2007 conference of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy: “The German term Bildung dates to 16th century Pietistic theology, according to which, the devout Christian should seek to cultivate (Bildung) his talents and dispositions according to the image of God, which was innate in his soul. In addition to this theological usage, Paracelsus (1493-1591), Jakob Böhme (1575-1624), and Leibniz (1646-1716) also used the term in natural philosophy to refer to ‘the development or unfolding of certain potentialities within an organism.’ [Emphasis added.] In the 18th century, Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), the founding father of the Jewish Enlightenment, used the term in the sense of unfolding one’s potential in an influential essay in 1784, ‘What is Enlightenment?’, identifying Bildung with Enlightenment itself. Pedagogical theorists, like Joachim Heinrich Campe (1746-1818), also focused on how pedagogical reform could promote the development (Ausbildung) and education (Bildung) of the citizenry. By the end of the 18th century, Bildung was becoming a term with not only spiritual, but also philosophical and political connotations. Increasingly, Bildung was associated with liberation of the mind from tradition and superstition. . . .” (http://www.philosophy.uncc.edu/mleldrid/SAAP/USC/pbt1.html, as of 3/7/2009.)
The moment the process of reasoning (following trails and webs of inference) moves from deliberation to actual choice (whether it is the choice to deliberate further or the choice to effect some environmental or cultural change), it transforms itself into a cause of action (or inaction). None of this strikes me as reductionist; it merely expresses, in an alternative, therapeutic description, that human beings are able to generate causes for action (or inaction) that go beyond the “brute causes” in the world. If this seems merely semantic, so be it. Semantics can be useful in therapy. To continue to call that occasion of choice a reason for action rather than a cause is but a habit of speech that has both its practical and mischievous uses. Nothing I am saying here should be taken to suggest that reasons and lava are the same sorts of thing, only that they may and do function as the same sorts of thing. To say, then, that to be rational is to be engaged in the process of giving and asking for reasons is just to say that, since we recognize, mutually, our capacity for choice based upon considerations other than “brute causes” such as the sight of the lava coming toward us, we expect one another to act, more often than not, in accordance with considerations other than such brute causes. The heat of the lava, the cold of the snow, the wetness of the water, are not, when we are faced with them, taken by creatures like us to provide a sufficient explanation for our actions, actions which are more often than not rooted in Bildung (nomos) rather than “nature” (phusis) – as Rorty, rightly, says. But that we turn to Bildung, to a thick soup of cultural inferences more often than we turn to the “brute causes” of the world that exist independent of our

preferences, needs and desires, is only to replace one type of cause with another, and to assign an honorific label to one, calling it a “reason.” I do not say that the application of this honorific label is wrong, so long as it does not suggest that that which wears it is wholly other than the natural order. We human beings, whose plans of life are often most concerned with Bildung, understand that there are times when we must, in order to act “appropriately” (by the lights of our community), plunge into the lava (or expose ourselves to bullets, or defy gravity, or endure the mountain snow, or carry quadruplets to term), even at the sacrifice of our lives, since we could not face our kin or countrymen, who have provided us with a life-world, were we not to do so. I will have more to say about this in Chapter I. The point I wish to begin to make here is that Rorty himself “overdramatizes” certain distinctions.

The three errors I have sketched all point to excesses of thought aimed in a single direction, excesses that have led many other philosophers and intellectuals scratching their heads. Yet, it is not so simple a thing to uncover just where the wrong turns are that led Rorty to these errors. Because of his gifts as a philosopher and as an essayist, his rejoinders to his critics seem convincing, even decisive. But what they show instead is that Rorty’s errors will not be uncovered in the webs of arguments and rhetoric that he offers-up, but in the very assumptions about language and empiricism, about culture and human nature to which he has held fast for decades, assumptions that have formed a tight, coherent web of ideas that ordered Rorty’s outlook on everything from
philosophy to politics. And yet, surprisingly, uncovering the flaws in those assumptions (and in Rorty’s excesses) does not result, in my view, in the collapse of the usefulness of either his antifoundationalism or his Ironism, and this is something critical that I wish to stress. Once we deal with Rorty’s excesses, we who are concerned with greater and not less communication between cultures, religions and communities, we who are concerned with greater exchanges of ideas about human possibility, can still claim in Rorty a powerful, erudite and sophisticated ally. I suppose it is safe to say that in many ways what I want to do here is rehabilitate Rorty and to show how his thought may be used toward the ends indicated.

It is serendipitous that it is precisely the dogged consistency of Rorty’s thought, its “violence of direction,” to pick up a line from Emerson, that allows these large errors to be followed down to their roots and teased out so that what remains can serve the purposes that he hoped his writings would serve. Rorty, like his hero, John Dewey, is nearly thoroughly consistent (one can almost predict what Rorty will argue from one volume of his Philosophical Papers to the next, even where the subject matter is different). This consistency is pointed out and characterized by Rorty himself, in a version of his essay “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre”:

I am a hedgehog who, despite showering my reader with allusions and dropping lots of names, has really only one idea: the need to get beyond representationalism, and thus into an intellectual world in which human
beings are responsible only to each other. . . . I am suggesting that we see the literary culture as itself a self-consuming artifact, and perhaps the last of its kind. For in utopia the intellectuals will have given up the idea that there is a standard against which the products of the human imagination can be measured other than their social utility, as this utility is judged by a maximally free, leisured, and tolerant global community. They will have stopped thinking that the human imagination is getting somewhere, that there is one far off cultural event toward which all cultural creation moves. They will have given up the identification of redemption with the attainment of perfection. They will have taken fully to heart the maxim that it is the journey that matters.  

And yet, there is something about this “violence of direction,” this “one thought” so prevalent among serious thinkers. For as Emerson tells us in his essay “Nature,” “Nature sends no creature, no man into the world, without adding a small excess of his proper quality. Given the planet, it is still necessary to add the impulse; so, to every creature nature added a little violence of direction in its proper path, a shove to put it on its way; in every instance, a slight generosity, a drop too much. Without electricity the air would rot, and without this violence of direction, which men and

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women have, without a spice of bigot and fanatic, no excitement, no efficiency.”⁹ I can’t read that passage without thinking of Rorty, as well as many other gifted intellectuals. The consistency of thought, the lack of equivocation or hedging, provides solid handles by which to grasp the thought all the more firmly, and to tease apart ideas all the more cleanly.

We have in the passage in which Rorty describes himself as a “hedgehog” an insight into his “ultimate concern” (a Tillichian expression that I use quite deliberately here). For Rorty, moving into a world in which “human beings are responsible only to each other” – a world in which human beings are free to describe and re-describe themselves and their world by means of an ongoing conversation and with reference to social commitments – was a significant component of his ultimate concern. This world seems salutary, at least from the point of view of Western liberals. Yet, it is not at all clear why achieving it requires the complete demise of all talk of human nature, human essences, and commitments to moral standards held to rest upon something extra-communal. Further, in this passage we see the seeds of the contradiction (or at least the tension) inherent in Rorty’s abjuration of the idea of “human nature” or nonhuman standards, for Rorty’s ultimate concern is dripping with unexpressed assumptions about the way human beings – all human beings – are “meant” to live, i.e. with reference to a baseline of tolerance, freedom, mutual assistance, and charity. He seems to confuse the

fact that human beings have chosen or perhaps *relented* to other baselines (axiological standards) as sufficient reason to conclude that *no* such assumptions are valid, that liberal ideas about freedom and cosmopolitan hope are *merely* a contingent, historical *fluke*, like Confucianism, fascism and the motor car were contingent, historical flukes. Yet, if one pores over the books, palimpsests, codices and papyri of all the world’s cultures, one can’t help coming away with a sense of the remarkable *consistencies* there were in the way our ancestors valorized freedom, justice, joy, fraternity, friendship, sublimity, and knowledge, even though *our* versions of these human goods had never occurred to them. These valorizations, these “goods,” are all pretty much the same today as they ever were, and this may be the reason that Rorty was so immovable in his commitment to liberalism and cosmopolitanism, despite his commitment to what I shall call the dual “fallacies of contingency and contextualism” – that is, the fallacies that attach to the belief that since things can always be other than they are, such necessarily rules out any strong claims that there is a trans-cultural *telos* or nature that resides within the human breast. This *telos* or nature is what leads Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen to proffer their notion of the *human* (not the Bangladeshi or Canadian) “capabilities.”

An alternative perspective is

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10 In considering the question of social justice and morality, Nussbaum (*pace* Sen) has devised what she calls the “capabilities approach” – in part as a response to those schools of moral philosophy that seem to lose sight of their objectives and either trail off into absurdities or simply fail to consider things which *have to* matter more than the theory allows. Thus she offers not a theory of justice based upon utilitarian, Kantian or communitarian imperatives alone, but rather an approach based upon holistic, cross-disciplinary reasoning, a study of philosophy, law, human psychology and cultural anthropology as they have taught us about the minimum social goods that are generally required for human flourishing. We are capable of and need a minimum portion of health, bodily integrity, sensory pleasures, time and resources to use our imaginations, time for
easily put forth, i.e. that the history of the species pretty much bespeaks what Hegel suspected – a movement, although by no means certain and by no means direct, toward freedom. Tyrants, fascists and megalomaniacs are not long suffered, even if they are suffered too long. There is something in us which rebels, at some point that is set by a plethora of considerations that cannot be divined in advance – but the rebellion always comes, if not in wholesale communal revolt, then in small pockets of resistance.

It was Rorty’s excesses and his ability to argue for them, brilliantly, that challenged his critics to think more deeply about their claims in favor of things like human essences and universal moral truths. Yet all that Rorty hoped for can be achieved without disengaging language (and socialization) from the world that is, on the account of most other philosophers, independent from all or any particular human interests, and without creating yet more dualisms, such as between the “secular” and the religious, or between “mind” and “world.” Rorty’s three errors actually make it more difficult to bring about the liberal utopia he hoped for, since they serve to block rather than enhance communication across cultures through the building of bridges of understanding and commonality that extend beyond mere contingent practices. It is hard to have a

thought and reflection, time and resources for the use and enjoyment of a range of emotions, training in practical reason so as to set down a plan of living, affiliation in communities, productive engagement with other species, play and leisure, a good measure of control over our fates, autonomy to plan the life that is good for us individually. The upshot of Martha Nussbaum’s capabilities approach is that a society that does not provide for the times, places and resources to meet these needs in its members ought not be considered fully just, because it has not provided to all what is their due in view of her understanding of human flourishing.
“conversation” with those whose views you find retrograde or silly, but who themselves take those views as essential to who they are.

Nevertheless, Rorty provided a set of significant tools for the creation of a cosmopolitan sensibility of the type that both Kwame Anthony Appiah and Martha Nussbaum describe in their various works.11 But in making my case, I shall not call up the works of modern or contemporary thinkers only, although many are good exemplars of the type of cosmopolitanism to which I refer, but I intend to at least refer to ancient religious and “secular” sources of similar ideas, and most notably, for the purposes of this writing, the Gospels and the epistles attributed to Paul, as well as to the Stoics. I do this, in part, to show why I think Rorty was wrong to establish the “secular”/religious dualism that makes an appearance throughout many of his books and essays. A mature and tenable cosmopolitanism need not be one that has no truck with religious ideas, or God-talk, or traditionalism. It need only call for an awareness of the contingency of culture, that cultural practice and ideas have histories set in motion by human beings for various human purposes, and so can be altered or rethought. The “danger” that a culture faces is the possibility of its seduction by other cultures. The cosmopolitan realization is that all of our cultures are the products of myriad seductions. At the same time, by the very use of the word “seduction,” I suggest, as Rorty suggests by using the same word in his

description of the ironist, that there is an awareness that something of value, something that has provided an identity and a direction, may be at stake. Seductions are not mere or capricious choices to reach for that which appears to be valuable or sweet; they involve a power to draw one away from that which one has already considered valuable. There is a cost to seduction, as Rorty well understood. His sketch of the ironist seems curt – but upon a close reading Rorty demonstrates a deep understanding of the shape of the character required to live the ironic life. It is, indeed, a life with which most Western intellectuals have more than a little familiarity.

Of course, it is arguable that the paradigm example of a sensibility that is at the other end of the spectrum from the sensibility of the ironist is that of the religious dogmatist (although we see the traits, as pointed out by Robert Brandom, infra, of such dogmatism in political and cultural movements as well). Indeed, it is not unusual that where one thinks of religion in general terms one expects a certain degree of dogmatic attachment to collections of metaphysical/theological ideas. It is even common to think of religion as essentially dogmatic. Yet scholars and theologians in Judaism and Christianity (not to mention in “Eastern” traditions) have for many years argued that at the heart of religion what is found isn’t dogma (uncriticizable metaphysical and moral claims), but narratives that provide meaning to life and wisdom for living, narratives that can be interpreted and reinterpreted by each succeeding generation (as is clearly seen in the rabbinical traditions of Judaism, and to some degree in ishtihad in Islam, as but two
examples). That being so, the work that Irony may do in social axiology may also be
done in the sphere of religion, as well as in sustained and critical reflection about the
meaning of one’s religious narrative in toto, or what I will, henceforth, loosely call
“theology” (loosely because open enough to encompass traditions that are not
theocentric). But so long as we take the essence of religious belief to rest in dogma, as it
seems Rorty did, we will think it odd to claim that Ironism can have much to do with
theological and religious commitments. Yet Ironism not only has theological and
religious uses for the modern religious thinker and theologian, but important theological
and religious uses that attend Jewish and Christian ideas of communal love and radical
existential freedom of the type that was at the foundation of Rorty’s various utopian
visions. Gianni Vattimo (who engages in a series of exchanges with Rorty in FR) finds
the Christian theological notion of kenosis useful on this point – the notion that God
emptied himself to make space for radical human freedom without coercion, an “act”
which makes the “secular” the fullest expression of the Christian message (the fullest
expression, that is, of God’s love for “Man” is evidenced in God’s turning over to the
human creation the right and the power to forge our own destiny). ¹² This notion is not far

¹² Romans 8:12 references “the glorious freedom of the Sons of God.” A 1965 declaration of the
Vatican Council addressing the right to religious freedom, for example, affirmed the fundamental
autonomy and dignity of the individual: “The declaration of this Vatican Council on the right of
man to religious freedom has its foundation in the dignity of the person, whose exigencies have
come to be and are fully known to human reason through centuries of experience. What is more,
this doctrine of freedom has roots in divine revelation, and for this reason Christians are bound to
respect it all the more conscientiously. Revelation does not indeed affirm in so many words the
right of man to immunity from external coercion in matters religious. It does, however, disclose
the dignity of the human person in its full dimensions. It gives evidence of the respect which
removed from James’ notion, found in his *Pragmatism and Religion* (1907), i.e. the idea that the religious undertaking is the quest of the free soul, and so is best understood as fraught with risk, with no guarantees of “salvation,” and best viewed as an adventure that entails growth and the expansion of ideas, as well as the attainment of a deep existential sense of meaning within lived experience.

As I argue in Chapter V, the ironist *can* take the view that the religious life and “doing theology” are salutary undertakings, just as she may hold that the life of the mind and “doing philosophy” are. As intimated, I have no single religious tradition or theological school in mind when I employ the word “theology” in this dissertation. (My use of the word “theology” extends beyond the Christian or Jewish use of the term to include serious and sustained arguments, critiques, enquiries and ruminations that surround “God-talk” in general, although many of the examples I will use are from the Christian and Jewish traditions, largely because I know these traditions best.) Ultimately, what will be argued is that better understanding of one another as members of

Christ showed toward the freedom with which man is to fulfill his duty of belief in the word of God and it gives us lessons in the spirit which disciples of such a Master ought to adopt and continually follow.” (*Dignitatis Humanae: On the Right of the Person and of Communities to Social and Civil Freedom in Matters Religious* (December 7, 1965)). The idea of *kenosis* or divine kenotic “self-emptying” may be noted as early as in Philippians 2:7. It is of note that this notion of *kenosis* bears certain similarities to Jewish Kabbalah, especially to Isaac Luria’s notion that God (or, more accurately, the “Ein Sof”) withdrew into Himself to make space for “creation” and thus human self-creation and autonomy. Gianni Vattimo sees this space as the space of “secularism,” and so secularism is the highest expression of divine love, for it is the space of radical human freedom, radical stewardship of Man over his own affairs.

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communities, whether distal or local, requires newer and more charitable interpretations of our various religious traditions such that those who adhere to one can come to see themselves, at least theoretically, in another. This need not require the collapse of all religious traditions into one another, in an act of what may be called “bad syncretism.” Rather, the idea is to come to understand – and come to terms with – the historical and genealogical antecedents of and within other traditions. Religious traditions are themselves “meta-stable” – a fact often disclosed in graduate programs in comparative religion and in most main-line seminaries but not often mentioned within and among the ranks of religious adherents (or, perhaps, in many Western philosophy departments).

The future of religious inter-existence calls for shifting the emphasis away from epistemological certainty and toward agape and humility, shifting attention, in a manner of speaking, from the vision of Aquinas to the vision of St. Francis of Assisi, from the Protestant purity of Pat Robertson and the Catholic legalisms of Pope Benedict XVI, toward the religious “messiness,” intimacy and magnanimity of Jalaluddin Rumi and Thomas Merton. Such shifts of perspective would, as both Rorty and Vattimo argued, place love and the intimate religious experience, rather than knowledge and obedience, at

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14 I prefer to use the word “adherent” instead of “believer” when referring to members of various religious communities. It is simply a better descriptor, especially given that “belief” has a different texture when understood in religious contexts. It is not, as Peirce might have said, a state where all real doubts are settled, rather it is a state of assent to engage the world from a certain narrative perch. It might very well be a good idea if religious adherents drop the use of the term “believer” altogether, since it muddies up discussions between themselves and those moderns and post-moderns who are apt to ask misguided questions about the bases for their justifications, i.e. moderns and post-moderns who don’t understand that religion and science like poetry and science, use two different vocabularies, and that the criteria of justification remain different between them.
the center of most religious narratives, and move religion into a more sanguine relationship (in this post-modern age) with art, philosophy, science, literature and technology, and allow the religious person the “right” to claim a manner of being in the world that he or she finds critical to an understanding of the human condition, just as the poet or artist must have her poetry or art to come to terms with that condition. This explodes one of the dualisms that Rorty beckoned us to adopt if we are to, on his account, be good liberals in the Rortian utopia. Had Rorty only read more modern theology and surveyed more approaches to religion, he would have known that, in many ways, various traditions had already “gone ironic.” It is true that theology does not always translate into the ideas and attitudes of the religious adherent, but at least it would have been clear that dogmatic assumptions in religion have been waning for many decades. Especially in Protestantism, even where commitments to the “truth of the Risen Christ” and other core teachings are preserved, the vast amount of reflection can be described as Wittgensteinian – a realization that what is at work in the various confessions and movements are narrative threads, language games, lenses through which to view the world. There are many who attend church or synagogue who are quite dubious about some of the “truths” within their traditions, yet who see the power in the narratives that give those traditions shape, and meaning to the lives of their adherents. Rorty himself was much less concerned with “truths” than what was or is done with them in the public square. As I will show, it was in fact those who professed adherence to those “truths” that made Rorty’s liberal public square possible – a fact he seemed often to have forgotten. As Alan
Wolfe points out, liberalism needed its Diderot and Voltaire. But where would it be without its Locke and Rousseau?

Rorty’s neo-pragmatist excesses (and, I suspect, his personal sensibilities as well\textsuperscript{15}) led him to speak too generally about “religion,” an uncharacteristic intellectual sloppiness. As Jeffrey Stout points out in his *Democracy & Tradition*, after critiquing Rorty’s famous notion that religion is a “conversation stopper”:

> I came of age ethically, politically, and spiritually in the Civil Rights movement, where I acquired my democratic commitments from prophetic ministers. In college, when I moved rapidly down

\textsuperscript{15} In his essay “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids” (hereinafter *Trotsky*), which is included in *PSH*, Rorty confesses his anti-religious sensibilities, and some things about its source: “To say that truth is what works is to reduce the quest for truth to the quest for power. Only an appeal to something eternal, absolute, and good - like the God of St Thomas, or the 'nature of human beings' described by Aristotle - would permit one to answer the Nazis, to justify one's choice of social democracy over fascism. This quest for stable absolutes was common to the neo-Thomist and to Leo Strauss, the teacher who attracted the best of the Chicago students (including my classmate Allan Bloom). The Chicago faculty was dotted with awesomely learned refugees from Hitler, of which Strauss was the most revered. All of them seemed to agree that something deeper and weightier than Dewey was needed if one was to explain why it would be better to be dead than to be a Nazi. This sounded pretty good to my 15-year-old ears. For moral and philosophical absolutes sounded a bit like my beloved orchids - numinous, hard to find, known only to a chosen few. Further, since Dewey was a hero to all the people among whom I had grown up, scorning Dewey was a convenient form of adolescent revolt. The only question was whether this scorn should take a religious or a philosophical form, and how it might be combined with striving for social justice. Like many of my classmates at Chicago, I knew lots of T. S. Eliot by heart. I was attracted by Eliot's suggestions that only committed Christians (and perhaps only Anglo-Catholics) could overcome their unhealthy preoccupation with their private obsessions, and so serve their fellow humans with proper humility. But a prideful inability to believe what I was saying when I recited the General Confession gradually led me to give up on my awkward attempts to get religion.”
the path that leads from Schleiermacher to Feuerbach, Emerson, and beyond, I found myself collaborating mainly with dissenting protestants, secular Jews, and members of the radical Catholic underground in the struggle against U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. I have known since then that it is possible to build democratic coalitions including people who differ religiously and to explore those differences deeply and respectfully without losing one’s integrity as a critical intellect.16

Rorty’s sense of “contingency” extends to all forms of cultural expression, save, apparently, religion, which he seems to hold as forever beyond the pale of interior reformation and critique so as to fit with the exigencies of his liberal, pragmatist and cosmopolitan commitments. Again, this indicates a temperamental attitude toward religion as well as a serious failure to consider the polymorphous iterations of religious faith, practice and thought – the possibility (indeed, the fact) – that religious adherents are able to deliberate and participate in liberal politics, while drawing on their religious commitments.17 Further, while Rorty is careful not to relegate the religious to the class of “irrationalists” (he thought labeling those who don’t see the world by the lights of philosophical logic or science as “irrational” is indicative of an intellectual cop-out) he seems to have overlooked a point made by Robert Brandom, also explicated by Stout:


17 See the interesting things being done by The Interfaith Alliance at www.interfaithalliance.org.
First, a claim can be religious without being a faith-claim. It is possible to assert a premise that is religious in content and stand ready to demonstrate one’s entitlement to it. Many people are prepared to argue at great length in support of their religious claims. So we need to distinguish between discursive problems that arise because of religious premises that are not widely shared and those that arise because the people who avow such premises are not prepared to argue for them. Second, as Brandom points out, faith is not “by any means the exclusive province of religion”. . . . Everyone holds some beliefs on nonreligious topics without claiming to know that they are true. To express such a belief in the form of a reason is to make what I have been calling a faith-claim. One would expect such claims to be fairly common in discussions of especially intractable political questions. When questions of this kind get discussed there are typically hard-liners on both sides who not only propose answers, but also claim to know that their answers are right. Yet there is typically a group of people in the middle who are prepared to take a stand, if need be, but would never claim they knew that they were right. The abortion debate is
like this, and so is the debate over the problem of dirty hands in the fight against terrorism. In fact, the phenomenon or nonreligious faith-claims is quite common in political discourse, because policy making often requires us to take some stand when we cannot honestly claim to know that our stand is correct. That is just the way politics is. (Emphasis added.)

Rorty’s Ironism, as defined supra, follows on his antifoundationalism (that is, it follows on the idea that there can be no appeal to something beyond “time and chance” or “non-human” (“God” or “pure reason,” for instance) in order to settle, with finality, that some claim or collection of claims is true and certain knowledge – or is, for that matter, false. His antifoundationalism hangs together with various accounts of anti-realism (cf., for example, Feyerabend) which hold that truth does not “exist” “in the world” over and apart from any claims that we may make about the world, but rather only within the rules of language games (including scientific theories). An antifoundationalist such as Rorty was seeks to overcome any hankering for epistemological certainty, and settle instead into the creation of knowledge as an ongoing, revisable and fallible undertaking and, further, sees knowledge itself as a tool for human flourishing rather than as the ultimate goal of inquiry. There will be no convergence of agreement down the long road of inquiry, a road that is supposed to take the species ever closer to something that looks

18 Stout, pg. 87
like the “truth” about “the way the world really is” – à la Peirce or Quine. Thinkers such as Rorty, who hold no such hope and do not even see the point of such a hope, find the idea of convergence misguided, laden with “logocentrism” (to use a Derrida neologism), and simply abandon convergence talk and move to a Protagoristic notion that whatever “truth” we get we will have to forge in experience using the tools of language. This, some might argue, is a “radical antifoundationalism,” as opposed to what may be called an “attenuated antifoundationalism” that holds out hope for convergence at, at least, some remote future time. But for Rorty such a distinction, one which moves the end zone over

19 Rorty is opposed to Peirce in the belief, argued for by Peirce in his How to Make Our Ideas Clear and elsewhere, that a convergence of opinion that would reveal the way the world is in itself was fated to be achieved down the long road of inquiry: “On the other hand, all the followers of science are animated by a cheerful hope that the processes of investigation, if only pushed far enough, will give one certain solution to each question to which they apply it. . . . Different minds may set out with the most antagonistic views, but the progress of investigation carries them by a force outside of themselves to one and the same conclusion. This activity of thought by which we are carried, not where we wish, but to a fore-ordained goal, is like the operation of destiny. No modification of the point of view taken, no selection of other facts for study, no natural bent of mind even, can enable a man to escape the predestinate opinion. This great hope is embodied in the conception of truth and reality. The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate, is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this opinion is the real. That is the way I would explain reality. But it may be said that this view is directly opposed to the abstract definition which we have given of reality, inasmuch as it makes the characters of the real depend on what is ultimately thought about them. But the answer to this is that, on the one hand, reality is independent, not necessarily of thought in general, but only of what you or I or any finite number of men may think about it; and that, on the other hand, though the object of the final opinion depends on what that opinion is, yet what that opinion is does not depend on what you or I or any man thinks. Our perversity and that of others may indefinitely postpone the settlement of opinion; it might even conceivably cause an arbitrary proposition to be universally accepted as long as the human race should last. Yet even that would not change the nature of the belief, which alone could be the result of investigation carried sufficiently far; and if, after the extinction of our race, another should arise with faculties and disposition for investigation, that true opinion must be the one which they would ultimately come to. ‘Truth crushed to earth shall rise again,’ and the opinion which would finally result from investigation does not depend on how anybody may actually think. But the reality of that which is real does depend on the real fact that investigation is destined to lead, at last, if continued long enough, to a belief in it.”
the horizon and forever out of reach, is ultimately untenable, since there can be no notion of “attenuated antifoundationalism” – there simply is no “really real about the world” that is attainable or which may be captured in a single, all-encompassing, super-vocabulary, and no epistemological telos at which to aim and for which to hope.

Thus, according to Rorty, all we can do is to undertake various “descriptions” and “re-descriptions” of the world – descriptions and re-descriptions that suit our various and changing needs – without anxiety about whether there is an epistemological hard bottom to such descriptions and re-descriptions, a hard bottom that goes beyond language and that allows us to rest securely on the supposedly universally validated “truth of the world” – some minimalist empiricism. We will, as fully plastic and fully malleable creatures, simply remake ourselves and our world as we go, over time, piece by piece, just as the species always has.20 This process of description and re-description does not

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20 In CIS (pg. 187), on the point of what Rorty takes to be the extent of human malleability, he says: “... intellectual gifts – intelligence, judgment, curiosity, imagination, a taste for beauty – are as malleable as the sexual instinct. They are as capable of as many diverse employments as the human hand. The kinks in the brain which provide these gifts have no more connection with some central region of the self – a “natural” self which prefers kindness to torture, or torture to kindness – than do muscular limbs or sensitive genitals.” This belief in the endless varieties of human formations, be they personal or communal, is a very important feature of Rorty’s thought. In is the third error, as pointed out earlier. For while there are far ranging possibilities, there are very few actual absolute novelties in the construction of selves or communities, mostly just variations on a theme. I agree with Rorty to a great extent on human malleability, but I do not follow him into the ether of infinite possibilities, and so I agree with Norman Geras’s criticisms of Rorty on this point: “... people are then more than simply what socialization or acculturation makes of them; permanent features, hence some kinds of universalist claim, should not be so embarrassing.” (Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind: The Ungroundable Liberalism of Richard Rorty, p. 51.) I take seriously the pronouncement by Quoholeth (purported author of Ecclesiastes) that “there is nothing new under the sun,” although I will insert the word “totally” between the words “nothing” and “new.” Both Rorty’s infinite malleability claim and
frequently happen in leaps, but rather in small incremental changes in what we take to be warranted claims, which are often based upon what we take to be axiologically relevant in our various cultural and political contexts. Indeed, for Rorty warrant is determined by such contexts, rather than by the world as such. Such incremental re-descriptions bear analogy to what is described by Otto Neurath, as made famous by Quine in his *Word and Object* – that is, Neurath’s boat metaphor.\(^{21}\) This reweaving of descriptions and beliefs about the world and about ourselves, this retelling of our various stories such that we are liable to, by and by, reconstruct the world and ourselves leads to Rorty’s notion that there are certain kinds of thinker who, accepting this as part of the human condition, live in an ongoing process of self-audits, reviews and reconsiderations of their present exigent commitments, what Paul Tillich referred to as “ultimate concerns”\(^{22}\) and what Rorty referred to as “final vocabularies.”\(^{23}\) For those who grasp fully this process of re-

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Quoholeth’s minimalism must remain unverifiable, and so both claims should be taken with a grain of salt. On my view, the truth is somewhere in the middle. We are more malleable than most think (to all of our continual detriment), and less apt to change our forms of civilization and personal plans of life than many of us would like to believe (to their continual frustration).

\(^{21}\) “Wie Schiffer sind wir, die ihr Schiff auf offener See umbauen müssen, ohne es jemals in einem Dock zerlegen und aus besten Bestandteilen neu errichten zu können.” In translation: *We are like sailors who must rebuild their ship on the open sea, without ever being able to dismantle it in dry dock and reconstruct it from the best components.*

\(^{22}\) See Paul Tillich’s book *Dynamics of Faith*, for example. The expression “ultimate concern” is used in many other books and essays by Tillich, including his *Systematic Theology* (in three volumes).

\(^{23}\) Rorty’s explication of a “final vocabulary” is found at the beginning of Chapter 4 of *CIS*: “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
description and re-weaving, life is lived without guarantees that such final vocabularies are in any way ultimate, infallible, or true about the way the world really is. The “final” in “final vocabularies” is always only contingent, and so unstable, able to be pushed off-center with the right amount of force by competing contenders for “finality” and “ultimacy.” Indeed, it is not because the commitment to a political ideology, to a theological system, to a national identity, to marriage or bachelorhood, to the idea of being a parent or remaining childless, is unstable within itself (that is, these are not internal doubts about the consistency of the vocabulary, although there may be those, too), but rather it is that the ironist is acutely aware of her finitude and fallibilism, the possibility that someone else’s vocabulary picks up important things that her own had not taken into account (the basis of the seduction mentioned earlier).

Ironism entails real uncertainty, the live possibility that one may “change one’s mind” – it is not merely methodological doubt, as in the Cartesian sense. The ironist begins in a state of palpable anxiety or heightened concern, which is only lessened by the firm realization that there is no final vocabulary, for anyone, that is safe from seduction by others. For the ironist, lashing oneself to the mast of one’s own present beliefs won’t do. One has to face the sirens’ music that suggests that one’s world may need to be rethought and reorganized. Yet—and this is quite noteworthy as regards the ironist—this anxiety is the result of the seriousness with which the ironist takes a decision to commit

words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. I shall call these words a person’s “final vocabulary.”
to a final vocabulary – quite the opposite of the charge that she is flighty, a mere kibitzer, a dilettante. It is this latter description of the ironist that critics of Rorty often fail to give due attention. For while ironists are never quite able to take themselves seriously (where “seriously” may be understood to mean “finished”) they do take ideas, praxis and poiesis seriously (where “seriously” may be understood to mean “substantial enough for the establishment of plans of life, communities or civilizations,” and that’s substantial enough indeed), and it is implicit in Ironism that ironists are deadly serious about intellectual integrity, a seriousness that in fact leads them to be ironists in the first place. This is implied, though not clearly stated, in CIS.

Here is the curious thing. The ironist is an ironist because of such intellectual integrity, because “for one reason or another, socialization did not entirely take.” 24 And yet what Rorty failed to see is that the possibility that socialization may not entirely take – thus creating this creature called the ironist – is because of her suspicion that, for example, National Socialism is a violation of human rights and dignity, not merely the rights and dignity of scattered or specific communities, or because of her suspicion that Jesus or Muhammad really is the answer, after all (something that Rorty did not seem to think possible in his sketch of the ironist). Such a view would raise immediate tensions, at least, in the notion that “socialization . . . goes all the way down.” 25 No doubt Rorty would argue that the reason the ironist has doubts about her final vocabulary is simply

24 CIS, pg. 186

25 CIS, pg. 185
because of her exposure to other potential good candidates to replace it (also part of her socialization), rather than something innate in human beings that leads them to think regardless of the manner and mode of their socialization, but seems a kind of self-sealed argument. This self-sealed argument is employed by Rorty because he wants to utterly discount any such notions of innateness, even where one’s appeal to it is minimalist, as is my own appeal to it. This is a symptom of the first error I believe he repeatedly makes throughout his work, and perhaps even of the second, i.e. his commission of the fallacy of the excluded middle, generally speaking. For it may very well be that the simple fact that since thinking is innate, even if it requires rather sophisticated language use to gain a head of steam, we are guaranteed the reaching of a plethora of important conclusions across cultures. What about thinking threatens the possibility of the Rortian utopia? Rorty’s abjuration of all innateness and all notions of a shared human nature were not necessary for his project, and only led him into clashes with other philosophers who saw this abjuration as fishy, as evidence of something not quite right with Rorty’s argument, as most recently exemplified in, inter alia, the criticisms of Edward J. Grippe.26 For it would have been enough to say that the rather impressive malleability of human beings does not allow such innateness and shared nature very much say in how things turn out. But that was too tame for Rorty, who wanted all human action and description to stand in thin air, unencumbered by any shared essences, any innate constraints or powers, other

than, perhaps, the shared desire to avoid pain (as “pain” may be variously construed from culture to culture).

Thus, it comes as no surprise that Rorty defines the ironist as he does, as someone, to reiterate, “who fulfills three conditions: (I) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) *insofar* as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is *closer* to *reality* than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself” (Emphasis added).  

It isn’t without what appeared to be good reasons that Rorty thought that the ironic sensibility was limited to, and *had* to be limited to, a certain select few individuals, even in the “secular” Western context in which tolerance for contingency is more the norm than in traditional cultures – these select few being persons who, for some reason or other, are capable of living in the “meta-stable” condition that he describes.  

27 See second epigraph, above.

28 It is interesting to note that “metastable” meant, for Sartre, a condition associated with bad faith. One wonders whether this was a surreptitious warning to the ironist, a warning against the possibility of entering into bad faith with respect to her final vocabulary, i.e. believing that her final vocabulary is stable, final, non-revisable. It is noteworthy as well how “metastable” is defined in the natural sciences: “Of, relating to, or being an unstable and transient but relatively
members of political communities, as bearers of cultures, requires a significant degree of commitment to communal bonds. Thus, it would seem that such meta-stability as possessed by the ironist would prove too corrosive to such bonds, weakening the affections (the eros) that hold the community together and give it an identity (and self-valorization/-validation) through time. Of course, the knowledge of other political communities and cultures is bound to increase the numbers of persons who live with some degree of so-called meta-stability. So it may be said that every person in a pluralist, democratic society is already meta-stable to some degree, having become so through the sheer exposure to ideas and habits not her own, under a cultural ethos of toleration. Yet Rorty believed that a broad prescription of Ironism, unlike a broad prescription of civic virtue, would actually undermine too many communal bonds. This curious and somewhat elitist conclusion is one that will be taken up herein. What may be said presently and preliminarily is that Rorty offers no good reasons to delimit the set of possible ironists in this way. This was an unfortunate conclusion regarding Ironism, for Ironism’s great promise is that it describes a state of mind and a state of being-in-the-world in which the ever present possibility of a relatively new vocabulary lessens the tendencies toward what Rorty called “cultural imperialism” and “monotheistic delusions of grandeur,”29 and fosters a spirit of creative cooperation, a sense of political and cultural humility, and the

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long-lived state of a chemical or physical system . . .” For a discussion of the scientific definition, go to http://www.answers.com/topic/metastability.

29 TP, pg.146
internalization of fallibilism – all of which may serve to reduce the probability of human atrocities of various kinds. The demolition of claims to ultimate truth about the way the world really is in itself creates clearings for communities that are functionally stable while being self-consciously meta-stable (a form of self-conscious awareness that the need for change may, at least in theory, arise at any moment) in view of the possible need to incorporate into one’s plan of life or into one’s community ideas, habits and practices that had previously been excluded or even viewed as unthinkable (wrong). It is important to explore what this can mean for the development of a future in which the very meanings of “identity” and “alterity” may be rethought.

Notwithstanding its excesses, Rorty’s Ironism is useful to that project of rethinking. It can represent the very heart of a virtue ethics for the 21st century – a virtue ethics that calls for the building up of tolerance for living in such meta-stability, and even the development of a taste for serious cross-cultural experimentation, in order to achieve peace, cooperation and true freedom to select cultural modes that might be useful – all goals that Rorty thought extremely worthy. Ironism, which places the autonomy and dignity of the person above any and all ideas and commitments that would rob that autonomy and dignity, links, without much intellectual tension, to the commandment to practice charity and maintain the agapic concern that is at the center of Biblical and other religious traditions (traditions that may be among those whose vocabularies come to “impress” – traditions that contain vocabularies “taken as final” by a people other than

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one’s own). It is for this reason that I will argue that this seemingly “secular” and corrosive Ironism actually helps to pave the way toward a universal love ethic, a love ethic in which we learn to serve and care for one another as fellow members of the species, rather than serve and care for ideologies, political theories, meta-narratives, and socio-political abstractions that were to serve as mere tools for human flourishing but which wind-up being served by the men and women who fashioned them. This makes Rorty the quintessential anti-idolater, a sort of philosophical “Moses” of the modern age (my reference, of course, being a loose analogy to the golden calf story of Exodus, Ch. 32). I will be saying more about Rorty as anti-idolater in Chapter I, where I will also point out another version of idolatry of which I think Rorty is guilty.

To reiterate, there is a good deal worth preserving in Rorty. To my mind, there is no better antidote to Blut und Boden political and cultural excesses than Rorty’s neo-pragmatic thought. Yet, it must be shorn of its excesses and errors before it can be used in any serious way in the service of the very political and cultural projects to which Rorty himself was committed. Rorty thought, in his hedgehog’s focus on antirepresentationalism, that performing a philosophical lobotomy such that ideas like “metaphysics,” “human nature” and “the gods” could no longer be generated was the best way to go, the best way to avoid the kinds of thoughts that can lead to new Pol Pots and Hitlers. However, lobotomies come with a serious cost. They are the lazy and unimaginative way out – not to mention, the most destructive.
The first two chapters of this dissertation will unpack the problems within Rorty’s thought before I, in the remaining chapters, launch a reformulation that I believe can be put to good use. What I hope will emerge is a “Neo-Rortian” vision that will help blaze the trail toward the cosmopolitan hope shared by so many at this critical moment in history, joining Martha Nussbaum, Anthony Appiah, Amartya Sen and many others who see the construction of cosmopolitan sensibilities as critical for the avoidance of conflicts and, in the language of Samuel Huntington, clashes of civilizations. As philosopher Michael Bacon holds:

> It is in his combination of the two sides of pragmatism—its critique of representationalism, and the role that this critique might play in achieving an antiauthoritarian society—that Rorty’s importance lies.\(^{30}\)

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\(^{30}\) Bacon, pg. xviii
Chapter I

Language, Mind, World

To drop the idea of languages as representations, and to be thoroughly Wittgensteinian in our approach to language, would be to de-divinize the world. Only if we do that can we fully accept the argument I offered earlier – the argument that since truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths.

- CIS, pg. 21

Conversely neither Schumpeter’s phrase ‘relative validity’ nor the notion of a ‘relativist predicament’ will seem in point if one grants Davidson’s claim that new metaphors are causes, but not reasons, for changes of belief, and Hesse’s claim that it is new metaphors which have made intellectual progress possible. If one grants these claims, there is no such thing as the ‘relativist predicament,’ just as for someone who thinks that there is no God there will be no such thing as blasphemy. For there will be no higher standpoint to which we are responsible and against whose precepts we might offend.

- CIS, pg. 50

In order to proceed with a discussion of Rorty’s contribution to cosmopolitanism, it will be useful, if not necessary, to provide some analysis of Rorty’s “linguistic turn,” for it bears directly on questions of ethics, culture, and charges of “relativism” that have been directed at Rorty. Rorty’s linguistic turn derives from a number of strands of thought, and is explicated in many of his works, most notably, perhaps, being PMN, in which he argues against representationalist epistemology, and in CP, in which he lays out his views regarding the consequences of a contextualist and linguistic approach to knowledge production. However, it is hard to completely understand Rorty without frequent references to several of his other works: TLT, CIS, PSH, and his four volumes of
papers, the last of which he published just before his death in 2007. In what follows, I will range across these works.

In this chapter I have opted for a critical explication rather than a mere explication of Rorty’s antifoundationalism since: first, it is more efficient to the purposes of this dissertation (given that the readers are all sufficiently familiar with Rorty’s work); second, it is not my intention to focus merely on the philosophical tenability of his antifoundationalism in this dissertation (which is rather about its uses, although tenability and use are obviously linked); and third, because a critical explication allows for a richer understanding of how Rorty’s ideas fit within the context of some criticisms of it. Hopefully in this way the explication can be made much richer than if a mere survey of Rorty’s arguments and claims were set forth with no critical context. With this critical explication in hand and some critical ground traversed, however, the next chapter will deal more directly with criticisms of Rorty’s thought, especially as it bears on culture, politics and religion. I will follow that chapter with my responses to those critics in an effort to demonstrate just why it is that the uses to which I wish to put Rorty’s thought are justified.

Rorty has readily admitted, throughout his philosophical writings, that he is out of step with many pragmatists and non-pragmatists alike regarding his (what I will call)
“linguistic absolutism” (what Richard Shusterman calls his “global linguisticsism,”31 what Brandom calls a “froth of words,”32 what others, including McDowell, refer to as “coherentism,” and others still refer to as “internalism”) which comes down to a belief that language “goes all the way down” to the point that it swings free from the world in respect of any claim we have to “know” anything at all about the world. That is to say, on Rorty’s account all claims to knowledge are simply a linguistic affair that is played-out in accordance with the rules of various language games (pace Wittgenstein), since language and knowledge (just as language and inference) are (and this is the critical piece) coeval.

This claim that language goes all the way down in the way Rorty thought it does has puzzled and troubled many philosophers who know and respect Rorty but who think that his purely linguistic solution to such “philosophical problems” (see Rorty’s concluding essay in TLT, “Twenty-Five Years After,” for a discussion of what Rorty came to think of both “philosophy” and “philosophical problems”) as arise from subject-centered epistemologies and bad forms of realism is simply off the mark – the wrong cure for the right disease. Those so puzzled (or who simply disagree), for both overlapping and disparate reasons, include John McDowell, Robert Brandom, Hillary Putnam, Richard Bernstein, Jürgen Habermas, Susan Haack, W.V.O Quine and Norman Geras.


Yet Rorty never relented or attenuated his philosophical positions in any discernable way. John Dewey, who remained his principal intellectual hero (by his own account), provides Rorty with the basic framework for his version of antifoundationalism, although, as many philosophers argue, Dewey would not have followed Rorty to some of his most extreme anti-empiricist conclusions (Dewey had great respect for empiricism and did not have the quarrel with “scientific method” that Rorty did, for Dewey believed that this method – the method of experiment and hypothesis testing in general, with all its requirement for maximally disinterested inquiry – was the engine that would move the species toward greater control of its environment or more salutary human relations).33

That said, Rorty’s reading of Dewey is not entirely perverse. Dewey provided Rorty with a set of naturalized ideas concerning knowledge, language, culture, contingency, contextualism, and “logic,”34 and by embedding scientific method within the language

33 See, for example, Dewey’s explications of the usefulness of the scientific method in his *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* as well as *Democracy and Education*.

34 “Logic” was a word the meaning of which was reconstituted by Dewey. As one commentator condenses the difference between what Dewey meant by this word and the way it has been used by most analysts: “The basis of Dewey’s discussion in the *Logic* is the continuity of intelligent inquiry with the adaptive responses of pre-human organisms to their environments in circumstances that check efficient activity in the fulfillment of organic needs. What is distinctive about intelligent inquiry is that it is facilitated by the use of language, which allows, by its symbolic meanings and implication relationships, the hypothetical rehearsal of adaptive behaviors before their employment under actual, prevailing conditions for the purpose of resolving problematic situations. Logical form, the specialized subject matter of traditional logic, owes its genesis not to rational intuition, as had often been assumed by logicians, but due to its functional value in (1) managing factual evidence pertaining to the problematic situation that elicits inquiry, and (2) controlling the procedures involved in the conceptualized entertainment of hypothetical solutions. As Dewey puts it, ‘logical forms accrue to subject-matter when the latter is subjected to controlled inquiry.’” (See article by Richard Feld, “John Dewey,” in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, at http://www.iep.utm.edu/d/dewey.htm.)
games of culture, Dewey provided Rorty (as he so often argued) with the tools to question whether this method should be seen as the übermethod for regulating all forms of inquiry. Dewey wrote, in his expansive *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*:

The wider import is found in the fact that every inquiry grows out of a background of culture and takes effect in greater or less modification of the conditions out of which it arises. Merely physical contacts with physical surroundings occur. But in every interaction that involves intelligent direction, the physical environment is part of a more inclusive social or cultural environment. Just as logical texts usually remark incidentally that reflection grows out of the presence of a problem and then proceed as if this fact had no further interest for the theory of reflection, so they observe that science itself is culturally conditioned and then dismiss the fact from further consideration. . . . This wider aspect of the matter is connected with what was termed the narrower. Language in its widest sense—that is, including all means of communication such as, for example, monuments, rituals, and formalized arts—is the medium in which culture exists and through which it is transmitted. Phenomena that are not recorded cannot be even discussed. Language is the record that perpetuates

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occurrences and renders them amenable to public consideration. On the other hand, ideas or meanings that exist only in symbols that are not communicable are fantastic beyond imagination. The naturalistic conception of logic, which underlies the position here taken, is thus *cultural naturalism*. Neither inquiry nor the most abstractly formal set of symbols can escape from the cultural matrix in which they live, move and have their being. . . . Logic as inquiry into inquiry is, if you please, a circular process; it does not depend upon anything extraneous to inquiry. The force of this proposition may perhaps be most readily understood by noting what it precludes. It precludes the determination and selection of logical first principles by an *a priori* intuitional act, even when the intuition in question is said to be that of *Intellectus Purus*. It precludes resting logic upon metaphysical and epistemological assumptions and presuppositions. The latter are to be determined, if at all, by means of what is disclosed as the outcome of inquiry; they are not to be shoved under inquiry as its “foundation.” On the epistemological side, it precludes . . . the assumption of a prior ready-made definition of knowledge which determines the
character of inquiry. Knowledge is to be defined in terms of inquiry, not *vice-versa*, both in particular and universally.\(^\text{35}\)

Rorty’s view was that if culture and language so condition even the practice of science itself, it should not be difficult to see how inquiry is driven by collections of cultural practices and vocabularies that are seen to be most *relevant* to such practices and vocabularies – and these may not have very much to do with any desire to reach “objective” or “disinterested” conclusions, and so a general “übermethod” would be nothing more than totalizing and scientistic.\(^\text{36}\) Rorty’s break with Dewey and other pragmatists on this point isn’t out of a need to make mischief, but was intended to be freedom preserving, as we will see momentarily. That is, he wanted to preserve space (and honor) for the types of practices and vocabularies (life-worlds) just referenced, especially in what Rorty would call the “private” sphere (where idiosyncratic self-formation need not have much truck with any übermethod, or tests for legitimacy, or tests for authenticity). While grounded in Dewey, he thought it necessary to break free from Dewey’s fixation on the (acknowledged) advantages of scientific method. So we can see both Rorty’s commitment to Dewey as well as his attempt to go beyond Dewey in this respect. Although *TLT*, for example, contains works by many philosophers writing on philosophy of language, many of the roots of Rorty’s views on language, epistemology,


\(^{36}\) See Rorty’s essay “Pragmatism without Method,” in *ORT.*
culture, and metaphysics bore deeply into Dewey’s efforts to, using the pragmatic method generally and the scientific method more specifically, break the back of bad metaphysics, stagnant traditionalisms and dogmatic cultural commitments (typical of most pragmatists), as explicated in such works as *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry, Reconstruction in Philosophy, Art as Experience, Democracy and Education*, and *The Quest for Certainty*. But Rorty believed that the trajectory of Dewey’s thought would have taken him to his own position: while this method has its uses for many things, it need not be applied as universally as Dewey thought. There are places where such method should not be thought the touchstone of inquiry, principally as regards the right of a culture to reweave its systems of beliefs and of individuals to re-weave their self-descriptions. For Rorty, such a method is an objectionable constraint on both (public and private) activities.

This is a principal reason that Rorty, in scores of later essays, talks, and throughout his four volumes of philosophical papers, held to his linguistic absolutism even in the face of some rather convincing criticisms from some of the preeminent philosophers of our day. Along with John McDowell and others, I am among those who are “stuck with philosophical anxieties” about the *radical nature* of Rorty’s tack. However, I do not say this to endorse any particular philosopher’s argument *tout court*, but rather I hold to a basic, minimalist empiricism that strongly suggests that, at a minimum, *consultation of* (if not *answerability to*, as in McDowell’s account) the world
is a check on the plausibility of at least some propositions and statements. (In this regard, I split the difference between Rorty and McDowell.) For it is one thing to tack away from a bad discussion about representationalist epistemologies and pseudo-problems in philosophy, and quite another thing to chart a course for the shoals. No philosopher wants to run aground, even one who sees merit and utility in a particular philosophical “vessel.” In what follows I will try to save the vessel – Rorty’s version of antifoundationalism – by making a slight course adjustment. This vessel is worth saving, because its cargo is nothing less than a new way of thinking about politics and culture, and, smuggled aboard (unbeknownst to Rorty himself, or so I will argue), a new way of thinking about religion and faith such that they may flourish and be compatible with a world of constant innovation, change and clashing values.

Norman Geras shares my (and McDowell’s) anxieties, and he worries that Rorty’s linguistic absolutism leaves us with nothing to prevent the rise of cultural practices and vocabularies that are loathsome. Geras, arguing that there is something shared among all human beings, something that allows us to speak to each other across the dividing lines of vocabularies (in a way that Dewey thought possible and Rorty, on Geras’s account, did not), tells us:

An alternative line of thought [to Rorty’s] is that vocabularies and language games are commensurable. I hope so. Because it doesn’t make a whole lot of difference precisely how the world is lost. . . .
[I]f the facts are wholly internalized to the language game, the implications are not good. If there is no truth, there is no injustice. Morally and politically, anything goes. There are appalling language games always in preparation somewhere, now as much as ever. They will be ‘played’ by those looking for the chance of it in deadly earnest. It remains to be shown that, amongst our defences against them, we have anything better than the concepts of common humanity, of universal rights, and of reasoning together to try to discover how things are, in order to minimize avoidable suffering and injustice.37

Rorty, I imagine, would simply say to Geras that he has all of the same worries regarding the possibility of appalling language games, but that (1) there are no such things called “injustice” and “suffering” simpliciter, (2) appeals to “truth” are not only going to avoid such appalling language games and injustice, but can actually cause them, for the “truth” is not obvious within the thick matrix of contexts in which communities (and even civilizations) are woven, and (3) relying on “concepts” of “humanity,” “universal rights,” and “reasoning together” are of a piece with “concepts” of “nativism,” “slavery,” and “dictatorship” – none is more true to the world as it is in itself than the others. Geras is quite right, Rorty would say, to worry about the atrocities that

are possible. His preference is not to rely on the “truth” of concepts that support liberal
and democratic views, but rather to continue to show what can happen in the world when
nativism, slavery and dictatorship are removed from the menu of human cultural
formations. For many, including Geras, this answer seems inadequate. Rorty would have
said that it does only because people like Geras insist there is a trump, a Super-argument,
external to our practices, preferences and axiologies, that we can enlist against the
planners or originators of such cultural formations. For Rorty, no such trump exists. This
has led many to conclude that Rorty was a mere relativist, and even lacked seriousness,
not adequately understanding the implications of his position.

Did he or didn’t he? While Rorty’s argumentative powers and ability to turn a
phrase were renowned, and his ability to defend his position tireless, one may suspect
after watching the show at length that what Rorty was concerned about was not the more
“trivial” debates between proponents of “truth” and proponents of “justification,” or
between proponents of “interpretation” and proponents of “use.”38 Rather, one may come
to see that Rorty was guarding something from what he believed the overly-
professionalized, bad metaphysical games of philosophers and clerics, among others,
made even more dangerous – more dangerous due to notions such as that of a
nomological (law-giving) God and of its “God surrogates” such as Truth, Reason, and
hypostatizations such as “Europe.” What Rorty saw himself as protecting was a robust

yet, paradoxically, fragile notion of human freedom, a freedom that should not be constrained by exogenous “facts of the matter” that are determined in some way other than by social agreement among competent participants in the various language games that human beings play (whether science, medicine, poetry or sport), or by human reifications of what are in actuality contingent commitments. Thus, comes a phrase he used several times, and which titled a book of interviews, edited by philosopher Eduardo Mendieta – “take care of freedom, and truth will take care of itself.” 39 (Here it would be good to review the brief Introduction to CIS, for it is a clear summary statement of Rorty’s moral and political concerns, as well as of his linguistic “theory of truth.”) 40

Concern for freedom is an ethical affair in the broadest sense of the term “ethical”; it derives from a particular set of ideas about, and concern for, human flourishing. Without suggesting too much philosophical kinship between the two thinkers, Rorty joins Levinas in the latter’s notion that if anything is “first philosophy” it must be ethics, although as Rorty pointed out in an exchange with philosopher Simon


40 In a conversation with Donald Davidson (a video recording of which is posted at the following web address on May 8, 2008), Rorty denied to Davidson that he actually had “a theory of truth.” Thus the scare quotes here. http://grundlegung.wordpress.com/2008/05/03/rorty-and-davidson-in-conversation/
Critchley, his notion of ethics was somewhat less rarified than Levinas’s.\footnote{“. . . I don’t understand the word ‘ethics’ [as Levinas uses the word], and I don’t think it is useful to give that word that sense. I don’t find Levinas’s Other any more useful than Heidegger’s Being – both strike me as gawky, awkward and unenlightening. I see ethics as what we have to start creating when we face a choice between two irreconcilable actions, each of which would, in other circumstances, have been equally natural and proper. Neither my child nor my country is very much like a Levinasian Other, but when I face a choice between incriminating my child or breaking my country’s laws by committing perjury, I start looking around for some ethical principles.” From \textit{Deconstruction and Pragmatism}. Chantal Mouffe (ed.). New York: Routledge, 1996, pg. 41.} I use this notion of “first philosophy” (one Rorty himself would have likely rejected) only to capture the sense of what the Rortian project, after \textit{TLT}, seems largely about. In the pursuit of this, what may be called \textit{anti-idolatrous ethics} (because no appeal to anything outside of consensus between real, live human beings is allowed – not gods, not logic, not \textit{a priori} conclusions, not hypostatizations like “Europe”), Rorty’s linguistic absolutism, which was attended to by a certain jaundiced eye toward even normal biological constraints which he would abjure and to which he would assign the expression (against certain epistemologists) “conditions for the possibility of . . . ,” takes him to what some have argued is a place that cannot be philosophically justified. It is a place in which language is totally unhinged from the natural world from which it arose (or, as McDowell puts it, in accordance with his minimalist empiricism, in which there is no “friction” between “mind and world”), and where we would have to relinquish all hope that appeal to (let us call it) disquotational truth about the way the world “really is” is achievable. The danger, for Rorty, is specifically the danger that we might attempt to settle our public affairs, construct our civilization, and plan our lives by reference to, and more
importantly obedience to, something that serves as a trump and which is exogenous to our preferences and contingent objectives. For Rorty, no obedience is owed or due. The idea of obedience to such things is, for Rorty, to take up a category mistake, to relinquish human authority to decide for ourselves how we shall live. As pointed out below, on Rorty’s view the world does not speak (tell, explain, command), only we do.\footnote{CIS, pg. 6}

In the Introduction I characterized Rorty’s anti-empiricism as “luciferian” or “promethean.” It strikes many as though we must in some way be “answerable” to the world, for after all, the world is not our creation, we emerged from the world. There remains something about the notion that human beings are not “answerable” to anything other than other humans that strikes many as odd. Rorty’s construal of McDowell’s “minimalist empiricism” misses the larger point I take McDowell to be trying to make. The upshot of McDowell’s argument is that the “cause/justification distinction” or, really, the “cause/justification dualism” (i.e., the world may cause us to hold beliefs, but only human beings can justify (give reasons for) the beliefs we hold) is unwarranted. As I mentioned, this (what I will now call a) dualism tracks another dualism that Rorty liked to use – the “Nature/Bildung” dualism, whether or not in those specific terms. But where one admits “justification” and “reasons” to the set of causes of human action, albeit as types of causes that have a certain quality, specific to creatures like ourselves, the dualism vanishes, and along with it a good deal of anxiety. A “cause,” just as a “reason”
(for action) has a certain function. Both are what we reference to understand or account for actions and beliefs. (I am using “reason” here as the end result, or conclusion of, a process of deliberation, assessment, and reflection.)

Rorty liked to talk about his preference for a “de-divinized,” pragmatist utopia. One may note that the notion of “divinity” was, for Rorty, reducible to authority and, indeed, the principal quarrel that Rorty had with religions (the purveyors of notions of the divine) had to do with the idea that they offered up gods, residing outside of human culture, as authorities who must be obeyed on cultural, social and personal matters. His attempt to strip the world (the realm of “brute causes”) of its authority over human freedom, to “de-divinize” it by, in effect, “divinizing” reason and Bildung as the only things to which human beings should answer, runs pari passu with his rejection of religious authority. But in setting up the argument the way he does, in understanding “brute causes” as on one side of a dualistic divide where “reason” and Bildung are on the other, Rorty made any sort of empiricism impossible, even if, as McDowell and others have argued, it meant disengaging mind from the world. One may speak of something-in-the-world-that-is-the-case as a “cause” or one may speak of it as a “reason” for action. Certainly, each expression carries a somewhat different sense from the other, but they are not as ganz andere with respect to one another as Rorty seemed to think (and as many other philosophers seem to believe in their resistance to a complete naturalization of

reason). The moment the process of reasoning (following trails and webs of inference) moves from deliberation to actual choice (whether it is the choice to deliberate further or the choice to effect some environment/cultural change), it transforms itself into a cause of action (or inaction). There is nothing reductionistic about this, in my view. Rather, it merely expresses, in an alternative, therapeutic formulation, that human beings are able to generate their own causes for action (or inaction) that go beyond the “brute causes” in the world (often referred to as free will) 44. To continue to call that occasion of choice a reason for action rather than a cause is a habit of speech that has its practical uses. This verbal distinction provides our fellows with a clearer explication of our actions. Whether we are compelled by a brute something-in-the-world-that-was-the-case (“the lion was about to pounce, so I fled to my vehicle”) or by a consideration of Bildung (“the finial was Romanesque, and so I replaced it with an Americana one so as not to upset my neighbors”), we have not left the continuum of causes for action. Despite the long “causes versus reasons” debate that has raged in philosophy, nothing I am saying here should be taken to suggest that reasons and something-in-the-world-that-is-the-case are the same sorts of thing, only that they may and do function as the same sorts of thing. To say, then, that to be rational is to be engaged in the process of giving and asking for reasons is just to say that, since we recognize, mutually, our capacity for choice based upon considerations other than something-in-the-world-that-is-the-case, we expect one

another to act, more often than not, in accordance with considerations other than the former. Something-in-the-world-that-is-the-case explanations are not taken, by creatures like us, to be sufficient explanations of our actions, actions which are more often than not rooted in social axiologies and thick communal norms rather than the extant conditions of the natural world – as Rorty, rightly, says. But that we turn to Bildung, to a thick “soup” of cultural inferences more often than we turn to the “brute causes” (unless the situation warrants) of the world that exists independent of our preferences, needs and desires, is only to replace one type of cause with another, and to assign a label that becomes honorific, calling it a “reason.” I do not say that the application of this honorific is wrong, so long as it does not suggest that that which wears it is wholly other than the natural order. We human beings, whose plans of life are often most concerned with Bildung, the cultural edifices we have erected, understand that there are times when we must, in order to act “appropriately,” act contrarily to the various somethings-in-the-world-that-are-the-case. That is, it is simply a fact of life that there are those times during which Bildung takes precedence over our need to respond to the “authority” of the world over our lives. This bespeaks continuity between what we tend to call nature and what we tend to call mind, along the order of (if I am reading him correctly) philosopher Evan Thompson’s account in his Mind in Life.45

But Rorty felt a strong need to keep the latter completely out of any considerations concerning human freedom, and this is why it strikes me as luciferian or promethean. For most of us see no reason why anyone would want to do such a thing, not even permitting a minimalist empiricism to help guide us to certain conclusions about “what is to be done” in the widest meaning of that phrase. But when one reads Rorty’s antifoundationalism as driven by a set of exigent moral and political concerns, one gets more insight into just what is going on in it. One might see constant references to the need to guide our choices and our acts only by our consultations with other human actions and human decisions, which we come to understand through our variegated linguistic engagements in communities of solidarity. Rorty’s antifoundationalism was a project of “rehab” for those likely recidivists who are constantly tempted to look “up” to the gods or to “Truth” or to “Europe” to set the parameters for values, for life, or to look down for aid in determining whether space flight or gay sex are “unnatural.” Thus, to the extent that he found one of the likely recidivist’s faces tilting toward “the heavens” of ersatz exogenous “speakers” or down to divine the “will of nature,” all set to do as commanded, Rorty, like a benevolent taskmaster, nudged him to remind him to keep his eyes “on the road,” where they belong.

As is well known, Rorty joins other pragmatists in saying, as did James explicitly, that truth is a “compliment we pay to sentences,” sentences which, of course, are part of human language. This assertion that truth is purely a linguistic affair has vexed many
philosophers for three reasons. First, it seems to remove any requirement to seek, in the world, verification or confirmation of any propositions or assertoric utterances that we call “true” (in a disquotational sense, that “it is raining” only if it is that case that it is raining), a position that seems to run afoul of classical pragmatist preferences for empirical verification, at least with a view to the formation of better forms of engagement with the world. Second, and overlapping the preceding, it locks within a linguistic cul-de-sac of mere assent and dissent regarding propositions and statements any possibility of getting at that which is true of the world separate and apart from human interests. Third, because of the way Rorty collapses truth into justification, and holds that justification is simply a linguistic affair which attends persuading one’s fellows to adopt her point of view, Rorty is characterized as a moral and cultural relativist, and/or as effete in the championing of any form of life, leaving no criteria for deciding between them. I will take-up each of these criticisms in turn, and then loop my conclusions back to my view of Rorty as moral philosopher and as an anti-idolater. I shall now take up the First and Third of these reasons, having treated the Second to some extent already.

Verification or Consultation? Let us suppose that what we mean by verification (or “answerability to the world”) is really “consultation.” (This is no small supposition, especially for realists and foundationalists who are quite happy with “verification,” but likely for Rorty as well, who would suspect that “consultation” is simply masquerading as “verification” (where verification is understood as meaning that the world is a tribunal,
that it *tells us* what is true) – but more on that shortly.\(^{46}\) In the thick linguistic lives that the members of our species now live, both “truth” and “justification” are linguistic proxies that point, directly or indirectly and ultimately, to some “condition” or “fact” that obtains in the world and that bears on or could bear on survival or flourishing, even where such does not seem the case. The most romantic French poetry or the most abstract discussion of art will eventually *refer back*, in a sort of anaphoric manner, to observations about the world if we were to just follow the trail of linguistic crumbs (often packed or layered within metaphoric or (per Brandom\(^{47}\)) anaphoric utterance); we just don’t think so because much of our activities regarding French poetry and art don’t require any such crumb following. I agree with Rorty’s claim that justifications are not apodictic statements about the way the world is in itself, only assertions about how one sentence

\(^{46}\) But we need not understand “verification” in either the way Rorty understood it or the way the early positivists understood it. When we understand “verification,” “consultation,” and “confirmation” in a deflated, interchangeable sense, in the sense that our sentences about the world that are subject to doubt should not be merely played off against other sentences concerning which we harbor no real doubts, but set against perception, we allow for the kind of minimalist empiricism of which I am in favor and which Rorty finds so problematic, as I will explicate. I tend to find the following statement, made by Quine, pretty unproblematic: “Rorty ascribes five tenets to me, numbered 1 to 5 [in *PMN*]: I disown: 1.\(^{2}\) There is no special epistemological status which any sentence has apart from its role in the maintaining of that ‘field of force’ which is human knowledge and whose aim is coping with sensory indications.\(^{2}\) I deny that the sole or main aim of knowledge is coping with sensory input, though this was perhaps its prehistoric survival value. For us, a major aim of knowledge is satisfaction of intellectual curiosity. Prediction, or the anticipation of sensory stimulation, is rather where *confirmation* lies. My further departure from (2) is on the score of observation sentences, which do have the ‘special epistemological status’ of being keyed directly to sensory stimulation and thus linking theory with outer reality.’ *W.V. Quine: Quine in Dialogue*, Dagfinn Føllesdal and Douglas B. Quine (eds.). Harvard University Press, 2008, pg. 151. However, I would still quarrel with Quine’s ownership of the word “special,” which simply plays into Rorty’s hands.

\(^{47}\) Brandom, pp. 311-333.
jibes with other sentences. But I disagree with Rorty, as Brandom and McDowell and others disagree with him, in his suggestion that it is necessarily the case that they have no referent other than other sentences.\(^{48}\) I not only disagree with Rorty on this point, but also with Derrida and most post-structuralists. They seem to have made two errors. One error is forgetfulness. While it is true that human culture is carried along on the back of sophisticated linguistic practices, what these thinkers have forgotten is that all such practices, however rarified, are, ultimately, statements about the world (including ourselves in it). What they have not forgotten, and so this is where we are in agreement, is that resort to observations dictates nothing, necessarily, about how to order our lives, our politics, or our institutions. And this is precisely the domain of the freedom that Rorty so vigorously sought to guard. The error was in resorting to linguistic and epistemological fictions to do so. And this leads to the second error – understanding confirmation as a trump. Confirmation is no more (but no less) than consultation (i.e., listening to what the world is “saying” to us, through our direct experience with it, regardless of our druthers or our cultural milieu), and such consultation can yield important considerations, primarily because the world is indeed a constraint upon our descriptions and re-descriptions, as McDowell and Brandom insist. Rorty abjures any

\(^{48}\) For Brandom, “The world is everything that is the case, a constellation of facts. But as the author of these words hastened to point out, those facts are structured and interconnected by the objects they are facts about; they are articulated by the properties and relations the obtaining of which is what we state when we state a fact (claim when we make a claim). To make a claim is to say that things are thus and so—that is, to talk about objects, and to say how they are propertied and related. Propositional contents (and hence facts) cannot be properly understood without understanding their representational dimension—what it means for them to be about objects and their properties and relations.” Brandom, pg. 333.
notion of the world “saying” anything to us, as he abjures the notion that the fruit of such consultation can properly be called knowledge. Why he is wrong on both points is what I will argue, below.

Rorty has tangled with many philosophers on the subject of empirical verification, or moving from the quotational to the disquotational and back again (another way to put it). I will focus on only two here, John McDowell and Robert Brandom, whom I believe make representative cases (albeit somewhat different cases) against Rorty’s linguistic absolutism which sees no value whatsoever in the idea that the ability to know (to know that and to know how) is a two-pronged evolutionary adaptation, one prong being observation (sense perception), the other prong being the capacity to draw inferences. In bringing McDowell into the discussion, there is one word that I will, conspicuously, leave out. That word is “enchantment,” a word McDowell uses very sparingly in Mind and Word, but a world that I think does more harm than good, since it is a loaded term, caught-up with fundamental clashes between “rationalist” modernity and “irrational” traditionalist notions. I want to evade this quarrel. For my purposes, the word is no more than a pejorative aimed at all metaphysical suggestions that there is a tether between mind and world, a tether that is unbreakable. I believe that such a tether obtains, but to speak of it as though speaking of or embracing an “enchanted” world almost turns such a notion into a jejune fairy tale.
McDowell, who is largely sympathetic to Rorty and to some of Rorty’s heroes (Donald Davidson, Wilfrid Sellars, W.V.O. Quine and Robert Brandom), takes issue with Rorty that one cannot speak of facts apart from linguistic practices, that is, with the idea that there are no facts of the matter about the world apart from sentences about the world. In *Mind and World*, McDowell argues that language flows from “second nature” and follows certain pre-linguistic inferential pathways which, for all intents and purposes, are something like “first nature,” i.e. the means by which the human organism determines, inferentially, what actions to take in view of certain stimuli with which it is faced. For McDowell, life-sustaining – or enhancing – responses to these first nature

49 However, Brandom stands apart from Rorty in how he understands “facts” and their relationship to sentences: “Rorty can explain our talk of facts; to treat a sentence as expressing a fact is just to treat it as true, and to treat a sentence as true is just to endorse it, to make the claim one would make by asserting that sentence. But [Rorty] rejects the idea of facts as a kind of thing that makes claims true. This is why he endorses the argument he sums up as ‘Since truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths.’ Before there were humans, there were no truths, so no true claims, so no facts. Now I think that at this point something has gone wrong with the argument. But before saying what, I want to stress that Rorty ends up saying these odd things just because they seem to be required in order to secure his prosaic, never questioned commitment to the existences of a world of causally interacting things that existed before there were vocabularies, that was not in any sense constituted by our vocabulary-mongering, and that goes its way in large part independently of our discursive activity. I think one can understand facts as true claims, acknowledge that claiming is not intelligible apart from vocabularies, and still insist that there were true claims, and hence facts, before there were vocabularies. For we should distinguish between two sense of ‘claim’: on the one hand there is the act of claiming, and on the other there is what is claimed. I want to say that facts are true claims in the sense of what is claimed . . . rather than in the sense of true claiming. With this distinction on board, there is nothing wrong with saying that facts make claims true – for they make claiming true. This sense of ‘makes’ should not be puzzling: it is inferential. ‘John’s remark that [p] is true because it is a fact that p,’ just tells us that the first clause follows from the second. . . . There were no true claiming before there were vocabularies, because there were no claiming at all. But it does not follow that there were no claimables.”
inferences have the epistemological character of truth, or settled belief. He argues that the confusion in Rorty, Sellars and Davidson, are as follows:

Davidson’s ground for giving up empiricism is, in its essentials, the claim that we cannot take experience to be epistemologically significant except by falling into the Myth of the Given, in which experience, conceived in such a way that it could not be a tribunal, is nevertheless supposed to stand in judgment over our empirical thinking. That certainly has the right shape for an argument that we must renounce empiricism. The trouble is that it does not show how we can. It does nothing to explain away the plausibility of the empiricist picture, according to which we can make sense of the world-directedness of empirical thinking only by conceiving it as answerable to the empirical world for its correctness, and we can understand answerability to the empirical world only as mediated by answerability to the tribunal of experience, conceived in terms of the world’s direct impact on possessors of perceptual capacities.50

McDowell uses the word “answerable” in a way that made Rorty uncomfortable, since the inference of “trump” seems to lurk in that construction (and for Rorty any non-human “trump” is a sort of God surrogate). But I will take McDowell to be using “answerable to” (an anthropomorphism) as I use “consult,” where “consult” is not meant

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as a habit or process of mere reference, but of *exigent* consideration for the *welfare* of the organism (you or me), as well as for our *sanity* – it is hard to imagine living in a world in which such consultation is not thought an obvious requirement for both living and for living well. And, as regards Sellars’s notion of “the logical space of reasons,” McDowell says:

Sellars and Davidson think we are forced to renounce empiricism, in the relevant sense, partly because they think the logical space of reasons is *sui generis*, as compared with the logical space in which Sellars sees “empirical description” as functioning, which I have identified on Sellars’s behalf with the logical space of nature. That is Sellars’s way of putting the claim, but Davidson has a counterpart; what figures in Sellars as the *sui generis* character of what he calls “the constitutive ideal of rationality.” . . . On this view, Sellars is right that the logical space in which natural-scientific investigation achieves its distinctive kind of understanding is alien to the logical space of reasons. The logical space of reasons is the frame within which a fundamentally different kind of intelligibility comes into view. And (the same in different terms) Davidson is right that ‘the constitutive ideal of rationality’ governs concepts that are for that reason quite special, in comparison with the conceptual apparatus of the nomothetic sciences. But it is one thing to acknowledge this – in Sellarsian terms, to single out a logical space that is to be contrasted with the logical space of reasons. It is another to
equate that logical space, as Sellars at least implicitly does, with the logical space of nature. That is what makes it seem impossible to combine empiricism with the idea that the world’s making an impression on a perceiving subject would have to be a natural happening [emphasis added]. The mistake here is to forget that nature includes second nature. Human beings acquire a second nature in part by being initiated into conceptual capacities, whose interrelations belong in the logical space of reasons [emphasis added].

The idea of exogenous, “world-based” (non-mental) constraints on reason, or constraints on that which may be asserted with warrant, plays out in McDowell. For on his account, some respect for the empirical as not only verifying but grounding linguistically derived conclusions in the logical space of reasons is the condition sine qua non of any rational concept to begin with. Recalling Kant’s first Critique (and interpreting Kant quite differently than Rorty), McDowell points out that intuitions (The Given) without concepts are blind, but concepts without content are empty. This strikes me as no empty observation, and tracks McDowell’s point, mentioned earlier, that language production is “secondary” (“second nature”) in both a neurological/evolutionary sense and in a temporal sense to the pre-linguistic machinery that is already there as a person engages the world by means of the senses, and so natural and special languages are the result of “being initiated into conceptual capacities” that allow for the thick

51 McDowell, pp. 21-22.
interplay of the noises (speech), marks (on paper), and rules (grammar) of various languages.

I agree with McDowell on this point. In doing so, I find myself inclined to a type of disquotational view of truth, but one that I think remains within the pragmatist tradition and honors the linguistic turn. My disquotational sense is two-horned rather than single-horned. On the first horn, we revert to the hackneyed though useful example, and hold that “snow is white” if and only if snow is white, that is, if by whatever we mean quotationally by “snow is white” (and here is the pragmatist move) (i) establishes coherent and predictable engagement with any empirical configuration where “snow is white” permits us profitably to engage (manipulate, predict, negotiate, poeticize about, use) the world. If “snow is white” consistently allows profitable engagement in this manner, devoid of real doubt, about a state of the world, we may say that “snow is white” expresses a collection of useful, life enhancing (in one way or another) conclusions about a state of the world separate and apart from human purposes. To the extent that such engagement is profitable in this way, we may call “snow is white” true, but true insofar as it usefully translates collections of sense data and non-linguistic inference (primary nature, on McDowell’s account) in a faithful manner, in a manner that is iterable. “True” here simply means that, for all intents and purposes, we have no reason to doubt that snow is white (the disquotational form) is a matter of fact about the world, where “matter of fact about the world” simply means that under the conditions that obtain
the world may always be expected to behave as we predict, anticipate, expect it will. In this disquotational account we are free of Rorty’s linguistic mythologies, remain free of the quest for certainty that Dewey warned us against, and re-engage the human mind, via a minimalist empiricism, with the world by viewing language as a development from pre-linguistic inference, like binocular eyes are a development on the single light gathering organelle of creatures that lived 550 million years ago. Language is the great facilitator of inferential capacities, not their originator. That is, inference (as a capacity) and language (linguistic practices) are not coeval. This strikes me as a much more sensible naturalism.

The second horn takes “snow is white” to bear the predicate “true” as a function of certain language games in which we stipulate that “snow is white” pursuant to the rules of the game governing the use of “snow”, “is” and “white” and where we leave open the possibility to use “snow is white” and each of its terms differently according to the rules of certain other language games, such as those of poetry, for example. However, all this said, my two-horned disquotational view of truth takes the post-structuralist point of view in holding that the rigidity of the construction “snow is white” as it is applied to our engagement of the physical world derives from the need to settle patterns of conduct and practices in order to establish a set, conservative, language game by which to approach a world that presents certain patterns of regularity, and where not heeding those patterns may be problematic (even disastrous) to the organism, separate and apart
from any other cultural exigency that bears on the matter. This is what the natural sciences take themselves to be doing, and where linguistic playfulness, in the pejorative or flighty sense of “play,” is far more proscribed. There are no Ezra Pounds (and certainly no E.E. Cummings) in chemistry or physics as such, and that is as it should be, as the first horn speaks directly to human survival and flourishing in the most basic of senses, and concerning which caprice or mercuriality in language is so problematic as not to be permitted. This conservative use of language in the sciences is what gives it its sense that it is the repository of superior truths, truths that are superior (for these important and specific purposes) to aesthetic truths or certain moral truths, for example (“Rodin was a master sculptor” – “People under 18 should not marry”). The battles between the natural sciences on the one hand and romantic poets and artists, on the other hand, stem from the pragmatics of language use, not from collections of uncomplimentary epistemological claims. Rorty (and others, such as Paul Feyerabend (see Feyerabend’s Against Method)) are right in asserting the rights of language games outside of the natural sciences, a common move among post-modernists. But the real debate is, and will remain, the types of exigencies that are at play among the various language games, not whether they are to be equated in some sort of field-leveling exercise. Once one understands things from that perspective, the argument takes on a different character entirely. But the question remains one, and will always be one, of values – of whether we should value the bare observation that “fire burns” over and above “walking on hot coals” in all instances, even where walking on hot coals is an
integral part of the identity of a community. “Fire burns” because, *ceteris paribus*, fire burns, held to be true given that there is no reason to doubt it. That fire burns is a fact of the matter about the world, a way in which the world speaks to us, and where this use of “speaks” is not understood along the lines of “enchantment” but along the lines of a kind of natural legislation. It seems to me that the ordinary person would have little quarrel with this notion that the world “speaks,” and would shrug off the epistemological vexations that certain philosophers display, as though something more significant than understanding certain natural boundaries for beings such as ourselves were at stake.

In some sense, regarding the first horn, to say that “snow is white” or “the atomic weight of helium is 4.002602” is true has to do with a value judgment regarding the domain in which such statements are uttered. Such statements come with a hidden instruction: “Do Not Disturb.” The hallowedness of scientific language, its “seriousness,” the assertion that it is language of a *different sort* are tenable *insofar* as it is a domain of human activity that leaves little room for cultural *playfulness* *insofar* as it is trying to construct language games that predictably track the behaviors that we find in nature, separate and apart from all *other* human intensions. Understanding the role of the empirical and the natural sciences from this angle, I have little desire to strip it of its sense of specialness, although by specialness I do not mean to suggest that its domain should be totalizing, for poetry, philosophy and journalism are “special” as well, *for other purposes*. However, I take that these rest upon a general knowledge of the world that is
provided by empirical knowledge, a knowledge that provides facts of the matter. Human freedom does not require, necessarily, that we heed our conclusion that snow is white in the sense of the first horn. What follows from the whiteness of snow across the full spectrum of human culture is debatable, always in flux. Now, it is in this flux that Rorty finds all the action, all the interesting pursuits of life, as do I. Yet I do not follow Rorty in his claim that we do not need to refer to the world to verify that “snow is white” is true.

The second horn pertains to all other domains of human culture or Bildung (religion, art, philosophy, economy) where we are free to choose our actions and beliefs without any belief that the world dictates our conclusions. Here, values other than animal survival often do trump. Here is the domain of human freedom, including, as Hannah Arendt called it (The Human Condition), the domain of the “world” over and against the “earth.” The forms of rationality that obtain in the natural or nomothetic sciences are of a different texture than that which obtains in human culture (that is human culture apart from the nomothetic sciences).

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52 Rorty’s essay “Rationality and Cultural Difference” in TP, trifurcates the meaning of rationality into Rationality₁, Rationality₂ and Rationality₃ (hereafter, R₁, R₂ and R₃). R₁ is mere “technical reason” or “skill at survival.” R₂ is that ability to set goals other than mere survival. “The presence of this ingredient [R₂] within us is a reason to describe ourselves in different terms than those we use to describe nonhuman organisms. This presence cannot be reduced to a difference in degree of our possession of [R₁]. It is distinct because it sets goals other than mere survival; for example, it may tell you that it would be better to be dead than to do certain things. Appeal to [R₂] establishes an evaluative hierarchy rather than simply adjusting means to taken-for-granted ends.” R₃ is different still. “R₃ is roughly synonymous with tolerance— with the ability not to be overly disconcerted by differences from oneself, not to respond aggressively to such differences. This ability goes along with a willingness to alter one’s own habits – not only to get more of what one previously wanted but to reshape oneself into a different sort of person, one
to which Rorty and others are committed, only from its excesses, and restores a Deweyan perspective on empiricism. Where I part company is in the “nothing but” character of the linguistic, as though certain linguistic practices need have no truck with the empirical, whether we do so with the result being “truth,” “justification” or “warranted assertibility.” I take McDowell to be saying that for the most part we construct many of our cultural practices without direct reference to the world, and even then the empirical, “The Given,” can demand nothing of us but that we take it into account in forming reasons for our actions. We are free for certain purposes to completely disregard the scientific or empirical claim that “snow is white” because snow is white. However, I also take McDowell to be saying that the language games of science are not in as free-play as the language games of other facets of human culture, as already suggested. Further, I take him to be saying that linguistic inference is second and supervenes upon non-linguistic inference – the type of inference that is drawn by the single organism as it navigates the

who wants different things than before. It also goes along with a reliance on persuasion rather than force, an inclination to talk things over rather than to fight, burn, or banish. It is a virtue that enables individuals and communities to coexist peacefully with other individuals and communities, living and letting live, and to put together new, syncretic, compromise ways of life. The Western intellectual tradition has often run these three senses of ‘rationality’ together.” The problem for Rorty is found in a certain valorization of [R2] because “For on a pragmatic view science, religion and the arts are all, equally, tools for the gratification of desire. None of them can dictate, though any of them can and will suggest, what desires to have or what evaluative hierarchies to erect.” Rorty prefers reasons for preferences rather than inexorable logics that rest on hallowed methods such as those of science, and he is suspicious, as am I, of modernity’s overemphasis and valorization of this sort of valorization of R2, and the skewed valorization of the ingredients of evaluative hierarchies. Both Rorty and I think the consequences of pragmatism and other contextualizing, historicizing philosophies require that we drop evaluative hierarchies of thought and action based upon a conference with something outside of time and chance, something outside of history. Both evaluations and hierarchies are then limited to what communities and people find relevant to constructing forms of life that fulfill their trivial and non-trivial needs – what Rorty calls “desires.”
world. Language is derivative, then, and is the outcome of human beings, in community, “being initiated into conceptual capacities” in just the manner Rorty and Davidson think. McDowell’s view of “second nature” tracks the psychological literature that argues that pre-linguistic inferential abilities precede language formation.

What I think can end the feud here is a mutual agreement, between Rorty and critics like McDowell, to understand “snow is white” (or “neige est blanc” etc.) as both the best way to describe a state of conditions in the world and as recommending a set of pragmatic responses just in case the state of conditions in which the marks or noises “snow is white” obtain, assuming all the while that both language, inference and sense can go awry. This, it seems to me, collapses the dualism between “scheme” and “content” that Davidson attempted to explode, takes the Sellarsian “Given” as indeed “plugged in” to our pre-linguistic inferential apparati, and preserves language as the large end of a sort of Bergsonian cone, the apex of which is the situs of non-linguistic inferential engagement with the world (where the world does indeed “speak” to us), the opening progression to the wide end of the cone representing thick inferential language use, and the various language games that lead to both a more sophisticated self-awareness and culture. It would also seem to collapse the “cause/reason” dualism, as discussed earlier. It would seem to preserve what McDowell and so many others believe is wrong with Rorty, while at the same time conceding Rorty’s point that, for most intents and purposes, human culture (whether “low” or “high”) is not very much concerned with, and even
less determined by, the apex end of the cone; that “The Givens” that are sucked-up into our non-linguistic inferential capacities are mostly about the preservation and integrity of the body in space and over time (the intuitions that would later be indexed linguistically, because of the need to communicate them to other beings like ourselves, into “this hot,” “that sharp,” “big animal, I run”) is simply not where the action is. Rorty wants to insist on (and goes overboard insisting on) this point, not because he is afraid of the apex end or that we are to a large extent natural animals like all others with capacities that only exceed other natural animals only along the same continuum, but because he insists that the thing about us that makes us distinctively human is our ability to use language in peculiar ways53 to rearrange our lives and our life projects. He fears that hanging around or privileging the apex end of the cone, looking for “Truth” to appear to tell us there, non-linguistically, what “we” are “all” supposed to be doing and thinking in the construction of our life plans, is – and here I would use another theological word – a sacrilege against human freedom. Thus Western, Platonic, logocentric metaphysics, whether in the guise of The Forms or materialistic scientism (that there is a fact of the matter about the world to which “we” must “all” comport) is odious in the extreme for Rorty. The history of Western metaphysics, so abjured by Rorty and his heroes, is precisely the history of forgetfulness of our freedom, a forgetfulness begun, on his account, in ancient Athens. The reason Rorty latches on to Derridian différance and

53 I say “in peculiar ways” because I do not believe that human beings are the only language users on the planet – that there is ample evidence that cuttlefish, whales, elephants and many other animals also use language in very sophisticated ways, ways that imply at least rudimentary inferential reasoning abilities.
trace, on to the Heideggerian attempt to explode metaphysics, on to Wittgenstein’s attack on essences and their replacement with the notion of the “language game” and of “family resemblance” (rather than essences), and on to Dewey’s diagnosis of a need for philosophical reconstruction whereby we stop “clinging to problems” that are but pseudo-problems, all that Rorty can possibly be after is a life that is more free, more rich and more textured. He was so fearful that we would stray backwards into Nazi “Truth” that he abjured any notion of “Truth” itself and would follow Dewey in replacing it with other “marks and noises” like “warranted assertibility” and “justification” as these were safer to use around the children, so to speak, who might take Truth and sneak off into the night for the purposes of mischief-making (such as forging pronouncements from the gods about what to eat, whom to marry, and so forth). He so abjured Platonic-like metaphysics that he cast all metaphysical speculation into the pit as “pointless” or “useless.” He derided a distinction between “snow is white” and snow is white as, as a characteristic Jamesian pragmatist, one that makes no difference, when for very many it does indeed make a very real difference (since they think that what is at the apex end of the cone is relevant, and is a touchstone and a outlier reference for human activity in a world in which there are very real constraints on whatever descriptions and re-description we might prefer).

But, on the question of the human capacity for pre-linguistic inference, one need not just argue against Rorty within the Rorty-McDowell-Brandom-Davidson-(et al.)
philosophical game. On this question there is ample evidence from within neuro-scientific research upon which to draw. While it is not the intent of this dissertation to argue out the ways in which such research makes the point, it may be useful to provide some examples and references. The philosopher José Luis Bermúdez, for example, points out that there is a considerable non-linguistic inferential (or “proto-inferential”) capacity in human beings.\textsuperscript{54} Pointing to the neuro-scientific literature, Bermúdez argues that human beings, as organisms, have a limited but innate cognitive capacity to negotiate the world without language use, and this limited but innate inferential\textsuperscript{55} activity should not be

\textsuperscript{54} In a review of José Luis Bermúdez’s book in the journal *Psychology* (October 17, 1999): “The cardinal assumption of Bermudez's . . . study of self-consciousness is that this study can be undertaken exclusively from the point of view of a scientific observer. Even when first-person thoughts are introduced as examples of self-consciousness, it is other person's first-person thoughts he is talking about, and these are introduced in evidence according to the inferences a scientific observer may draw from them. To back up his adoption of this assumption he utilizes Gareth Evans' (1982) "Generality Constraint", which prohibits a concept from being limited in principle to one and only one instantiation (thus ruling out private language; Bermúdez 1998, p. 59 . . . ). Going hand in hand with the generality constraint is the Symmetry Thesis according to which "A subject's psychological self-awareness is constitutively linked to his awareness of other minds." (p. 230) These two conditions, working together, ensure that the concept of self-consciousness, which emerges, cannot be solipsistic in nature. The orthodox philosophical presupposition about self-consciousness is that it is an attribute not available to non-language using living things, whether these be human infants or other species. Bermúdez names this presupposition the Thought-Language Principle. (p. 12-13) The Paradox of Self-Consciousness is an elaborate attempt to overthrow this presupposition. He begins by seeking to refute the presupposition with a philosophical argument - the appeal to a vicious circle.”

\textsuperscript{55} Bermúdez is clear, however, that may be meant by “inference” cannot be the sorts of propositional logics that are possible only with semantic formations, i.e. language. Cuttlefish do not know propositional logic, and cannot explain, through public language, the details of their rational processes. That is why, in his *Thinking Without Words* (pp. 142-149 and 189-193), Bermúdez draws a distinction between “protoinference” and “inference.” I take this distinction to be reasonable, but weak. It seems to assert no more than we already know, i.e., that formal
pinched off, *entirely*, from the practice (or capacity) of giving reasons (to others) for one’s beliefs. An organism that can follow a sequential chain of events, that understands a basic order to the daily cycle and works within it, and that avoids harm while satisfying its needs is not an organism that is devoid of “know-how” (which entails memory and planning) even if that organism is unable to, linguistically, generate collections of coherent concepts and give reasons to others of its kind who will form a tribunal which would assess its conclusions or behaviors. Bermúdez’s grounding of epistemology in cognition is reminiscent of Quine’s “naturalized epistemology.” Both he and McDowell put aside the view of knowledge as something more or less “supernatural” in the sense that human beings have a capacity that resides off of the continuum of cognitive capacities that emerge rather far down in the zoological pecking order. Both are concerned with how creatures like ourselves form “beliefs” about the world, and the manner in which they justify those beliefs to themselves (as evidenced in reiterative actions) and to others (via justifications using language). However, at least Quine’s psychologized view of “epistemology,” as so described, is concerned with its enlistment as a tool for providing “foundations” for the natural sciences. Rorty won’t follow Quine here, for once you are in the realm of *cognition*, that is, the realm of determining the ways in which people (and other species) draw information from the world, combine it with logical or propositional processes of reasoning, akin to the formal logics humans employ, cannot be assigned to pre-linguistic life forms, even life forms that display a high level of reasoning ability, relatively speaking. But with that caveat being the only distinction between “protoinferences” and “inferences,” I am content to simply drop the “proto-“ and hold that pre-linguistic life forms are in fact engaged in inferential reasoning, even if not mapped to semantic expression, syllogism, etc. That is what I have done here.
other information, interpret it, and make decisions about it or use it, there appear to be no reasons to consider the natural “world,” and so the natural sciences, only. To the contrary, how we settle beliefs about a plethora of other matters in the rest of human culture also can be fit into something like a “naturalized epistemology.” The cognitive apparatus applies to poetry no less than it applies to physics. The justification of belief applies to beliefs about the quality of a sonnet as it applies to how we use alloys. For Rorty, the way we justify those beliefs is through language. The problem is that to suggest that language is the only way we justify our beliefs (at least, to ourselves), that we look solely to collections of other beliefs, organized in sentences and propositions, is to remain within the vicious circle of linguistic absolutism. Rorty believes he has no recourse because nothing received from the senses – raw feels or qualia – can in any way be considered knowledge, since (A) knowledge is justified belief, (B) justified belief requires inferential reasoning, and (C) inferential reasoning requires competent language use. According to Bermúdez at least, it is not always the case that (C).

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56 See Rorty’s discussion of “pre-linguistic awareness” in PMN, Chapter IV.

57 There is a swirling debate not only about the place of language in drawing inferences, but regarding the existence and use of “non-conceptual content.” This is not a debate into which I have formulated a coherent position, but theorists of non-conceptual content raise more questions regarding the finality of any position based on linguistic absolutism, since language is rooted in inferences, inferences in concepts: “What constraints are imposed upon specifications of the content of propositional attitudes by the requirement to respect the way the subject thinks about the truth-condition of the relevant attitude? Different theories of content will respond to this question in different ways, but the following is widely held to impose a minimal constraint upon any such response. The conceptual constraint [holds that] [s]pecifications of the content of a
In his book, *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness*, Bermúdez grapples with a series of propositions, all of which seem plausible, but cannot all hang together, for they lead to the paradox that is the title of his book, the paradox of self-consciousness. Bermúdez writes:

A paradox is an unacceptable conclusion or set of conclusions reachable by apparently valid argument from apparently true premises. The clearest way to appreciate a paradox is to list the incompatible propositions that

sentence or propositional attitude should only employ concepts possessed by the utterer or thinker. Certain theories of content and concepts directly entail the conceptual constraint. Within a broadly Fregean tradition, for example, the contents of propositional attitudes (and the meanings of sentences) are taken to consist of concepts — and it is hard to see how one can have a propositional attitude whose content is a complex of concepts without possessing each of them. But the conceptual constraint does not depend upon adopting any particular theory of content. Its plausibility stems, rather, from the conjunction of two thoughts. 1. In specifying what a thinker believes, what a perceiver perceives or what a speaker is saying by uttering a certain sentence in a particular context one has to be as faithful as possible to how that thinker, perceiver or speaker apprehends the world. 2. How a thinker, perceiver or speaker apprehends the world in having beliefs about it, perceiving it or speaking about it is a function of the concepts he possesses. This way of motivating the conceptual constraint has been explicitly put forward by several authors who argue forcibly for the second thesis (see, for example, Peacocke 1983, McDowell 1994a, and Noë 1999). Theorists of nonconceptual content, in contrast, accept the first constraint without the second. They hold that specifications of content must respect the way a thinker, perceiver or speaker apprehends the world and *because of this* they cannot be circumscribed by the concepts possessed by the thinker, perceiver or speaker. Theorists of nonconceptual content postulate the existence of ways of representing the world (and hence the existence of a type of content) that are not constrained by the concepts possessed by the thinker.”  J.L. Bermúdez and Arnon Cahen, "Nonconceptual Mental Content", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (On-Line) (Winter 2008 Edition).
form the premises and conclusions. In the case of the paradox of self-consciousness, they are as follows:

1. The only way to analyze what is distinctive about self-consciousness is the capacity to think “I”-thoughts.
2. The only way to analyze the capacity to think a particular range of thoughts is by analyzing the capacity for thinking canonical linguistic expressions of those thoughts (the Thought-Language Principle).
3. ‘I’-thoughts are canonically expressed by means of the first-person pronoun.
4. Mastery of the first-person pronoun requires the capacity to think ‘I’-thoughts.
5. A noncircular account of self-consciousness is possible.

To resolve such a paradox, and the paradox of self-consciousness in particular, something has to go. One or two of the propositions are primarily responsible for the paradox. Bermúdez decides that the proposition that has to go is proposition 2:

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[76]
My proposal is that proposition (2) be rejected, in other words, that it be denied that the only way to analyze the capacity to think a particular range of thoughts is by analyzing the capacity for their canonical linguistic expression [emphasis added]. More precisely, I shall be arguing that there is an important class of thoughts for which the Thought-Language Principle fails to hold because the Conceptual Requirement Principle fails to hold.

What Bermúdez will go on to argue (among other things) is that non-linguistic inference, drawn similarly from observations, is just part of how we accumulate knowledge, whether know-how or know-that forms. He goes on to say:

To capture this diachronic form of self-world dualism [which Bermúdez rejects] I introduced the notion of a nonconceptual point of view. Having a nonconceptual point of view on the world involves taking a particular route through the environment in such a way that one's perception of the world is informed by an awareness that one is taking such a route. This diachronic awareness that one is taking a particular route through the environment turned out to involve two principal components - a non-solipsistic component and a spatial awareness component. The non-solipsistic component is a subject's capacity to draw a distinction between his experiences and what those experiences are experiences of, and hence
his ability to grasp that an object exists at times other than those at which it is experienced. This requires the exercise of recognitional abilities involving conscious memory and can be most primitively manifested in the feature-based recognition of places. The spatial awareness component of a nonconceptual point of view can be glossed in terms of possession of an integrated representation of the environment over time. That [an organism] possesses such an integrated representation of the environment is manifested in three central cognitive/navigational capacities:

- The capacity to *think* about different routes to the same place [emphasis added]

- The capacity to keep track of changes in spatial relations between objects caused by its own movements relative to those objects

- The capacity to *think* about places independently of the objects or features located at those places [emphasis added]

Powerful evidence from both ethology and developmental psychology indicates that these central cognitive/navigational capacities are present *in both nonlinguistic and prelinguistic creatures* [emphasis added].\(^59\)

Bermúdez’s later work, *Thinking Without Words* (Oxford University Press, 2003), provides a sustained argument for what he calls the “cognitive turn.” In that volume he argues – and I think persuasively – that it is possible to map linguistic rationality onto nonlinguistic creatures and thereby discern that sustained inferential reasoning is taking place. I would call the basic capability to navigate the world that Bermúdez sketches knowledge, insofar as, pace Dewey, I see subjective observational reports (or, perhaps preferably, registrations) as components of knowledge, not pinched off from cognitive inference in some absolute manner. The types of organism to which Bermúdez refers have the ability to use perception, qualia and inference as important components in settling beliefs about any state of affairs in the environment. The dualism between perception and inference that Sellars erected in the Myth of the Given is, oddly, just the sort of dualism that Dewey abjured (and which McDowell abjures), although Dewey, too, held that mere registrations using powers of perception do not count as experience. A

60 There is also much written today about “nonconceptual mental content” which further questions the idea that knowledge necessarily entails the manipulation of concepts: “... the basic idea of nonconceptual content provides a promising tool for tackling a range of problems in the philosophy of mind and cognition. Allowing that a creature's representational capacities can outstrip its conceptual capacities makes it possible for philosophers and cognitive scientists to study aspects of cognition and behavior that remain outside the scope of more traditional approaches — from subpersonal computational mechanisms to the psychological states of non-human animals and human infants to the nature of perceptual experience.” (“Nonconceptual Mental Content” in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, at http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/content-nonconceptual/). See also Bermúdez’s 2007 article “What is at stake in the debate about nonconceptual content?” in *Philosophical Perspectives* 21(1), 55-72.
kind of privileging of linguistic inference over qualia, perceptions, or “raw feels” creates
the illusion that justified beliefs (that is, reliable rules and guides for action) might rely on
such inference alone, and this is, ironically, a form of the “divination” of mind that Rorty
himself abjured. So without hedging, let me now claim that it just is the case that
knowing – at least at a primitive level – involves sense perception, qualia, and raw feels
which trigger innate inference-drawing capacities, as much as it involves the drawing of
inferences utilizing language, and that perceptions and qualia are conditions sine qua non
for anything we would call knowledge. To borrow a Rortian and Jamesian line,
“knowledge” is just a “complement we pay” to certain cognitive states that are useful in
negotiating the world, is a word we use to refer to the end result of active observation and
inferential reasoning combined and is in a state of constant adjustment and self-testing
such that more successes than failures result, leading to greater survival and, ultimately,
flourishing. Each of sensory impressions (“raw feels” – PMN, pg. 24), qualia (i.e., our
particular sense of being in the world) and inference (logic) has epistemological value,
that is, has a role to play in settling action and comportment toward other beliefs. Sellars
is right in claiming that truths are not simply given, but he was wrong to suggest that it is
limited to linguistic justifications alone, with no recourse to basic observations because
they are unable to stand “on [their] own feet” (as he puts it in Empiricism and the
Philosophy of Mind). Neither such observations, nor inferences, stand on their own feet.
The former can yield to sophisticated forms of life (like ourselves) little for survival and
flourishing, and the latter leaves no backstop for including forms of justification based
upon knavery, power, or mass hysteria (because, as a merely linguistic affair, any dominant communal decision goes). If knowledge is about anything, it must be, as a tool, the cutting of the best path to some form of flourishing.

Even if one were to agree with the Sellarsian claim that inferences are indeed being drawn even in the rudimentary navigations of an organism as sketched by Bermúdez above, he may still argue, with Bermúdez, that such inferences are not language-dependent. (This is my position.) This is very important in assessing Sellars’ and so Rorty’s claim that all knowledge is linguistic-inferential knowledge. We are at the point now – a kind of synapse – from which the organism’s ability to navigate the world pre-linguistically breaches over into the thick linguistic soup of language games that Sellars and Rorty regard as the absolute basis for all knowledge, and in doing so cut mind off from world in the kind of dualistic way that John McDowell points out, and which both he and I believe is unnecessary. Again, this pinching off is the result of relegating sensory registrations and qualia to the cellar of the non-cognitive, and making a sui generis “logical space of reasons” the true home of all knowledge – something that science does not bear out. While one may not follow them all the way through in all details, evolutionary epistemologists, noting this attempted sleight of hand to assign sensing and qualia to a realm outside of epistemology and cognition, may be more right than wrong in arguing that human knowledge is an evolved adaptation, an outcome of natural selection, and that any such adaptation of any species is a kind of “knowledge,”
that evolutionary adaptation just is the primary way that organisms know the world. This deflates any vestigial puffery about our superior status on the zoological scale – that we are in fact off the scale in our possession of something unique in all of the animal kingdom, rather than in possession of a rather rare version of other types of mechanisms for flourishing (so far as we know). So, as they say, our solutions to problems of relativity theory are continuous with an insect's changing camouflage, the colors of which can be viewed as “knowledge” of its environment. “Human knowledge is a special case of this primary and ubiquitous biological knowledge of adaptation.”

Knowledge as “know-how” in this sense need not rely on language (or, as it would seem to follow, concepts), though it of necessity relies on, at a minimum, a form of inference which Bermúdez argues is a kind of diachronic notation of basic features of the world for future use. I think this is important insofar as anthropologists place linguistic ability, temporally, after non-linguistic though clearly inferentially-based survival enhancing behaviors. I see no necessary reason to set all such pre-linguistic or non-linguistic inferential ability outside of the thick practice of giving reasons in the social setting and before a “tribunal” of other language users who would assess the justifications for actions. It is true that such rudimentary navigational ability does not lend itself to what we would call human culture, but that is not the point. The issue is not whether it leads to what we take to be human culture, but rather whether it is a form of

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61 Science Encyclopedia, online at <http://www.science.jrank.org/pages/9897/Knowledge-Linguistic-Turn.html/Knowledge-TheLinguisticTurn>
knowledge, or entails forms of knowledge. The answer for Bermúdez would seem to be in the affirmative. The lamentation that this is a trivial form of knowledge, that it is rudimentary, is not the point, and such would be akin to decrying the observation that paramecia and flamingos are both forms of life on the basis of one’s preference for flamingos. Otherwise put, it would seem to be no more than privileging thick, linguistic conceptual soup over thin diachronic awareness and know-how of pre-linguistic forms of life. From an evolutionary point of view, if we are, as organisms, bearers of the capacity to draw inferences, then in some way we are innately in touch with some “conditions” about the world that, for all intents and purposes, operate as exogenous “truth” operates – as guides for action (providing the basis for warranted assertability, when and if the need for justification were to arise, as Dewey held), whether that action is navigating a harsh terrain or erecting a new museum to display 17th Century portraiture. That the exogenous constraints that obtain guide, rather than dictate, is a key point in our discussion, in so far as Rorty worried that such guides have often been used as trumps. He was right; they have been. But once one leaves off suggesting that there are or can be any such trumps, as I do, one can relax and return to the more or less common sense point of view that “fire burns” and “rocks are hard” are facts of the matter about the world, though we may describe both in various ways, whereby “burns” and “hard” must always be taken into account in some manner, regardless of our descriptions, interpretations and cultural uses. A poem written about “cool flames” is linguistic play, and in ways not noticed is paying homage to the fact that “fire burns,” just like a culture’s practice of walking across hot
coals at sacred times may continue without interruption simply because we note that “fire burns” and “rocks are hard.” This is a wholly pragmatist position, or so I would argue, and one that side-steps the conundrums created by linguistic absolutists like Rorty. In a very real sense, then, \textit{the world does indeed “speak” to us}, and this has implications for the minimalist empiricism embraced by philosophers like John McDowell.

\textbf{Facts.} Before I take up the charge of relativism that is frequently directed at Rorty, I want to close this discussion of Rorty’s linguistic absolutism by turning attention to a word that is frequently used by both empiricists and by those (people like Brandom, for example) who seek to split the difference between Rorty’s version of anti-representationalism and realism. That word is “facts.” I turn to a quote from Brandom, previously cited, which I restate, in part, here:

\begin{quote}
Rorty can explain our talk of facts; to treat a sentence as expressing a fact is just to treat it as true, and to treat a sentence as true is just to endorse it, to make the claim one would make by asserting that sentence. But [Rorty] rejects the idea of facts as a kind of thing that \textit{makes} claims true. This is why he endorses the argument he sums up as ‘Since truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths.’ Before there were humans, there were no truths, so no true claims, so no facts. Now I think that at this point something has gone wrong with
\end{quote}
the argument. But before saying what, I want to stress that Rorty ends up saying these odd things just because they seem to be required in order to secure his prosaic, never questioned commitment to the existence of a world of causally interacting things that existed before there were vocabularies, that was not in any sense constituted by our vocabulary-mongering, and that goes its way in large part independently of our discursive activity. I think one can understand facts as true claims, acknowledge that claiming is not intelligible apart from vocabularies, and still insist that there were true claims, and hence facts, before there were vocabularies. 62

Is Brandom right to say this? I think Brandom is caught in the slippage that seems to be extant in these types of antirepresentationalist discussions, and so from a certain point of view Rorty is right when he retorts that Brandom’s view of “facts” is incoherent, insofar as it is inconsistent with his own linguistic view of that in which “facts” consist:

I think that [Brandom’s] claim that “If we had never existed . . . there would have been facts (truths) going unexpressed” . . . is at odds with another claim Brandom makes that “the notion of a fact . . . is only intelligible relative to that of a vocabulary.” 63

62 See note 49.
Rorty is right in pointing out the confusion here, for in fact there are no facts in the world. “Fact” is a word that is a surrogate for “truth.” The most we can do with the world is point to it, perceive it, and determine a course of action regarding it. What we are faced with when we are faced with the world is, to borrow a word from Heidegger for my own purposes, *ontics*. I use the word *ontics* to mean the ordinary things that we encounter, along with their various (and variously describable qualities), as well as “conditions” that allow the world to hang together in the way it does, independent of any human projects or desiderata – these include “laws of nature,” “Strong Force,” “Weak Force” and the like. Thus, “facts” are, as well, a part of language, a decision about some ontic state of affairs. Like “true,” “fact” is a compliment we pay to some settled belief about the world, about some ontic phenomenon or phenomena in the world. What Brandom seems to have run up against here is the failure of language to come to terms with the raw “is-ness” of the world, an “is-ness” that he wishes to call “facts.” But so long as “fact” is simply another word for “truth” or “settled belief” there is no epistemological term that will do for this purpose – we have to resort to ontological descriptors, the descriptors that carry us from the world to mind. It is not a “fact” of the matter about the world that I am writing this as I sit in a yellow, leather club chair. All I know is that there is this *ontic* that I can clothe (have clothed) with words and pre-existing concepts, words and concepts that link up with other words and concepts, that allow me to *say* something about (and perhaps quite a lot of something about, for lots of different purposes) this ontic that nests within a web of relations with other ontics that are
named and that allow me to comprehend and ultimately proclaim “this” is a “yellow,” “leather,” “club,” “chair.” What Brandom needs, but perhaps would not so acknowledge, is a relaxed, ontological way of describing the ways that the world “speaks” to us. Using a word like “fact” just gets him sucked into the game Rorty is playing. Rorty has his traps ready for all who use words like “facts” and “truth” as regards the world. There is some point at which the game becomes tiresome, when one wants to assert that the world “speaks,” and that the way it “speaks” is continuous with (not pinched off from) the way we “speak.” One can assert such a thing especially where one sees the world, not as “enchanted,” but as the consequence of Reason in a more or less Hegelian sense. Rorty thinks that no self-respecting pragmatist would say such a thing. But, not so different than the Stoics, so long as we don’t take Reason to dictate the abundant particular possibilities of life, or as a trump, I don’t know that self-respect has anything to do with it.

Rorty was largely right to take language (and vocabularies) to be central to what it means to be human. What Rorty grasps, but would not have put in these terms, is that to be human, to be language users, to be creatures that are able to take the various ontics of the world and engage them using a “froth of words” and concepts, requires that we be in some position such as Heidegger, in *Being and Time* (Division I, Part IV), described as “thrownness,” requires that we be placed at some ontological “distance” from the world of other ontics with characteristics other than those we possess. That there are minds at all seems to require this “distance,” and what we can mean by “minds” is akin to Hilary
Putnam’s notion – that minds are systems of object-involving capacities possessed by beings more or less like ourselves. Here I would only replace “object-involving” with “ontic-involving” to do justice to the range of “components” that we take to be part of the word, the things perceived as well as the things not perceived or, as Merleau-Ponty would say, “the visible and the invisible.” In some sense, this “thrownness” is akin to “birthing” insofar as beings with minds are “pushed out” of the mere “is-ness” of the world, and are permitted to “turn back” upon the world and capture it in its various phenomenal movements. Pushing this analogy further, perhaps we may say that what Rorty rejected was an attempt to re-enter the birth canal, and he accepted the “distance” as that which is what makes us what we are, and so sees fixations on “the world” apart from the “object-involving capacities” that are supercharged by language as a denial of our birthright. For while McDowell is right in suggesting that, for example, the logical space of nature and the logical space of reasons are not wholly separable, given that the mind is part of nature, he seems to grasp insufficiently that qualitative difference between ontics and mind, between bald “is-ness” and rich linguistic description. Brandom is right to assert that there is, what Rorty himself agreed there is, i.e. “a world of causally interacting things that existed before there were vocabularies, that was not in any sense constituted by our vocabulary-mongering, and that goes its way in large part independently of our discursive activity.” But that world is not constituted by “facts” or “truths” – which are terms of an epistemic rather than ontological language game. I hasten to add here, that I

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am not arguing that the world is only accessible by language, but we access it via the inferences we draw concerning it, whether or not those inference are clothed in language.

In closing this part of the discussion, I turn back to Rorty’s provocative Introduction to *CIS*. For there he says, in defense of his linguistic absolutism, that “the world does not tell us what language games to play.” I agree. It does not. But it does tell us something about the constraints which tug or bear down on the language games that we do play. To deny that in order to preserve freedom is simply to go too far. Further, one can understand Rorty in saying “The suggestion that truth, as well as the world, is out there is a legacy of an age in which the world was seen as the creation of a being who had a language of his own. If we cease to attempt to make sense of the idea of such a nonhuman language, we shall not be tempted to confuse the platitude that the world may cause us to be justified in believing a sentence true with the claim that the world splits itself up, on its own initiative, into sentence-shaped chunks called facts.” But, as I have argued, I don’t think there is much danger, per se, in either believing that the world causes us to be justified in believing a sentence true (or that a pre-linguistic inference is true), just as I take the notion that “the world splits itself up into sentence-shaped chunks called facts” as no more than a metaphorical way that certain types of creatures remind themselves that there are things about the world – some call them (perhaps unfortunately) “facts,” some call them “realities,” and some call them “ontics” – that carry on without
much regard for what we think about them in all of our religions, cultures and philosophies. We get on pretty well believing just that.

The trouble for freedom isn’t to be laid at the feet of such rather innocuous claims, but rather at the feet of megalomaniacs, sanctimonious moralists, and self-certain hermeneuticists who believe that they have a privileged view on the world, can read all of its truth in a single, *a priori*, sweeping vision, and then attempt to force the rest of us to live by those visions. Religion, epistemology and empiricism are not nearly as problematic as Rorty thought. It is human arrogance that was, and remains, the problem. His fears for human freedom are, as well, what led him to insist on the radical separation of “the public” from “the private,” to say, as he does in the Introduction of *CIS*, that “there is no way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory” – that “the vocabulary of self-creation is *necessarily* private, unshared, unsuited to argument – and that “The vocabulary of *justice* is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange” (emphasis added) – are excessive prescriptions for guarding the public (political, cultural) squares from certain idiosyncratic, personal excesses that attend private self creation. In suggesting that the idiosyncrasies of the private need not subject themselves to *any* tests of “legitimacy” or argument, leaves “the private,” however else Rorty intended it, a bizarre realm of artistic geniuses, devout believers in all sorts of gods, and even lunatics. This prescription strikes many as just as ghastly as some of the evils it is designed to ward off. In point of fact, no such realms called “the private”
and “the public” exist, unless one is willing to play Rorty’s novel and even ingenious “language game.” Rorty’s dualism was a passionate attempt to save both the public and the private from each other, as a distraught child might attempt to save volatile parents from each other by locking them in separate bed rooms. It speaks volumes that he begins *CIS* with that quote from Milan Kundera’s *The Art of the Novel*, which reads, in part:

> The imaginative realm of tolerance was born with modern Europe, it is the very image of Europe – or at least our dream of Europe, a dream many times betrayed but nonetheless strong enough to unite us all in the fraternity that stretches far beyond the little European continent. But we know that the world where the individual is respected . . . is fragile and perishable. . . .

Rorty was old enough to have seen some of the worst that the twentieth century had to offer, often in the name of oracular consultations with things that were, as he put it, beyond time and chance. The “dream of Europe” was none other than the dream that such things would never be permitted to happen again. In view of that, one can understand Rorty’s excesses, using the only tools at his disposal – his philosophical training – he fought for the “dream of Europe” by attacking spurious claims to divine what the world really wants us to do, to be. He was in large part correct. And so Rorty’s prescription for wide democratic and liberal practices, his vigorously championing the open society and Emersonian self-creation, cannot be gainsaid.
Relativism. The charge of relativism arises against Rorty because, for him, there was no exogenous trump that can settle disputes between communities or individuals regarding important political or moral ideas, or even whether certain political or moral ideas should be taken to be important. In determining which community is correct about certain of its values or practices, one merely has recourse to attempt a synoptic view of the values and practices themselves. There can be no appeal to a fact of the matter about the world that settles the argument, decisively. This charge of relativism is, ironically, our jumping off point to consider Rorty as an anti-idolater, and to reframe him as, primarily, a moral philosopher and fierce democrat. The horror that is supposed to attach to the charge of relativism is really bound up in Rorty’s insistence that we stop looking for exogenous guarantees that our decisions (about abortion, or war, or education, or family structure) are the right ones.

For Rorty, the only “gods” are we ourselves. The right of individuals and communities to decide for themselves what actions to effect and what values to hold is near to being sacred. This comes close to converging with Kant’s conclusion regarding the autonomy of the individual, at one point, at least, where Kant and Rorty could agree. However, Rorty abjured Kant’s moral philosophy as merely another collection of exogenous constraints that decide our actions in advance, as a flight to rules and formulas to decide what should be decided in a thick conversation wherein we try to persuade one another, rather than try to kill one another, over the issues in dispute. His position has
been viewed as akin to Protagoras’s humanist notion that “man is the measure of all things.” (Rorty himself acknowledged an affinity for Protagoras and spoke of the Greek philosopher as a “proto-pragmatist.”)  

I wish now to proffer a summary defense against this charge of invidious moral and cultural relativism, even though I hope I have made a successful argument that we are obliged to at least consult the world in our deliberations regarding actions and values. Consultation of the world is a moral obligation of anyone taking the human experience seriously, otherwise an unnecessary opening is left to holocaust deniers, flat earthers and other assorted crackpots, all on the basis that they agree, in solidarity, that there was no holocaust and that spherical worlds are fantasies. There is something in us, or at least in most of us, that does not tolerate too much cognitive dissonance, the cognitive dissonance that obtains when we behave as though we do not seriously disagree with the claims of our peers, and can prove our case against them if given half a chance.

While Rorty’s so-called relativism rattles the cages of those who think we are subject to exogenously formed duties that direct our actions in decisive ways (against Nazism, for example), he may also be seen as engaged in a kind of quasi-Kantian move toward hallowing the autonomy of the individual, without the Kantian rules and transcendental philosophy, and accepting the risks that come along with that autonomy. That is to say, Rorty thinks that all we have is each other, and that that is enough, and so

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we had better start to look to one another, through sustained conversation, for solutions regarding how we will live together into the future, rather than wait for a blueprint from the gods or from Reason. Thus, he forged forms of ethical discourse that place a premium on expanding notions of loyalty, cosmopolitan sensibilities, and cultural engagement, rather than enhanced receptivity to divine revelation or *a priori* sources of indubitable moral truth. Implicit in Rorty’s loyalty ethics is an affinity for Hume’s views on the place of human sympathy. Rorty was persuaded that the greater our sense of loyalty toward one another, inside and outside of our communities or societies, the more likely it would be to take care of one another and to be concerned about the flourishing of other people, even if they are far flung. It is interesting to note that the Rortian “saint” would be the person who lived a life of intense *feelings* of sympathy, and thus loyalty, for and toward a large circle of human beings, and perhaps even for other creatures.66 Throughout his work one finds constant reference to the need to bring about conditions of life in which others are permitted to flourish by their own lights. Despite what certain of Rorty’s critics hold, his “ethnocentrism” is rooted in just this, not in a view that one’s own point of view on moral or cultural matters is “the right” view for all, as in some imperialist or supremacist sense. Rorty thought all cultures should be “ethnocentric” in this limited sense, and that disputes between communities should be settled through conversation and joint deliberation, and never through violence.

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Rorty’s critics believe that his “relativism” leaves the door open to the possibility that a community will emerge that will empower new Hitlers and Pol Pots. Rorty conceded this point, but responded by saying that he sees no way to so control the impulses and actions of other, autonomous human beings such that, absent some form of social lobotomy, we can rest absolutely assured that they have no recourse to such possibilities. There simply is no guaranty that such types of people will not be brought back to positions of power by decisions made in their own societies. All we can do is respond when we begin to see it happening, and preferably with diplomacy rather than violence. He thought that appeals to “foundations” would have little impact upon societies that have opted to go totalitarian, including in those cases where such a decision was based upon that society’s own conclusions about “foundations” (regarding, for example, the “essential nature of man,” or “the natural order of things,” or “the edicts of the gods”). None of this suggests that Rorty did not have very strong preferences for democratic and progressive forms of political engagement. To the contrary, he was a life-long progressive who understood democracy to be the best expression of human concern and respect for the autonomy of the individual to live his or her own life as he or she sees fit. His form of social hope, which may be read as involving caritic or agapic love, is captured in his book *AOC*, the title of which he derived from James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time*.
If we - and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others - do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world.67

Beyond this, Rorty defends himself (and pragmatism) against the charge of relativism as follows:

“Relativism” is the view that every belief on a certain topic, or perhaps about any topic, is as good as every other. No one holds this view [emphasis added]. . . . The association of pragmatism with relativism is a result of confusion between the pragmatist’s attitude toward philosophical theories with his attitude toward real theories. . . . “Relativism” only seems to refer to a disturbing view, worthy of being refuted, if it concerns real theories, not just philosophical theories. Nobody really cares if there are incompatible alternative formulations of a categorical imperative, or incompatible sets of categories of the pure understanding. We do care about alternative, concrete, detailed . . . proposals for political change. When such an alternative is proposed, we debate it, not in terms of categories or principles but in terms of the various concrete advantages

and disadvantages it has [emphasis added]. The reason relativism is talked about so much among Platonic and Kantian philosophers is that they think being relativistic about philosophical theories – attempts to “ground” first-level theories – leads to being relativistic about the first-level theories themselves. If anyone really believed that the worth of a theory depends upon the worth of its philosophical grounding, then indeed they would be dubious about physics, or democracy, until relativism in respect to philosophical theories had been overcome. Fortunately, almost nobody believes anything of the sort.68

The distinction Rorty draws between “philosophical theory” and “real theory” is one that is intended to relegate philosophical theorizing (especially representationalist philosophical theorizing) to a certain place in the culture which is removed from the exigencies of life – a place that need not be visited on pilgrimages in search of justifications for one’s or one’s community’s moral or political commitments. But this is not much more than a slap at the stature and seriousness with which philosophers have held themselves, a sort of populist suggestion that the sciences and the demos would get along just fine without philosophical theorizing. The real meat in Rorty’s self-defense against the charge of relativism is in the first two sentences of the preceding quote. For if indeed no one really believes that any competing belief on any important moral, political

68 CP, 168
or cultural matter is as good as any other belief on such matter, then things turn on how one selects from among competing beliefs. Since there is no representationalist grounding available, all that is left is the axiological commitments of the community (or state, or individual, or religious institution) itself, over and against the axiological commitments of others. On Rorty’s account, philosophical theorizing can do no more to help settle the matter than robust conversation and constant reference to the identity or identities – for the individual as well as for the community – that may be at stake. The “real” political theory that commits to an idea such as “we holds these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal” requires assent and action upon review of the goals and traditions that are relevant to the society that holds such a view, not philosophical justifications, not the justifications that derive from philosophical theories, even though philosophical theories may have contributed to the language that expresses the political commitments contained within such language. Rorty would argue that very few people worry themselves about such philosophical contributions.

There remain some problems in Rorty’s self-defense, both with respect to relativism and with respect to the distinction Rorty wished to draw between “philosophical” and “real” theories. As regards the latter, it just is the case that philosophical theories, even representationalist ones, have provided collections of ideas that lead to democratic institutions and practices of the types with which we are familiar, just as it is the case that other (and sometimes the same) philosophical theories led to
some of the worst butcheries and tyrannies the world has ever seen. To the extent Rorty sought to protect us from our tendency to draw upon philosophical theories, he may also have been arguing, desideratively, for the obstruction of “real theories.” For the most part, the drafters of the American constitution were foundationalists, not anti-foundationalists, and they looked to the philosophical writings of other foundationalists to find support for their political commitments. Jefferson, for example, drew heavily on the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment and upon John Locke. John Locke’s and Adam Smith’s views regarding the nature and rights of “man” were grounded in representationalist philosophical notions that tried to align human actions with “the way the world really is in itself.” Many might easily argue that it is a good thing they did so, that we are none the worse for it. Rorty seems to have thought that any attempts to consult the world are inherently fraught with danger, while non-representationalist approaches are somehow less fraught. However, the jury is still out on that question, still out on the question of whether “we” non-representationalists, committed to “real” theory, are less likely than, say, radical jihadists to blow the world to pieces. True, Rorty’s utopia will contain no jihadists – but neither will it contain John Lockes, or Adam Smiths, or Martin Luther Kings. It is hard to say that such a utopia would not be impoverished to the extent of the absence of thinkers such as these. It is such reasoning as this that leads to Edward Grippe’s charge that Rorty is a “fundamentalist” of a sort – for into his utopia only Rortyans may enter. Still, to the extent Rorty sees “foundations” as dispensable for the instantiation of such political ideas that “all men are created equal,” that it would have
been enough for the colonists to rest comfortable in the “We hold” portion and to jettison what followed, i.e. the notion of endowment by their Creator with inalienable rights that provide something that “We hold” does not provide, we are still obliged to take him seriously. For to the extent that “We hold” is what does most of the work, and to the extent commitments to the “Creator” interferes with the rest of the mechanisms and procedures of the democracy, then, on Rorty’s account, we saddle ourselves with something that is “more trouble than it is worth.” For Rorty, the “rights of man” are just as easily created from or conjured-up out of our capacity, as a species, for empathy and sympathy as they may be assumed to result from divine commands.

If Rorty is to be branded an anti-idolater and if his work after TLT is to be situated within that frame, I have to explain what I mean by “idolatry” and why I find this a useful metaphor to use in Rorty’s case. First, in Rorty’s version of anti-idolatry “the gods” (which include representationalist “philosophical theories”) are supplanted by human needs and desires. With that alteration made to what is the basic form of religious idolatry, we can note, nonetheless, that an idolater is one who venerates an idea or object to the detriment of those whom the idea or object is designed to serve. Idolatry inverts the relation of valuer and valued, user and used. The master is placed in the position of servant. By “venerates” I do not intend to imply that the idea or object need be within a religious framework, although it could be. One can venerate a number of non-religious ideas or objects – truth, reason, power, knowledge, haute couture, Das Volk, Europe,
The American Way, capital, and commodities, to name but a few “gods.” The point is that whatever the ultimate object of veneration all else must be subordinated and “sacrificed” to it. For Rorty, God is an idol, since God is an idea that has been served to the exclusion of concern for real live human beings with their collections of interests and desires (Rorty does not consider how the idea called “God” served the creation of the “dream” referred to by Kundera). The same goes for Truth. Truth as idea – as ideology – functions as venerated touchstone to determine whether or not the lives of certain people were worth living regardless of whether those living them thought so or not. The Western conception of Truth as that which tracks with scientific methods and discoveries, and which displaces all other forms of truth – has moved from its proper role as tool and has taken on the role of arbiter and judge for that in which a good life consists. In Stalinist Russia, the “Truth” of historical materialism (a “philosophical theory”) meant the crushing of real, live human beings who had different notions regarding how a state should be ordered, and in the Germany of National Socialism the “Truth” of the importance of blood purity, resting upon notions of bad “philosophical theory” and pseudoscientific race theory, meant the genocidal slaughter of millions. Rorty, along with Levinas and others, was suspicious of any such “Truth” claims with results that overrode the interest of real human beings to live the lives they preferred to live. “Nature” is another idol, which is why Rorty abjured the idea of a world that “speaks” to us.
As suggested above, while we may or may not agree with the story Rorty was trying to tell, we might more easily agree that the ultimate importance of his work can profitably be considered as connected to his desire for the attainment of a utopia, free of such “gods,” where books, ideas, and politics serve us, rather than the other way around:

My sense of the holy, insofar as I have one, is bound up with the hope that someday, any millennium now, my remote descendants will live in a global civilization in which love is pretty much the only law. In such a society, communication would be domination-free, class and caste would be unknown, hierarchy would be a matter of temporary pragmatic convenience, and power would be entirely at the disposal of the free agreement of a literate and well educated electorate. 69

There is something very right in this last passage, and something that might have only been possible for Rorty to conclude by riding the pendulum too far (but not much too far) in the direction away from metaphysics, empiricisms, and epistemologies of various types, as noted above.

For Rorty, then, nothing trumps human freedom. The only constraints he would impose – which seem eminently fair – are the constraints imposed by Mill in On Liberty: live as you wish but harm no one else in his or her right to do the same. Any other rules

69 FR, pg. 40
smack of idolatry for Rorty, as attempts to place above the live, human being oppressive rules of life as though they take priority over the pursuit of happiness. Percepts don’t have much that is interesting to say about directing human conduct, goals and interests. We may non-linguistically register that “rocks are hard,” but by language we can reason out the ways in which they may be crushed or moved or arranged, so that cities may be built. We may non-linguistically register that “fire burns,” but by means of language harness fire to serve many purposes that have very little to do with bare survival. Yes, I argue against Rorty that the world does “speak” to us, and I believe it speaks to us in ways more profound than bare registrations of the type sketched by Bermúdez. I believe that there are powerful intuitive forms of knowledge, forms of non-conceptual knowledge celebrated by many non-Western approaches to philosophy that actually require quieting the flow of words. But even if one concedes my point that the world does “speak” to us in this way, its bare “utterances” do not provide us with enough information to form and adjudicate our more complex actions and values. And so, despite my criticisms of his linguistic absolutism, and despite my efforts to make some minimal room for non-linguistic rationality, I believe Rorty is substantially correct in his evaluation of the place of language in human rationality. It does no good to turn to intuition for most human purposes (building homes, farming lands, raising children and the like), although it is on my view important to make room for intuition as an important informer of our various, 

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private plans of life. Rorty’s infamous private/public distinction sets the stage for how this may be done, without denigrating, in doing so, either the private or the public as some believe he has. In saying this, I hasten to add that this distinction is too sharp, and precludes or inadequately considers the possibility of the creation of communities focused upon shared “idiosyncratic” insights, of which there are in fact numerous examples. Such communities go public when their values are at stake, and they should, even in a democracy or, better put, especially in a democracy. Rorty’s view regarding the public/private split assumed that robust and useful “conversation” and political deliberation about roads and sewers and school districts could proceed without such idiosyncratic touchstones jockeying for a voice. They never have, and they never will.

71 It is worth taking a moment to point out an interpretation of this distinction or dualism that renders it less severe, even though, as I argue elsewhere herein, Rorty himself made too much of this distinction. It comes from an interview he gave, and which attenuates or back-peddlers a bit on this distinction: “The original misinterpretation came from Nancy Fraser, who said ‘Rorty didn't realize the personal is the political.’ I think she and I were at cross purposes. I was thinking of one sense of private, something like Whitehead's definition of religion: "what you do with your solitude." Fraser was thinking of the private as the kitchen or bedroom, as opposed to the marketplace and the office. There was no relevance to what I was saying. . . . I didn't say everybody had a public/private split, but some people do. There is a spectrum here. Some people have no public consciousness. This is the case of the sociopath; he simply doesn't think that there are any moral subjects out there. There are also a lot of other solitaries: hermetic poets who don't care if they have an audience. At the other extreme, there are people who have a minimal inner life. Their happiness consists entirely of being the soccer coach, or being the pater familias, or being chair of the Rotary Club. My public/private distinction wasn't an explanation of what every human life is like. I was, instead, urging that there was nothing wrong with letting people divide their lives along the private/public line. We don't have a moral responsibility to bring the two together. It was a negative point, not a positive recommendation about how everybody should behave.” Derek Nystrom and Kent Puckett (eds.), Against Bosses, Against Oligarchies: A Conversation with Richard Rorty. Charlottesville, VA: Prickly Pear Pamphlets, 1998. Pp. 60-61.
And the “idiosyncratic” need not be the danger to public deliberation that Rorty seemed to think. The democratic liberalism that Rorty so loved is rooted in “idiosyncratic” Jewish and Christian ideas. The strong sense that it is for us fallible human beings, to, like lovers, “change the history of the world” is a sensibility that dovetailed with the caritic theologies that Rorty once rejected as possible conversation partners. In FR, Rorty and Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo traded thoughts on the *kenotic* (from the Greek κένωσις (*kenosis*), meaning “emptying”) nature of the meaning of the Cross in the Christian tradition - the idea that the full meaning of the Cross is God’s *kenotic* “emptying of Himself,” his handing over the destiny of human beings to human beings themselves. This *kenosis* points back to Protagoras, the “proto-Pragmatist,” on Rorty’s account, and forward to Peirce, James, Dewey and Rorty himself. Such a theological notion (*kenosis*) allowed Rorty into a new conversation by which two very different thinkers, Rorty and Vattimo, concluded that the *summum bonum* of human life and engagement is love itself, a love only possible in the condition of freedom and Levinasian responsibility for the Other. So in *FR* (pp. 35, 40) we find Rorty saying:

The gradual movement within Christianity in recent centuries in the direction of the social ideals of the Enlightenment is the gradual weakening of the worship of God as power and its gradual replacement with the worship of God as love. . . . *1 Corinthians 13* is an equally useful text for both religious people like Vattimo, whose sense of what
transcends our present condition is bound up with a feeling of dependence, and for nonreligious people like myself, for whom this sense consists simply in hope for a better human future.

The “secularist” freedom that Rorty desired is possible even when holding onto the gods, or to God. Many of Rorty’s heroes, the ones who brought into the world the liberalism that Rorty so admired and thought worthy of defense, thought so. Vattimo’s use of *kenosis* to describe the ultimate expression of Christianity as the “secular” preserves the transcendent by re-describing it. Deflation and re-description of the types Rorty himself championed are what are in order, rather than a blunderbuss attack on all the “gods,” or on the role of human intuition as it was employed by, for example, Emerson and Thoreau. Yet without Rorty and his heroes’ attacks on the idols, neither Vattimo, nor I, would be as far down the road of our creative re-descriptions as we are. It is not necessary to kill the gods, only to understand them differently. A more nuanced neo-pragmatism (and post-modernism) is in order. And it is important to point out, before I proceed, that *one’s “idols” are relative to one’s “gods.”* Rorty’s own idolatry needs to be explored, for he was wrong to conclude, in the sweeping fashion that he did, that real human beings must *never* be “sacrificed” to grand narratives. Human beings sacrifice themselves and others, in a variety of ways, to grand narratives, including the narratives of Democracy, Christian love and Buddhist compassion, which are largely rooted in large *metaphysical* ideas that have little to do with “muddling through” the quotidian affairs of
Thus, Rorty’s anti-idolatry can itself be viewed as a form of idolatry – the idolatry of placing the quotidian above the grand visions of a better world that is based upon the pursuit of the highest ideals that a community may hold – often worth the sacrifice, as many of the dead would attest if we take their passionate commitment to such “gods” as evidence. It is our journey toward the highest ideals, ideals that we think are somehow woven into the structure of “how things hang together,” that permits the progress of human beings toward the human perfection that has yielded both Jesus on the Cross and Jeffersonian democracy, as well as the moral disasters of Hitler and Pol Pot. This just is the risk of “Man Thinking,” and neo-pragmatic lobotomy is not the cure. Social hope is not merely an end but a process in which ideas clash and jockey for position. It is the hope that Jesus and Jefferson will win out over Hitler and Pol Pot, with no guarantees that they will. But as there is no philosophical or political guarantee that they will, social hope requires faith, faith that there is some good reason above and beyond our mere idiosyncratic projects and wishes, why they should. Only through the expectation that we will get there, some day, an expectation that is based upon more than catchphrases like “social justice,” will they ever be achieved. Certainly, there are risks in such a view. Such risks can be seen in the pogroms, massacres, genocides, intellectual purges, and wars of history. But risk is never abated. It is only transferred. Should we run the risk of swapping the belief that somehow the “law of love” is written into the fabric of the world for the risk that the best we can do is muddle through, we only wind-up with a different set of gains and losses. What Rorty does offer us is a set of warning buoys that can show
us the shoals and rocks that lead to the worst outcomes, the tail events, that holding to such visions may visit on the species, in the forms of bad political philosophies and ideologies that are rooted more in power than they are in love. This is no mean gift, but rather a gift that can be translated into a set of brakes and buffers for the pursuits of our high ideals.
Chapter II

Rorty’s Extremism – More Criticisms of Rorty’s Thought

Every philosophy is under the illusion that it has no illusions because it has discovered the illusions of its predecessors.

- Reinhold Niebuhr\textsuperscript{72}

I begin with a series of additional criticisms of Rorty’s thought, and subsequently unpack them for the critical content captured in each, for the critical explication undertaken in the previous chapter was insufficient to provide the range of problems from which so many believe Rorty’s work suffers. This unpacking also provides the opportunity to do some final ground clearing before laying down my arguments, in Chapter III, in support of Rorty’s version of pragmatism, his antifoundationalism and his Ironism. We can begin with Rorty’s own acknowledgment of some of these criticisms, in \textit{Trotsky}:

1. I am sometimes told, by critics from both ends of the political spectrum, that my views are so weird as to be merely frivolous. They suspect that I will say anything to get a gasp, that I am just amusing myself by contradicting everybody else.

2. Rorty begins [the essay] ‘Pragmatism, Davidson, and Truth’ with an admiring description of pragmatism, into which he wants to enroll Davidson, as ‘a movement which has specialized in debunking dualisms and in dissolving traditional problems created by those dualisms.’ . . . But Rorty’s own thinking is organized around the dualism of reason and nature, and that means he can be at best partly successful in being a pragmatist in his own sense. No wonder his attempt to dissolve traditional problems has the aspect of refusing to listen to questions that still stubbornly look as if they ought to be good ones, rather than supplying a way of thinking within which the questions genuinely do not arise.

Of course, Rorty does not cast his view about nature and reason as a dualism. He speaks, for instance, of “patiently explaining that norms are one thing and descriptions another.” . . . That sounds like calmly drawing a distinction; it is not the obsessive mode of utterance
characteristic of a philosopher insisting on a dualism. But I have been urging that if we try to think as Rorty says we must, we are stuck with the philosophical anxieties that he wants to avoid. Cultivating a non-obsessive tone of voice is not enough to ensure that philosophical obsessions are out of place.

I cited Rorty’s suggestion that Putnam wants “a synoptic vision which will somehow synthesize every other possible view, will somehow bring the outside [field linguist descriptions] and the inside [the committed seeker after truth] points of view together.” Rorty means to accuse Putnam of the grandiose aspirations of traditional philosophy, which he thinks we should discard: thought is to be brought into alignment with its objects, minds with reality. My suggestion has been that bringing the outside and the inside points of view together (not “somehow”, which suggest a mystery) is exactly the sort of dualism-debunking and problem-dissolving move for which Rorty himself admires pragmatism. So [what I have been arguing] could be represented as a pragmatism in Rorty’s sense, even though, in trying to give expression to it, I borrow from thinkers such as Kant, whom Rorty finds utterly suspect. And I am claiming that Rorty’s own pragmatism is half-baked, according to standards set by his own
account of what pragmatism is.” (John McDowell, *Mind and World*, pp. 154-155)

3. However, Rorty’s “self-creative” neopragmatist metaphysics now reads as a prescription for disaster, an invitation to think that there is only one possible democratic way of living—the American way, because it is “our” way—and that such a way of living must reject all claims of piety as illegitimate intrusions on individual liberty, attending to no other sources of guidance than those interactively corrected ideas of free individuals that might emerge from “democratic deliberation.” (Judith M. Green, *Pragmatism and Social Hope*, pg. 80)

4. The success of the institutions of the West can be measured for Rorty only by subjective criteria. Western science and political forms of life do not have their prestige because they have discovered more about how nature is articulated and about what forms of community best suit human beings. Europeans rather have been very good at changing their vocabularies and reinventing themselves rapidly. Presumably Europe became a fashion leader in such vocabularies, and so managed to keep its cultural hegemony, because it could keep coming up with new vocabularies faster than those in the rest of the world could copy them.
But surely there is a large difference between Eastern Europeans’ adoption of the Western legal system and democratic institutions and their copying of Western clothing and rock music. It is true that within the fashion model we might decide to make our commitment to some fashions much more important than our commitments to others. But how would we thereby have made it comprehensible that others must, in order to get matters at least roughly right, follow us in making those same fashions (human rights, for example, and greater equality of opportunity) more important? Why is there that limitation on their freedom? Could it really be the case that there is no deeper rightness here than that the trend-setting West has happened to make those fashions extremely important for joining ‘our’ club? (Frank B. Farrell, in *Rorty & His Critics*, Herman Saatkamp, Jr. (ed.), pp. 185-186)

5. Again, it seems to me that Rorty is asking for the reader to have faith in his, Rorty’s, idiosyncratic repackaging of ‘pragmatist’, and if one does then one will understand, among other things, ‘an important element in the construction of narratives’. Yet this is the pattern of request all religious faiths make, as I have noted earlier: ‘believe and you will understand’. Only, now we are being asked to come within Rorty’s personal gloss, his ‘pragmatic creed’, where the good is
uniquely (dogmatically?) defined by and through his narration. . . .

Like a religious belief . . . it is the spirit of the New Pragmatism, rather than any final vocabulary (meta-narrative) peculiar to himself, which Rorty wishes to insinuate into intellectual discussions, and through these debates into the conversations (narratives) of the general public. Thus, his stated goal is not the winning of a philosophical debate, but shifting paradigms, reconfiguring webs of belief. As Rorty has said, this activity of paradigm shifting calls not so much for discussion based on traditional reason as it does for an all-or-nothing change of perspective, a change in the way one views all: 'understand my story and you will see. (Edward J. Grippe, Richard Rorty’s New Pragmatism: Neither Liberal Nor Free, pp. 148-149)

A good way to explicate and discuss some of the major criticisms of Rorty’s thought is to begin with these, each in its turn (roughly), after which I will provide a summarization that links to other criticisms. In the next chapter, I will provide responses to these criticisms as I think warranted, and where I agree with the critic I will so indicate. This will allow us to deal with many of the criticisms leveled at Rorty’s before finally moving into the uses of his thought in the development of a tenable cosmopolitanism and in forging new religious and theological approaches and practices,
less encumbered by doubts about Rorty’s thought, or where such doubts persist, after weighting them and juxtaposing them to some of Rorty’s own responses. We will begin with the criticisms that Rorty himself pointed out in *Trotsky*.

The suggestion that Rorty was being frivolous in many of his essays and books has been offered by more than one critic. The charge of frivolity (articulated in various ways) derives, in part, from Rorty’s supposed embrace of value and moral relativism as well as what Clifford Geertz has called “relax-and-enjoy-it ethnocentrism”\textsuperscript{73} which, supposedly, means that he was, among other things, unable to offer an adequate defense of the democratic liberalism he so loved, or was, alternatively, in flirting distance of Western cultural triumphalists – a no-no in an age of identity politics and robust criticism of Europe’s supremacist tendencies (and one of philosopher Judith Green’s primary criticisms of Rorty’s version of pragmatism). Nancy Fraser has taken Rorty to task for his off-point feminism in his essay *Feminism and Pragmatism*.\textsuperscript{74} Richard John Neuhaus (the recently deceased Lutheran-minister-turned-Catholic-priest and editor of the Catholic-Christian magazine *First Things*) thought Rorty’s “relativism” was inadequate to the very task of preserving liberalism, and so actually undermined Rorty’s project:


In addition, and despite his subordination of the public to the private, Rorty’s final justification for his way of talking is thoroughly public in nature—because it is the best way to sustain the liberal democracy that he, along with most of us, favors. We have had occasion to point out some of the ways in which Rorty’s ironist vocabulary fails in precisely that task, for it can neither provide a public language for the citizens of such a democracy, nor contend intellectually against the enemies of democracy, nor transmit the reasons for democracy to the next generation. Rorty’s public justification of ironic liberalism thus fails on its own stated terms.75

Indeed, Rorty’s writing, both in its style and in its substance, seems insufficiently concerned with the anxieties normally felt after the assault on “universal morality” that has been so much a part of both modernity and post-modernity, whether packaged in the wrappings of the natural sciences, or pragmatism or of existentialism. Even his fellow pragmatists, themselves suspicious of lunges for certainty using bad metaphysics, have distanced themselves from him. Susan Haack coined the phrases “Vulgar Pragmatism” and “Vulgar Rortyism” and wrote, in defense of the classical

pragmatist tradition: “Though hoping against hope that Peirce was wrong that ‘in the matter of ideas the public prefer the cheap and nasty,’ I worry about the readers, especially the students, [who] will . . . conclude that that [pragmatist] tradition is worthless, or, even worse, that vulgar Rortyism is what we should learn from it. It’s a shame.” 76 Joseph Margolis, along with many others (especially many who still attend annual meetings of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy), holds that Rorty simply misreads and misrepresents Dewey (and Dennett and Davidson and Quine) in a rather cavalier and playful and even scandalous manner, and thinks this is not accidental, that Rorty does so to further his own (erroneous) interpretation of pragmatism, as well as his own anti-philosophy crusade. 77

What Trotsky reveals is someone who has burst through to certain insights regarding philosophy, someone who believes that C.I. Lewis, and William James and John Dewey have provided a better way forward than Plato and Kant and Carnap did. There is, following this insight, a certain impishness to Rorty’s prose, an impishness that expresses a certain delight, a certain glee, that he holds a secret that few others hold – a sense of himself as having emerged from the thickets and woods of philosophy and culture, an emergence that allowed him to peer over into a lush valley filled not with


77 In his book Reinventing Pragmatism: American Philosophy at the End of the Twentieth Century (Cornell University Press, 2002), Joseph Margolis writes regarding Rorty that “he means to misread Dewey whenever it suits his post-philosophical purpose.” I have spoken with Margolis in person about his views of Rorty’s version of pragmatism. This quote puts things mildly.
philosophers but real people fashioning real lives, lives that made all of the representationalist and foundationalist philosophy to which he once committed his energies seem passé, even pointless. The impish prose, in combination with his post-philosophical views, poked a finger into both “eyes” of high culture – the belief that there are (sublime) arguments that light the way to exogenous justifications of cultural practices (and that there in fact are such justifications), and the belief that philosophical practice generates such arguments. Rorty’s iconoclasm is, for many, painful enough – or at least disconcerting enough. The fact that he delivers his iconoclastic messages (that the culture is largely delusional in its belief in foundations, “truth” and “progress”) with such cavalier prose seems to betray a lack of concern regarding the anxieties that his messages cause. He delivers messages like this one breezily, as though they are not world-shattering for the recipients who might take them seriously:

A post-Philosophical culture, then, would be one in which men and women felt themselves alone, merely finite, with no links to something Beyond. . . . Pragmatism, by contrast, does not erect Science as an idol to fill the place one held by God. It views science as one genre of literature – or, put the other way around, literature and the arts as inquiries, on the same footing as scientific inquiries. Thus it sees ethics as neither more “relative” or “subjective” than scientific theory, nor as needing to be made “scientific.” Physics is a way to try to cope with various bits of the
universe; ethics is a matter of trying to cope with other bits. (Emphasis added) 78

Or, after having physics and ethics described as “bits” and hard science placed on the same plane of social utility as literature (Rorty liked to pit science or philosophy against “literature” without also pointing out that “literature” includes (and on Rorty’s own account must include), arguably, Erica Jong and Donald Goines novels, and not only Shakespeare and Flaubert), we are told, in rather matter of fact terms:

The most powerful reason for thinking that no [Post-philosophical] culture is possible is that seeing all criteria as no more than temporary resting places, constructed by a community to facilitate its inquiries, seems morally humiliating. Suppose that Socrates was wrong, that we have not once seen the Truth, and so will not, intuitively, recognize it when we see it again. This means that when the secret police come, when the torturers violate the innocent, there is nothing to be said to them of the form “There is something within you that you are betraying. Though you embody the practices of a totalitarian society that will endure forever, there is something beyond those practices that condemns you.” This thought is hard to live with, as is Sartre’s remark: “Tomorrow, after my death, certain people may decide to establish fascism, and the others may be

cowardly or miserable enough to let them get away with it. At that moment, fascism will be the truth of man, and so much the worse for us. In reality, things will be as much as man has decided they are.”  

Rorty’s seemingly breezy acceptance of these conclusions, despite his awareness that they can be “morally humiliating” or “hard to live with,” is precisely what got him into so much trouble with fellow intellectuals and the guardians of the public culture – those who believe in “truth” and “right” and “progress,” and that a good deal of blood has been shed and ink spilled to underwrite them. Much of the public culture believes what Rorty does not believe, i.e. that there is indeed “something within you that you are betraying” when you engage in certain acts, such as helping to usher in an age of fascism, or of slavery, or of genocide. For most people – people who put their lives on the line for social justice, for example—such things as fascism, slavery and genocide are always wrong, in all places, under all conditions, and so bespeak a “something within” each of us that transcends all cultures and all possible political configurations. Rorty’s (and Sartre’s) belief that, yes, these things are horrible and are to be fought against even if one’s life is lost in the process does not, for them, imply a need for that “something within.” So while Rorty and Sartre can be imagined attending the same protest rallies, and engaging in the same forms of resistance and dissent as the “something within” crowd, those same fellow freedom fighters might find it curious that Rorty and Sartre, however they have fought

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79 Baynes, Bohman, and McCarthy, pg. 60.
along their side, underwrite their commitment with nothing more than their personal conclusions that they are right, perhaps guided by the accidents of their Western socialization. Their fellow dissenters want more than that – they want the moral certitude that is obtained precisely by appealing to something trans-cultural, something that should constrain us and that condemns us, even where human beings opt to go against it. They want the shared belief that where we engage in certain sorts of practices (pogroms or genocide, for instance) we stand condemned even when we get away with it for all intents and purposes, even when our community calls those sorts of practices something other than evil. It is not difficult to understand why these dissenters feel that someone who takes a trans-cultural view of the moral norms, who condemns categorically certain heinous acts, is more trustworthy than someone who grounds his condemnation on nothing more than his own contingent perspectives.

But if we put these more extreme cases aside, cases such as pogroms and genocides, Rorty might be justified in holding to the position he does, the position that says that there is no “something within” that condemns certain acts despite the culture’s practice of such acts, that what you take to be a something within is no more than the internalization of your culture’s norms. He would point out how cultures are divided over many matters that inform daily life. What “something within” condemns the eating of animal flesh, undertaken in just about all societies around the globe? What “something within” condemns the beating of one’s wife, a practice that is still pervasive around the
globe, a practices that is often underwritten by “something above”? What “something within” condemns the rape of women by conquering armies during the vast history of the species, when such a practice was celebrated by the warrior cultures themselves? What Rorty argued in response to questions about the trustworthiness of persons like Sartre and himself is that the West has pointed out certain problems associated with this list of practices, on the basis of pragmatic considerations, and that this has created persons who are in fact less inclined to engage in them or waiver in their condemnation of them as compared with persons who arrive at their conclusions on the basis of divine command or, as Peirce would have put it, on the basis of “authority” or “tenacity.” What is a belief other than its value for action? And if that be so, why would the pragmatist’s or existentialist’s view that pogroms are wrong be less commendable than the belief of the reader of scripture who concludes pogroms are wrong because God said so, and has nothing else to fall back on but that stark belief? The answer would appear to be that the moral actor who responds to divine command “sky hooks” his belief, to use Rortian language. That is, he thinks pogroms are wrong just in case God says so. His belief has foundations that the pragmatist and the existentialist lack. Yet, Rorty would argue, such foundations are by no means certain. If one’s belief that pogroms are wrong rests on them, then they rest on something just as if not more precarious than the pragmatist’s or existentialist’s Western beliefs about the wrongness of pogroms, since, one may change one’s mind about God, or conclude that one’s religious tradition provides insufficient
reasons to abhor pogroms, just as one may change one’s mind concerning the value of one’s Western, liberal views.

Yet, there seems plenty of evidence that Rorty has made a wrong turn, as Brandom suggests infra -- that in his glee to overthrow religion-informed moralities and epistemic foundations he has stepped into the trap that Reinhold Niebuhr suggests lies in wait for brilliant iconoclastic thinkers – “Every philosophy is under the illusion that it has no illusions because it has discovered the illusions of its predecessors.” The illusion that Rorty discovered operative in the work of many of his fellow philosophers was their commitment to representationalism. He writes, as Edward Grippe suggests, as though he himself has no illusions, as though there is nothing at all dubious about his linguistic absolutism and his version of antifoundationalism. But could it be that he operates with another set of illusions, illusions about the very possibility of cultural practices and language games that swing completely free of the world? Can he not see that there is something about the world itself, something about the world prior to any culture or linguistic practices, that must be taken into consideration as we engage in our cultural politics and form our plans of life; that, at least in some limited sense, the world is an epistemic partner? Rorty is quick to acknowledge the “brute” facts of the world, but could never bring himself, because of his position on language, the myth of the given and a particular version of inferential reasoning, to see that there are languages that are more natural than the natural language we invent in human culture – that all transactions,
whether with other human beings or with non-human ones, are transactions in and with the world (for other human beings are a part of the world, not separate from it), negotiations to obtain the things wanted or needed. Those transactions take place with our eyes and hands, legs and genitals, feet and heads, no less than with our lips and tongues and fingers, as we speak or write our more artificial languages. There is a continuum of languages and language games, from those that involve transactions with rocks and trees to those that involve the supplication of kings. The thing that makes this seem like nonsense is a view of mind and a view of world as utterly removed from one another, a view that is dualistic. For all of Rorty’s naturalism, for all of his razing of the gods, his arguments seem to betray a certain view of human intellectual capacities, a view that takes those human capacities to be semi-divine, a cut above the rest of nature rather than lying on a continuum (a metaphor, let us remember) within nature. This is the stark break that McDowell goes after in Rorty’s work. What McDowell seems to be saying against critics such as Rorty is that they are missing something important when they concern themselves with his “re-enchantment” of the world (over and against his claim of not having done so). What they are missing is that the flip side of “re-enchantment” is the re-naturalizing of our highfalutin conceptions of mind and human culture (or as McDowell says, as quoted above, “My suggestion has been that bringing the outside [world] and the inside [mind] points of view together (not “somehow”, which suggest a mystery) is exactly the sort of dualism-debunking and problem-dissolving move for which Rorty himself admires pragmatism.”) For on one reading of McDowell, we can say, perhaps,
that his project was, in part, not so much an attempt to drag mind into the world, but rather the world into mind (as continuous with it). This attempt to place mind on the continuum of nature suggests that nature is not merely a “brute” “thereness,” or wholly other, but rather is a sort of communicant as regards our needs and wants in life.

For Rorty, the idea that the world must be consulted as we engage in cultural politics or form our plans of life or determine our moral practices is an absurd one. He has sharp criticism for those who espouse such ideas. For example, of McDowell he says, rather glibly (and I quote at length):

[F]or McDowell the idea that the world is a sort of conversation partner is all-important. He wants to conceive of experience as “openness to the world” or “openness to reality,” in the same sense of openness in which a conversable person is open to new ideas. It is essential for him to describe perpetual illusions (the Müller-Lyon illusion, the woman with her head in a black bag whom the unwary take to be headless, etc.), _not_ as causing us to have true or false beliefs depending on our programming, but as presenting us with candidates for belief that we are free to accept or reject depending on our degree of intellectual sophistication.

McDowell likes to talk about the world doing you favors, showing you a kindness, vouchsafing facts. . . . Brandom, Sellars,
and Davidson all agree that the space of reasons as we find it is
also, by and large, the shape of the world. Because most of our
beliefs must be true, we can make no sense of the idea that a great
gulf might separate the way the world is and the way we describe
it. Unlike McDowell, however, they think that the world shapes the
space of reasons not by “vouchsafing facts” to us but by exercising
brute causal pressure on us. Just as the brute pressure of the
environment led to successive stages of biological evolution, so it
led to the successive stages of cultural evolution. These three
philosophers and McDowell agree that if you cannot use words
you do not have conceptual capacities. To have a conceptual
capacity just *is* being able to use a word. But the first three see no
reason to think of the nonhuman world as a conversation partner.
But for McDowell, things are not so simple. He says that
“conceptual capacities . . . can be operative not only in judgments .
. . but already in the transactions in nature that are constituted by
the world’s impacts on the receptive capacities of a suitable
subject. . . . McDowell agrees that rocks and trees do not talk, but
they do not *just* cause us to make judgments either. He thinks of a
perceptual appearance as a request to you by the world to make a
judgment, but as not yet itself a judgment, even though it has the
conceptual form of a judgment. So rocks and trees offer us reasons to believe by, so to speak, borrowing our ability to use words – an ability they did not have before humans developed language. McDowell’s “impressions” are neither physiological states that produce noninferential beliefs, nor those noninferential beliefs themselves, but something in between the two – the ingredients of *second nature*.  

One correction, at least, is in order. McDowell does not hold “that if you cannot use words you do not have conceptual capacities.” In *Mind and World* he says rather plainly that “it is not just in our comprehension of language, and in our making sense of one another in the other ways that belong with that, that conceptual capacities are operative.” This only makes the picture worse as far as Rorty is concerned, and it is not hard to see why Rorty reacts to McDowell the way he does, for if McDowell is correct then Rorty’s linguistic absolutism, as such, is finished. What McDowell argues, in effect, is that Rorty’s refusal of all suggestions that there is a link between what is called “mind” and what is called “world,” a link that can be established once reason is not assumed to be pinched off from the world, but is rather seen as an extension of nature itself, and where concepts are not language dependent but are rather generated as part of the mind’s transactions with the world. Rorty’s refusal to understand concepts and language in these

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80 *TP*, pp.147-148  
81 McDowell, pg. 72
ways creates the dualism between mind and world that many philosophers find untenable. As already suggested, this refusal is rooted in an indefatigable commitment to the notion that one cannot talk of inference or conceptual thought without language, which is tied into Rorty’s acceptance of Sellars’ view regarding “givens” and the manner in which inference operates, i.e. linguistically. But as McDowell argues, and I think persuasively, one does not need the *words* “red” and “mauve” and “purple” to understand that they are different from one another as they are encountered in the world (and may be *used* differently), just as one does not need the words “purple” and “rock” and “chair” to, spontaneously, understand that these are different (and may be *used* differently), or the words “throw” and “rock” and “lion” to understand they these are different (and may be *used* differently), and that there can be, and are, relationships between all of these. 82

McDowell seems right to point out the anxieties that Rorty’s position allows to remain. His anxieties link with Brandom’s when Brandom says that:

Rorty can explain our talk of facts; to treat a sentence as expressing a fact is just to treat it as true, and to treat a sentence as true is just to endorse it, to make the claim one would make by asserting that sentence. But [Rorty] rejects the idea of facts as a kind of thing that *makes* claims true. This is why he endorses the argument he sums up as ‘Since truth is a property of

82 There is, beyond this, a growing literature on “nonconceptual content,” but that will not be taken up here. However, for a discussion of this subject, see York H. Gunther (ed.), *Essays on Nonconceptual Content*. Mass.: MIT Press, 2003.
sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths.’ Before there were humans, there were no truths, so no true claims, so no facts. Now I think that at this point something has gone wrong with the argument.  

Rorty’s point is, of course, well taken. It is quite a Deweyan or Jamesian one, and in the history of pragmatism has remained potent. So what is going on? Much of the discord between Rorty and critics like McDowell and Brandom has to do with how words such as “facts” are being used. Where “fact” is thought to refer to claims about “X” thought to be beyond doubt according to the rules of a language game, then determining what are the “facts” can turn out to be a wholly linguistic affair (it is a “fact” that a ten and a queen win in Black Jack), and where “fact” is thought to refer to “states of affairs in the world independent of human knowledge or interests” (it is a “fact” that lava kills all organisms in its path), then the meaning takes us toward empirical investigation, toward microscopes, telescopes and test tubes by which we flesh out what is the case irrespective of what any cultural language game has to say about it. The dualism that Rorty’s linguistic absolutism creates is clear, problematic, and his critics are correct to decry it. The feeling that Rorty has made a wrong turn some place is in precisely the place McDowell suggests, even if one does not agree with some of McDowell’s

arguments in *Mind and World* and elsewhere. As with “facts,” the idea that we can mean only one thing when we use the word “language,” that language is limited to certain marks and noises made by human beings, as Rorty has put it, is where the problems arise. If we assume that by language we mean transactions with others – other objects and other people – to effect changes in our environment, obtain what we wish, forestall injuries, etc. – the hard argument between Rorty and McDowell softens. Had Rorty not argued for such radical freedom for human beings and had he not claimed such an intense specialness (almost divinity) for human culture, despite his claims that he was a thoroughgoing naturalist) he would have been able to place all human transactions within nature, and would have worried less that another philosopher chose to describe those transactions differently than he did. For one who claimed that there is no privileged vocabulary, the way Rorty critiques McDowell and others suggests that he believed there in fact is – Rorty’s.

This self-certainty, on the account of other of Rorty’s critics, slops over into other areas separate and apart from empiricism and the philosophy of mind. As Judith Green, a persistent critic of Rorty, puts it, “. . . Rorty’s . . . neopragmatist metaphysics now reads as a prescription for disaster, an invitation to think that there is only one possible democratic way of living—the American way, because it is “our” way—and that such a way of living must reject all claims of piety as illegitimate intrusions on individual liberty . . . .” There is something to this charge, for Rorty’s call to “keep the conversation going”
seems, at times, less like a call for cosmopolitan engagement and *exchange* than it does a technique to keep violence at bay. That is, this call for the perpetual conversation seems less like a call to listen with the real possibility of being persuaded by others who live by different lights than it does a tactic to eventually convert misguided traditionalists, religious believers, and antidemocrats to the wisdom of “our kind of civilization.” In dispatching the bad, Platonist, metaphysical and logocentric philosophies of the ages, Rorty has also banished *all* forms of metaphysics and all forms of theological inquiry, as these have little to do with *his* conception of what it means to carve out a deliberative democratic order. Green is right to call Rorty out on his version of democratic liberalism. For one thing, it seems that there is something ahistorical about it, an attempt to pick the plums while ignoring the trees on which they grow. The trees that bore the fruit of liberalism are grounded in religion and religious sensibilities. As much as great harms have arisen in and come from the “world of religion,” this should not be forgotten. Thinkers ranging from John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, to Walter Rauschenbusch (Rorty’s maternal grandfather and founder of the “social gospel”), Reinhold Niebuhr, Richard Niebuhr, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Thomas Hill Green are all important contributors to liberalism. Green, a Victorian philosopher and a sharp critic of Herbert Spencer’s “Social Darwinism” and “survival of the fittest” slogans and attendant ideas, helped to found the “new liberalism.” A firm Christian believer and avid liberal, Green held that God intended for the individual to live up to his or her full potential, and this

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called for constant social reforms on the part of the state. As for Rauschenbusch, Alan Wolfe writes in his *The Future of Liberalism* (Knopf, 2009):

Like Green, Rauschenbusch was not an evangelical; he did not believe that an individual’s soul could be salvaged simply by developing a personal relationship with Jesus. But he did believe that a society could be saved if it took upon itself the task of responding to vast inequities it generated: “Equality,” as he put it, “is the only basis for Christian morality.” Along with Upton Sinclair’s novel *The Jungle*, an attack on the conditions of American’s meat-packing plants, which was published the year before *Christianity and Social Crisis*, Rauschenbusch’s book was instrumental in leading the United States to abandon laissez-faire in favor of active government.84

The religious roots of liberalism, Rorty largely ignores, emphasizing, instead, the fruits of liberal thought and the liberal tradition. Less snarky than contemporary critics of religion, such as Christopher Hitchens, he nevertheless looked upon all religious metaphysics with a jaundiced eye, ignoring the contributions of religious thought to his beloved Western liberalism, contributions ranging from Locke’s *A Letter Concerning Toleration* to Martin Luther King’s *Why We Can’t Wait*. The problem with this is that it is decidedly *illiberal*. As Wolf goes on to argue:

84 Wolfe, pg. 78
From a liberal perspective, this advocacy on behalf of nonbelief is long overdue; liberals must constantly be on guard against those who would shut down free inquiry in the name of religious conviction. The question of whether homosexuals should be free to marry or whether wars ought to be fought in the Middle East should be decided by rules of liberal democratic debate and considerations of national interest, not by the commands of a supernatural authority. It is healthy for a liberal society to have matters of faith debated—even debated vehemently—rather than treated as so sacred and holy that no one is allowed to question them. One can scarcely imagine modern liberalism in the absence of a Voltaire or a Diderot. Yet neither can one imagine contemporary liberalism in the absence of John Locke or a John Leland. If at least some liberal thinkers were able to make a place for religion in earlier times, perhaps liberals ought to be able to make some place for religion now. This is not something that thinkers like Hitchens and company [and one can place Rorty in that “company”] are at all interested in doing. On the contrary, if the mark of a liberal is open-mindedness, there is something decidedly closed-minded about the more zealous of this resurgence of militant nonbelief. . . . Damon Linker, a writer on American religion, is right to suggest, as he did in a 2007 essay in The New Republic, that nonbelief has historically taken both liberal and illiberal forms, and that much of the
resurgence of atheism we have been witnessing in recent years belongs in
the latter category. 85

Rorty’s tone, as a nonbeliever, has been far more muted than Hitchens’, but the
content, when all is said and done, is a shared desire to banish religious belief to the
sidelines, to the realm of the “private.” With what can be interpreted as liberal noblesse
oblige, however, Rorty defends religion against charges of irrationalism, and insists on
the right of religious people to opt out of certain spheres of political deliberation. As G.
Elijah Dann puts it, in his study of Rorty and religion:

When religious belief is placed in the private domain, as Rorty sees
matters, the analysis of religion remains outside the grasp of so-called
“first philosophy” where epistemology and metaphysics lurk waiting for
the next wandering, hapless naïf. Rorty thinks if religion keeps within the
private domain, then it will as well keep itself “from getting caught up in
what the contemporary American philosopher Robert Brandom calls ‘the
game of giving and asking for reasons.’” But this shouldn’t happen in
Rorty’s scheme because “to say that religion should be privatized is to say
that religious people are entitled, for certain purposes, to opt out of this
game.” And by opting out of the game—keeping their private pursuits, as
it were, to themselves –“they are entitled to disconnect their assertions

85 Wolfe, pp. 172-173.
from the network of socially acceptable inferences that provide justification for making these assertions and draw practical consequences from having made them.” 86

Rorty’s banishment of religion to the realm of the private is banishment from one of the most important spheres of life – the political sphere. While he acknowledges that religious beliefs will nonetheless influence political decisions, he would banish religiously informed arguments from the political chambers of the country. In an interesting and illuminating section of his essay *Religion as a Conversation-stopper* (1994), Rorty writes:

The main reason religion needs to be privatized is that, in political discussion with those outside the relevant religion’s community, it is a conversation-stopper. [Stephen] Carter is right when he says:

One good way to end a conversation – or to start an argument – is to tell a group of well-educated professionals that you hold a political position (preferably a controversial one, such as being against abortion or pornography) because it is required by your understanding of God’s will.

Saying this is far more likely to end a conversation than to start an argument. The same goes for telling the group, ‘I would never have an abortion’ or, ‘Reading pornography is about the only pleasure I get out of life these days.’ In these examples, as in Carter’s, the ensuing silence masks the group’s inclination to say, ‘So what? We weren’t discussing your private life; we were discussing public policy. Don’t bother us with matters that are not our concern.’ This would be my own inclination in such a situation. Carter clearly thinks such a reaction inappropriate, but it is hard to figure out what he thinks would be an appropriate response by nonreligious interlocutors to the claim that abortion is required (or forbidden) by the will of God.  

But it no more follows that religion needs to be privatized for this reason than it is the case that Marxist thought needs to be privatized. Banishment of ideas that motivate political actions and commitments cannot be privatized. There are many people today who view Marxist thought as outdated and problematic as others view religious thought to be outdated and problematic. What Judith Green is right to point out is that there are all sorts of religious ideas – all sorts of Judaisms and Christianities – that are more digestible in public policy deliberations than others. There is nothing in either Marxism or

\[\text{\textsuperscript{87} PSH, pg. 171.}\]
Catholicism that is inherently problematic to such deliberation, and there are several responses to a dialogue partner who raises her belief that God wills a certain position on a moral matter that impacts public policy. “So what?” is only one response. Another could be something along the lines of “I am also a Muslim, and I hold a position that is different than that one on this issue because in The Cow the Prophet says ‘X,Y and Z.’ Or, one could imagine someone saying, “I understand. I have wrestled with this thing myself, and I might be inclined to vote with you, although for somewhat different reasons.” What Rorty reveals here is his discomfort, if not actual fear, of any kind of religious discourse. Although he would banish religion to a nice, comfortable place, outside of the bodies of political deliberation, he still would banish it – because he had neither the vocabulary nor the imagination to engage religion on its own terms, as a collection of ideas not his own. This said, in later years his willingness to engage religious ideas, even if through dialogue with rather marginalized religious figures, was noteworthy, and I will be discussing Rorty’s “religious turn” in the following chapters.

Frank Farrell pick up on a point made more poignantly by Richard J. Bernstein. It is a point approached from different vectors by Norman Geras and Susan Haack. In his book The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity, Bernstein writes:

Many of the troubling features of Rorty’s portrait of the liberal ironist come into sharp focus when we compare it with the figure
of O’Brien invented by Orwell. For O’Brien is the double of the liberal ironist – a double that haunts Rorty’s redescriptions of liberalism. Rorty tells us “in the view of 1984 I am offering, Orwell has no answer to O’Brien, and is not interested in giving one” (p. 176). Rorty himself does not think O’Brien can be answered.

I take Orwell’s claim that there is no such thing as inner freedom, no such thing as an “autonomous individual,” to be the one made by historicist, including Marxist critics of “liberal individualism.” This is that there is nothing deep inside each of us, no common human nature, no built-in human solidarity, to use a more referenced point. There is nothing to people except what has been socialized into them – their ability to use language, and thereby to exchange beliefs and desires with other people. (p. 177)

. . . There is no important difference between Rorty and O’Brien concerning the infinite malleability of human beings and the possibility of socialization “all the way down.” O’Brien is the true
“disciple” of Rorty who has diabolically mastered the lesson of the contingency of all vocabularies.

What then is the difference that makes a difference between Rorty and O’Brien? Simply put, it is a difference in the “final vocabularies.” Rorty is a liberal who thinks that “cruelty is the worst thing we do,” O’Brien, the co-author of *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, thinks “the object of torture is torture,” the point of humiliation to humiliate.

O’Brien reminds us that human beings who have been socialized – socialized in any language, any culture – do share a capacity which other animals lack. They can all be given a special kind of pain: they can be humiliated by the forcible tearing down of the particular structures of language and belief in which they were socialized (or which they pride themselves on having formed for themselves. (p. 177)

But let us not forget that for Rorty it makes no sense to claim that one “final vocabulary” is more rational than another (except in a circular sense of “rationality”). It is futile to ask for a justification
of a “final vocabulary,” or to think there is some standard by which we can objectively judge one “final vocabulary” to be superior to its alternatives. O’Brien would entirely agree with Rorty, and perhaps even mock him for failing to emphasize that the only important issue, the only difference that really makes a difference is who has the intelligence, imagination, sophistication, and power to succeed in imposing his vocabulary, to completely socialize human beings in whatever manner he (or the Party) desires.88

Richard Bernstein’s point here cannot be gainsaid. Bernstein, like Richard John Neuhaus, thinks there is something terribly wrong with the idea that the vicious among us and the virtuous among us both build their moral castles in the same air, with no “foundations” beneath them save for a cloud of words. Bernstein’s philosophical intuitions tell him that there is something wrong with this picture. Rorty’s response would seem to be that with radical freedom the possibility for both radical evil and radical good are born. His response to Bernstein’s conclusion that O’Brien is his disciple would likely be that O’Brien is what you get when you socialize enough of your youth to believe that there is something virtuous about “Oligarchical Collectivism,” and that Gandhi is what you get when you socialize enough of your youth to believe that the divine resides within each of us; that if you want fewer O’Briens and more Gandhis you will have to fight for

them, but you shouldn’t think that foundationalist philosophical arguments are going to be of much use in the battle.

Could it be that Bernstein and Rorty are both right? Could it be that there is indeed something shared among all sane human beings that lead them toward cooperation and magnanimity, but that this something is fragile enough to be broken or “reshaped” into “Oligarchical Collectivism” under certain conditions? The answer seems clear. J.S. Mill’s warning in chapter 2 of Utilitarianism comes to mind: “Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance; and in the majority of young persons it speedily dies away if the occupations to which their position in life has devoted them, and the society into which it has thrown them, are not favourable to keeping that higher capacity in exercise.” If we wish to have more Gandhis and fewer O’Briens, or more democrats, liberals and cosmopolitans, and fewer nativists, jingoists and racists, we will have to create them via liberal-cosmopolitan soul-making. Whether we have more of some and fewer of the others goes back to what Baldwin insisted – that we have to do our duty, face the possibilities before us, and shape the souls of the young in the direction of democratic and liberal sensibilities, fellow feeling, and cosmopolitan hope. As we do this, we must remain aware that the nativists, jingoists and racists are not going anywhere, and that they are seeking to socialize their children to be small, insular, fearful and intolerant. Rorty’s reminder that there is nothing in the stars that will guarantee success to either
side is both a shock and a challenge to fellow democrats and fellow liberals. Even if we believe that there is something in us that is betrayed should we decide to support the O’Briens of the world, even where “Oligarchical Collectivism” is “the truth of Man,” that it can be betrayed – and often is betrayed – is enough of a reason to take Rorty very seriously. For Rorty is telling us that to rest on the laurels of foundationalist arguments to guarantee justice, freedom, and respect for other human beings is a prescription for disaster. Staving off “O’Brien” requires showing, through the ongoing “conversation of humankind,” the advantages of a cosmopolitan world over the one O’Brien would construct. This conversation never ends – or, perhaps better put, this conversation had better not end. Every day, the world is born anew. What we fill the day with will determine who and what wins in the long run. This is why Rorty remains relevant to any discussion of cosmopolitan hope. He may be read as calling us away from the “clean rooms” of our naïve desideratives and platitudes, to hodiernal toil in the grimy yet splendid fields of liberalism and democratic practice, where the battles for souls are won – and, too often, lost.
Chapter III

Why Rorty Matters

We have learned quite a lot, in the course of the past two centuries, about how races and religions can live in comity with one another. If we forget these lessons, we can reasonably be called irrational. It makes good pragmatic and pluralist sense to say that the nations of the world are being irrational in not creating a world government to which they should surrender their sovereignty and their nuclear warheads, that the Germans were being irrational in accepting Hitler’s suggestion that they expropriate their Jewish neighbours, and that Serbian peasants were being irrational in accepting Milosevic’s suggestion that they loot and rape neighbours with whom they had been living peacefully for 50 years.

- PSH, pg. 275

With the various criticisms of Rorty behind us, what can we say of what may be left of Rorty’s thought? Let’s start with where I believe Rorty is correct in many of his writings since TLT. I quote Rorty, supra, as saying: "I am a hedgehog who . . . has really only one idea: the need to get beyond representationalism, and thus into an intellectual world in which human beings are responsible only to each other." This "one idea," teased-out in his antifoundationalism and Ironism, links with a vision of cosmopolitan hope - of a world in which we are ever mindful of the contingencies of our parochial views, of the various ways that we are or may be engaged in cruelty toward one another (whether in the form of physical aggression, or the dismissal or denigration of ways and plans of life that are not our ways and plans of life), and in which a desire to avoid such
cruelty is a critical virtue. This discussion of “contingency” has occupied philosophers at least since Nietzsche, but that does not mean that it has sufficiently permeated the public squares to effect the types of moral transformative changes that are required to bring about the types of moral sensibilities that can help us attenuate our nativistic and tribalistic tendencies or our moral and metaphysical absolutisms which continue to lead to the deadly clashes and encounters we continue to see played out on the evening news. Because Rorty knew this, he was not only a philosopher of “contingency” but preached the “Gospel of Contingency,” using more or less accessible language that would allow his disciples to go forth into the world. The goal would be a release from arbitrary and dogmatic nomological constraints imposed from above, greater human happiness, a romantic utilitarian respect for the Other’s right to pursue her projects in relative peace (pace Mill), and, eventually, “any millennium now,” a condition in which love would be the only law.

Rorty considered the “liberal ironist” to be the sort of person who would comprise his pragmatist, liberal utopia. I take the “liberal ironist” to possess the important qualities – virtues really – that can help bring about a cosmopolitan utopia (the other dimension of Rorty’s thought that is necessary to bring this about is his “frank ethnocentrism,” which I take to be a form of what the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah refers to as “rooted cosmopolitanism,” as discussed below). So far we have only
alluded to the ironist, i.e., so far we have focused only on the ironist side of that label “liberal ironist.” But the liberal side is also critical for Rorty’s utopia:

This book tries to show how things look if we drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and private, and are content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable. It sketches a figure whom I call the “liberal ironist.” I borrow my definition of "liberal" from Judith Shklar, who says that liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do. I use "ironist" to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires—someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance. Liberal ironists are people who include among these ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease. 89

This explodes any assertions that Rorty was merely “playing around,” although many philosophers have rendered much criticism of Rorty’s “liberal ironist” – some castigating it as oxymoronic, or as a peculiar fantasy the moral grounding of which is actually insufficient to create the very future for which Rorty hoped. I think that these and

89 CIS, pg. xv

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other criticisms have some merit. However, if we stick with the simple hope embodied in
the sketch of the liberal ironist that Rorty gives us, what can be seen is precisely the sort
of person that a liberal, Western education is intended to create. Much of the history of
Western political thought has been a history of learning about and living with the
contingent nature of our religious ideas, philosophical perspectives, and cultural
formations. The digestion of that contingency has forced people of the West to pull back
from a good deal of the self-certainty that has led to the brutal treatment of others
different from ourselves, even down to this day. The recognition of contingency, that
history and circumstances and cultures could have been other than they are, has
undermined the happy and cozy illusion that “our kind of culture” and “our kind of
people” have been ordained by the gods, have it right on all of the important questions of
life, whether those questions regard religious devotion, the structure of the family, the
level of commercialism, the roles of the sexes, or any one of a number of other more or
less quotidian matters. Learning about this contingency, and taking it to heart, creates
people who are “sufficiently historicist and nominalist” (perhaps we can simply say,
humble enough) to see certain of their practices, modes of thought and institutions as
possibly defective or incomplete.

People who are “sufficiently historicist and nominalist” pull back from
sweeping condemnation and stigmatization of, separation from, or persecution of gays,
Muslims, Christians, Jews, Dalits, Native peoples, and women. They have learned that
cruelty is not just some static concept that can be divined via a philosophical formula or algorithm, or by reference to a timeless “list of the cruelties,” but “discover” their cruelty by reading history, philosophy, and positive law, rather than the “book of nature” – by taking up a perspective that they had not taken up before, or thought possible to take up before.\(^90\) Or it might be more appropriate to say that we add to our list of cruelties as we ask different kinds of questions and discover different kinds of things about ourselves and about others. Certainly, Rorty would put it that way. Thus, we in the West came to the conclusion that we needed to add certain things to our list of the cruelties. We decided that it was necessary to add denial of women suffrage, abuse of Africans, sweatshop conditions, and sixteen hour work days – and there is more to be added yet, as we “re-weave” the story of what it means to be “us.” Few of the things just referenced were thought particularly cruel prior to various awakenings that came about only after asking lots of questions, philosophizing about justice and freedom, and reading lots of books and watching lots of TV shows and movies (one of the most important and most neglected methods for moral transformation) about great African civilizations, the important roles played by women throughout history, and the need of the body and the mind for rest and time spent with family and friends, among other “catalysts” for change. Cruelty is learned through an ongoing series of insights that come from and through liberal education, and

\(^90\)Rorty borrows the notion that “cruelty is the worst thing we do,” the first in the ordering of the vices, ahead of “snobbery,” “hypocrisy,” “misanthropy,” and “betrayal,” from Judith Shklar, who also writes, in her book *Ordinary Vices* (pg. 37), in the chapter “Putting Cruelty First”: “What is moral cruelty? It is not just a matter of hurting someone’s feelings. It is deliberate and persistent humiliation, so that the victim can eventually trust neither himself nor anyone else.”
the process of determining that certain practices and habits are cruel is an ongoing one. We do not know for sure what we will consider to be cruel in the coming generations. The liberal, on Rorty’s account, is someone who is sufficiently aware that the next “discovery” about our cruelty may be contained in the next anthropological treatise, the next novel, the next movie, the next philosophical text to roll off of a university press, the next homeless child we meet in the street, or the next neighbor we hear swear at her aging parents.

Cruelty requires awareness that we are causing some sort of significant pain or harm to another human being (or other sentient life form), denying him or her a pleasure or a possibility that we ourselves enjoy or cherish. Because Rorty thought himself the kind of liberal whom Judith Shklar was defining, a person who thought that “cruelty is the worst thing that we do,” he was aware that these new “discoveries” may require changes in the way we think and in the practices to which we are committed. Rorty, however, did not believe that there is a ubiquitous, universal human trait that recoils or responds in the presence of such discoveries, which is where Rorty and I differ. I think it is patently obvious that such a trait is extant, even though it can be dulled or rendered insensitive for a variety of reasons, reasons that often, if not always, attend an illiberal education, or illiberal socialization. It is the combination of this trait with the sensitizations that books, movies and philosophical and political treatises stir within us that creates the liberal ironist sensibility. In Rorty’s own words, one need not be wholly

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nominalist and historicist to be a liberal ironist, but only “sufficiently” so. One can hold that we are hard wired to detect and respond to cruelty, that the ability to detect new forms of cruelty is beneficial to the survival of a communal species such as ours, and still be liberal in Rorty’s sense. Experiencing the thought and feeling that some condition is cruel requires an *innate* ability for sympathy, *pace* David Hume and Annette Baier. Of sympathy, the psychologist Lauren Wispé writes:

> One would search in vain for the “true beginnings” of sympathy [in organisms]. Still, it is possible to think that within the context of the human organism’s maturation and specialization, in what proved to be a supportive social structure, and in a propitious ecological niche, potential for sympathy residing in the genes may have been released in such a way that they developed into a prototype of sympathy for that time and species. We can only conjecture that the basis for this protosympathy must have rested on a biological drive for physical contact and an emotional urge for communion.”91

Wispé’s view is shared by philosopher Mary Midgley and other philosophers, as well as many evolutionary biologists. But Rorty prefers to avoid resting either sympathy or cruelty on anything that can be described as “human nature,” as we have already seen. This is the difference between what may be a sufficient historicism and

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nominalism, on the one hand, and Rorty’s more extreme historicism and nominalism, on the other. And yet, we see that this extreme historicism and nominalism naturally mesh with his linguistic absolutism. Both work, together, to create the notion that both language and culture swing free of the world.

But I do not wish to make too much of our differences, for Rorty’s extremism serves certain pedagogical and heuristic purposes. The trait, or capacity, to detect cruelty is indeed activated and deactivated by cultural formations (novels, etc.), and by the various language games we play or are socialized into. The action of adding to the list of cruelties requires a more sophisticated cultural practice than dwelling on any innate capacity might yield, and it requires a desire to ask troubling and unsettling questions about our life-worlds – which makes the process a liberal one. Rorty’s antifoundationalist writings are an appeal to us to drop the sorts of pretentions we have to absolute knowledge, since he sees the dangers in which such pretentions might result. Pretentions to knowledge about preordained (natural) roles for women, or about the (natural) caste of certain groups, or about the (natural) moral superiority or (natural) inferiority of whole civilizations has led to beastly slaughters and bloodbaths, and the crushing of the psyches of countless millions of human beings. This is why Rorty must be taken seriously, for although he goes too far at times, for blood baths do not result only from our self-certainty and absolutisms, he is warning us away from our self-certainty and absolutisms nonetheless, away from our cultural smugness and arrogance, from our “right” to claim

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that we know what is best for others who live by very different lights. This is why I find puzzling claims that Rorty was really some sort of Western chauvinist, that Rorty’s ethnocentrism was a form of supremacist exclusivism.

On that point, I mentioned that Rorty’s conception of the liberal ironist links to his “frank ethnocentrism.” The man who exposed to the world his own “frank ethnocentrism” (his preference for Western liberal cultures) is the same man who thought that “cruelty is the worst thing we do,” and who implored us all to “keep the conversation going” and so seek to persuade one another of the validity or utility of our ideas and insights through reasoned argument, debate and dialogue, rather than by resort to violence, which includes forms of cultural imperialism. Some of his critics miss the point that Rorty’s “frank ethnocentrism” is not something to which one *aspire*. Neither is it a *prescription*. It is already a *condition* of our rootedness in various cultural folkways, byways, practices and ideas that define “us,” shape “us,” and which “we” come to love – whether “we” are Cambodians, Israelis, Jamaicans or Muscovites. As with Walzer’s notion of cultural “thickness,”92 Frank ethnocentrism is the starting point of our conversations with others (cf. Gadamer’s notion of “prejudice” in his *Truth and Method*). We do not begin as disembodied, de-cultured, autonomous beings, in a position to assess the merits of a myriad of cultural practices and views. We enter into conversation by drawing heavily upon “where we come from, how we do things,” where “things” refers to

eating, sleeping, marrying, working, celebrating births, disposing of the dead, etc. To “keep the conversation going” one must bring one’s actual self to the exchange, not some fictionalized and abstract self. Thus, the frank ethnocentrist is not some personality type – we are all frank ethnocentrists, to one degree or another. The liberal ironist realizes this, but is historicist and nominalist enough to not let her frank ethnocentrism become inflated to the point of jingoism, xenophobia, supremacy, or in the extreme, cultural cleansings. On ethnocentrism, Rorty writes:

. . . one consequence of antirepresentationalism is the recognition that no description of how things are from a God’s-eye point of view, no skyhook provided by some contemporary or yet-to-be-developed science, is going to free us from the contingency of having been acculturated as we were. Our acculturation is what makes certain options live, or momentous, or forced, while leaving others dead, or trivial, or optional. We can only hope to transcend our acculturation if our culture contains (or, thanks to disruptions from outside or internal revolt, comes to contain) splits which supply toeholds for new initiatives. Without such splits – without tensions which make people listen to unfamiliar ideas in the hope of finding means of overcoming those tensions – there is no such hope. The systemic elimination of such tensions, or of awareness
of them, is what is so frightening about *Brave New World* and *1984*. So our best chance for transcending our acculturation is to be brought up in a culture which prides itself on not being monolithic – on its tolerance for plurality of subcultures and its willingness to listen to neighboring cultures. This is the connection which Dewey saw between antirepresentationalism and democracy.\(^9^3\)

The puzzle regarding how someone can be both a liberal ironist and frankly ethnocentric at the same time is no puzzle at all. The frank ethnocentrist is organically grown. We become frankly ethnocentric by living and coming to love certain forms of life, lived with friends and neighbors, in which memories and good feelings are generated and tragedies are suffered together, and we come to wish to defend those forms of life against those who would attack or undermine them through various forms of aggression. When that happens, we tend to get our backs up, to go “super-ethnic” as a defense mechanism, as a way of asserting our rights to live by our own lights. The sort of conversation that Rorty has in mind is (far from being aggressive) a *free* exchange of ideas that may have the effect of undermining certain folkways and ideas learned within our own life-worlds. Because such undermining is brought about through a free exchange, the putting aside of certain habits of mind or practices is a *free* act, not forced upon us. We are seduced to the other’s ways of doing things, to the other’s point of view,

\(^9^3\) *ORT*, pp. 13-14
or we are open to the possibility of the seduction. This is the place where Ironism and liberalism (as defined by Rorty) link up. Yet, there are those who hold that any undermining of other’s cultures, especially by the West, is necessarily hegemonic. I take such a sentimentalist view as inferring that there is something necessarily sinister about the seductions that cultures represent to one another, especially cultures with powerful allures, that exposing someone to the merits of praying five times per day or of allowing universal suffrage, because such ideas may raise doubts in the onlooker regarding her own practices, is morally wrong. There is a tendency in some thinkers to fetishize small, local communities and forms of life as though they have a natural right to exist without interference. But such sentimentalist notions fly in the face of the very notions of liberalism and education. Such a view can’t be held by anyone who has pluralist commitments and who places the right of individual to choose forms of life for themselves above the right of a culture to persist in perpetuity, blissfully out of contact with the rest of the world. It is a wholly incoherent view.

Recently, philosopher Dmitri Nikulin, in an article published in the New School’s *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, compared Rorty to the Cynic philosophers of ancient Greece, a comparison I find somewhat apt. He concludes his article this way:
The Cynic is thus a necessary but transitory and transitional figure who provides a diagnosis of his time yet himself is his own time’s symptom. After the Cynics, however, come the Stoics, who not only refute the current doubtful moral and political practices, but already give positively formulated moral theory. If it is indeed the case that philosophy always moves, albeit differently at different epochs, within the triangle of physics (thinking about nature)—logic (thinking about thinking)—ethics (thinking about action), then the peak of the recent interest in philosophy of science (“physics”) and philosophy of language and mind (“logic”) can only move toward moral philosophy (“ethics”). And it was Richard Rorty, a contemporary Cynic philosopher, who helped clear the way toward the elaboration of a new modern ethics.\(^94\)

I have no idea whether philosophy moves within the triangle Nikulin suggests, but such a notion does suggest a few things. First, in philosophy, because of overemphasis and forgetfulness of other spheres of life, lacunae open up for a new generation to exploit. This does seem to happen in cycles, or episodes. In that sense, we are due for something like what in fact is beginning to happen. A questioning of both modernity (with its emphasis on analysis, critique, change and contingency – indeed the fetishization of these things), and post-modernity (with its abjuration of grand narratives

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\(^94\) New School for Social Research, Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal, Volume 29, November 2, 2008, pg. 105.
and their cousins – sweeping generalizations about the human condition and what is needed to address human problems). This combination has created sick souls – the sort of nihilism that Nietzsche, rightly, predicted – however offering only a fanciful prescription of an über-sensibility to stand and face it down with muscular creative self-constructions.95 This won’t do. It was no more than an adolescent fantasy. That it won’t do does not mean a return to blind superstition or bad metaphysics, but rather only that we make room for what I call the Grand Vision, where one can assert “the truth of things” in a full-throated way, but attended by the lessons that contingency, history, genealogy, and fallibilism teach us – that we may go beyond mere competing narratives, but live by the lights that we think are the ones that illuminate our human affairs the best; where, indeed, we understand the self as a “center of narrative gravity,”96 but allow for that gravity to be quite powerful indeed without collapsing into a singularity of monomania. The Rortian ironist has the equipment to do this. She is the herald of a cosmopolitan utopia in which tolerance transforms into magnanimity, in which love trumps the need for certainty. In that regard, Rorty is indeed at least one of the philosophers who helped to “clear the way toward the elaboration of a new modern ethics,” as Nikulin suggests. But also as he suggests, Rorty is a transitional figure.

95 Pierre Manent, in his An Intellectual History of Liberalism (Princeton University Press, 1995) writes: “The motivating force of modern history thus appears to be twofold: the natural desire to escape from the political power of revealed religion; the no less nature desire to escape the mechanism man conceived to satisfy the first desire.” Pg. 116.

there is much beauty in the notion that all we have is each other and that we are only responsible to each other, there is no rulebook that suggests *how* this possession and responsibility *must* play out. This will be the work of thinkers who stand on the shoulders of James and Dewey, Davidson and Sellars, Wittgenstein and Quite, and Rorty.

When Rorty told us that “reason cannot get outside the latest circle that imagination has drawn” and that “In this sense, imagination has priority over reason”\(^{97}\) he was beckoning us to consider the possibilities we have to create the world we most want. And when he tells us that “We overlay nature with another world, the world that concerns us, the only world in which a properly human life can be led”\(^{98}\) we can understand him through the extreme segregation of nature from culture, and despite the apparent “essentialism” in the construction “a properly human life,” for he is trying to, as argued in Chapter I, preserve human freedom. This freedom consists in staring down the natural world (or “supernatural” world), not letting it dictate the terms of our actions. Rorty enjoyed the free play of imagination, and thought that imagination is where the action is. Imagination is, after all, what allows us to consider the possibilities of re-weaving our identities and plans of life. There is something in Rorty that takes us as we are – terrestrial, grounded, and bounded by time; but within these obvious constraints, Rorty bid us to come and dance, explore, create. For life is about the dance, it is not about cutting nature at its seams. In this regard, just as Rorty railed against self-imposed

\(^{97}\) *PCP*, pg. 115

\(^{98}\) *PCP*, pg. 110
constraints – the constraints of reason or religion or conservatism, he grasped the basic truth of the human condition (clearly, my construction, not his), which is that all we get in life is the opportunity to create one, and that chance, that right, to create is to be cherished. To the extent the public demands to adopt and internalize a program supposedly more in touch with reality than another, Rorty felt the right of the private should shove back mightily. We do not live for nations or states or reifications, but to grow our own “orchids,” whatever they may be, a notion that seems to link up, quite beautifully, with Voltaire’s admonition at the very end of *Candide*. This was why Rorty was not only a liberal, but a *fierce* liberal, and why he is also a fierce ally of cosmopolitanism. While I think he made some mistakes in the way he attempted to preserve the chance and the right just referenced, this is also true of most zealots whose wide-eyed glimpses of a precious vision lead them to a description of the world too blunt to stand for long without refinements. Every “Jesus” needs his “Paul,” and will get him whether he likes it or not.

It is not out of flightiness that Rorty says that “Danton and Robespierre – and for that matter, Antigone and Creon – should have tried harder to make some sort of deal,” but because they took cultural norms as trumps over life itself, trumps that led them to honor specific cultural memes more than life. As he put it, “truth and reality exist for the sake of social practices, rather than vice versa. Like the Sabbath, they are made

99 *PCP*, pg. 89
for man.” When life ends the ability for Deweyan growth and Rortian re-description and re-weaving end, and for Rorty such growth, re-description and re-weaving are the only points of living. (What he failed to see because of his paternal hopes was that sometimes growth, re-description and re-weaving mean the sacrifice of self for new or different visions, mean offering oneself to those visions (whether the secular artist in his loft, or the Catholic monk in the hermitage, both suffering and enraptured for the sake of the very disparate visions they hold). The danger of growth, re-description and re-weaving just is the danger that one may “fall in love” with one’s new idiosyncratic vision. We can smile at Rorty’s rants against foundationalisms, as he sneaks in a newer version of the “truth of man,” the truth that we are here to grow and re-describe ourselves with no particular telos to guide us. Yet he did know that his was one account and one perspective among many others; yet ultimately there was a kind of essentialism at work, a kind of essentialism as robust as any Thomist’s.

It is sometimes said that Dewey, James and Alain Locke gave us what Rorty gave us, but without the extremes. I do not see the point of such comparisons. Rorty’s driving home the “consequences of pragmatism” as he saw it generated new perspectives, fresh ideas. And his style stood head and shoulders above these others. And style counts for something, especially when trying to persuade your peers and fellow citizens. Once we give up our Platonic fixations on the hard distinction between “knowledge” and

\[\text{PCP, pg. 7}\]
“opinion” we can see that rhetoric is just a device for preparing the hearer for the new way of looking at things. Often, when that disarming does not take place, neither does pedagogy. It may not count for much if what is on offer is all style and no substance; but hardly anyone would accuse Rorty of lacking substance. It seems to me that few tell the story of freedom, liberalism, and humanism as Rorty tells it. In Chapter I, I spoke of Rorty as a sort of driving instructor who nagged his charge to “keep his eyes on the road.” This was the constant reminder that runs throughout so much of his writing. We must cure “the urge to find unmediated access to the real,” we must, “before we can rid ourselves of ontology . . . rid ourselves of the hope for . . . non-linguistic access [to the world],” we must give up “The idea that there is one right thing to do or to believe, no matter who you are, and the idea that arguments have intrinsic goodness or badness, no matter who is asked to evaluate them.” This was not merely argumentation. In fact it was not mere rhetoric – it was preaching, and some of Rorty’s essays on liberalism, culture, and philosophy read like sermons.

Frank Farrell commented that, for Rorty, “The success of the institutions of the West can be measured . . . only by subjective criteria” and that “Western science and political forms of life do not have their prestige because they have discovered more about how nature is articulated and about what forms of community best suit human beings. 

101 PCP, pg. 110
102 PCP, pg. 107
103 PCP, pg. 83
Europeans rather have been very good at changing their vocabularies and reinventing themselves rapidly.” This seems an apt criticism. But Rorty quickly counters, as per the epigraph of the next chapter, that it is not subjectivity but “intersubjectivity” that counts, i.e., submission of the validity or use of such institutions to the tribunal of one’s community or one’s peers. While Rorty abjured any empirical verification or consultation or answerability to the world, as we have seen, it remains the case that such institutions still do live or die at the level of such tribunals. A more charitable interpretation of Rorty is that he is saying something like “Of course we need to consult the world around us when we consider whether to have certain institutions and what shape they should take. The error is in thinking that such consultations will tell us what to do based upon some correlation between the world and the work that these institutions are trying to do. Institutions live and die based upon what those who erect them think are worthwhile things for the community to pursue. A society that prides itself on seamanship, fishing and cattle-raising, because of traditional commitments to these things, may have no use for a department of agriculture. And a society that spends all of its time purveying the gospels and engaging in commerce will have little use for a large military or a NASA.” One could imagine Rorty also saying that “The construction ‘what forms of community best suit human beings’ drips with bad essentialism, for no community is concerned with such a thing, but rather it is concerned with the question ‘What practices, values and institutions best suit our purposes?’ For those of us in the West, it suited our purposes to find newer and better ways to manipulate the environment (for better or worse) and to
focus less on theological concerns and more on economical and mundane ones. The ‘success’ of Western civilization is measured by the yardstick invented by the West itself. Other civilizations use different yardsticks. The Islamic world thinks that the West has made certain grave errors in its economic and technological monomania, as well as in certain of its sexual values, and so it has been reluctant to adopt large chunks of the West’s modus vivendi. It has its own way of measuring ‘success’ that may strike Farrell as strange, but is nevertheless as ‘legitimate,’ by its own lights, as our fixation on technology and classical economic principles.”

A take-away from reading, and re-reading, Rorty’s works is that he is asking us, or goading us, to retexture some of the notions we use in our public culture. He wants us to loosen—up notions like “literature,” “philosophy,” “poetry,” “real,” and even the “West,” since by so doing we are able to make room to include within them writers and thinkers who have been exiled or “excommunicated” from them, even when they think they have interesting things to say about them and consider themselves a part of the communities that these words describe. To call a work “not really literature,” or to say that, for example, “Derrida was not a real philosopher,” or to say that “Whitman did not write real poetry” is to do no more than to expose one’s lack of imagination – one’s inability to stretch the mind enough to rethink what “literature,” “philosophy,” and “poetry” might encompass. This lack of imagination is what leads certain people to “go Platonic,” to assume that there are real and pure forms of all of these things that should
not be sullied with idiosyncratic experimentation or re-description, just as certain communities thought that blacks or Asians sullied the neat definition they had concocted of what it means to be human, or that allowing women the right to own property and to work outside of the home sullied the meaning of “manhood.” Rorty himself was thought to be, for years, an “inauthentic” pragmatist, revealing the narrowness and rigidity of those who were the self-appointed priests of the church of Peirce, Dewey and James (fortunately, this is changing). This debate about what is the “authentic” form of something usually takes place, by Rorty’s lights, on a plain upon which it is dangerous to play. It is the plain upon which the defenders of “authenticity” think that the things to which they are committed are beyond re-description – and worse, that any re-description may mean the end of the things one may care about the most. This sort of person was, for Rorty, the sort of person who is too “sane” to think that “the world may swerve.”¹⁰⁴ The penchant, the lust, to draw distinctions between the “authentic” and the “inauthentic” are woven into public culture, such that while we now have a “rise in the proportion of ironists to metaphysicians among the intellectuals . . . metaphysics is woven into the public rhetoric of modern liberal societies” [and so] “the distinction between the moral and the ‘merely’ aesthetic – a distinction which is often used to relegate ‘literature’ to a

¹⁰⁴ CIS, pg. 184
subordinate position within culture and to suggest that novels and poems are irrelevant to moral reflection” is one that obtains.  

Richard Bernstein worried (Chapter II) about Rorty’s conclusion that “There is nothing to people except what has been socialized into them – their ability to use language, and thereby to exchange beliefs and desires with other people.” I share Bernstein’s anxiety. Yet, while I hold that we have certain shared capacities that allow us all to describe ourselves as human, and while both Bernstein and I might quarrel with Rorty’s typical “nothing but” rhetoric, it remains the case that the world is divided into the decent and indecent, saints and knaves, egalitarians and tyrants, into humanitarians and misanthropes, and into O’Briens and Emersons, across a broad spectrum. While we have shared capacities for holiness, we, as well, have shared capacities for evil – something Bernstein explores at length in his book Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation (Blackwell, 2002). And this is the worry, and the reason why the “conversation” must be kept alive, for it is only by doing so that we can check one another’s excursions from the plain of holiness toward the plain of evil. It is in doing so that we are reminded of the horrors that await, as well as the advantages of comity and fraternity, and a form of cosmopolitan solidarity that is more than a veneer.

On the subject of religion, while Rorty must be taken to task for too shallow a view of “religion” – this grand moniker that is supposed to capture the essences of a

105 CIS, pg. 82
multitude of approaches to faith and spiritual sublimity – and for not keeping up with the liberalizing currents within it, there is something about what he calls “romantic polytheism”\textsuperscript{106} (as bloodless as it is) that fits well into the long ecumenical and interfaith dialogues that have been going on for years. For when he speaks of monotheism as bearing responsibility for the notion that there can be only one right “description” of God, he employs monotheism as not only a reality in the history of religions but as a trope, and lays at its feet a certain pervasive intolerance and self-certainty that we in fact do find in many of the largest monotheistic faiths. Pointing to the notion that in polytheistic cultures, where “your god does need not be thought of as a rival of my god,” there was greater tolerance for various descriptions of many mundane cultural commitments as well. Christianity itself was saved by syncretistic re-descriptions, yet, like Freud denying his debt to speculative philosophy, Christianity has denied its debt to this syncretism.

Rorty matters because he tirelessly reminded us of the dangers of (as he quotes Milan Kundera in the opening page of \textit{CIS}) forgetting that “the world where the individual is respected . . . is fragile and perishable.” We do well, then, to check our absolutes, and to keep them in check. It does no good to say that Rorty dwelled on this point too much. The danger is in not dwelling upon it enough – a lapse of which we are all guilty from time to time. It is during some of those times that “They” (Nazis, religious fanatics, and witch hunters of various sorts, to name a few candidates for “They”) come

\textsuperscript{106} \textit{PCP}, Chapter 2.
for us. Rorty, having lived through the bloodbaths of the twentieth century, having seen firsthand what “They” can do, was well aware of just how fragile respect for the individual can be. The “conversation” he counseled us to “keep going” is the sunshine that keeps “Them” from carrying out the things plotted in the dark, and that teaches “Them,” perhaps, that re-description is not half as bad as They thought. If Rorty appeared to be a “fundamentalist,” as on Grippe’s rather odd account, it is because first of all, he was, after all, an anti-representationalist zealot with only “one thought,” and second, because he entertained no arguments that would have any form of representationalism reintroduced as a basis to justify actions that need no representationalist justifications. Rorty’s romantic liberalism, quite to the contrary of it being “neither liberal nor free” (as Grippe would tell it), causes Rorty to be grouped by most other intellectuals with the most fervent liberal apologists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Again, as Alan Wolfe reminds us:

It is not clear, however, that Rorty really takes irony to a point where it exists outside the liberal tradition [emphasis added]. Rorty’s ironic stance is directed primarily against philosophical claims to truth; it is not directed against liberal society per se. As he expresses the point: “The social glue holding together the ideal liberal society . . . consists in little more than a consensus that the point of social organization is to let everybody have a chance at
self-creation to the best of his or her abilities, and that that goal requires, besides peace and wealth, the standard ‘bourgeois freedoms.’” If the poetic shows the way, the prosaic, in Rorty, still guides how most of us live. This is how Rorty ends up in the same camp as one of American liberalism’s most important, and certainly most prosaic, thinkers: the American pragmatist John Dewey. To function well, liberal society, Rorty believes, does not require its citizens to engage in “Socratic requests for definitions and principles.” It can get along instead through what he calls “Deweyite requests for concrete alternatives and programs.”

Rorty’s liberalism may be of the most minimal sort, but it is liberalism nonetheless. “Solidarity has to be constructed out of little pieces, rather than found already waiting, in the form of an ur-language which all of us recognize when we hear it,” he contended. Expressed that way, Rorty does not seem that far away from the early postwar liberal ironists after all” which “developed [their] ironic stance to distance [themselves] from the ideological left.”

107 Wolfe, pp.121-122
But Rorty may be considered a cosmopolitan, and not just a liberal. Cosmopolitanism rests upon an ironic view of human social intercourse, a view that leaves the door open for an exchange, if you will, of cultural body fluids. Cosmopolitanism goes beyond liberalism because it goes beyond the tolerance needed to organize a certain type of state, and ultimately a certain world order. It commends, rather than merely prepares and braces for, the possibilities of seduction. It is therefore truly ironic in the sense of Ironism. It considers the questions that Rorty considered in his essay “Justice as a Larger Loyalty,” that is, it considers questions of justice to be unimaginable without considerations of loyalty, and the affects of loyalty. This view of cosmopolitanism is not very different than the ancient Stoic version. As Martha Nussbaum tells us:

The Stoics stress that to be a citizen of the world one does not need to give up local identifications, which can be a source of great richness in life. They suggest that we think of ourselves not as devoid of local affiliations, but as surrounded by a series of concentric circles. The first one encircles the self, the next takes in the immediate family, then, in order, neighbors or local groups, fellow city-dwellers, and fellow countrymen – and we can easily add to this list groupings based on ethnic, linguistic, historical, professional, gender, or sexual identities. Outside all these circles is the largest one, humanity as a whole. Our task as citizens of the

\[108\] PCP, pg. 42
world will be to “draw the circles somehow toward the center” (Stoic philosopher Hierocles . . .), making all human beings more like our fellow city-dwellers, and so on. We need not give up our special affections and identifications, whether ethnic or gender-based or religious. We need not think of them as superficial, and we may think of our identity as constituted partly on them. We may and should devote special attention to them in education. But we should also work to make all human beings part of our community of dialogue and concern, base our political deliberations on that interlocking commonality, and give the circle that defines our humanity special attention and respect.\footnote{Nussbaum, pg. 9}

“Drawing the circle somehow toward the center” requires a sense of loyalty to all within each of those concentric circles. “Justice as a Larger Loyalty” may be read, precisely, as suggesting the possibility of engendering the Stoic’s point of view – without the metaphysics. Although Rorty had little use for appellations such as “humanity as a whole,” his essay grasps the basic thrust of the Stoic social imagination. Rorty’s equating loyalty to justice has been seen as problematic, but for the purposes of this discussion, we need not concern ourselves with that issue. Rather, despite this dubious equating, the essay exercises the moral imagination in that in it Rorty engages the possibility of our casting our blanket of fealty – which attends certain fraternal feelings – over those we would not usually consider kith or kin, and reframe that casting not as aid, or relief, or
diplomacy, but as affective devotion. Rorty is here flirting with a planetary love ethic. What continues to resonate for me is not only that which is underneath the title of his essay, but the tethering of the word loyalty to the word justice, the suggestion that the former has at least something important to do with the latter, and that the latter can be extended. For reasons which attend his larger philosophical projects, Rorty is invoking, along with many feminist philosophers, sentiment and feeling as philosophically pertinent. He asks us to consider possibilities that we don’t usually consider, or even think realistic, precisely because he knows that we human beings are capable of enormous transformations. Imagine a feeling of devotion (which attends loyalty), rather than a mere duty of loyalty or principle of loyalty or an entitlement to loyalty, and which is extended to persons that are not a part of our own thick, Walzerian communities of language, culture and place.

To be loyal in the fully human, thick rather than merely positive, thin sense requires the persistence of a level of concern that not only entails a recognition of the formal dignity of strangers, but must also entail the possibility of actual friendship and kinship, the kinds of things we read about in novels and see in popular films, the unlikely relationship which draws out the capacity for deep fellow feeling across all lines of separation and social distance. We might not be able to do as Rorty suggests – completely erase the distinction between justice and loyalty since, clearly, misguided loyalty can itself be the cause of injustice; but to consider that the reason for some of the tension
between justice and loyalty might be removed if we saw in the stranger a friend or even
kin but for the contingent circumstances of life. But there is one more move in this essay
that is compelling, though it flusters other philosophers. It is the idea that our own self-
esteeom might attend whether or not we have extended our loyalties as Rorty suggests we
can, and one day might. For he says that “one’s moral identity is determined by the group
or groups with which one identifies, the group or groups to which one cannot be disloyal
and still like oneself.” As philosophically limbless as this observation may seem, there is
something to it. For example, in analyzing Kohlberg’s theory of moral development,
philosopher Laurence Thomas suggests that it is precisely in attaching our own self-
esteeom to our Other-regarding commitments that we achieve the highest levels of Other-
regarding conduct.¹¹⁰ Both Rorty and Thomas, it seems to me, are suggesting that linking
the power of self-esteem to affective and principled devotion to others can create a
mighty moral engine, not merely a thin sense of moral duty that can be compromised
when the thick eros of myopic and unbridled loyalties beckons. This links-up, as well, to
several of Aristotle’s ideas. According to Vernon Provencal on this point, “[Aristotle’s
notion of] Philautia [or self-love], the species of philia [the kind of love that occurs in
friendship and family relationships], is [actually] the ground of all other forms of human
philia. The love of self is actualized . . . as the love of Other.”¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ See Laurence Thomas’s essay, “Morality and Psychological Development.” In: Peter Singer
¹¹¹ Vernon Provencal, “The Family in Aristotle.”
Whether or not Rorty, Thomas and Aristotle are all saying exactly the same thing, their triangulation on the place of self-esteem or self-love in Other-regarding love seems clear – one points to the other. Aristotle wants to be clear that love of other is linked to self-love, and Rorty and Thomas want to suggest that that self-love can be used as a springboard to the highest ethical life. In it, we see the ego turned around on its axis. It is perhaps the best use of the ego, perhaps the thing the ego was ultimately meant for, given that we are creatures of community. This is as much an evolutionary observation as it is a philosophical or theological one. Imagine the ego, that natural self-regarding element of our psychologies, directed at the flourishing of others as the source of its own nourishment. It would be like the first bird, troubled by the drag of its plumage as it ran through the grass, suddenly spreading its wings, and realizing that its irritating appendages were the very things that gave it the power of flight.

The notion that we can link-up our self-esteem or self-love to our love of others is no mere philosophical abstraction. People whose families came to this country from Ireland, Germany or Britain identified with the plight of African-Americans and participated, at great risk, in the Freedom Rides during the Civil Rights Movement in order to help secure not, primarily, their own civil rights, but the civil rights of strangers in Montgomery and Selma and elsewhere. They traveled hundreds of miles of road distance, but traversed millions of miles of social distance. These were examples of agapic love, I think, but those who took the Freedom Rides likely, to use Rorty’s
language, “could not have done otherwise and still liked themselves.” Missionaries and foreign aid workers give-up lives of relative comfort to assist people in war-ravaged or disease-filled parts of the world whose names they had never heard of until they arrived there. These, too, “likely could not have done otherwise and still liked themselves.” One could say that these are but anomalies, tail-events (using the language of statistics), sporadic and high flying examples of intense fellow feeling, Kohlbergian “Level Six” types whom we know to be rare indeed. Perhaps. Or perhaps if we pay close attention to their examples, they can show us the way to live similar lives in the face of the moral challenges of our day, perhaps not only in some drastic embrace of possible Martyrdom but in critical acts of moral courage – to embrace a neighbor of a different religion, tribe or color, to reach out to those who suffer or those who are starved of recognition. These examples teach us how to pay the price of love, and that price, rooted in our own self-esteem, is no cost, but a form of payment to us. It all hinges on the question “Who and what do I want to be, to be remembered for, to live for, to die for?” Even for these persons, the cock crows thrice daily – even they are human, but they continue down their path even as they stumble forward at times. There is something then to Rorty’s conception of justice as a larger loyalty. If justice may not be equated with loyalty, perhaps it may at least be made more secure by it. I might put it a little differently than Rorty, however – I might prefer to say something like “Where you find justice (at a minimum, the attempt to render to those the measure of care that they are due), you will find loyalty standing behind it – a loyalty, perhaps, that is not conscious of itself as such,
but a loyalty that abides nonetheless.” There can be no justice without at least some loyalty, save for inside some thin, formal notion, which may soon collapse for want of passion. That loyalty is based upon, as David Hume and Adam Smith and so many others suggested, an identification with the other and, on Rorty’s account, the other’s capacity to feel pain and to be humiliated, like ourselves.
Chapter IV

Rorty and Cosmopolitanism

The alternative to [a] spurious and self-deceptive kind of cosmopolitanism is one with a clear image of a specific kind of cosmopolitan human future: the image of a planetwide democracy, a society in which torture, or the closing down of a university or a newspaper, on the other side of the world is as much a cause for outrage as when it happens at home. This cosmopolis may be, in nonpolitical matters, as multicultural and heterogeneous as ever.

- Rorty & His Critics (Herman Saatkamp, Jr. (ed.)), pp. 203-204

If one reinterprets objectivity as intersubjectivity, or as solidarity, in the ways I suggest . . . then one will drop the question of how to get in touch with “mind-independent and language-independent reality.” One will replace it with questions like “What are the limits of our community? Are our encounters sufficiently free and open? Has what we have recently gained in solidarity cost us our ability to listen to outsiders who are suffering? To outsiders who have new ideas?” These are political questions rather than metaphysical or epistemological questions. Dewey seems to me to have given us the right lead when he viewed pragmatism not as grounding, but as clearing the ground for, democratic politics.

- ORT, pp. 12-13

It is time to consider some applications of Rorty’s antifoundationalism and Ironism. Rorty’s central observations about the nature of language and the contingency of culture survive the excesses of his arguments, as I hope I have established in the previous chapters. This is because, indeed, we live most of our lives immersed in sophisticated language games, not collections of mere pre-linguistic inferences such as those of
cuttlefish, and now have a historical and anthropological record that demonstrates the transitory nature of cultural formations and ideas. For most practical and cultural purposes, Rorty is correct – the idea that truth is made via these language games rather than found through directly representing the world “as it is in itself” must lead us to face the fact that the radical contingency of the vast majority of our social constructions – that is radical contingency at least in the long run – begs for a different type of commitment to social and political arrangements – begs for a deflationist approach to them, although without deflating them to the point of indifference (and that is, of course, the tricky part). This deflationism opens the door to a consideration of the possibilities of a cosmopolitan rather than a parochial sensibility. Ultimately, Rorty’s insistence pays off, not by providing an untenable linguistic absolutism, but by taking us on a radical journey toward it and as far as we can go, for we come to see on that journey just how malleable and free we are, and how difficult it is to hold that any language game, life-world, or social arrangement is historically fixed. This is precisely what the cosmopolite has suspected for quite a long time, whatever shape her cosmopolitanism has taken – whether as universal participation in a common logos in which all human beings participate, as in Seneca, Epictetus, and Aurelius, or as a Heraclitian or Whiteheadian understanding of change as a constant of the world. Although the idea of a common participation in something beyond the historical and the simple phusic idea of constant change seem very different, both suggest that there can be no constant touchstone in culture or nature that will underwrite the specific forms of life that are extant at any given time. Seneca’s and
Epictetus’s notions of *logos* deflated all particular cultural expressions by assuming something overarching that had a claim upon our loyalties no less than our parochial commitments; Heraclitus insisted that there simply is no stability in the “world of men.” Either will do to address self-certainty, to deflate our attachments to particular language games, and thereby deflate those *Blut und Boden* passions that often lead us to substitute, as Rorty would say, violence for persuasion. Rorty’s thought seems aimed squarely at such monumental human blunders as Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, the Atlantic slave trade, Jim Crow, William Shockley’s eugenics and “dysgenics,” the denial of women suffrage, Stonewall, wife burning, caste systems, Apartheid, and Gaza – all based upon a belief that one has a special relationship with the Truth, that one’s idiosyncratic vision of the way the world really is in itself overrules others’ idiosyncratic visions, thus giving them the right to impose one’s own fantasies about their special relationship to the Truth on others – even to the point of justifying their oppression, humiliation or extermination.

Yet the fact that we are often prepared to substitute violence for persuasion does not persuade all thinkers in the direction of cultural deflation, toward the notion that we can attenuate passionate commitments, or should attenuate them, despite the historical record. These thinkers believe that just as thoughts without content are empty, life without exigent cultural and social commitments is not really worth living. Thus, for these, there remains a general suspicion of cosmopolitanism and cosmopolites. For example, Stanley Fish, who in many other ways holds a kind of pragmatist/cosmopolite
position, especially on the question of contingency, takes on cosmopolitanism and cosmopolites (though not necessarily using these labels) with directness. In his book, *The Trouble with Principle*, Fish challenges the “fuzziness” of certain antifoundationalist ideas:

But in whatever form it takes, the project is an instance of what I call the critical self-consciousness fallacy or antifoundationalist theory hope, the fallacy of thinking that there is a mental space you can occupy to the side of your convictions and commitments, and the hope that you can use the lesson that no transcendent standpoint is available as a way of bootstrapping yourself to transcendence (on the reasoning that since we now know that “we cannot hope to escape from” our prejudices, we can be on guard against those prejudices and better able to see things clearly). . . . Both pragmatist philosophy and democratic process begin in a recognition of the intractability of difference, and it would be a contradiction to turn that recognition into a method for eliminating (or even ameliorating) difference. Democracy (*pace* [Richard] Bernstein) is not a program for transforming men and women into capacious and generous beings but is a device for managing the
narrow partialities that (as Hobbes saw so clearly) will always inform the activities of human actors.\textsuperscript{112}

The sophisticated cosmopolite will agree that there is no “mental space you can occupy to the side of your convictions and commitments,” but will not assent to the notion that this fact must lead to the maintenance of collection of “narrow partialities.” For the options that follow from a recognition that there is no such mental space do not preclude the capacity to engage in critical evaluations about and between cultures (including our own). The history of the West is in part (along with its horrors of imperialism and colonialism) a history of critical self-reflection and self-correction. What we see in Fish’s remarks is a lack of sensitivity to that fact, and this leads to an either/or approach to the possibilities that may obtain – either a flighty cosmopolitanism on the one hand, which deludes itself into believing that stepping outside of all possible skins is both possible and commendable, or, on the other hand, an erotic communitarianism which prescribes to the member of the community a “that’s just who we are, so take us as we are or leave us” mentality.

Rorty shared Anthony Appiah’s notion of “rooted cosmopolitanism” as the third option, one that moves beyond the either/or choice that Fish proffers.\textsuperscript{113} That is,

\begin{quote}

\end{quote}
Rorty proffers a form of cosmopolitanism that understands the psychic need for certain cultural partialities: “A cosmopolitanism with prospects must reconcile a kind of universalism with the legitimacy of at least some forms of partiality.” Rooted cosmopolitanism is one that takes seriously the possibility of full recognition of one’s cultural tethers (or, as Rorty has put it, one’s “socialization”), while at the same time acknowledging the ease with which cultures penetrate one another, often imperceptibly. In Rorty’s own language, one can be frankly ethnocentric (“We cannot leap outside our Western social democratic skins when we encounter another culture, and we should not try”\(^{114}\)) while at the same time “fuzzying up” the differences between “us” and “them” so as to put aside any notion of permanent mutual incomprehension or incommensurability.

For these reasons, the philosophically sophisticated cosmopolite or cosmopolitan maintains some erotic attachments to the ways in which he was socialized, but also wields the ironist’s notion that his final vocabulary, developed through that socialization process, is up for grabs (though not all at once) due to the possible seductions by others who have been socialized differently. Thus, the cosmopolite is not given to totalizing and inflationary claims about the virtues of his culture, and leans toward cultural deflationism rather than outright skepticism. A deflationist, on this account, remains open to the idea that one day, however far into the future it may be, all of the ways in which he was socialized could be replaced by new ways, many of which will arise due to intercourse with other cultures rather than merely because of internal decisions made by the lights of

\(^{114}\ ORT, \text{pg. 212}\)
his culture’s thought leaders. Rorty refers to “pragmatists” in the following passage, but here “pragmatists” might be replaced with “cosmopolites,” for in many ways “pragmatist” and “cosmopolite” sensibilities are the same, since they are both given to experimentalism and fallibilism:

But pragmatists are quite sure that their own vocabulary will be superseded – and, from their point of view, the sooner the better. They expect their descendants to be as condescending about the vocabulary of twentieth-century liberals as they are about the vocabulary of Aristotle or of Rousseau.115

This dovetails with the basic sensibility of the ironist — one who has learned to make peace with the idea that her own “final vocabulary” (politics, metaphysics, cultural beliefs) is and should always be subject to possible revision or rejection; one who is open to cultural seduction.

Unlike Rorty, who holds that Ironism cannot be the sort of philosophical attitude that we teach citizens to inculcate as a regulator of their own commitments, I hold that Ironism, with its deflationist tendencies, contains critical ethical principles that should be *widely* sowed and cultivated, principles that prime the pumps of human social intercourse, dialogue and democratic participation by lessening the narrowness that forestalls compromise and the ability to respectfully acknowledge the nature of others’

115 *ORT*, pg. 219
loyalties to their own final vocabularies (cf. Josiah Royce’s notion of “loyalty to loyalty”). Ironism rests upon fallibilism, which the cosmopolitan, along with the pragmatist, takes to be the hallmark of emotionally, philosophically, psychologically and politically mature peoples.

As for Fish’s and others’ criticisms of cosmopolitanism, there are various replies. A notion of the self as needing formation by and though almost volkish communal milieus seems to be an excessive characterization. Martha Nussbaum, in her book *For Love of Country – Debating the Limits of Patriotism*, comes-up with a Mead-like concept of the self and argues that it is not the case that a child is born into a culture and then learns to work out thin and more universal moral principles from the thick predicates of that culture, but rather learns thin principles by its interactions with the first persons in its life. She argues against Walzer’s notion in his book *Thick and Thin – Moral Argument at Home and Abroad*, where he similarly claims that thin universal moral commitments are subsequent to the more grounded cultural rules that we learn as members of communities (again, what Rorty calls socialization). On Nussbaum’s account, the child does not only learn the language of its people, but learns the meaning of frustration, physical pain, loneliness, and despair which it can then project into a “generalized other” in the sense that Mead understood it. The child comes quickly to


assume that its feelings are felt in all persons, and thus can extend its sympathies to all persons suffering similarly. The child learns cruelty by experiencing (and not just reading about) cruelty, and learns to recognize the symptoms of cruelty in other people’s lives, whether they are proximal or distal, whether they speak the same language or not. Nussbaum agrees that selves are not born, but are made, yet she has a view of just how they are made that is more Kantian than Walzerian. For Nussbaum, there is an innate capacity to empathize and sympathize that does not require thick socialization. In defending this view (and herself from some of her more communitarian critics) Nussbaum invokes Walter Scott:

In Walter Scott’s famous poem, on which I was raised, the non-patriot is a man ‘with soul so dead’ that he never could be the subject of ‘minstrel raptures.’ The poem suggests that all true poetry is patriotic in inspiration and in theme. Several of my critics would appear to be followers of Scott, and I am cast as that person whose empty humanism is destined to go to its grave ‘unwept, unhonored, and unsung.’ I suggest, instead, that large-souled and compelling art is generally concerned with the recognition of the common in the strange and the strange in the common – and that narrowly patriotic art, by contrast, is frequently little more than
kitsch, idolatry. Scott’s poem is kitsch. Much of Rudyard Kipling’s poetry is kitsch.118

Yet there is something to be said for ‘minstrel raptures.’ However, to see our way clear to a widening democratic humanism we must address impulses within ourselves that tend to pull us away from greater confraternity (Richard Rorty’s expanding circles of loyalty) and toward a degenerate tribalism. The management of this degenerate, tribalistic impulse requires a consideration of the nature of our relationships as well as a certain kind of moral training and discipline, both “personal” and public. This tribalistic impulse is the basis of the danger of backsliding, away from cosmopolitan hope and toward undemocratic compacts, nativism and jingoism. Given this, a missing link in cosmopolitan thought has to do with how we train ourselves to avoid such backsliding, which usually becomes most visible as simple intolerance.

The specific instances of intolerance with which we most frequently come into contact have been recounted ad nauseam – racism, classism, sexism, and an assortment of other bigotries – and often flow from certain attitudes toward and beliefs about our political, cultural, religious and other metaphysical commitments, commitments that become fetishes rather than revisable imperatives. It is the mode of and the manner in which we invest in these commitments, though not necessarily the commitments themselves, that lead precisely to the aforementioned types of intolerance. I am certainly

not the first to draw this conclusion. Yet, if this is correct, if we are going to make any significant moral progress (beyond that we already have) in addressing intolerance it will be necessary for us (citizens of states, members of ethnies, etc.) to come to terms with the nature of our most cherished beliefs, to see them for what they are and, at the same time, to rethink the kinds of people we need to become at the very core of our characters if we and our children are going to comprise a future largely free of the problems that have plagued the species for so many thousands of years.

Many communitarians believe that such a re-evaluation and re-valuation of those commitments necessarily leads to the loosening of loyalties and a flavorless and colorless existence. Others think that only those with certain temperaments and psychologies can stand the stresses that would accompany the existential disorientation that would be triggered by such a deeply personal introspective process. I do not agree with either of these assessments. Rather, I believe the key to guiding us through the process is the right kind of moral training and education, i.e. the kind of moral training and education the specific end of which is the elimination of untenable forms of intolerance, and a form of training that aims to turn us all into ironists. Further, I think, as did Locke, Royce, Dewey and as do Richard Rorty and others today, that the result will not be a monochromatic social order, but widened circles of loyalty, enhanced possibilities for friendship and mutual trust, the expansion and invigoration of social intercourse and commerce, and the stigmatization of bilious ideological and religious
rhetoric and ideas. This requires more than liberal education; it requires cosmopolitan education – education that exposes youth to other life-worlds and invites them to learn from them rather than view them as mere objects of study.

However, such cosmopolitan education can work best in societies that are already liberal, societies that celebrate “our kind of civilization” – a phrase that can raise hackles. Similar phrases used by Rorty also raised hackles, for Rorty was famous for his “we” and “our” statements (“we North Atlantic liberals,” “we Western democrats,” “we pragmatists” etc.). “Our kind of civilization” merely refers to democratic-liberal ones. The venue is narrowed in this way because democratic-liberal states rest upon certain time-tested philosophico-religious principles and have a certain moral imagination that, together, are the natural springboards from which to achieve cosmopolitan sensibilities. Generally speaking, people in democratic-liberal states have democratic liberal souls that prepare them for further movement down the road of what Daniele Archibugi, a leading contemporary cosmopolitan thinker, calls the “unfinished journey” of democracy.

I am aware of the debates about liberalism’s shortcomings. Michael Sandel and others have provided a sustained critique of liberalism, certain features of which will be touched on, below. Nevertheless, it is yet possible to hold the view, despite the criticisms, that a democratic-liberal state is the best that the species has been able to

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achieve by way of the governance of heterogeneous peoples and the management of pluralism away from incendiary and toward conciliatory states of affairs. Democratic liberalism is perhaps the major achievement of the species’ political reflections and experiments, the closest formula for the “Beloved Community” that has so far been concocted. It is necessary for me to be clear about this because the proffer that irony takes us beyond liberalism, further down the road of the unfinished journey of democracy, is one that must take-up the tensions inherent in such a proposal. The creation of ironists requires soul-making, and soul-making is no easy task. Those, such as Sandel, who have held that liberalism has lacked the tools to foster a sense of community will certainly be inclined to argue that the notion of creating ironic souls is beyond the pale. But Irony, as discussed herein, need not strip citizens of communal eros – rather it may actually enhance it because it celebrates what Royce called “loyalty to loyalty.” Like liberalism, Ironism is a regulatory device, not a constitutive device that expresses the shape or content of communal life, and cosmopolitan soul-making does not necessarily entail an overhaul of institutions or cultural formations, but rather the development of a certain kind of character in the individual members of the society. This proffered overhaul is as much psychological as it is ethical, as has already been suggested.

But cosmopolitan souls require more than irony, and we must give communitarians their due, and in what follows I shall attempt to do just that. Psychological health requires a sense of rootedness, a sense of identity and a sense of
linkage to a community of which we take ourselves to be members. As an American patriot, Rorty did not believe, as some have argued, that we should be effete as regards our commitments to those communities. The other side of Ironism is ethnocentrism, which is a basic communitarian notion. Rorty’s version of “ethnocentrism,” which he assures us is neither un-pragmatic, nor illiberal, nor invidious, is as follows:

[E]thnocentrism is, we pragmatists think, inevitable and unobjectionable. It amounts to little more than the claim that people can rationally change their beliefs and desires only by holding most of those beliefs and desires constant – though we can never say in advance just which are to be changed and which retained intact. . . . We cannot leap outside our Western democratic skins when we encounter another culture, and we should not try. All we should try to do is get inside the inhabitants of that culture long enough to get some idea of how we look to them, and whether they have any ideas we can use. That is also all they can be expected to do when encountering us. If members of the other culture protest that this expectation of tolerant reciprocity is a provincially Western one, we can only shrug our shoulders and reply that we have to work by our own lights, even as they do, for
there is no supercultural observation platform to which we might repair.\textsuperscript{120}

There is something right about this, even unassailable, at least on its face. The question is how to encounter The Other as Other (not as hopelessly different, or ontologically different, but holding to collections of practices and beliefs that are sufficiently different from our own to make dialogue and mutual understanding a challenge), without lapsing into some species of nativism. These are the tensions between Ironism and ethnocentrism, between cosmopolitanism and communitarianism. They have been with us since the founding of this country, a country that both seeks an identity as well as to absorb differences within itself without balkanization.

Indeed, since its founding, a primary aspiration of the United States has been to make room for “differences” (cultural, religious and gender), notwithstanding the fact that the nation has often failed to actualize that aspiration. The founding documents of revolution and constitution, in speaking of all “men” being created as equals or as adopting a position of general equality, proffer a robust mutual respect of each one in his or her person, especially vis-à-vis the organs of government. Beyond these founding documents, there is a host of ancillary writings by the founders. For example, there is Thomas Jefferson’s \textit{Notes on the State of Virginia}. Therein Jefferson wrote: “The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts \textit{only} as are injurious to others. But it

\textsuperscript{120} “Cosmopolitanism Without Emancipation,” in \textit{ORT}, pp. 212-213
does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither
picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.” 121 Noteworthy is the implication that government
power is concerned “only” with those things and conditions that are or may be
“injurious,” and while Jefferson’s metaphors for injury are mundane (broken bones,
picked pockets), they point to, as well, the injuries that accompany the denial of
fundamental rights which, pace J.S. Mill, must be respected by all citizens and protected
by government. Jefferson was attempting to make his fellows reflect on the relevance, to
their own lives, of their neighbors’ deepest lived commitments.

One may read this passage as Jefferson’s not-too-subtle signal to his fellow
countrymen (first and foremost, fellow Virginians), who were to become, after all, the
font of government, to learn to take a somewhat ironic view toward the beliefs and
private practices of their fellows. The question of the practical relevance of one’s
fellow’s habits and practices to one’s own life is characteristic of America’s pragmatic
bent, with its valorization of instrumentalism and practical outcomes and consequences,
and this Jeffersonian ironism – the proscribing and domesticating of one’s fundamental
views about life – entailed questioning which habits and practices might amount to some
tangible harm. Jefferson’s focus was shifted away from high cultural concerns and
metaphysics toward concern for life itself, as well as toward the “life” of the political
community itself. Jeffersonian ironism was meant to be a guardian of both as the

121 Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, Query 17.
condition for the possibility of the *good* life, however the good life is variously construed. This shift from concerns about culture to concerns about basic biological life and the life of the political community (where a consensus about quotidian affairs is hammered out) may be restated as the refocus of political attention on the preservation of a minimalist “we” that is stripped of much of its (supposed) exigent cultural furniture. The American experiment, therefore, might be seen as a continuous attempt to keep, in the public-political sphere, the exigent cultural furniture of the citizenry to a minimum, pushing it into their various *private* life-worlds where one is perfectly free to worship or not worship as she pleases, or to carry-on certain cultural practices without regard to whether they are widely shared. Government’s withholding of recognition of one’s widely shared and/or, conversely, idiosyncratic habits and practices is not merely so passive as it seems, but is rather the exercise of a certain form of power, as the withholding of recognition is often an exercise of power. Regarding this use of power we may be justified in borrowing the words of Alexis de Tocqueville in concluding that it shapes a certain type of civic soul whereby “[T]he will of man is not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided; men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly restrained from acting. Such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes . . . .” 122 In other words, it is a power that trains, a power that

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tamed. What it tames in particular are the erotic, uncompromising commitments to idiosyncratic views that do not lend themselves to dialogue and democratic approaches to the quotidian problems of a commonwealth and commonweal, which require commitment to a shared political vocabulary and sensibility, shared rules of discourse, and shared ideas about what counts as good reasons and good evidence for proposing or rejecting public policies of various sorts.

Jefferson’s ironism was a call for a kind of “Copernican revolution” in politics and civil society. Just as Copernicus insisted that it was the earth that went around the sun, and not the converse, Jefferson argued that government and civil society must not revolve around a particular view of “The Good” (a particular notion of what living a good human life entails), but rather that particular views of The Good must revolve around an impartial government and civil society. Jefferson’s ironism, shared by other of the founders, was another tool to beat back political theologies that held that the legitimacy of the sovereign derived from something beyond the political community itself, from God or the gods, for example. It is not hard to see how someone who viewed himself as first and foremost Catholic or Muslim, and only secondarily as American, might respond to this form of ironism, which evaluates all religious and even cultural practices as more or less equivalent, albeit for certain political purposes only. Throughout human history, a role of the sovereign was to protect the gods and ways of the polis, to protect a specific
notion of The Good. Jefferson and the other founders stood this idea on its head. The purpose of the American-style democratic polis is to protect the rights of each to indulge in his own gods and ways, so long as those gods and ways were not injurious to the political fabric or to one’s neighbor.

Thus, while Jefferson’s remarks seem to offer some very pragmatic wisdom concerning how it is that people with disparate views of that in which The Good consists may coexist and form a true commonwealth and commonweal, there were and are many who see in Jefferson’s words a rather severe attenuation of their moral, theological and cultural commitments, commitments taken to be exigent to their identity and plans of life. To these persons, being a Catholic or a Jew is not a marginally exigent commitment, not some casual undertaking to be ignored by the powerful organs of society, to be domesticated as a “merely” private affair, and they wonder whether a true “commonwealth” and “commonweal” (rather than a mere federation) is even possible where deeply held moral and theological views are not shared in common. In their view, if a series of retreats and surrenders concerning deeply held convictions is the price that must be paid for “lukewarm” democratic practices wherein one is obliged to tolerate the most odious habits and practices of one’s neighbors, it may be that this price is too high. This doubt lingers even though Jefferson’s purported nonchalance is to be taken, ostensibly, as but a procedural nonchalance, for there are some who hold that it is not merely an innocent procedural mechanism of the state to maintain order and peace, but
rather an ideology, the projection of a set of values hidden within what seems to be a reasonable maxim for pluralism, tolerance, and coexistence. These persons hold that Jefferson’s and other of the founders’ procedural agnosticism derived from a sweeping intellectual curiosity and critical demeanor, and to their commitment to the ideals of the Enlightenment. In their view, the ironism that Jefferson and other of the founders introduced is the corrosive uprooting of thick and vivacious (erotic) cultural and theological commitments, replacing them with the Enlightenment’s turn toward reason, utility and “secularism” which offer little more than a grey and mundane vision of life focused exclusively on mere political, economic and biological concerns – and a kind of bland peace between rival views. It preaches the Enlightenment program from under the veil of a democratic paideia (or a project of public education) that teaches citizens to be circumspect regarding all notions and expressions of The Good. The irony expressed in Jefferson’s “twenty gods, or no god” construction came at the beginning of a process of democratic soul-making that taught, both tacitly and directly, that religious and even cultural commitments are necessarily secondary or tertiary considerations when compared to civic and political stability, merely part of the flotsam and jetsam of personal opinion that comes and goes among the citizenry over time, unlike the notion of democracy itself. What matters most is the “grand conversation of man” in general (a generalized “man”), and not any particular sets of provincial and personal conclusions. While this was part of a procedural and regulative approach to governance, it placed a cool penumbra over the citizenry whereby, it is argued in various ways, the citizen herself
follows the cue, and begins to cool down her own erotic commitments (to ethnicity, to religion, to idiosyncratic cultural practices) for the sake of civic peace and social consensus between diverse interests. This democratic paideia, this new republican soul-making built upon Jeffersonian ironism, put in question certain demands for recognition, given that the state itself would withhold recognition from any subset of the citizenry that demanded that their idiosyncratic moral, cultural or theological views be established within the organs of the state.

Doubts about Jeffersonian ironism remain. Many years after Jefferson, we arrived at a place where the sanctity of mere procedural fluidity would be questioned with considerable sophistication. So-called “multiculturalism” would emphasize variegation and pluralism rather than flat commonality along the lines of Israel Zangwill’s melting pot myth of total assimilation, and, at the same time, call into question the very possibility of a non-value-laden procedural “play space” as that which is supposedly achieved by maintaining a rather strict neutrality on the part of the organs of government. As intimated, it would accuse the very idea of “procedural liberalism,” a supposed value-free regulative political idea, of being no more than another constitutive notion of what a good life entails, and of being a veiled form of “cultural imperialism” due to the fact that the Zangwillian assimilation of all was to an Anglo-European set of cultural productions and languages, most notably English. This led to a new politics – “the politics of recognition,” or “identity politics” in and through which citizens as well as the
institutions of state would be called upon to see that to which they had in the past blinded themselves — religious, racial and cultural differences; pluralism rather than monism; American identities rather than American identity. Yet, if multiculturalism was a needed remedy, it also introduced some new and exigent questions of an ethical nature. Just what are the ethical limits, if any, of our demands to be recognized in our various outlooks, cultural practices, preferences and beliefs? What about the problem of balkanization? Is there ever a point at which one is ethically justified to withhold recognition?

In the American public square, recognition is often discussed as an affirmative moral obligation, and so those who fail to “perform” recognition (for it entails more than just passive observation and notation) stand to be socially reprimanded or suffer some form of social sanction, whether or not the offenders are aware of the offense. Why should this be? Before we attempt to answer that question, we must first understand what is often meant by “recognition” in this context. A fitting definition of recognition would seem to go something like this:

“Recognition” is the act of engaging and regarding the other as she wishes to or demands to be engaged or regarded, and not merely as we might engage or regard her through the lenses of our own experiences and values. Further, recognition is not engaging or regarding the other as a mere abstract being that happens to have certain rights and duties (as merely homo sapiens or as merely human) but rather as a member of an
actual organic community (or communities), and as an individual with
certain idiosyncratic plans of life not wholly shared by others in that
community (or those communities).

Let this be our working definition. We might say, further, that recognition has
three axes. The first axis entails understanding and respecting how the other sees herself
as *embedded* in particular organic communities (tribes, nations, religions etc.). The
second axis entails seeing her as a relatively *free* agent who is able to choose how
completely she identifies with any such communities, rather than reducing her to mere
membership in those organic communities or to mere membership in the species. The
third axis is in fact her membership in the species, her “mere” humanity. Now, by
“organic” community (communities) I mean a set or sets of human beings smaller than
the set of all human beings, which have particular or idiosyncratic views about the
matters that have a significant impact on the formation of the life plans of their members,
and to which those members more or less accede – at least accede enough to draw what
they consider meaningful differences between themselves and others who do not share
their particular or idiosyncratic views. Another feature of organic communities is their
*conservatism*, which helps to assure that the cultural memes of those communities are
replicated across generations. Take a community of Hindus in Kashmir, India, for
example, or a community of Hassidic Jews in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, as another. These
exemplify organic communities.
Clearly, recognition requires more than a “flat humanism,” as I shall call it, in accordance with which one sees other human beings as mere species members and as mere communal nodes whose life plans and cultural predicates may be substituted for any others, and whose moral value remains unaffected through such substitutions. It requires more than seeing a person’s value as resting on the third axis only. Those who argue for a robust recognition of the other as other do not usually argue that the qualities of human beings that make them valuable to themselves and to others is exhausted by their being mere species members, but rather that their value cannot be properly understood without understanding both their membership (embedding) in organic communities and their freedom, as agents, to construct and live out life plans of their own choosing.

Without wading too deeply into rival schools of philosophical ethics, we can yet say that on the account of certain schools of thought a person’s moral value is based precisely upon such a “flat humanism” and, on the account of certain other schools, the value of persons derives through consideration of their membership in various communities. On the account of the latter schools, proper recognition assumes that taking note of mere species membership is at best morally insufficient, and that we are obliged to see other human beings as, also, determined by collections of choices, their own choices as well as choices sometimes made by others and toward which they stand in a relationship of general assent. This is because the collections of choices that, together, make up communities are the spiritual flesh on the species skeleton, so to speak; or, to
put it differently, the vectors of what it means to be human to begin with. Those who hold such a view about the importance of such spiritual flesh I will simply call, quite unoriginally, communitarians. Communitarians tend to push back against Ironism, and insist that certain communal values and beliefs are not up for grabs, ought not be surrendered for the sake of political compromise and consensus, but rather must be dealt with (recognized) rather than ignored or dismissed as inessential or fungible. Communitarians take such a notion as this one, proffered by Rorty (in his characteristically devil-may-care manner), as extremely problematic:

I take the pragmatist, minimalist liberal, position to be: try to educate the citizenry in the civic virtue of having as few . . . compelling interests, beliefs and desires as possible. Try, for example, to get them to change the subject from “When does human life begin?” to “How can some unprincipled and wishy-washy consensus about abortion be hammered out?” Try to get them to be as flexible and wishy-washy as possible, and to value democratic consensus more than they value almost anything else. Try to make them as little inclined to emigrate or secede as possible, by encouraging them to tolerate compromise on matters which they previously thought uncompromisable. 123

Rorty, at least here, seems to be siding with the flat humanist, valorizing procedural liberalism and embracing Jeffersonian irony. The idea of a democratic paideia that trains the citizenry to be “as flexible and wishy-washy as possible” links up well with Alexis de Tocqueville’s remarks, supra. Flat humanists tend to think that the communitarians’ insistence on placing a significant value on communities of meaning, in which they have “compelling interests, beliefs and desires,” takes our eyes off of the ball of our shared human essence and fixes them, instead, on cultural predicates that come and go – religion, national identity, ethnic affiliations and the like. They tend to think that it is possible to peel apart two “truths” about ourselves, i.e. our mere species membership, on the one hand, and our collections of “compelling interests, beliefs and desires” on the other. For them, such peeling apart is more than a thought experiment and, when it is accomplished, they fancy that they will be in a position to assign disparate moral values to what remains (assigning greater worth to the idea of our species membership, our humanity simpliciter, and less worth to the ideas that comprise our “compelling interests, beliefs and desires”). When all is said and done, flat humanists seek as the bearer of human value something that is not contingent or mercurial, and so they devalue what Martha Nussbaum and other philosophers take to be the “mere accidents” of place, birth, culture, and language.

The flat humanists, one can argue, have it half right. They have it half right because our sympathies do seem to attach, in great measure, to the human being
simpliciter, with significant demotion of specific cultural or political predicates, at least at times. It is that dignified, autonomous, embodied self that lives out culture and that relates to others like itself and that can see itself in the other. It is the embodied human being, culture notwithstanding, that feels pain, that can be killed, that is the bearer of hopes and that generates culture itself – that is the foundation of the social or communal “self” as nexus of ideas, choices, habits, languages, beliefs and desires. But one has good cause to disagree with the flat humanists in their belief that species membership and the cultural self can be abstracted from one another, peeled apart and separately evaluated as discussed above, and that such peeling apart is more than a thought experiment, engaged in for specific purposes. It is no accident that in the preceding sentences I refer to the de-cultured human essence by using the impersonal “that,” since no “who” can be thought to have come into existence without at least some minimal collection of “compelling interests, beliefs and desires.”

From whence, in the history of ideas, do the flat humanist’s abstraction come? Beyond Jefferson, the flat humanists’ perspective can be genealogically traced to or connected to ideological currents that range from the ancient Stoics (with their idea of a universal logos common to all rational creatures) to Christian universalism (consider the faith assertion that “there is neither Jew, nor Greek” expressed by Paul in his letter to the Galatian Christians), and lead up to such thinkers as Baudelaire, who is said to have coined the word “modernity.” For Baudelaire “modernity” is a condition in which an
analytic and experimental rather than a synthetic and conservative eye is focused on all human productions, including the most cherished, and in which, therefore, there is an instability that results from the rapidity of change and the pursuit of “progress.” For the Stoic, the Paulist Christian and the secular Modern, all cultural productions—which includes all traditional productions—are up for grabs. Concerning modernity, the French historiographer Jacques Le Goff, writes:

Modernity . . . becomes an attack on limits, an adventure in marginality, as opposed to [on the other hand] a conformity with the norm, a refuge in authority, a gathering in the center in the manner characteristic of the cult of the antique.” 124

Modernity, being concerned with pushing against limits and “adventures in marginality,” valorizes antagonism and stress with and within all forms of organic community and the identities that seek to remain true to them. Such an ideological orientation differs significantly from those of cultures that do not sanctify the destabilizing analysis and ironic sensibility that is the mainstay of modernity. If there is a clash in our contemporary world it is not a “clash of civilizations,” as Samuel Huntington suggested, but rather a clash of two general modes of/for existential orientation, two general modes for seeing the world. One views the productions of organic communities as fungible and continuously in flux; the other sees the point of life as surrender to and

service of those very productions. Of course, this expresses merely ideal polar ends of a heuristic axis, but, nonetheless, the idealization captures the antagonisms.

Against the ideas of Immanuel Kant and certain other Enlightenment thinkers who have been interpreted as boiling-down human beings to an essence of reason or rationality, many contemporary philosophers hold that the ability to “reason” cannot be dissociated from our various cultural projects, and so reason is but the critical capacity, a tool that helps bring about certain forms of life. On their view it is because cultures and civilizations arise out of that capacity that we must take them seriously. The point of reason, for these philosophers, is action, and action leads to, inevitably, these disparate forms of life. They understand the general point that Jefferson was making in his Notes on the State of Virginia, and they may even largely agree, but they see danger in what Sandel has called an “aspiration to neutrality.” 125 Sandel noted that this “aspiration to neutrality” goes too far when it begins to cause the members of a community to take an ironic view of that community, viewing its various practices as but temporary, imperfect and revisable – and, therefore, cheap. Such a strong sense of “the contingency of all things” erodes fealty and a sense of belonging to something that is worth belonging to. Sandel argues, with Le Goff, that this “aspiration to neutrality” is distinctively modern:

Ancient political theory held that the purpose of politics was to cultivate the virtue, or moral excellence, of citizens. All associations aim at some good, Aristotle wrote, and the polis, or political association, aims at the highest, most comprehensive good: “any polis which is truly so called, and is not merely one in name, must devote itself to the end of encouraging goodness. Otherwise, a political association sinks into a mere alliance, which only differs in space from other forms of alliance where the members live at a distance from one another. Otherwise, too, law becomes a mere covenant – or (in the phrase of the Sophist Lycophron) ‘a guarantor of men’s rights against one another’ – instead of being, as it should be, a rule of life . . . .” (Emphasis added.) 126

Other philosophers, of our own age, roughly speaking, such as G.W.F. Hegel, John Dewey, William James, Henri Bergson, Alasdaire MacIntyre and, somewhat and seemingly paradoxically, Rorty, have, at a minimum, resisted the ideological pressures to bifurcate the sources of human moral worth and valorize capacities for cultural and political formation and action while devaluing the formations (forms of life) and actions themselves. They take a more pragmatic and utilitarian point of view and hold that morality itself can only be understood, or at least best understood, in terms of synthesizing, creative action within communities holding to their own distinctive forms

126 Sandel, pg. 7
of life, even to their own rationalities, or ordering principles. They argue that it makes no
sense to talk about the static moral worth of abstract human beings apart from their freely
chosen actions and projects, whether as individuals or as communities of various
magnitude and variegation. Rorty, who tried to tie together flat humanism with an
interesting form of communitarianism, goes so far as to say that our own modernist
civilization is but one possibility among many, and that there is a natural communitarian
impulse toward a “we” that is the best that we can hope for, and that we’re none the
worse for it. Communitarians take it that an “aspiration to neutrality” is an aspiration to
the impossible, for neutrality is not a possibility to begin with. Rorty agreed. No one is
neutral as to what the important values of life consist in.

Now it is important to make clear that in speaking of organic cultures and
organic communities, I am not speaking of their more trivial practices and beliefs. What
is not meant is that such cultural trivialities as driving on the right or left side of the road
are, in and of themselves, morally worthy or morally significant. Instead, organic cultures
and communities are founded upon those things that the culture or community takes to be
its sine qua nons – its political systems, its religions, its sacred myths, its practices of
marriage, its rites of passage (etc.). It is among these sine qua nons that we find those
expressions with which flat humanists have to come to terms. These expressions are what
define a people, define who they take themselves to be. Flat humanists should not only
embrace moral transitivity at the very least (that if persons are to be seen as having

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dignity then so should their *productions*, their *actual choices*), but guard against failing to
distinguish between cultural trivialities on the one hand and wholesale cultural
expressions such as the preservation of historic languages and the establishment of
political regimes on the other, even though it must remain necessarily the case that, when
pressed, all cultural manifestations are, at least theoretically, expendable because
contingent, although (and this is the important point) *not capriciously expendable*.

We do not live in a world in which the only thing of moral worth is our basic
membership in the species. Such a world is an Enlightenment hallucination, or worse, and
tenable cosmopolitanisms have no truck with this idea. We are not born to gaze at our
moral navels, to wrap all conceptions of moral worth into a mere *capacity* or a
transcendental and mysterious moral essence called “humanity.” Moral value attaches,
also, to what we choose to create and to be. Further, if our autonomy is to be given such
prominence, the choices we make are necessarily imbued with moral significance. Every
non-trivial act and institution may be seen to have moral significance, as they express
what it *means to be human*. There is, for example, moral content to citizenship, especially
to citizenship by assent or choice, as well as to actions which display fealty to a particular
organic community. Indeed, it is often the case that one has a duty to such community, a
moral duty, insofar as one ought not to, at the very least, be a free-rider within or upon it.
The flat humanist’s notion of “accident” goes too far in the wrong direction because it
fails to take into account the reciprocal nature of communal membership and the
anthropology of communal formation. One’s community provides a language, physical
resources and existential orientation. These are *goods*, resources which may not be taken
lightly from a moral perspective, or viewed as capriciously expendable without violating
collections of moral duties. *They represent the deposit of the community’s collective
wisdom and resources in the individual member.* So to the question “Is recognition a
moral imperative?” we have good reason to answer in the affirmative. However, that we
may have a moral duty to recognize one another as members of organic communities and
not as mere human beings or actors within a political ideology of procedural liberalism
does not satisfy the *modal* question, “How much recognition do we owe?” It is to that
question that we now turn.

The economist and social philosopher Amartya Sen writes that “The world has
come to the conclusion – more defiantly than should have been needed – that culture
matters. The world is obviously right—culture does matter. However, the real question is:
*‘How does culture matter?’*”127 After considering what we have discussed so far, one
might easily assent to Sen’s observation here. But, of course, many would be tempted to
point out that it is not much of a revelation, nor when reflecting on the present moment,
in which we are faced with a shrinking globe, is the most relevant question merely the
question of how culture matters. Arguably, the more important and more philosophically
interesting question of moment is another normative one: “How much *should* culture

Company, 2006, pg. 103.
matter?” It pairs-up with another question – “How much recognition should one demand from others?” That question can be reformulated, “How much should I demand others to see me as X?” where ‘X’ stands for any number of cultural predicates.

It is true that the flat humanist—whom I reiterate is, to some degree, a bit of a heuristic straw man created for the purposes of conceptual clarity—draws on some very good philosophical arguments, instincts and historical knowledge. If Jefferson’s remarks, above, injected some ironism into the body politic, it was certainly arguable, from his point of view, that the risks that came with such ironism were worth it. Mr. Jefferson knew full well the dangers of overly inflamed group passions, tribalism, cultural chauvinism, and unchecked sectarianism, such as those that were prominent during the English Civil War (1642-1651) and decried by his former countryman, political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, with whose works Jefferson was acquainted. It was more than a mere affinity for Enlightenment philosophy and science that led Jefferson to argue as he did. The brute facts of history – of which we are even more acquainted – also played a part. The attempt to constrain the often inflamed passions of sects, whether cultural, political, or religious were, Jefferson concluded, exigent goals (seconded by James Madison in The Federalist Papers). Thus, at a minimum, the organs of government would create a zone of privacy in respect of the customs and beliefs of various segments of the citizenry, protecting its various rights, in the private pursuits of its individual members, to live as they saw fit. However, the government would not grant
any such private pursuits special recognition and would thus avoid placing the authority of government behind any constitutive personal pursuits, or pursuit of The Good.

The idea of a government’s withholding recognition as an antidote to inflamed sectarian passions and tribalism can have its useful and tempering cognates among the citizenry itself. Though multiculturalism, in the 1970s and 1980s, arose as a needed response to the invidious devaluation of the cultural productions, beliefs and worth of women, Africans, gays and others, and as an effort to re-center the cultural productions of disenfranchised peoples, it is still reasonable to assess the degree to which demands for recognition may at times exceed their purposes as antidotes to marginalization and begin, instead, to tear at the fabric of commonality and overlapping commitments that hold any people together as a people – a people under a single political compact with overlapping or shared cultural sensibilities. Lycophron’s point remains apt: At what point does a political community become, merely, “a guarantor of men’s rights against one another”? American conservatives, for example, raise this concern often, and worry about what may be called “identity creep,” the demand to recognize, with increasing sedulousness, our differences rather than our sameness. Of course, when it is conservatives who are raising this concern over identity creep, some wonder whether they are simply waxing nostalgic for a bygone era in which “whites” (and principally, “white” males) determined the value of various cultural productions, and determined whose practices and beliefs would be taken seriously, and whose would not.
However, concerns regarding the limits of recognition (whether demands for or performances of it) need not be limited to a society’s cultural or political conservatives, and can be thought through within a philosophical framework rather than a mere partisan political one. Demands for recognition place fair stresses on one’s fellows – the stresses that attend sensitivity to the concerns and feelings of others. These are stresses we should all be willing to bear as moral actors, particularly in supposedly pluralist societies. However, there are those who worry that there can be a point at which demands for recognition become so complicated and idiosyncratic that in order to perform recognition as so demanded creates undue burdens. At such a point, the question of whether we have a moral obligation to perform recognition becomes pertinent and not necessarily indicative of narrow-mindedness or insensitivity. For at some point the demand to be recognized as, for example, either a multi-hyphenated human being or as narrowly fixed, “pure” and “unhyphenated,” focused on but one aspect of identity (say, sexuality or nationality) borders on the narcissistic, and becomes too much of a demand. Arguing for a greater overlapping consensus such that we assent to more than a mere compact by which we guarantee one another’s rights and that is also based upon shared sentiments and shared ideals is critical to the coherence of society and the survival of a political community, a “we.” What is to be avoided is what Sen refers to as “solitarist” identities, through which one places oneself within and construes one’s national participation as citizen only through the perspective of some “distinct” and socially distant ethnic enclave within the nation. As Sen writes,
There is a real need to rethink the understanding of multiculturalism both to avoid conceptual disarray about social identity and also to resist *the purposeful exploitation of the divisiveness* that this conceptual disarray allows and even, to some extent, encourages. What has to be particularly avoided . . . is the confusion between multiculturalism with cultural liberty, on the one side, and *plural monoculturalism* with . . . separatism on the other. A *nation* can hardly be seen as a collection of sequestered segments, with citizens being assigned fixed places in predetermined segments. Nor can [a nation] be seen, explicitly or by implication, as an imagined national federation. . . . (Emphasis added.) 128

A community, even a nation or nation-state, organized around a mere political compact does not or may not have the power to command a deep fealty and high sacrifices on behalf of such community. What Sen refers to as “plural monoculturalism” erodes the *national spirit* (that is not to say *nationalistic* spirit) as well as the desire to achieve a better understanding of fellow citizens of various backgrounds. There is an erotic spirit to be shared, which spirit is lost where solitarist identities and plural monoculturalism are nurtured or encouraged – where one is encouraged to (or understood to) approach national identity and citizenship from a distance, and always or only though the lens of one’s immigrant or religious or sexual (etc.) community.

128 Sen, pg. 165.
In addressing the questions of identity, I have been using “culture” to mean something more than certain trivial habits and customs. I will let philosopher Roger Scruton assist me here to explicate the notion that the true threads of a culture are more than a people’s trivial expressions, however comfortable they may be:

The culture of a civilization is the art and literature through which it rises to consciousness of itself and defines its vision of the world. . . . Cultures are the means through which civilizations become conscious of themselves, and are permeated by the strengths and weakness of their inherited form of life. There are many cultures as there are many civilizations, even though you can belong to a civilization and know little or nothing of its culture. . . . A culture consists of all those activities and artifacts which are organized by the “common pursuit of true judgment,” as T.S. Eliot once put it. And true judgment involves the search for meaning though the reflective encounter with things made, composed, and written, with such an end in view. Some of those things will be works of art, addressed to the aesthetic interest; others will be discursive works of history or philosophy, addressed to the interest in ideas. Both kinds of work explore the meaning of the world and the life of society. And the
purpose of both is to stimulate the judgments through which we understand each other and ourselves. . . \textsuperscript{129}

Another way to put this is that culture consists in the mechanisms (books, media, rituals, sacred days) \textit{through which} a civilization is cognizant of its own relative uniqueness and durability through time, and the shared values and visions that tether its people to one another and to the community itself. Some might refer to this notion of culture as “high culture,” but I do not, and neither would Rorty; for many of the books, media, rituals and sacred days are assessable to all or nearly all within the community. Given the shortness of life and the demands on our time, there is something psychologically healthful in the notion that we ought to aspire to coherent and culturally efficient exchanges with our fellows, who share our own general sensibilities, even as we seek an ever widening circle of fealty and trans-cultural concern. One can legitimately declare corrosive to community what I will now call the demand for \textit{hyper-recognition}, for recognition from cultures beyond the culture of a community, since it already proceeds from a position of significant social distance and the entrenchment of a view of oneself as radically “other.” Here is an example.

A Frenchman vacationing in Puerto Rico has no more right to demand that the Puerto Ricans speak French to him and recite the words to \textit{La Marseillaise} at the opening of a football game in Old San Juan than the Puerto Ricans have the right to demand of the

French visitor that she be fluent in Spanish and know the words to La Borinqueña. The social distance between the two peoples, all else being equal, would render absurd any such demand. But such a contrived example as this renders the outer limit to the point I am making. For there can be absurd demands placed upon people who live within the same society, whose interests in what makes them or keeps them different from others eclipses those things that are in fact shared. While an “aspiration to neutrality” might not be a worthy goal, save for on the part of government itself, an aspiration to volkish exceptionalism or tribalism seems an equally unworthy goal.

As it turns out, both the aspiration to neutrality and the aspiration to hyper-valorize an insular community are avoidable. They are avoidable when we take a cosmopolitan view of things. A cosmopolitan – one who considers herself as having moral, political and cultural obligations and interests that exceed her own political community and culture – dissolves both the flat humanist and communitarian insights into a synthesized world view that breaks free from both extremes. If she has thought matters through properly and is not a mere adventurist, she will understand her obligations to her own “compelling interests, beliefs and desires” and the “compelling interests, beliefs and desires” of her own community, but will reach out to explore and dialogue with those who have noticeably different sets of “compelling interests, beliefs and desires.” As mentioned, this particular brand of cosmopolitanism is “rooted
cosmopolitanism." The rooted cosmopolitan embraces the ironic spirit recommended by Jefferson and modernity, and made more robust by Rorty in the form of his own Ironism, but understands and celebrates the *eros* of community. It holds that although our communal identities may be emotionally, historically and spiritually thick, they do not rest on more than communal decisions over time, *but are none the worse for that*. The cosmopolitan’s brand of recognition is to precisely recognize in accordance with our working definition of recognition, above, but it pulls back from demands to recognize the other in a *totalizing* manner, i.e., in a manner that obliterates all other axes that *have to matter* when considering the moral worth of individuals (and communities). He operates according to an ethics – an ethics of identity (and of belief) – *that calls into question all totalizing commitments*. In that regard, the cosmopolitan will actually withhold recognition or resist acceding to demands for recognition, in certain instances, *precisely on moral grounds*, just as she performs recognition more robustly than do flat humanists. No one, on the cosmopolitan’s account, is *merely* Hindu, *merely* Muslim, or *merely* human. Seeing others as reducible to single predicates is what may be referred to as *vulgar recognition*. Vulgar recognition is accession to the demand of the other to obliter ate critical elements of his or her *being human* in favor of one aspect of her constructed self. An ancient example of such a determination not to see the other only as a totalized aspect of his identity is the story of the Good Samaritan. Through that story,

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we are taught that a Samaritan is not merely and only a Samaritan, that a human being is not merely a human being, and that a Jew is not merely a Jew. The cosmopolitan would remind us that we are all composite, with identities informed by many ideas and commitments, that these ideas and commitments can be important or exigent, yet our moral worth is neither exhausted, nor explained by any one of them. That is why I suggested that cosmopolitans may be said to be culturally deflationist.

A cosmopolitan view carries implications for how we approach and promote diversity within our various political and civil institutions. Writes Appiah:

“A liberal democratic polity does not rest on diversity, but on shared political commitments weighty enough to override competing values," Stephen Macedo writes, and he stresses that the "abstract ideals of liberal justice lay claims of mutual respect on every group in society, whereas the claims of particularity advanced by pluralists create no necessary claim for tolerance or respect." . . . What he calls transformative liberalism suggests that one legitimate function of a liberal state is, and has been, to attenuate the strong, Blut-und-Boden identitarian commitments it encounters: to process the surly sources of alternative authority—whether Catholicism or English nativism—and leave something diluted by broader liberal commitments. . . . Historically speaking, this is precisely what the American republic has done, which is what some find so alarming. And
yet it is not enough to find a balancing of interests between We the People and We the Peoples; we must also consider the interests of Me the Person, while acknowledging the enmeshment of them all. . . . [So, if] intolerance of other identities is built into an identity, or if learning the views of others except as shameful error is one of their norms, we [Western liberals] will be seeking, in public education, to reshape those identities so as to exclude this feature. This is liberal soul making. . . . Actually existing liberalism, of almost any description, is more than a procedural value: it places a substantive weight on creating a social world in which we each can have a good chance at a life of our own. (Emphasis added.)

Stephen Macedo’s view, referenced by Appiah, i.e. the notion that “a liberal democratic polity does not rest on diversity but on shared political commitments weighty enough to override competing values” is one with which Rorty would have agreed completely. It links up with Roger Scruton’s ideas regarding culture. So far we seem to be coming down on the side of the communitarian rather than the cosmopolitan position. But Appiah adds to Macedo’s statements that “if intolerance of other identities is built into an identity, or if learning the views of others except as shameful error is one of their norms, we will be seeking, in public education, to reshape those identities so as to exclude this feature. This is liberal soul making.” It is also entailed in my notion of

131 Appiah, pp. 203, 211.
cosmopolitan soul making. We have navigated, in this brief sketch, to a position between the Scylla of strong communitarianism and the Charybdis of an unsustainable, bloodless, and confused liberal cultural relativism and flat humanism, a navigational feat governed by an ethics of identity that requires us to exercise due respect for the cultures and identities that we encounter, whether overseas or within our own borders. The process of a robust democratic *paideia*, of liberal (or liberal-cosmopolitan) soul making, produces *magnanimous* citizens who embrace a common cultural identity, but who are boldly in dialogue with others who have perspectives that differ from their own. Making room for such perspectives need not mean that we graft them onto or into “those activities and artifacts which are organized by the ‘common pursuit of true judgment’,” as Scruton put it, but it does mean that we are open to having those activities and artifacts affected by other ways of seeing things.

Magnanimity is a key cosmopolitan virtue. Understanding, fully, the communitarian needs of human beings, Josiah Royce, whose loyalty to loyalty I have already referenced several times, elevated loyalty to the level of a critical moral, psychological and existential virtue, to be respected wherever encountered. He viewed loyalty to a life project, to certain worthy causes and institutions as that virtue which makes life worth living, and so in his thinking we find the flavor of Aristotelian communitarianism which claimed that *attachment to communities flows from our very nature*. The importance that Royce attached to loyalty informed Martin Luther King’s
view that until you have something to die for you have not yet really begun to live. And in Royce’s notion of loyalty to loyalty we are asked to consider the *summum bonum* of a human life. Where we see others committed to causes and plans of life, we witness *that which is highest in them at play* – the giving of themselves to something outside of themselves, to something worthy and in accord with human flourishing. Royce’s notion links up with philosopher Charles Taylor’s view that we grasp our lives in a narrative – the story or stories we find ourselves a part of, or which we elect to be a part of. From the point of view of cosmopolitan magnanimity, however, not any narrative will do, of course. There are Nazi and Khmer Rouge and Stalinist narratives, too. Royce did not suggest that loyalty to just any project or plan need meet with a magnanimous embrace, but any life plan that is itself loyal to the loyalties others maintain in their own life plans are. His notion, then, dovetails with the liberal tradition as constructed in the writings of Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, John Stuart Mill and others – the idea (the rather simple yet ever threatened idea) that liberty’s brake must be applied once it impinges on the liberty of another in the pursuit of her own highest flourishing, her own loyal commitments to things and persons outside of herself, when it encroaches upon another’s loyalties to his community, institutions, plans of life – the people to which he has given his heart, the people he cannot betray and still think himself decent.

Just as democracies require that their citizens have democratic souls, cosmopolitanism requires certain kinds of souls. These souls have a richer and more sophisticated understanding of the values that the flat humanists would have us always
bear in mind, as well as those values of common fealty and loyalty that are lauded by communitarians. They regulate the tension between these values by an ongoing process of inflating or deflating one or the other. This is done by remaining in constant dialogue, by “keeping the conversation going,” as Rorty would say, and abandoning the hope that there is a possible optimal and static balance, one to be discovered rather than made, between human being and being human, between *phusis* and *nomos*.

For our species, the challenges ahead involve the difficult work of true and sustained dialogue, whereby The Other is recognized for who she is, while we bring to the discussion the rich traditions of tolerance, liberalism, and cosmopolitanism that will, as well, make demands and requests of The Other as well – demands and requests to loosen her grip on static identities, for example. (The ethical limits of recognition apply, not only within our own communities, but geopolitically as well.) It is arguable that only through such robust and sincere dialogue will we avoid a future rife with new forms of terrorism, born of resentment and misunderstanding on the part of all concerned. Whether we will pursue such vigorous dialogue is anyone’s guess. Perhaps, after all, it will be the sheer necessity to talk that will stir the desire to reach out, in magnanimity, to those unlike ourselves and, to quote the songwriter James Taylor, “take the devil for a countryman.” It is, after all, preferable to resolve to be virtuous than to be dragged to virtue by unfortunate events that we could have forestalled if we but only had the will to do so. Of course, the former takes difficult personal and inner work, the latter merely forced action when no other course is available.
A tenable cosmopolitanism is variegated and shot-through with an understanding of the need for individual communities that allow each of us to feel “at home” not merely in the world but “somewhere” in the world – somewhere that is called our culture, our ethnic group, our religious tradition, all of the above. When we consider Rortian Ironism we are obliged to do so while also considering his keen sense that we are all part of some “we” community or communities which provide value and meaning, make our very short lives efficient, answer the basic questions about how we shall live through today and tomorrow and the next day. Thus, Rorty’s Irony-cum-ethnocentrism is intended to explicate both the meta-stability of our commitments, as well as the need to have them. Rorty provided the lubricant to cool the friction between liberalism and Catholicism, doubt and faith, Deweyan cultural experimentation and Scrutonian conservatism. This is, in part, what is so intriguing about his thought.

But the magnanimity of cosmopolitanism requires, also, a keen understanding of the fragility of human existence and the hunger in the human breast for meaning, and so must take seriously the various communities of meaning that are encountered. Such communities of meaning include religious communities, and not merely political or “secular” ones. For this and other reasons, we now turn to a discussion of Rortian Ironism and religion.
Chapter V

After Secularism: Religion, Theology and Rorty’s Thought

This account of the essence of Christianity—one in which God’s self-emptying and man’s attempt to think of love as the only law are two faces of the same coin—permits Vattimo to see all the great unmaskers of the West, from Copernicus and Newton to Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud, as carrying out works of love. These men were, in his words, “reading the signs of the times with no other provision than that of the commandment of love.” . . . [T]hey were followers of Christ in the sense that “Christ himself is the unmasker, and . . . the unmasking inaugurated by him . . . is the meaning of the history of salvation itself. . . . To ask whether this is a “legitimate” or “valid” version of Catholicism, or of Christianity, would be to pose exactly the wrong question. The notion of “legitimacy” is not applicable to what Vattimo, or any of the rest of us, does with our solitude. To try to apply it is to imply that you have no right to go to church for the weddings and baptisms and funerals of your friends and relations unless you acknowledge the authority of ecclesiastical institutions to decide who counts as a Christian and who does not, or not right to call yourself a Jew unless you perform this ritual rather than that.

- FR, pp. 37-38

As noted earlier, in his discussion of “solidarity,” Rorty asserts that the fundamental premise of his book [CIS] is “that a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance.” . . . Herein lies the possibility of theology in a post-Rortyan world!

- Everett J. Tarbox, Jr., “Richard Rorty and the Possibility of Theology” in Pragmatism, neo-Pragmatism, and Religion – Conversations with Richard Rorty, pg. 309

Why is this chapter included in this dissertation, a dissertation about Rorty and
cosmopolitanism? There are several reasons. First, I wish to use Rorty as a foil for discussing a persistent dualism, the “secular”/religion dualism, for I take this dualism to be an obstacle to a robust, tenable cosmopolitanism. On this point, I will argue that Rorty’s anti-religion stance is actually problematic, since he considers this dualism to be an important feature of his story about how we get to the pragmatist, liberal (and cosmopolitan) utopia for which he hoped. Second, I want to argue for a more affirmative position as regards Rorty’s thought. I want to argue that neither Ironism, nor antifoundationalism is necessarily corrosive to religious sensibilities or the religious life, and that Ironism itself leaves the ironist, necessarily, with a kind of faith, insofar as the ironist must commit to a plan of life and a final vocabulary without the certainty that that plan of life or final vocabulary shall have staying power, or is somehow the final word. Her action in the world – in a world where action is required – is based upon her faith in her final vocabulary, however “meta-stable” she may be. Third, cosmopolitan hope requires that we engage people where they are, not where we, from the top of the “Mt. Olympus” of Western liberal “secularism” (the master narrative of the West that has forgotten that it is but one narrative among others, as I will discuss below), wish them to be. What must be considered is the possibility that Rorty’s view of religion as a “conversation stopper,” a view shared by many “secular” Westerners, was based upon an incapacity not necessarily in religion generally speaking, but in Rorty himself. For the view that religious propositions are any
more “conversation stoppers” than, say, Marxian, Objectivist, racist, radical
ecologist, Republican or feminists ones is patently false as a general claim – it all
depends upon the company and the context of the “conversation.” As Jeffrey
Stout proffered, supra, there are, within a liberal democracy, many
“conversations” that are possible between religious and non-religious people. If
what Rorty meant by “conversation stopper” is that the possibility to be persuaded
to another radically different way of looking at things is undermined once
“religious ideas” are injected into an exchange, whether on public policy or art, he
was simply wrong. As Alan Wolf reminded us, liberalism is shot through with
ideas derived from religion, ideas only likely possible given the creative energy
generated by looking at the world through religious eyes.

Rorty rested his notion that religion is a “conversation stopper” on: a very
narrow view of “religion” (there is, in fact, no such thing as religion per se, any more
than there is such a thing as philosophy per se, yet Rorty often spoke of religion in rather
general terms) and religious propositions; on too fulsome a notion of what deliberative
and inclusive democratic practice actually require (as Judith Green points out); on a
violent rupture between what he thought of as two isolated realms of thought and
interpretation, namely “The Secular” and “The Religious”; and on a particular
understanding of “secularism” as understood to mean, simply, “non-religious.” While
Rorty deserves some credit for some of the rethinking that he exhibited in his later
writings on religion, where he substituted “anticlerical” for “atheist” as properly
descriptive of his view of “religion” and God-talk (as he does in FR), his dualistic
perception of the landscape on which religion plays out remained problematic.

Cleavage to neat dualisms, even while denying that one is doing so, often
bespeaks both fear and love – the fear that something loved (one side of the dualism) is
under threat (by the other side). Derrida was right in pointing out (far more abstrusely
than Dewey – and for my taste) how dualisms tend to operate. They tend to center one
aspect while marginalizing the other. They tend to do so in an effort to protect the
centered aspect from the marginalized one. Rorty knew better then to speak in such stark
categorical ways, but when it came to religion he, like many self-described “secular”
thinkers, lapsed into dualistic language. That Rorty cleaved to certain neat dualisms is
curiously anti-Deweyan. Dewey, whom Rorty claimed as a hero, made clear that dualism
“forces upon us antithetical, non-convertible principles of formulation and interpretation.

... [I]n case no such sharp division actually exists, the evils of supposing there is one are
not confined to philosophical theory. Consequences within philosophy as such are of no
great import. But philosophical dualism is but a formulated recognition of an in impasse
in life; an impotence in interaction’s inability to make effective transition, limitation of
power to regulate and thereby to understand” (emphasis added). 132

Whether or not the dualism exists for the sake of preserving a beloved, it is yet the case that dualisms usually operate as cancers to cosmopolitan hope. They operate to ossify perspectives and interpretations, creating supposedly incommensurable forms of life, rather than simply assuming (honestly and at first blush) such forms of life to be incommensurable. It is impolite, even fallacious, to psychoanalyze a thinker as a response to his or her arguments. But it is not to psychoanalyze Rorty to say of him what the philosopher Alain Locke once said of the activity of philosophers in general, and what Hegel said before him using a different construction. In his 1935 essay “Values and Imperatives” Locke wrote: “All philosophies, it seems to me, are in ultimate derivation philosophies of life and not of abstract, disembodied ‘objective’ reality; products of time, place and situation, and thus systems of timed history rather than timeless eternity.”\footnote{Leonard Harris (ed.), \textit{The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond}. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989, pg. 15.} Rorty was a “son of his time,” as Hegel put it. The battles of his life, his place, his upbringing, the philosophy from which he held forth, were of his time. He was a liberal at a time in which liberalism was being rethought. He saw the ravages of war, Nazism, the camps – but also, there was a temperament, freely acknowledged, that cast him in a self-described “secular” mold. In \textit{Trotsky} he wrote:

This quest for stable absolutes was common to the neo-Thomist and to Leo Strauss, the teacher who attracted the best of the Chicago students (including my classmate Allan Bloom). The Chicago faculty was dotted
with awesomely learned refugees from Hitler, of which Strauss was the most revered. All of them seemed to agree that something deeper and weightier than Dewey was needed if one was to explain why it would be better to be dead than to be a Nazi. This sounded pretty good to my 15-year-old ears. For moral and philosophical absolutes sounded a bit like my beloved orchids - numinous, hard to find, known only to a chosen few. Further, since Dewey was a hero to all the people among whom I had grown up, scorning Dewey was a convenient form of adolescent revolt. The only question was whether this scorn should take a religious or a philosophical form, and how it might be combined with striving for social justice.

Like many of my classmates at Chicago, I knew lots of T. S. Eliot by heart. I was attracted by Eliot's suggestions that only committed Christians (and perhaps only Anglo-Catholics) could overcome their unhealthy preoccupation with their private obsessions, and so serve their fellow humans with proper humility. But a prideful inability to believe what I was saying when I recited the General Confession gradually led me to give up on my awkward attempts to get religion.134

134 PSH, pg. 3
It is not clear to me why Rorty characterizes his inability to believe the General
Confession as a “prideful” inability – many have simply disbelieved it, giving one reason
or another that went to the genuine doubts they had about its content. Perhaps what we
see in his statements in *Trotsky* is the need to go against the “common view.” We needn’t
make too much of that, for Rorty himself explains it as a simple, and common, adolescent
revolt. But I can’t help but suspect that that revolt led to a hardening of perspectives that,
in turn, made it difficult to see religion as anything but, in a larger sense, “The General
Confession,” wherein one suspends some of one’s judgments in deference to “the
tradition,” whatever it may be. Rorty cast religion in the mold of Authoritarian Father,
against whom it is only right to rebel. So long as religions were not “let loose” into the
public domain, to attempt to “impose” themselves on free thinkers, Rorty was more or
less content to let them be. But this exiling of religion is not feasible in practice, even if it
fit into Rorty’s neat, dualistic scheme.

Rorty did not believe that there is anything deeper than the social – something
he shares with many leftists and academic social analysts who speak of “liberation” in
purely social terms, and never in existential ones, and so have no use for any form of
soteriological language. His statement regarding many of the thinkers of his day, who
believed that “something deeper and weightier than Dewey [would be] needed if one
[were] to explain why it would be better to be dead than to be a Nazi” not only casts
Dewey in a certain light, but suggests, as well, the starting point for Rorty’s reduction of

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things to immediate social needs, immediate social experiences, and to a notion that the best we can do in life is to “muddle through” it. We have here the first steps onto a philosophical path that seems to lack the tools of imagination needed to grasp why it was that those “awesomely learned refugees” (like so many others) thought that more is needed to guarantee that we will not, one day, become Nazis ourselves.

Yet, it is precisely the power of this belief – the belief that there is something “more than Dewey” – that has shaped the type of liberalism that Rorty hoped would one day be perfected in a community of global citizens forming what Royce and King after him called the “Beloved Community.” This is not what makes Rorty wrong and Royce and King right. But by assuming, later, that “Dewey” was sufficient, while still rather young, and by not exploring the other ideas that were on offer from other versions of Christianity (in particular) and other versions of religiosity more generally, Rorty set himself up for an inability to break through the “prideful” disposition that prevented him from taking seriously the “General Confession.” The idea of religious transcendence – better put, perhaps, the feeling of religious transcendence – was not one with which Rorty would have much truck, and not much use. And that inability prevented him from making much room for it in his philosophy or in his reflections upon “what is to be done.” This is odd for a thinker with such sweeping imaginative insights, and who thought human moral and cultural imagination are the best things the species has going for itself.

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However, Rorty *did* understand that religion was not something that can be brushed out of the public culture by simply declaring a preference for “secularism.” It could not be so brushed aside, in his view, for two reasons. The first reason is that, by Rorty’s lights, which are rooted in a *sedulous* commitment to human freedom, as discussed, there is no reason to believe that the natural sciences (or even “Dewey”) have a special grasp on “the way the world really is” such that they can dictate the language games that we choose to play, the forms of life we choose to construct. There are other vocabularies that must be consulted to fill-out our conceptual grasp of the world, a conceptual grasp that is always incomplete and always in flux (for Rorty, an idea that is buttressed not only by Deweyan and Jamesian fallibilism, but also by Thomas Kuhn’s arguments regarding the nature of the “advance” of scientific theories). Second, religion, like science and art, still has its *uses*, still has a “practical” impact on the way human beings plan out and live their lives. At the same time, Rorty held that religion, *too*, must give up its claim to have a privileged view into “the way the world really is in itself,” as having the final, ur-vocabulary that all must appropriate. His criticism is not based, merely, upon scorn for a reviled set of religious world views. Rorty’s criticism of religion and of science has to do with the ways he takes them to play out – that they *both*, standing alone, tend toward epistemological and hermeneutical overreaching, and “hog the ball” of explanation, description and inquiry by claiming a special privileged access. Both religion and science, in his view, tend toward such extravagant claims, or toward “totalizing” claims, in the language of critical theory. This is the actual form of religiosity
that troubled Rorty, just as it was this form of scientific expression that troubled him. For both attempt to end the conversation – the conversation of humankind – a conversation required to weave and reweave identities for ourselves during the journey of life, which is, by Rorty’s lights, life’s sole purpose. Yet Rorty’s criticisms of religion tend to be sweeping, categorical. It is religion per se – any religion that has transcendental commitments – that stands in the way of his pragmatist, liberal utopia. In that utopia, poetry would replace religion, and poetry would serve as the focal point of a “secular” form of “polytheism”:

The substitution of poetry for religion as a source of ideals, a movement that began with the Romantics, seems to be usefully described as a return to polytheism. For if, with the utilitarians, you reject the idea that a non-human authority can rank human needs, and thus dictate moral choices to human beings, you will favor what [Matthew] Arnold called “Hellenism” over what he called “Hebraism.” You will reject the idea, characteristic of the evangelical Christians whom Arnold thought of as “Hebraist” that it suffices to love God and keep his commandments. You will substitute what Arnold called the idea of “a human nature perfect on all its sides.” . . . A romantic utilitarian will probably drop the idea of diverse immortal persons, such as the Olympian deities, but she will retain the idea that there are diverse, conflicting, but equally valuable forms of human life. A
polytheism of this sort is recommended in a famous passage near the end of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* at which James says:

If an Emerson were forced to be a Wesley, or a Moody forced to be a Whitman, the total human consciousness of the divine would suffer. The divine can mean no single quality, it must mean a group of qualities, by being champions of which in alternation, different men may all find worthy missions. Each attitude being a syllable in human nature’s total message, it takes the whole of us to spell the meaning out completely.\(^{135}\)

Of course, James’s remarks did not have much to do with a merely “poetic” polytheism, for neither Emerson the mystic nor Wesley the Christian would have seen themselves in the description “romantic utilitarian.” James was referring to the need for ecumenism and interfaith dialogue and exchange. In any event, all of this leads to many questions to which Rorty gives no good answers in his various treatments of liberalism and religion. Just whose poetry is to be barred in Rorty’s utopia? What about the poetry of Thomas Merton or Abraham Joshua Heschel (two men rooted in their traditions but Jamesian to their cores in their religious visions)? Why must poetry be substituted for religion? Why can’t poetry and religion coexist, peacefully, especially if by religion we are speaking of Jamesian religion, as Rorty describes it? Why is the poetry that attends

\(^{135}\) PCP, pp. 29-30
loving God and keeping His (Her, Its) commandments to be removed as a source of ideals? Why is even the thought experiment that builds upon Paul’s notion that God “wrote the law upon our hearts” (*Romans 14*) beyond the pale of the poetic life woven into and through the religious one? And what of the Psalms, and the sweeping love prose of Islam, or of the Sufis, or of Rumi specifically? And why assume that there are not many millions of “monotheists” (people who root themselves in a singular vision of God) who are very Jamesian in their belief that no “Emerson” should be forced to be a “Wesley,” and that the attitude of each is a welcome part of precisely the conversation that Rorty wants to keep going?

But as Rorty’s notion of “truth” can be summed-up, generally, as what can be justified before or to one’s community, he held that religious claims are as apt to be candidates for the appellation “true” (or “false”) as are scientific or athletic claims—“God is love,” “the mass of an object increases as its velocity increases” and “you should ice your hamstrings after the 100 meter” are all “true” just “in so far forth.”

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An expression used by James: “Riding now on the front of this wave of scientific logic Messrs. Schiller and Dewey appear with their pragmatistic account of what truth everywhere signifies. Even where, these teachers say, ‘truth’ in our ideas and beliefs means the same thing that it means in science. It means, they say, nothing but this, *that ideas* (which themselves are but parts of our experience) *become true just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relation with other parts of our experience*, to summarise them and get about among them by conceptual short-cuts instead of following the interminable succession of particular phenomena. Any idea upon which we can ride, so to speak; any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labor; is true for just so much, true in so far forth, true *instrumentally*. This is the ‘instrumental’ view of truth taught so successfully at Chicago, the view that truth in our ideas
word “appellation” quite deliberately. For Rorty, as for James and Dewey (and also Derrida, who is among Rorty’s Continental heroes), truth is a “compliment” paid to certain sentences that stand-up to the scrutiny of one’s community (and by “community,” Rorty means to include professional communities, such as the community of scientists, as well as the general moral community of one’s neighbors and fellow citizens). Within such communities, each statement thought to be true will have hooked-up with collections of other related statements thought to be true and some statements thought to be false in a way that grants them passage within the language game of which they are a part. The language games each contain certain assumptions, collections of settled beliefs which operate in the background. Much of the _Sturm und Drang_ that surrounds this notion of truth misses the point that Rorty is largely taking an operational rather than either an _a priori_ approach or a single _a posteriori_ methodological approach. One thing is clear: “truth” is not “out there” in the world; the word “true” can only be made sense of within the context and confines of our language games, the criteria that we establish as humans to arrange our affairs as we live out our lives. But let us not belabor this point, already amply made in the previous chapters.

For Rorty, religion’s only _raison d’etre_ is, in fact, like everything else, its _usefulness_. With Rorty, I open up the word “use” far more widely than on some crass, means their power to ‘work,’ promulgated so brilliantly at Oxford.” William James, _Pragmatism – A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking_ (1907), Chapter II.
instrumentalist account of the word. I agree with Rorty that religions indeed boil down to
how they are used, and the word “God” boils down to the same. Once we approach
religion as something that offers statements that might or might not be “useful” rather
than “true” in some final sense, we enter onto a pragmatist path. Now, that Rorty was on
this pragmatist path, by his own account there are two things that make his antipathy
toward religion odd. First, there are various religious commitments that are salutary, as
James would remind us. Their “use” neither blocks “the road of inquiry,” nor undermines
liberalism. Second, even though Rorty himself had no use for religion his neo-
pragmatism gives the various religions something that can be a powerful tool as they
proceed to understand themselves in an age of heightened commitments to “secular”
values, and can even help religions be of more value to their adherents. For example,
there is something about Ironism that can help religion move farther away from
traditional epistemology and towards a richer phenomenological self-understanding, that
is, toward a phenomenological engagement of the world wherein heightened senses of
interconnection, sympathy, and purpose are generated in ways that science, technology,
and art likely (of themselves) cannot be. The value – the use – of religion becomes, then,
the work of forging such heightened senses in a sustained way, through acts of reflection
and communal commitments to the undertaking. The idea of transcendence and the idea
that there is “Something” (God) beyond “time and chance” does not mean, then, that this
Something must be directly appealed to in order to settle specific debates about “what is
to be done” (which has to be the focus of Rorty’s quarrel with religion), but rather plays

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the role of that which looks favorably upon our steps toward forging such heightened
senses. As Paul Tillich argued, this Something need not be indubitably “believed in” so
much as it must be postulated, taken as a serious enough possibility to shape decisions
and plans, without getting in the way of other exigent language games. This can become
the basis of one’s creed (credo), the etymology of which can be expressed not in
cognitive terms but as “that to which I give my heart.”\textsuperscript{137} This, too, is religious faith.

In most God-centered religious traditions, God operates in this way, for if the
idea of God did not first fulfill this \textit{function}, the function of pulling us beyond our normal
human responses and actions, God would be of little \textit{use}. The idea of God (in this sense)
would be equivalent to Aristotle’s prime mover, with regard to which moral speculation
is largely pointless. The power of religion is this postulating and this postulating is going
to result in \textit{poiesis} – the construction of modes of thought, of life-worlds, and, indeed,
also of poetry. It is the faith that one’s final vocabulary may express something that is not
solely derived from inter-subjective deliberations but links to something much larger than
we ourselves. (Religions are not alone in inviting us to consider ourselves part of
something larger than ourselves, which consideration is intended to elicit certain \textit{affective}
responses. The astronomer, in telling us that the heavy metals and carbon that make up
our physical bodies were formed in stars, is asking us to have an emotional response to

\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Engaging Our Theological Diversity}, a report by The Unitarian Universalist Association’s
Committee on Appraisal, 2005, pg. 13: “The concept of ‘credo,’ usually thought of as a
statement of individual belief, can be traced etymologically [in Latin] to the notion “that to which
I give my heart – a commitment that is more emotional than intellectual in nature.”
that fact – the fact that we are “star stuff.”) The religious ironist – a description I apply to myself – holds to such a possibility, finds it moving, but does not assume that the vocabulary she speaks is beyond revision. She holds that even her religious vocabulary (which is the seat of her ultimate concern) is fallible, requiring readjustment for various reasons internal to itself as well as external to itself, and by various lights. She hopes that she is on the path of greater insights, both moral and metaphysical, but she is aware of the contingency of all theology and religious metaphysics. Her religious community is no less experimental than any other, except that it is so critical for orienting her in life in general that she has special and sentimental commitments to it. In Tillichian language, her religious community, a community that is about thinking and feeling transcendence – that she, i.e. her very life, is enmeshed in more than any quotidian affair or discourse of life (including philosophy or the astronomer’s rapturous declaration that we are “star stuff”) can do proper justice to – is the “home” of her ultimate meaning and ultimate concern in a way that the university, or a career, or her marital status or guild membership is not. It is a view upon the world that encapsulates poiesis but also transcends it, in that it is critically exigent, grave, entailing or concerning all of her plans of life, the very meaning of life itself. It is her own master-narrative, shared by and within a community that “speaks” the same “language” she does. She does not obey something beyond time and chance (“insofar as she philosophizes” or theologizes), but adopts a perspective and a form of life that she is fully aware is socially constructed and that, nevertheless, offers a theological story worthy of serious attention and application within
her life-world, a story worthy of adoption as her own Grand Narrative. But this does not make her anti-liberal.

Rorty held that we can get along without the idea of God\textsuperscript{138} as underwriter of our moral responses, actions, and quotidian affairs. He was right. Many people do get along without God for these purposes. For Rorty, we can heighten our moral responses and lead better lives by reading lots of “secular” books that sensitize us to the suffering of others and stimulate our imaginations, and we’d be better off if we did. These books do not require us to appeal to something as vague as “God” can be, but rather to get a glimpse of ourselves suffering through the actual, this-world suffering of others. What Rorty misses is that most religious communities came into existence precisely out of concern for quotidian affairs. Though they have sprung a metaphysical arch over themselves, the appeals to God often needed mediation through religious figures who wrestled with mundane issues. The response “God says so and so,” given regarding certain mundane issues and dilemmas, is not very different than the response “Reason requires that you do so and so” or “It is undemocratic to not do so and so.” That is, religious communities are as much in the game of giving and asking for reasons as any other community. We are reminded of what Jeffrey Stout pointed out earlier:

\textsuperscript{138} “God” can be understood as the Creator, the guarantor of our morality, the ground of Being, our Ultimate Concern, or, in the language of Keiji Nishitani, The Nothing. That is to say, my use of the world here should not be construed as limited to any single tradition or theology.
First, a claim can be religious without being a faith-claim. It is possible to assert a premise that is religious in content and stand ready to demonstrate one’s entitlement to it. Many people are prepared to argue at great length in support of their religious claims. So we need to distinguish between discursive problems that arise because religious premises that are not widely shared and those that arise because the people who avow such premises are not prepared to argue for them. Second, as Brandom points out, faith is not “by any means the exclusive province of religion”. . . . Everyone holds some beliefs on nonreligious topics without claiming to know that they are true [that people are endowed with unalienable rights, for example]. To express such a belief in the form of a reason is to make what I have been calling a faith-claim. One would expect such claims to be fairly common in discussions of especially intractable political questions. When questions of this kind get discussed there are typically hard-liners on both sides who not only propose answers, but also claim to know that their answers are right. Yet there is typically a group of people in the middle who are prepared to take a stand, if need be, but would never claim they knew that they were right. The abortion debate is like this, and so is the debate over the problem of dirty hands in the fight against terrorism. In fact, the phenomenon of nonreligious faith-claims is quite common in political discourse, because policy making often requires us to
take some stand when we cannot honestly claim to know that our stand is correct. That is just the way politics is. (Emphasis added.)

It is not at all clear that the liberal, “secular” utopia and social hope that Rorty clung to could ever come to pass by such weak methods as conversing, arguing and reading sensitizing books, although we must not assume that any of these methods should be denigrated and deemed unnecessary with respect to the achievement of that objective. To the contrary, they serve important purposes for increasing our sense of empathy and sympathy, and such books remain at the heart of liberal education. But that many people feel the need to root their ethical and political lives in more than the conversation that Rorty discusses is based upon a sense that this conversation, reduced to quotidian terms of public policy and bodily health/safety, inadequately address their intuitions that these concerns are but penultimate. For religious people, reduction of hope to the mundane leaves out too much of the human experience, which is shot through with experiences and intuitions and questions regarding what lies beyond and what underwrites human experience simpliciter. So to the extent that religious persons are willing participants in this conversation there is no reason to view them as in any way unsuited for the sort of utopia that Rorty sketches. Further, the religious thinker will argue that to leave out her perspective leaves out far too much. She will argue that the specter of nihilism easily haunts our prospects for the full promise of liberal democratic practices (or individual

139 Stout, pg. 87
moral practices) without a serious commitment to vocabularies of transcendence, of one variety or another – that political, economic and policy poiesis are not enough. Sooner or later, she will argue, the larger questions of life will intrude, and the question of meaning will burst through even in the most resplendent social order. This perspective is elided too cavalierly, and is belied by the widespread commitment to religious forms and practices that still exist.

Theologian J. Wesley Robbins writes:

Nature’s lack of preference for any one of the various sorts of linguistic behavior that humans have exhibited over time is a special case of its lack of preference for any one of the various organic forms which have evolved over time. The natural world’s indifference to how we describe it no more calls for ontological explanation than does its indifference to elephants or whales, birds’ wings or fishes’ fins, the moles’ burrowing behavior over the peacocks’ mating behavior. Specifically, it does not require the speculative thesis that the world is physically indefinite until someone observes, and thereby describes, it.140

This puts Nietzsche’s conclusions in different clothing. The notion that Nature has absolutely no preference for our acting one way over another chills the moral ardor and is the principal basis for the clash between religion and “secularism.” Saying that those susceptible to such a chill (and who turn to religion for a narrative of purpose) display a “failure of nerve,” as Rorty often did, won’t do. For those who seek such purpose in religion (religious metaphysics and narratives) for such purpose can simply turn to them, shake their heads, and wonder how it is they can so lack imagination as to not get the point. They could argue that the Rortyans suffer from a lack of basic comprehension and sensitivity to the human condition (which includes spinning through a void on what is virtually a speck of dust), just as the Rortyans argue that religious folks are cowards, unable to face the “truth” of the world – an odd thing for a pragmatist to say or suggest since, after all, on Rorty’s account one cannot speak of the “truth” of the world.

Those with religious sensibilities and inclinations find it hard, as did Strauss and the other exiled students that Rorty wrote about in Trotsky, to see how sensitizing texts or good “conversations” and debates will, by themselves, incline someone filled with the fashionable idea that “all is contingent” to behave with more kindness, more charity, to the point of, at times, ablating her own interests, as morality may sometimes require. For after all, one “reasonable” response to radical contingency is sociopathy, and most professional philosophers whom I have read do not take this option seriously
enough. A leap of faith, in Paul Tillich’s rather than Kierkegaard’s terms, that “the fabric of the universe” is “on the side” of virtue, or that charity is the centerpiece of all moral action need not necessary “get in the way” of the practices and theories of the natural sciences, or of the axiological commitments we hold for liberal democracy, or of freedom. They may, at times, place one in the minority, or at odds with one’s fellows, but there is nothing about such claims that are corrosive to democratic practices. In fact, it is odd to assume that democratic practices are necessarily better without them. One need not, in taking this view, side wholly with Kant, who postulated the possibility of punishment for bad conduct along with a possible reward in the “long run.” On the contrary, what is suggested here, from the religious ironist’s perspective, is that the rewards and the punishments are located within the natural span of life. This is a departure from the too common idea that religion is necessarily about salvation of the personality in some hereafter. But one need not indulge a notion of a hereafter to understand the salutary rewards of the leap of faith, as just described. As James argued, there is nothing especially irrational about grand teleological claims, even if such claims push beyond scientific verification or falsification. This is not to say that religious fables and myths must be taken seriously on their face. But the idea of a grand teleology (King’s “the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice,” for example), is a grand faith proposition, a metaphysical claim, that does not require commitment to stories of miracles, demons or visitations by the gods.

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Many who are anti-religion operate from the fallacy of the excluded middle, which infects their reasoning about religion and which is based, it seems to me, on an insufficient consideration of the various ways the nettlesome features of religion can be teased apart from the vivifying features that allow many religious persons to be rather good “conversation” partners. Today’s “secular” critics of theology and religion (who conjure images of Savonarola and Falwell as the exemplars of faith) might be heartened to see the uses to which I will put Rortian Ironism, uses that have the effect of taming some of those nettlesome features, among which are their *epistemological* excesses. Most important for the purposes of this writing, Ironism greatly assists (*ironically*) to help forge a useful way to understand and critique theology and religion without attempting to push them to the margins of public culture, as Rorty himself would have preferred. Plainly, I am using a Rortian device to further a cause that Rorty himself would not approve, i.e. the right and the need for religion to be and to remain part of the grand “conversation of humankind” that Rorty wished to “keep going.” It may seem perverse to do so, but I do not do so simply to turn Rorty upon himself for perverse reasons, but rather because of the power of his Ironism and the place that I see for it in forging the cosmopolitan peace that he hoped we would be fortunate enough to attain, on a planetary scale. It is impossible for me to imagine that cosmopolitan peace without something very much like Ironism as a *virtue* inculcated into the world’s “citizens,” thereby bringing about the “value pluralism” to which Alain Locke was devoted. As Locke pointed out:

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The greatest problem of contemporary philosophy is how to ground some normative principle or criterion of objective validity of values without resorting to dogmatism and absolutism on the intellectual plane, and without falling into their corollaries on the plane of social behavior and action, of intolerance and mass coercion.  

Yet Locke was wrong in saying that it was the greatest problem of contemporary philosophy. It is, rather, the greatest problem of the contemporary world, or certainly one of them. Yet, I fear, the eliding of religion, the failure to take into account its varied and deep iterations, the short shrift so often given to it by those charged (who charge themselves?) with thinking about our various problems of intolerance, are themselves part of the intolerance that needs to be rooted out – an intolerance based upon ignorance.

The application of Irony to theology and religion can help to set the stage for the rethinking and exposure of certain assumptions that operate to maintain certain hackneyed, dogmatic and/or preconceived ideas about the nature of religion and about what theology and religion consist in. That is, Irony may be used to, as well, explicate an “ironic approach” to religion that does not at the same time raze religious faith to the level of the banal, as most would assume would be the result. All of this would seem remarkable, even implausible, given the manner in which Irony seems to operate – that is,

141 Harris, pg. 36
in a manner that is anything but supportive of the cohesion and commitment required for religious life and thought (given the communal nature of religion). Certainly, I am aware of the challenges. But if I am correct, the rewards may be substantial, as new dialogical, theological and philosophical tools may be forged that could take us beyond the menu of options most usually on offer: acidic critiques of religion; wispy and uncritical explications of religious ideas and concepts; or deflations of lusty and quickening religious ideas into banal philosophical carcasses, tossed around in seminars but stillborn at the seminar room door.

There are certain dualisms that have been erected in the modern age that interfere with a more nuanced understanding of religion by modern, liberal intellectuals such as Rorty. First there is the split between the religious and the “secular,” as already mentioned. The religious/”secular” dualism with which we are familiar has been accepted, largely, without a proper and sufficiently nuanced examination of the possibilities associated with the meanings of the terms “religious” and “secular.” This is the case even though there is a good deal of scholarship about and around both of these terms. The dogma upon which this distinction rests must be challenged, for it has a genealogy of its own. Second, the practical/spiritual dualism—another dogma of modernity—is equally ripe for critique, as it is more than arguable that this dualism is a construction that need not exist and ought not to exist (Dewey and James obliterated a similar dualism, the philosophical/practical, in their versions of pragmatism). Rorty, in
particular, falls into this dualistic trap when he draws sharp distinctions between transcendence and politics (or the social). Third, the view of “truth” in phenomenological terms rather than in merely logical or scientific terms often goes largely unexplored other than by thinkers who can blend streams of thought from various disciplines. This fixation on rationalistic and instrumentalist truth is not new, and there is still much work to be done to beat back its influences in the public culture. Fourth, Ironism is, as suggested, a significant structural element of a virtue ethics that we would do well to develop if we are to face the significant political, moral and technological challenges ahead in a shrinking world. This has direct relevance to theologies of various types, as ethics plays a critical and overlapping role in theological thought. Fifth, the religious life is salutary, in my view, when “religious life” is understood as participation in communities, whether small or large, committed to practices that allow the space for members or participants to give regular and full-throated assent to strong spiritual feelings, to critical metaphysical-theological speculation, to a feeling of connection to the world beyond them, to charity, and ultimately to a reasoned abandonment of self to a set of high ideals and exigent propositions about how one is to live in the world with the limited time allotted. Often, God-talk just is such activity and articulation, and in such contexts God is understood less as a being “dictating” orders from beyond “time and chance” and more as a critical word in an important language game, as on Wittgenstein’s account of religion. In this regard, religion’s communal dimensions (the sangha, the monastery, the church, the temple, the revival, the prayer meeting) are healthy responses to the need for meaning and the sense
of exigency that attends the life of reflective beings, and are not necessarily pathological as Rorty himself too often suggested. *These communities reinforce the commitment to such ideals through ceremony and ritual*—through repetition. As Henri Bergson noted, “Religion is that element which, in beings endowed with reason, is called upon to make good any deficiency of attachment to life.”¹⁴²

It can be argued, and has been, that this simply means that religion serves as placeholder until better explications and practices along the lines of “naturalism” are placed into service. This reduction of the religious life to the level of intellectual and spiritual foster parent must be placed under scrutiny, along with the assumption that the vocabulary of naturalism, when construed as one side of a dualistic divide, is the ur-vocabulary that is to cast its penumbra over all others. One of the founders of pragmatism, C.S. Peirce, was himself wary of such a dualism, as Cornel West points out in his *The American Evasion of Philosophy*:

. . . Peirce [was] highly sensitive to the eclipse of Gemeinschaft owing to urban industrialization and professional specialization under an ever-expanding monopoly capitalism. . . . Peirce embraces the Episcopal church, castigates the individualism, professionalism, and Americanism of his day, and thoroughly devotes himself to the life of the mind and the ideas of community and love. . . . On the church, he writes: ‘Many a

scientific man and student of philosophy recognizes that it is the Christian church which has made him a man among men. To it he owes consolations, enjoyments, escapes from great perils and whatever rectitude of heart and purpose may be his. To the monks of the medieval church he owes the preservation of ancient literature; and without the revival of learning he can hardly see how the revival of science would have been possible. To them he owes the framework of his intellectual system, and if he speaks English, a most important part of his daily speech. The law of love which, however little it be obeyed, he holds to be the soul of civilization, came to Europe through Christianity. Besides, religion is a great, perhaps the greatest, factor of that social life which extends beyond one’s own circle of personal friends. That life is everything for elevated, and humane, democratic civilization; and if one renounces the church, in what other way can one as satisfactorily exercise the faculty of fraternizing with all one’s neighbors . . . The raison d’etre of church is to confer upon men a life broader than their narrow personalities.¹

To the question, “Yes, but is religion true?” Peirce would have likely shaken his head in disbelief, not because of belief that religion has all the answers, but because it makes, in the lives of billions, the maintenance of high ideals possible – whether in the

form of church, synagogue, mosque or temple. In West’s explication of Peirce, and in the
selection from Peirce quoted, religions are not understood as mere collections of
propositions that rival those of science and are to be judged before its tribunal – it is
rather a Gemeinschaft that serves to hallow life and stretch our vision and imagination,
through dedication to certain propositions that are transcendent, world shattering, and
highly salutary as promoters and defenders of high ideals. This is why it is difficult for
many who are outside of religious traditions to understand them from that perspective –
for the power of the religion is not the stark collections of claims and propositions, but
the grand experiment that comes with attempting to live them out. The point of the
Gemeinschaft is not the pursuit of “truth,” but of full human flourishing where “full”
means “in all of the dimensions of the human personality, from money getting to the
recognition of the sublime, to a sense of gratitude that comes from one’s understanding
that one is a ‘child of God’” (which recognition, variously portrayed, is the soteriological
thrust of religious participation and/or experience). Of the worry that religion seeks
some plan of life instead of truth, James joins Peirce in reminding us that “The possession
of truth, so far from being here an end in itself, is only a preliminary means toward other

144 Soteriology, which concerns “salvation,” is not limited to the Christian tradition, but has its
cognates in Shintoism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Taoism and even in Epicurianism and
Stoicism. In all, salvation is bound up with the idea that one is attached to or belongs to
something far larger than self, whether one reaches this conclusion through discursive process or
through intuition. The world salvation has become a bugbear because of its close association with
religious fundamentalism, but it captures a far wider collection of ideas in the history of religions
and metaphysics. Plato’s metaphor of the cave contains a soteriological account, and escape from
blinkered understanding of one’s place in the world for a far more rich understanding that allows
one to see, more clearly, how one is a part of the whole.
vital satisfactions[,] . . . [and] true is the name for whatever idea starts the verification-process, useful is the name for its completed function in experience. True ideas would never have been singled out as such, would never have acquired a class-name, least of all a name suggesting value, unless they had been useful from the outset in this way.” 145

The truth of religion – considered in broad brush – is that, whatever the dubious epistemological or metaphysical claims, it is motivated by the need to build a story, a Grand Narrative, using what it thinks is the case about the meaning of the world itself. It attempts, audaciously, a vision of the world that offers something that neither nihilism, nor instrumentalism, nor open-ended philosophizing can offer. It is reluctant to let its more crude mythologies go for good reason – much is at stake. Ultimately, it does let them go, but only when it is able to reweave its own story given the new insights it encounters. Religions tend to be conservative for this reason. This may explain why liberal faiths in the West are anemic, for they rush to latch onto the new without finding ways to weave together their narratives with the new content.

Contingency and meta-stability do not necessarily spell the end for a fervid commitment to a way of being in the world that is self-consciously religious. Rather, they raise the possibility that one can view whole swathes of one’s religious ideas as experimental, subject to revisions (at a minimum, by the lights of the religion itself, if not in relation to or in view of new ideas external to it), thus view the religious life as a grand

experiment (rather than something akin to trivial quotidian experiments) by which (in accordance with) one lives and lives with intensity and commitment, all the while testing one’s assumptions about that to which one has given oneself. This is precisely what Rorty himself advocates when he bids us to give up transcendental foundations and philosophical arguments and ask ourselves, instead, “What would happen if __?" sorts of questions. The experimentalism that pragmatism champions is applicable to religion and to the work of theologians, who ask all sorts of “What if” questions: “What would happen if we change this teaching or practice? Would it really be so bad?” “What if we described God as the ground of being, rather than as a father?” Indeed, this experimentalism actually compliments the notion, as found in many faith traditions, that ultimate knowledge is not to be had by human beings, and so humans are supposed to be engaged in a lifelong search for enriching perspectives, for more salutary communal practices, and for greater capacity to give, share, and love.¹⁴⁶ To say that this is not true of all religions or religious communities is not to say very much. It is certainly true of most. Most traditions I have studied, from Christianity to Hinduism to Native American forms of religiosity, proclaim the meagerness of human comprehension, as well as the need to expand human commitment and charity outward, as Black Elk, the famed medicine man of the Oglala Sioux, tells it in his vision about the great sacred hoop: “And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people was one of many hoops that made one circle, wide as daylight

¹⁴⁶ See the Old Testament book Job, Ch. 39.
and as starlight, and in the center grew one mighty flowering tree to shelter all the children of one mother and one father. And I saw that it was holy.” 147 Black Elk’s beautiful and elegant insights were derived from a personal “vision” rather than a sustained philosophical argument. It is the form of idiosyncratic commitment that Rorty preferred to see sequestered, kept outside of public policy discourse.

I find myself in agreement with Charles Taylor when he writes in his recent work, *A Secular Age*, that “In any case, we are just at the beginning of a new age of religious searching, whose outcome no one can foresee.” 148 It may be that his use of the words “new age” is off-putting because of its connotation of unreflective ideas, bad appropriations of foreign modes of religiosity, and the like. Understandably, one may wince at much of what comes out of what is called “new age.” But one may also honor the authentic searching that is taking place. This new age movement arose to fill the void that was created in the so-called “secular age” about which Taylor writes, and its current forms are merely a beginning. The search is on, and the Enlightenment fixations on instrumentalism (inclusive of crass materialism), are cracking and crumbling, just as our classical pragmatists Peirce, James, and Dewey (*et.al*) had hoped they would. I think that philosophers have a role to play in explicating why it is such harsh lines cannot long endure. People with philosophical training may, if we choose, help shape the direction of these various attempts to erect new forms of religiosity (or at least articulate, among

ourselves, new ways to understand and converse with religion), or we can, as I suspect many of us will, stand on the sidelines and continue to live-out Hegel’s curse, and fly at twilight, having missed another opportunity to shape what will be, I predict, a powerful reformulation of the very meaning of religion. It may be that many “secular” philosophers will simply be unable to preserve a place for religion in their various utopias, but I suspect that another reason many will be unable to do so is explained by Thomas Nagel in the concluding chapter of his book *The Last Word*, titled “Evolutionary Naturalism and the Fear of Religion” – “It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that.”¹⁴⁹ Like what? Clearly, Nagel has in mind a conception of “God” that is similar to Rorty’s – of an authoritarian father figure in the sky. The “like that” in Nagel’s explication of why philosophers tend to be “fearful” to take religion seriously has to do with the possibility that the play space of thought and action will be bounded or curtailed in just the way Rorty and so many other “secularist” philosophers would abjure. The fear to which Nagel refers is the stunning thought that, as one commentator has put it, “religion may be in some sense true.”¹⁵⁰ This is an odd construction, but its sense comes through. At a minimum, it means that there is something worthy about living a religious life and in admitting theological reasons to the list of reasons for one’s actions. If this gets Nagel’s point right, then the

“secularist” philosopher’s response to religion is, perhaps, the evasion of an obligation to engage religion “as an equal” for no other reason than a hope to keep playing certain intellectual games without constraint, rather than by a reasoned, philosophical dispatching of all things religious. Or, to be more charitable, it means evading an obligation to re-habituate ourselves to rethink what we once considered beyond the pale, or below the dignity, of philosophy.

Religion is not the straw man at which philosophers like Rorty keep aiming. It is not at all hard for me to conceive of ironic religion, for it is the form of religiosity I myself live and teach. Irony links up with a commitment to a life that can be described as one of religious minimalism. By religious minimalism I mean forms of communal spirituality that are stripped of dogmatic confessions and dogmatic creedal formulations, that admit their clerics or leaders to the role of “executive” (in the etymological sense) rather than priestly guardians of esoteric “truths,” and that read all religious writing with historicist eyes and as edifying allegories, metaphors, and analogies that stimulate our better impulses toward charity, solidarity, vision and epiphany. However, unlike Rorty (and despite critics of religion such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens), I am convinced that, all else being equal, we shall neither abandon our religious impulses, nor should we abandon them, just as I remain convinced that the species will neither abandon its embrace of things sublime, or beautiful, or political, nor should it abandon them. But my hope – my cosmopolitan hope – is for the blossoming of forms of minimalist religion
that are potent in their ability to draw out of future generations attitudes of awe and reverence nourished in and through enclaves of various size, which group celebrations are the essence of religious life as understood from Durkheim onward.\textsuperscript{151} Ironism provides a conceptual key that can be used to unlock those possibilities – the possibilities that I think are no mere watery remainders or reductions of religious life, but of full-blooded and full-throated religiosity \textit{cum} theologies that are not constrained by crippling doubt, but rather view doubt as, necessarily, at the very nucleus of religious life. Such doubt would be seen as the catalyst which transforms that life into a cheerful adventure of excursions through vistas transformed by growth and experience, by which our descriptions of God (taken here to mean That which is, yes, the source of all that we take to be Being, in both the ontological and ontic senses, as well as the source of our possibilities of ongoing re-description, and \textit{not} as the “Legislator” that fixes life within a block universe devoid of chance and novelty) and of the physical world itself will indeed shift, and should shift, throughout the journey of life. It embraces the notion that such shifting is neither religious vice, nor heresy; neither evidence of tepidness, nor flightiness. It would be a form of religiosity that would finally come around to an experimental approach regarding its own mission, and finally come to see what all see who walk through life’s various mansions – that no one ever rests, neither in body, nor in thought, and that to expect our religious and theological thoughts to become arrested is

anti-human. This notion of God is not new – it has been explored and explicated in various ways from the Upanishads to Alfred North Whitehead to the theologian John Henry Wieman. Such a gleeful perspectivism and fallibilism in matters of religion are not the exception in the history of religions, but rather are somewhat the norm.\footnote{See, \textit{inter alia}, Huston Smith, \textit{The World’s Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions} (1991), as well as Mircea Eliade, \textit{A History of Religious Ideas}, in three volumes (1975, 1988, 1985), and \textit{Patterns in Comparative Religion} (1986).} We only think otherwise because of an incomplete understanding of that history (across cultures), or because we commit the fallacies that lead to what Charles Taylor warns us about - our tendencies to accredit the over-simple and \textit{caricatural}. Such readings give us Bill Maher’s spoofs, which are devoid of any real understanding of the nature of religion itself, but fixate upon literalisms and superstitions that are easy targets.

This possibility for religion, I will argue, can be its future just as it has been its past, and align religious thought with the values of pluralism and “the open society” that we hold dear. If that be so, and if I am right about the persistence of the religious impulse, talk of the death of religion, so popular among many intellectuals (Rorty included) will, I predict, do very little to put away that impulse, as intellectual historian Mark Lilla has recently suggested (though more out of resignation than joy).\footnote{Mark Lilla, \textit{The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West}. New York: Knopf, 2007.} It is we in the so-called West, self-described “secularists,” Lilla points out, who are out of touch with reality when we suggest that the future of the world is a “secular” future, and that a
future, liberal utopia will be devoid of religious ritual, or God-talk, or prayer, or raised hands. The question – the challenge – is, How may Irony (the view that in our holding our final vocabularies, our highest and most dear attachments, we must be constantly “self-conscious” because conscious of other competing final vocabularies that appeal to us) train that impulse in such a way that the twin *summum bonum* of the Rortian ethic – the discovery of and avoidance of cruelty as we live out our religious lives (this is the “liberal” side of the construction “liberal ironist”) – is a first order principle of what must be characterized as our *experimental* religious selves?

The ironist holds to her final vocabulary with certain misgivings that take into account the opportunity costs of doing so, yet she invests her life and understands her life with reference to it. She does so because her final vocabulary is, as a matter of *decision*, the “best,” given all of her various considerations of the others that could replace it. Indeed, because Ironism rests on *faith* – the faith that at the moment, at least, one “has it right” enough to plan a life and to converse about one’s vision for oneself and for one’s community (the sorts of thing that is where the action is, according to James) – that Ironism and my notion of religious minimalism mesh. It is precisely a faith because it does not rest on “certainty” or “truth” but floats upon an honestly-derived and reasonably bold *perspectivism*. It embraces the *existential* choice made so famous by and in that school of thought (i.e., existentialism). It is Luther saying, “I can do no other” as it is Harriet Tubman, or Franklin Roosevelt, or Jack Kerouac saying the same. In religion, it is
faith in one’s own vision of the meaning of everything. It is the quintessential Emersonian faith, penned in Self-Reliance, about believing that what is true for self is true for all. The ironic twist, the addition to Luther’s or Tubman’s or Roosevelt’s or Kerouac’s words that the ironist insists be added, is – “for now.” The “for now” keeps the focus on the human agent as the highest value, rather than a current set of perspectives to which the agent may cling as a final vocabulary. The “for now” is an exigent formulation, in that it leaves the agent free to think new thoughts and draw-up new plans of life. This bold perspectivism moves away from religions as collections of claims about the nature of the world, toward religions as various sorts of enclave that experiment with various theological and religious ideas about how life should be lived, and perhaps even where or why it should be lived. The religious ironist’s experimentalism does not ask “How can I believe?” but rather “What is it like to try to step inside the perspective of one who sees God or the Tao in a rock garden or a stream or even in refuse?”

There is a kind of faith that may yet emerge (indeed, in many quarters has emerged) from this historical moment that is not rooted in science-defying claims that offend modern sensibilities, and that comply with an open and informed and vibrant ethics of “belief,” although for the religious ironist “belief” takes on a different sense than the word usually carries. One can say that this kind of faith requires more of a step

154 Rorty himself says, in his essay “Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance”: “A pragmatist philosophy of religion must follow Tillich and others in distinguishing quite sharply between faith and belief. Liberal Protestants to whom Tillich sounds plausible are quite willing to talk about their faith in God, but demur at spelling out just what beliefs that faith
than a leap, a decision to, in confidence, walk within the for parameters of one’s final theological/religious vocabulary, to plan and construct a form of life, and to face the world as one at home in it rather than as a stranger, huddled against its threats (threats that are what Dewey suggested religion, in large part, derives from). Thus, there is a theological use to which Ironism can be put, and this use may allow for a new understanding of both Ironism itself and of the possibility of religious faith in the contemporary world. The insight may present itself when one considers that the ironist herself may be said to “walk in faith” and, if that be so, the idea of “walking in faith” means that our well-considered final vocabularies about the larger questions of life need not be castigated by so-called “secularists,” as it subjects itself to constant revision and seduction by other points of view. Since there are no epistemological foundations, the

includes. . . . The reason the Tillichians think they can get along either without creeds, or with a blessedly vague symbolic interpretation of creedal statements, is that they think that the point of religion is not to produce any specific habits of action [forbidding abortion or marching for more foreign aid, for example], but rather to make the sort of difference to human life which is made by the presence or absence of love.” (In the anthology Pragmatism, Neo-Pragmatism and Religion – Conversations with Richard Rorty (Peter Lang Publishing, 1997). So “belief,” for me, does not point to any specific requirements for action or political alignment, but rather is more like what Rorty is calling “faith” – an acting upon an assumption that certain general and sweeping commitments, a grand and overarching vision about the world in toto, leads to a certain kind of life that “Tillichians” like me think is worthwhile. This faith springs not merely from isolated propositions or philosophical arguments, but all of lived experience. The religious life, as a life of faith, provides the final vocabulary for the religious “believer.” Rorty defines such a vocabulary as 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” (CIS, 73). But for the religious ironist, this belief entails doubt, although less doubt than doubts about specific creeds or philosophical propositions, for, for her, she has difficulty imagining seduction away from her faith. What Rorty does not articulate well enough, and why I can make such a claim, is that there are degrees of doubt, even degrees of radical doubt. My radical doubts about whether I will forever hold that meat-eating is wrong are not the same as my radical doubts about whether belief in God produces a certain kind of salutary life, one worth fighting for.

See the first chapter of Dewey’s Experience and Nature.
“secularist” ironist and the religious ironist may both be said to be engaged in serious but contingent descriptions and re-descriptions of the world. Thus, metaphor and analogy are given the honored place that they deserve, but devoid of ultimate claims about the way the world or God or the Tao (etc.) really is. (One may recall that Lao Tsu’s first statement, and ultimate warning, in the *Tao Te Ching* is that the Tao that can be told/named/explained is not the Tao, and there are cognates to this claim in the more mature and nuanced “theologies” of other traditions, most notably in Hinduism, in which Brahma is never graspable but always adumbrated into slices of possible experiences and imaginative theological play.) Ironic theology plays out within an *religio-aesthetic* engagement with life *for the sake of human flourishing*, and invites bold claims for consideration as possible fonts for the construction and maintenance of various forms of life linked to salutary speculations about the source of all that we have before us. *As with Rorty, the point is flourishing, not apodictic truth.*

It is true that from the perspective of many religious persons, Ironism is problematic. For them, it is an acidic prescription that can only lead to a ghastly epistemological or theological relativism that puts all religious claims up for grabs – especially the most science-denying ones. Well, that it is, for all religious claims are and ever were up for grabs, just like all other claims. As Gianni Vattimo argues in *FR*, a book which is a series of exchanges between Rorty and himself, the biggest error of the Christian church has been its jousting with science for the right to determine what is true
about the world. Speaking as a very idiosyncratic Catholic Christian who understands the need for something like Ironism, which he prefers to clothe in the language of hermeneutics, Vattimo says: “Because we are not yet . . . Christian enough, we still oppose the historical-cultural cogency of the biblical tradition to a ‘natural reality’ that supposedly exists independently of it and with respect to which the biblical truth is obliged to ‘prove itself’” (emphasis added). I think the title of the book is apt indeed. For Vattimo seems to have it right. And that Rorty, oddly enough, was pulled, during the last years of his life, into a discussion about the future, rather than the demise, of religion, suggests that there was some thawing that was taking place, some reconsideration of the pride he wrote about in Trotsky. Perhaps.

As religious thinkers, Vattimo and I want to step away from any such attempt to “oppose.” Ironism, the embrace of phenomenological descriptions of life alongside scientific descriptions and serious hermeneutical “play” can all indeed lead to a robust and full-throated religiosity that can serve the deep spiritual needs (the need to be fully at home in the world) of people in pluralist societies wherein differences are seen as fonts of possible experience rather than as dangerous combatants in a zero-sum war of religious epistemologies, and can help us move past hackneyed dualistic notions such as the “secular”/religious and the practical/spiritual. Rorty, of course, despite the possible thaw, did not think, in the end, that religion has much of a place in the utopia he sketches

156 FR, pg. 53.

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repeatedly in his writings, writings limited to the lexicons of politics, sociology and ethics:

My sense of the holy, insofar as I have one, is bound up with the hope that someday, any millennium now, my remote descendants will live in a global civilization in which love is pretty much the only law. In such a society, communication would be domination-free, class and caste would be unknown, hierarchy would be a matter of temporary pragmatic convenience, and power would be entirely at the disposal of the free agreement of a literate and well educated electorate. 157

I suspect that this is more of a delusion than Rorty could have appreciated. It is not so much that the social landscape he sketches is not to be pursued. It must be! It is that the focus on social hope at the expense of existential hope is lopsided, or incomplete. Without the domain of transcendence and of faith, without the possibility of full-throated religiosity, life, for billions, is and would be impoverished even if we arrived at a perfect egalitarianism, and social justice was the way of things on a planetary scale, or, to borrow a phrase from Sartre, “the truth of Man.” Rorty, for some reason, thought that the larger, vexing, questions of life would cease in such a utopia. They would not. They could not. This is why religion matters in any serious consideration of cosmopolitan hope. Where

157 FR, pg. 40
religion, understood in broad terms, is not taken seriously, cosmopolitan hope is retarded, because true dialogue is hamstrung.

**Theology and the Uses of Ironism.** Notwithstanding the preceding, we have some groundwork to do before we can coherently discuss Irony’s use for religion and theology, and not all of that ground will be covered in this dissertation. However, we can make a start. First, just what is theology and how I am using the term herein? Theology is the study of God or of the various gods believed to “exist.” That is to say, it is a reflection, sometimes systematic and sometimes not, on the nature, demands, “plans” and desires of “God,” usually evolving from within a religious narrative that centers on a generalized faith that has critical existential importance. In academic settings (which are not the only settings for doing theology), it is usually associated with rationalist and discursive reflections rather than on mere assertions and unreflective traditions (which is why theologians often run into trouble with ecclesiastical or rabbinical authorities). This makes theology somewhat distinct from histories, sociologies, anthropologies, phenomenologies and psychologies of religion, which attempt to understand the “nature of religion” from various perspectives *outside* of particular constitutive religious or theological discourses. For the most part, theology is performed by religious adherents to various religious traditions.
The use of the word can be traced back to the Greeks – a combination of \( \theta\varepsilon\omicron\varsigma \) and \( \lambda\omicron\gamma\omicron\varsigma \). (See *The Republic*, Book II, Chapter 18).\(^{158}\) Notwithstanding this, it is the Christian context that has colored the history of theology as a discipline, at least in the West. Yet today there is a much more broad (though not uncontroversial) usage that allows the word “theology” to be applied to any kind of reasoned discussion or discourse about various religious perspectives on God and “divinity.” If one were to accept the more broad application of the word, one would with some warrant to discuss the “theology” of traditions that are not God-centered (or “theocentric”) in any way akin to the Christian (and other Abrahamic) tradition, such as Buddhism and Taoism. This is because Christian theologians themselves have discussed God in ways that approach discussions of the “ultimate universal force” or the “ground of being” found in non-theocentric traditions. Examples of such theologians include Paul Tillich (e.g., his *Dynamics of Faith*, among many other works), Thomas Merton (*Zen and the Birds of Appetite, Mystics and Zen Masters,* and the *Asian Journal*), and John Hick (*A Christian Theology of Religions: The Rainbow of Faiths*), to name but a few of the many examples.

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\(^{158}\) “I said to him, You and I, Adeimantus, at this moment are not poets, but founders of a State: now the founders of a State ought to know the general forms in which poets should cast their tales, and the limits which must be observed by them, but to make the tales is not their business. / Very true, he said; but what are these forms of theology which you mean?”
Postmodern theology, for example, opens the way for a broader understanding of just what theology might mean after foundationalism. To explicate this point, here are two perspectives, which I present at length:

Postmodernism has been thought by some to be profoundly ant-religious. Partly, this is based on a misreading of postmodern concerns with the deferral of meaning and the endless plurality of forces, political, cultural, physiological, economic, and psychological. Postmodernism popularly invokes fears of relativism, nihilism and linguistic idealism (there is nothing that is not the construct of language). Liberal postmodern a/theologies do nothing to counter this popular conception. In fact, they have helped create it with their own emphases upon the death of God, an ontology of violence, and the untameable flux of existence. With Marion and de Certeau, postmodern theology portrays how religious questions are opened up (not closed down or annihilated) by postmodern thought. The postmodern God is emphatically the God of love, and the economy of love is *kenotic* [emphasis added]. Desire, only possible through difference, alterity, and distance, is the substructure of creation. *It makes transcendence both possible and necessary* [emphasis added]. In specific Christian communities – communities defined and created by the narratives of Christ’s life and work, the creedal teachings of the church
and liturgical practices – the operation of this love provides a redescription of the Trinitarian God and the economy of salvation. Postmodernism, read theologically, is not the erasure of the divine. Rather, it defines the space within which the divine demands to be taken into account. The divine arrives with the endless institution of the question – Levinas’ “enigma,” Cixous’s “mystery.” Hélène Cixous, Jewish by origin, pupil of Derrida, co-founder of Écriture feminine, confesses: “When I have finished writing, when I am a hundred and ten, all I will have done will have been to attempt a portrait of God. Of the God. Of what escapes us and makes us wonder. Of what we do not know but feel. Of what makes us live.”

And also,

The postmodern condition consists of more than negative gestures, more than shakes of the head and shrugs of the shoulder. In contrast with modernity, it also motions for the return of the repressed and for the embrace of the “other.” Modern systems can only master reality by excluding what does not fit. That which falls outside our conceptual systems is thus deemed irrational or unscientific. This was the great paradox of the modern desire for mastery, “that in its quest for universal

and totalizing comprehension, its system was obliged to exclude or repress that which lay outside of it, thereby calling its universal and total comprehensiveness into question.” Common to several currents of postmodern thought is an anti-systematic impulse, “a predilection for the plural, the multiple, a valorization of everything that has been suppressed by earlier systematicity, everything that had been left out or relegated to the margins.”

Concern for the other is the major theme in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, for whom ethics – an infinite respect for the irreplaceable other – replaces epistemology as “first philosophy.” . . . One candidate for “most repressed other” in modernity is religion. At the very least, a strident secularism has kept religion out of the public square. The so-called fact-value distinction relegated faith to the margins of private preferences. Postmoderns have played Hamlet to modernity’s Horatio, insisting: “There are more things in heaven and earth…than are dreamt of in our philosophy” (Hamlet, Act I, v). Postmoderns gesture not only in the direction of the other, but also toward the “beyond.” In Graham Ward’s words: “The emergence of the postmodern has fostered post-secular thinking” [emphasis added]. In particular, the postmodern condition has enabled the recovery of two neglected forms of religions discourse – the
prophetic and the mystical – that seek, in different ways, to involve the beyond: justice, the gift.  

“One candidate for ‘most repressed other’ in modernity is religion.” Indeed. The “marginalization” of religion in modernity begs for a calling-back of religion from those “margins” through an exposition of the pretentions that have set it there. In the very first chapter of Derrida’s work, *Margins of Philosophy*, we find Derrida discussing, in the essay/chapter “Tympan,” his analysis of those halves of various dualities that have been shoved to the margins of Western philosophy, with its various claims of ownership and delimitation of the rational space in which it assumes itself to operate. By exploring this (or shall I say “retracing” or “digging” into this?), we may see that a similar binary is established between the religious and the so-called “secular.” The “secular” is not a neat category or option – it has a genealogy of its own, a “white mythology” of its own.

In “Tympan” Derrida calls philosophy (or rather a certain kind of philosophy) to account regarding its self-defined, self-described, arrogated aspirations with the very first words, using his typically playful approach:

To tympanize — philosophy.

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Being at the limit: these words do not yet form a proposition, and even
less a discourse. But there is enough in them, provided that one plays upon
it, to engender almost all of the sentences in this book.

Does philosophy answer a need? How is it to be understood? Philosophy?
The need?

Ample to the point of believing itself interminable, a discourse that has
called itself philosophy – doubtless the only discourse that has ever
intended to receive its name only from itself, and has never ceased
murmuring its initial letter to itself from as close as possible – has always,
including its own, meant to say its limit. In the familiarity of the language
called (instituted as) natural by philosophy, the languages elementary to it,
this discourse has always insisted upon assuring itself mastery over the
limit (paras, limes, Grenze). It has recognized, conceived, posited,
declined the limit according to all possible modes; and therefore by the
same token, in order better to dispose of the limit, has transgressed it. Its
own limit had not to remain foreign to it. Therefore it has appropriated the
concept for itself [emphasis added]; it has believed that it controls the
margins of its volume and that it thinks its other.

Philosophy has always insisted upon this: thinking its other. Its other; that
which limits it, and from which it derives its essence, its definition, its
The word “tympanize” refers to an archaism which means “to criticize” or “to hold up to public ridicule.” The play on words here is quite interesting. In the very first line is a double entendre, for it implies that philosophy is itself the effort to tympanize, while at the same time we see Derrida himself poised to turn the game around and to hold philosophy to a blistering “public ridicule” regarding its various pretensions. Certain of those pretensions require that it push certain ideas to the margins of itself, as they are not “proper” for philosophical discourse. Philosophy (metaphysics), for Derrida, has sought to become *sui generis*, and we note that he remarks that philosophy has even sought to define itself with no reference to something outside of itself, and to suggest that it alone must go on, without stop, even when other disciplines or endeavors reach horizons beyond which they can no longer go. The “other” that Derrida refers to here is the “other” that is radically (in the etymological sense) *not* philosophy. And what, in particular, has philosophy done? “It has appropriated the concept for itself” [emphasis added]. By doing this, by assuming for itself something “pure” – the concept – philosophy has relegated the non-concept, that which is not “clear and distinct,” to the margins. The poetic, the artistic, the theological, the religious, the symbolic and the metaphorical – the lifeblood of religious thought – are also to go to the margins since they are not “pure” concept. The

162 Derrida, pg. x
devaluation of the symbol and of the metaphor, that is, their marginalization, is part and parcel of the centering of the philosophical (philosophic-scientific) in modernity.

What is metaphor? From the Greek, *metaphora* is a "transfer," especially of the sense of one word to a different word - literally "a carrying over." And precisely what is carried over? What is carried over is some meaning that facilitates comprehension of a new situation by reference to another. Metaphor, as Derrida points out in his essay "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy" and elsewhere, is what is pushed to the margins, for metaphor has too much in common with poetry and religion for it to be properly understood as important to philosophy. It is “second rate,” ornamental, as philosophy has appropriated to itself “the concept” itself, which is supposed to operate devoid of all efforts to “carry over” meanings or ideas. The true concept, as the metaphysician would have it, is devoid of such carryings over, which are, if we would refer to Plato, approximations of the really real which the concept only can contain. Thus, this form of philosophical thought (which Derrida often simply brands “metaphysics,” which, in this usage, is more than speculation but insistence on an immovable ground for certainty and rectitude, which Derrida (along with other antifoundationalists) does not believe possible to achieve) establishes a new dualism, that between the literal, on the one hand, and the figurative/analogical, on the other hand. Further, the dualism, as pointed out by Derrida in *White Mythology*, is cast as the

163 Derrida, pg. 207.
“proper” and the “nonproper.” What Derrida hopes to do is to undermine this “white” purity of the notion of “concept” as unsullied by “tropic” language, by pointing out, as is typical in his deconstructive moves, that “concept” and “metaphor” depend upon one another in a relational play of *différance*. My last lengthy citation from “White Mythology” helps to explicate this point:

The concept of metaphor [here is a curious phrase in and of itself], along with all the predicates that permit its ordered extension and comprehension, is a philosopheme.

The consequences of this are double and contradictory. On the one hand it is impossible to dominate philosophical metaphorics as such, *from the exterior*, by using a concept of metaphor which remains a philosophical product. Only philosophy would seem to wield any authority over its own metaphorical productions. But, on the other hand, for the same reasons philosophy is deprived of what it provides itself. Its instruments belonging to its field, philosophy is incapable of dominating its general tropology and metaphorics. It could perceive its metaphorics only around a blind spot or central deafness. The concept of metaphor would describe this contour, but it is not even certain that the concept thereby circumscribes an organizing center; and this formal law holds for every philosopheme. And this for two cumulative reasons: (1) the philosopher will never find in
this concept anything but what he has put into it, or at least what he
believes he has put into it as a philosopher. (2) The constitution of the
fundamental oppositions of the metaphorology (*physis/tekhnē,*
*physis/nomos, sensible/intelligible, space/time, signifier/signified,* etc.) has
occurred by means of the history of a metaphorical language, or rather by
means of “tropic” movements which, no longer capable of being called by
a philosophical name — i.e., metaphors — nevertheless, and for the same
reason, do not make up a “proper” language. It is from beyond the
difference between the proper and the nonproper that the effects of
propriety and nonpropriety have to be accounted for. By definition, thus,
there is no properly philosophical category to qualify a certain number of
tropes that have conditioned the so-called “fundamental,” “structuring,”
“original” philosophical oppositions: they are so many “metaphors” that
would constitute the rubrics of such tropology, the words “turn” or “trope”
or “metaphor” being no exception to the rule. To permit oneself to
overlook this *vigil* of philosophy, one would have to posit that the sense
aimed at through these figures is an essence rigorously independent of that
which transports it, which is an already philosophical thesis, one might
even say philosophy’s *unique thesis*, the thesis which constitutes the
concept of metaphor, the opposition of the proper and the nonproper, or

[274]
essence and accident, or intuition and discourse, of thought and language, of the intelligible and the sensible. 164

What Derrida seeks to do here is to point out certain pretensions of philosophy (metaphysics) that remain to this day, and which have had a major impact on the way in which we understand the world and each other. The discussion of metaphor goes beyond ontology and metaphysics, and it has direct relevance for ethics. The search for an Archimedean point on which to stand, that is as Archimedean point outside of language, a point from which to construct a “proper” philosophical language that would be the judge of so many collections of “nonproper” languages, is just the move to which traditional philosophy, in modernity, has lent a (false) credence. On Derrida’s account (as well as others, including Dewey’s, James’s and Rorty’s), there are no non-contextualized concepts from which to draw. All concepts are constructed from the materials of various language games that are themselves bounded and contextualized. Aristotle’s rejection of Platonic realism captured this in antiquity, but it has been forgotten in the practices of metaphysicians who purportedly know of this Aristotelian move in which “form” is itself the result of metaphorical thinking, a “carrying over” of ideas from the sorts of thing that, for example, artisans do. For Plato, any such suggestion would be a degradation of the Forms, which Plato assumes come to the philosopher after pure abstract contemplation.

164 Derrida, pg. 229.
Derrida, no longer bounded by such notions of the “proper” and “nonproper,” employs metaphors to shed light on the pretentions to hold static truths, to hold the master interpretation of any textual condition or event. Once he is freed from this binary oppositional and dualistic way of thinking, he engages in the free play with/off metaphors to drive his points home against the pretentious notions of Western philosophy. He tweaks philosophy’s nose. He “tymanizes” philosophy, which sees itself as the master tympanizer. In this free play we find him invoking such tropes as “postcard,” “trace,” “semen,” “haunting,” “pharmacology” and even the “proper.” In doing so he seeks to destabilize the pretentions. It is for this reason that, at least in part, his writings are so elliptical, so seemingly odd in construction and style. He is engaged in “showing” more than he is engaged in “arguing.” He does not wish to let the metaphysicians “capture” him on their own, logocentric terms.

Derrida was aware of the difficulties of extricating oneself from logocentric approaches. Part of that difficulty lies in the fact that it often appears that concepts stand on their own two legs, and are in need of no metaphorical supports, or simply have no such supports. It appears so because we have forgotten that our concepts are sedimented

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165 “Proper” is a word that is the subject of deconstruction as well, as it derives from the Latin proprius, which has the meaning “one’s own.” This notion of “own’s own” as cut off from what is not “one’s own” makes the proper the improper. See Niall Lucy’s A Derrida Dictionary, on this point.

166 Having said this, I am not won over to the need for the bizarre style of writing that Derrida employed. It seems to me that the pragmatists were able to accomplish much of what Derrida sought to accomplish, without the maddening obfuscations.
– embedded in layers of contextual realities that gave them their power to “carry over” meanings that are best understood textually/contextually. As Derrida points out, as we turn to dead languages and draw from them certain concepts which their users once employed, we are often cut off from the text/context of which they are a part. The “white ink” that writes over this sediment, and thus causes us to forget that we rest upon it as but a new layer, fails to see that the sediment is thus inherited and is an “active scene” that we employ in all out thinking. We believe the text is blank, that concepts are new, rather than inscribed upon a “palimpsest” filled out by others who etched their meanings before we arrived on the scene. This forgetfulness leads us to believe that we are original in our conceptual formation, that we can thus, for the first time, stand outside of thought (language) in describing the world. These ideas, for Derrida, are preposterous. The very idea of “concept” is itself not an immaculate “conception,” but the result of “insemination.” Conceptum, it may be noted, has its etymological roots in “conceit” (concipere). This notion of concept as originary to the lone thinker, originary to “pure thought,” is the fundamental substratum of Western metaphysics, and what is being challenged by deconstruction as well as by pragmatist thinkers such as Rorty.

Some errors are worse than others. The forgetfulness that has led to a belief in “immaculate conception” as just described is not problematic in itself, but is so in virtue of its effects. Derrida was concerned, primarily, with these effects. He was concerned, primarily, with what a certain bad metaphysics causes in terms of our practical
engagements with others in the world. What he finds is an arrogation that allows certain agents to presume to hold a God’s eye view of the lives and practices of others. This is precisely Rorty’s concern. Both thinkers situate this among, primarily, European metaphysicians. Thus Derrida says:

“But in this passage there seems to be a suggestion to a way out of this condition. This way out is constituted by both a recognition and an ethic. The recognition is that this “Indo-European” mythology is a mythology, among others, which traces back to interlocking and inter-textual axiologies. The ethic is a principle of deflation which would prevent hallucinations regarding the worth and “propers” of all mythologies. I hold that this is true of the “secular” mythology of the current age – another white

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167 Derrida, pg. 213
mythology that arrogates to itself the “proper” view of the world, forgetting that it is but one more mythology, one more narrative among others.

It is no wonder, then, that Derrida critiques other thinkers who abjure metaphysics and yet would re-appropriate the terms of that metaphysical language game, or else forget the sources of their own theorizing. He chides Heidegger for this, but he also is suspicious of Freud, while at the same time applauding Freud (a key figure when considering the “return of the repressed” as indicated above in respect of religion) for very important insights that rotate the vertical hierarchical axis to the horizontal position, as for example the axis containing “conscious” and “unconscious” at its poles. Derrida sees a tension in Freud in the latter’s Project for a Scientific Psychology. With respect to that work, as well as in Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle Derrida points out tensions in Freud where he attempts to distance himself from metaphysical speculation while at the same time holding a “debt” to those “speculators” who preceded him. It is as one commentator pointed out: “What is at stake here is to what degree do we read Freud as a totalizing theorist. Derrida is right to criticize Freud for his active forgetting with respect to his debt to certain philosophers, to their ‘speculations,’ and to deconstruct Beyond the Pleasure Principle by showing how Freud’s attempt at a totality via the avoidance of a beyond to the ‘PP,’ Nietzschean or otherwise, is always already divided.”
Here I wish, solely, to point out the irony that is at work in Freud, for as much as he attempts to drill down into the meaning of unconscious motives using a great deal of metaphorical language (including “the mystic writing pad”), he himself engages in an attempted cover-up of his debt to others who he now wishes to relegate to an abjured domain of mere “speculation” (a.k.a. philosophy). In this move, Freud exposes himself and we can see the gravitational pull of the natural sciences, which are the stages for the scenes of battle between the conceptual and the literal, between truth and metaphor, and ultimately between the “true healers” and the “charlatans.” The “merely” philosophical stands over and against the natural sciences with which Freud wishes to align himself – the natural sciences being observational, empirical, rigorous, and outside of the domain of mere perceptions. Against this gravitation pull, Freud struggled to continue in his efforts to provide a rich new vocabulary with which to reinterpret ourselves. In this new vocabulary, Freud would want to create some distance from both speculation and disreputable “mythological” explanations. Yet, we find him employing both speculation and mythological tropes throughout his writing in an effort to “generalize” from his observations. Any worry that Freud had that led him to distance himself from the “speculators” and the myth makers while at the same time engaging in speculation and myth making is one that Wittgenstein, for example, believed Freud should have put aside (and so no need to begin chapter IV of Beyond the Pleasure Principle with the clarion

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comment and disclaimer: “What follows is speculation, often far-fetch speculation, which the reader will consider or dismiss according to his individual predilection”). In considering Wittgenstein’s treatments of Freud, philosopher Vincent Descombes notes that from:

… the point of view of a Freudian—and, even more, a Lacanian—it is very important that psychoanalysis should be a scientific theory; if it did not have the dignity of a ‘science,’ it would be merely a manner of speaking. I mean that the locution ‘manner of speaking’ would of necessity be taken, by a disciple of Freudian ideas, as degrading. This is not necessarily the case for Wittgenstein: to offer a new manner of speaking or of conceiving things, to propose a new system of expression, is not to elaborate a scientific theory, *but neither is it to produce an arbitrary construction* [emphasis added]. Where Wittgenstein’s diagnosis becomes tinged with condemnation is when a systematic confusion is revealed between science . . . and the imaginative activity of inventing a system of notation. This claim to global explanation is the mark of a pseudo-science. . . . Here again we encounter the problem of how to distinguish a scientific theory from mythology. What is the defining feature of mythology? A classical rationalist or a positivist would answer that a mythological explanation is coarse or primitive. Wittgenstein rejects
this notion. He does not in the least think that the ‘primitives’ treated by Frazer are coarse, or that they reason less well than the celebrated author of *The Golden Bough*. Therefore, mythology cannot be distinguished from science the way that the knowledge of ignorant people can be from that of the scientists. The difference between them is not a matter of ages of the mind. . . . In fact, mythological explanation is not an attempt at scientific explanation, therefore partial and fallible. It can be recognized above all by its encompassing and imperious qualities: it is imposing, it elicits unconditional adherence and rejects in advance all possibility of disagreement on the basis of experiment. It persuades the mind that things must happen in a particular way, even if things seem to happen quite differently.” 169

Yet, what is accomplished, or at least attempted, by both Freud and Derrida is the removal of certain pretensions. Having rejected revealed religion (for the most part), Freud re-centers revelation in the psychic apparatus itself, and suggests that the knowledge we have of ourselves is derived from the unconscious, which had theretofore gone ignored as irrelevant to life, since what was relevant to life were the plans and awareness of the consciousness. Freud’s unconscious, analogized to “the mystic writing pad” and which Derrida links to the “trace,” is the primary engine that drives the human

actor through life. It is the unconscious that harbors the actor’s wishes and desires, motives and shames, assigning to the conscious mind the task of bringing about what the unconscious mind most desires. The repression of these desires and drives is what leads to their expression in other areas of life which, in a “neurotic,” Freud called “symptoms.” These symptoms are not necessarily signs of “madness” but rather the unconscious mind “speaking” what it wants in ways that are not repressed in an effort to release the overflow of psychic energy that has been built up (as in the “fort/da” explication). While there is certainly a neurological dimension of this, the neurological (i.e., the biological) alone does not explain that which psychoanalysis seeks to explain. In other words, understanding the analysand’s symptoms is not exhausted—cannot be exhausted—by a merely biological etiology of her symptoms. Both are needed to relieve the patient’s discomfort, confirming Wittgenstein’s conclusion that a “claim to global explanation is the mark of a pseudo-science.” One could go further and say that the claim of any approach to thought that purports to be a global explanation of the phenomena of which it would treat is the mark of a totalizing and arrogant approach. It protects its “proprietary” interests at the expense of its supposed goals of explanation, growth, cure etc.

But as we return to the consideration of metaphors properly, what we find is that this is precisely the approach that has been chosen by much of Western metaphysics. To put it plainly, metaphysics has assumed a spectatorial position *viz.* the rest of nature, and has seen itself above and beyond it, judging it from a point outside of it, and *outside*
of language. Its pretention to deal only with abstract concepts that are no longer tethered to a rich history of plays of différance has severed its attachment to the world. It now not only serves as spectator but as arbiter. It sees itself as above the “taint” of mythos and analogy, and as occupying a “pure” realm from which to decide the affairs of all – especially the “primitives.” In this way, metaphysics imposes on the world obligations that are derived from within a pseudo “non-context” (which is the “white mythology”) and that sees all contexts as retrograde, in the way that Plato viewed the realm of change (which is the realm of context) as retrograde.

Yet metaphors, which can be subsumed under the heading “Analogy,” is the most basic form of inferential reasoning, and it is the form by which we derive our concepts. In The American Scholar, Ralph Waldo Emerson insisted on this point (as he does time and again in his writings), saying “science is nothing but the finding of analogy, identity, in the most remote parts” of nature. Metaphors, working through plays of sameness and difference, work to transform that which is unfamiliar into that which is familiar for pragmatic purposes and uses. Yet we find that the resistance to this way of thinking is woven throughout Western thought. For example, Hobbes, seeking the abstract clarity of concepts, abjures metaphorical reasoning: “metaphors, and senselesse and ambiguous words” are like “ignes fatui,” [swamp gas] and so reasoning with

metaphors “is [akin to] wandering amongst innumerable absurdities.” Yet, it is precisely our capacity to reason by analogy that yields the most fruit and it is arguable that metaphorical reasoning (reasoning by analogy) is at work in even the most abstract scientific theories. There are apocryphal accounts of Einstein deriving key concepts of his theory of general relativity from basic analogical ruminations about clocks and particles of matter, rather than abstract and abstruse mathematics. Regarding this point, psychologist David E. Leary states: “To start things off, I shall state my own thesis as baldly as I can: All knowledge is ultimately rooted in metaphorical (or analogical) modes of perception and thought. Thus, metaphor necessarily plays a fundamental role in psychology, and in any other domain. In other words, the inspiration of psychological thought, which I have symbolized as ‘Psyche’s Muse’ . . . derives from the comparative, relational mode of understanding that I presume to be fundamental to human cognition.” And he goes on to add something that links-up well to both Derrida’s and Wittgenstein’s insights and which will take us to our next point: “Aristotle . . . explained mental functioning through the use of biological metaphors, while recent cyberneticists . . . have revised our notion of biological organisms through the use of mechanical and cognitive metaphors. Thus, to Aristotle the mind is a living thing, whereas to cyberneticists living things are information-processing machines. Consequences of both a moral and an aesthetic nature result from such conceptual differences. This general contention

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regarding the fundamentally metaphorical nature of human thought seems obvious to me, but it is nevertheless worth stating and considering, since forgetting the metaphorical nature of our concepts invites ‘hardening of the categories’ and the various sorts of myths and cults – such as the myth of objectivity and its associated cult of empiricism – that have characterized so much of twentieth-century thought, in the social and behavioral sciences as elsewhere.\(^\text{172}\)

What we may glean from these few preliminary remarks is that metaphors are tools of cognition that help to jump-start a series of thoughts relevant to some inquiry at hand. The operative word here is “tools.” If metaphors, as tools, yield concepts which are supposedly of a higher ontological or epistemological value than that from which they “arise” (as is the case for metaphysicians), how do we understand concepts themselves? As detached, free floating, pure, spiritual, mental inhabitants? One is free to explore that path. On Derrida’s account, however, it is likely to yield some very problematic conclusions – a “white mythology.” There is another way to understand concepts. They are the result of metaphorical or analogical reasoning, but are no less “tools” for action. The notion that a concept can be best understood as a tool is one put forward by both Dewey and James, and Dewey made most of it, grounding the notion of concept as part of the human organism’s repertoire of capabilities.\(^\text{173}\)

\(^\text{172}\) Leary, pg. 3.
Analogical reasoning, on Derrida’s account, will always be tethered to that which came before it, an idea that resonates with Freud’s theory of the unconscious. The historical residues and structures of the past are always present, just as the psychic residues (memories, traumas etc.) of the past are also always present. This is an invitation to look down, rather than up. That is, it is an invitation to release ourselves into the unending play of events and ideas that still “speak” to us and by which we project ourselves into the future. “Presence” is no longer all that matters. The past is always with us, as well, and we are ceaselessly becoming, comparing, weighing, and anticipating what the past means (can mean, may mean) and how it will play out. The “how it will play out” is obviously future-oriented. That being so, the past, present and future play into one another and, because our understanding of our temporal condition itself changes, we exist within a durational condition of intertextuality, whether we acknowledge it or not. Not only are we in touch with all of the events of the past, we become aware that those events do not flow backward in a straight line, through some select temporal point, but are the result of intertextuality at every level. Intertextuality is nothing but the truth of the borrowing of features of the life-world as it is inserted by and as it inserts itself into the life-worlds of others. It is easy to see that, on this account, no single interpretation exhausts explanation. There is no dominant interpretation, save for specific purposes.

Not only is “concept” pushed from it privileged position as occupying a special realm, we find that it is in fact derivative of metaphorical reasoning, and metaphorical
reasoning points back and down, if you will, to the world from which it gets/we get the material for its analogical “play.” Concepts, for beings such as we are, *spring* from the engagement with the world, are thoroughly dependent upon that engagement, and are only viewed as separated from it by a *bad* metaphorical move, a move that pinches mind off from nature. Language itself is not merely an internalist affair, and never could be. This point of view more than grounds the pretentions of a certain kind of philosophy, it obliterates any attempt of philosophy to swing free of the world (as in certain forms of idealism and linguistic philosophy). More to the point, it prevents language from swinging free of the world, too, as previously discussed.

At its most basic level, a metaphor can be put into language in the form “this is like that.” To the extent the analogue holds, the organism will meet with success. To the extent it does not hold, the organism will meet with failure. The metaphor of the unconscious works this way, in a veritable pragmatist account of truth. The unconscious is like a repository of repressed feelings. When those feelings are denied expression (release) as they might prefer, they seek other outlets. These analogies give the psychotherapist something to work worth, a possible way to approach the patient. If it was supposed that the symptoms on display were the result of a cognitive break or neurological disease, there would be very little that the psychotherapist could accomplish. But, as it turns out, these analogies are “useful.” They allow the analysand to be treated on the basis of repression, rather than on some other basis. To the extent they are “useful”
as “generalities” about the way human beings repress and express their repressions, the “myth” of the unconscious provides better understanding regarding the psychic lives of human beings. Since it explains in a way that is better than the metric approaches of the natural sciences, it is akin to the natural sciences, though not being one. One may say that psychoanalysis is as good as the natural sciences or, the natural sciences are as good as psychoanalysis.

We might wish to consider some of the blindnesses that obtain when we ignore the reality of analogical thinking. A good way to sum up is by recourse to the conclusion to the cognitive scientist George Lakoff’s and Mark Johnson’s book *Metaphors We Live By*. There they conclude:

The theory of metaphor has come a long way. . . . Yet, most of the key ideas in this book have been either sustained or developed further by recent empirical research in cognitive linguistics and in cognitive science generally. These key ideas are as follows:

- Metaphors are fundamentally conceptual in nature; metaphorical language is secondary.

- Conceptual metaphors are grounding in everyday experience.

- Abstract thought is largely, though not entirely, metaphorical.
Metaphorical thought is unavoidable, ubiquitous, and mostly unconscious.

Abstract concepts have a literal core but are extended by metaphors, often by many mutually inconsistent metaphors.

Abstract concepts are not complete without metaphors. For example, love is not love without metaphors of magic, attraction, madness, union, nurturance and so on.

Our conceptual systems are not consistent overall, since the metaphors used to reason about concepts may be inconsistent.

We live our lives on the basis of inferences we derive via metaphor.174

Two points are quite noteworthy from this list of statements. First, metaphor precedes metaphorical language. This takes us into the current “externalist” versus “internalist” debates in epistemology and the philosophy of mind, as those currently raging between philosophers like John McDowell and Hilary Putnam in the externalist

camp (more or less), and philosophers like Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty in the internalist camp.

The second point is this, and it links up with what I take to be the upshot of Derrida’s corpus of work: We have to be mindful, vigilant, regarding the metaphors we choose as our (to use a phrase coined by philosopher Stephen C. Pepper) “root metaphors.” Our lives unfold quite differently depending upon the metaphors we employ. As Levinas and others point out, metaphors that see human beings as akin to machines yield treatment of human beings as machines. Max Weber wrote about the “disenchantment” of the world on this point, the result of seeing the world using whole new sets of metaphors. Metaphors that instrumentalize the world would yield, on Weber’s account, a world in which all is instrument, including the human beings who inhabit it. Leary’s warning, supra, about the “hardening of the categories” attends Weber’s warning. What I turn to now are the ways in which a postliberal theology can reclaim some of the religious ladders we have kicked away in modernity and postmodernity.

From Postmodern to Postliberal Theologies. What does all of this have to do with theology? “Postliberal” theologians pick-up on the antifoundational approaches discussed above, and in many ways postmodern philosophical approaches and postmodern theological conclusions inform the postliberal theological approach, which I

would prefer to characterize as *the will to communal religious axiologies*. For the purposes of my analysis, I will simply use the label “postliberal theology.” The best summation of postliberal theology that I have encountered was prepared by James Fodor, and I will quote it at length:

1. Postliberal theology represents a postcritical “journey to regain an inheritance” (i.e., a retrieval and redeployment of premodern sources in characteristically “unmodern” ways to meet today’s challenges).

2. It self-consciously engages and reflects upon theology’s tasks in relation to its ecclesial settings (borrowing but also adapting previously unavailable conceptual tools from the social sciences, especially in their descriptive aspects, to articulate how texts and readers interact).

3. It deploys narrative as a key category, promoting thereby a distinctively Christian form of intratextuality and a hermeneutics of social, ecclesial embodiment in service to the practical tasks of living the Christian life. Concretely embodying scripture in ecclesially appropriate ways stands in contrast to theologies which attempt to “lift” from the text certain teachings or moral truths in a manner that leaves the Bible behind, albeit as a necessary but finally dispensable resources, on the way to the “true meaning” of faith.
4. It emphasizes the particular grammar of Christian faith, concentrating on its scriptural logic and the regulative role of doctrine with a view to sustaining communities of “native speakers” facing diverse pressures (internal and external) that would weaken that competency, threaten the church’s identity or otherwise distract it from its central mission as one of communal witness and service.

5. It allocates to theology a primarily corrective rather than constitutive function. Theology’s aim is to repair, correct, and sustain rather than constitute Christian language-games. Its aim is not fundamentally to alter the ways or modes in which scripture is read and appropriated, but instead “to identify and correct errors by first-order interpretation’s own implicit standards.” Much like a linguist would study a natural language with a view to articulating its grammar and formulating rules of good or “proper” usage, so too the theologian investigates the first order use of scripture in the faith community (in worship, prayer, preaching, catechesis, piety, and life) in order to generate “second-order concepts and theories which make maximum sense of these actual practices.”

6. It exhibits a distinctively Protestant flavor that yet is open to Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox inflections in ways that promote comparative
work of a reconciling, ecumenical nature within Christianity but also among the Abrahamic traditions.

7. It espouses a non-essentialist approach to religions (the belief that there is no universal “core” or “essence” that all religions share). Affirming and attending to the material specificities and irreducible differences among religions, rather than trying to “dissolve” them into a single commonality, helps check, on the one hand, proclivities toward supersessionism (the view that Christianity “fulfills” and thus surpasses and supplants Judaism by rendering it obsolete) and encourages, on the other, genuine interchange and mutual understanding. For instance, appreciating the ongoing differences between Judaism and Christianity, despite their joint witness to the one God, helps Christian theologians better understand not only the possibility but also the necessity of developing an Israel-like understanding of the church.

8. It adopts a non-foundational epistemological posture, committing itself to offering pragmatically superior and theologically fructifying conceptual redescriptions of the Christian faith, instead of attempting to ground those claims on purportedly universal principals or structure that can be accessed in a “neutral” and “objective” (i.e., framework-independent) manner. Taking Matthew 7:16 (“By their fruits you will
know them”) as a guiding insight means that the rational coherence and credibility of faith exhibits itself more in terms of good performance and competent execution – as might be discerned, for example, in the gifted actor, the skilled craftsman, or the adept writer – than by conformity to independently formulated criteria. Because faith’s rational qualities are more akin to tacit, unformalizable skills whose norms are too rich and subtle to be exhaustively specified in any general theory of reason or knowledge, religions’ intellectual content calls out for practical display (how effectively they contribute to the gathering and up-building of communities of faith) rather than speculative “resolution.”

9. It sees its primary task as descriptive rather than apologetic. Energies are concentrated more on explicating the internal structures and logic of Christian life than on translating them into contemporary idioms and thought patterns, especially if the aim of translation is to solicit approval and/or legitimation. Whenever apologetic engagements are pursued, they are done in a non-systematic, ad hoc fashion – as the occasion arises, in connection with a particular issue, relative to a specific context, with respect to particular interlocutors.
In such a description of postliberal theology, one finds a home for Ironism, since woven throughout these nine explications of postliberal theology are the meta-stability that is the hallmark of the ironist, the fallibilism of both classical pragmatism of the James, Dewey and Peirce varieties and neo-pragmatism of the Rorty variety, yet there is a grounded concern with the communal, understanding that communities of meaning, with their various particularisms of “worship, prayer, preaching, catechesis, piety,” are salutary for existential orientation, and for life itself. All of these activities use metaphorical language, attempts to carry-over meanings that seem exigent to the human condition. The religious life is the life of carrying-over the notions and appearances of daily life into a different language that allows for a synthesized description of the human experience as, in Jamesian language, “MORE.”

Indeed, the point of the discussion regarding metaphors and concepts and metaphysics is to point out how things can be re-described and re-positioned – move back and forth from the honored position to the dishonored position, and back again – move from being described as ignes fatui only to later be described as the fundamental ways we actually form concepts, from being described as honored philosophizing, only to be described later as mere “speculation.” At each phase, it seems to me, good things and bad things happen; some things are lost and some things are gained. It was a good thing for Freud to attempt to move the standards of psychoanalysis closer to the standards of the

176 See “Conclusions” in James’s Varieties of Religious Experience.
natural sciences, but to attempt to distance himself from philosophy in doing so he kicked-out from under himself the ladder he used to climb to a new way of thinking. (There remains much philosophizing in psychoanalysis.) This tendency to kick-out ladders makes me suspicious. The members of the Vienna Circle tried to kick-out any non-verifiable claims or propositions, labeling them meaningless, or nonsense. It turns out, as Popper helped to show us, that statements that are not verifiable (or analytic) are \textit{not} meaningless. It may strike one that there are certain fashions of thought that come and go. Sometimes this is harmless for the most part, and sometimes it is not. The blunt marginalization of religion I take to be a certain fashion of modernity that is harmful and so one to be reconsidered, for what is at stake is a mode of being in the world that allows for rich uses of metaphors and re-descriptions that allow human beings to hallow life in ways that extend beyond mere poetry or quotidian affairs. While it may be useful to move beyond religious \textit{literalism} and \textit{self-certainty}, kicking-out certain rungs of the ladder that we find utterly incompatible with the current world view, the tendency philosophers have to kick-out the ladder of religious thought and commitment is one that needs to be rethought. There is very little in James Fodor’s description of postliberal theology that ought to raise the hackles of even ardently “secularist” philosophers and intellectuals.

The West’s movement toward “secularism” as a \textit{repudiation} of religion is something that needs to be reconsidered for the sake of cosmopolitan hope. I want to double back now and discuss a genealogy of “secularism” – a word I have placed in scare
quotes throughout this dissertation, but henceforth will free from its captive quotes, as now the time has arrived to dig into the genealogy of this most important word of modernity/post-modernity.

Let us trace the etymology of the word “secular” in our effort to de-center it, or at least to begin to undo the dualism of which it is one part. We begin with a basic etymological sketch:

c.1290, "living in the world, not belonging to a religious order," also "belonging to the state," from O.Fr. seculer, from L.L. sæcularis "worldly, secular," from L. sæcularis "of an age, occurring once in an age," from saeculum "age, span of time, generation," probably originally cognate with words for "seed," from PIE base *se(i)- "to sow" (cf. Goth. mana-seþs "mankind, world," lit. "seed of men"). Used in ecclesiastical writing like Gk. aion "of this world" (see cosmos). It is source of Fr. siècle. Ancient Roman ludi sæculares was a three-day, day-and-night celebration coming once in an "age" (120 years). Secularism "doctrine that morality should be based on the well-being of man in the present
life, without regard to religious belief or a hereafter” first recorded 1846.177

It is the last sentence of this entry that concerns us here, that is, how it is that a regard for the well-being of human beings is peeled apart so completely from religious belief. According to Arie L. Molendijk, “secularization is still the reigning paradigm when the face of religion in modernity is discussed. This raises the question of why secularization theory is so persistent. The foremost answer is that it is the master narrative by which many of us have learned to perceive religion in the modern world, the paradigm that shapes our view of religion.” 178 We can indeed trace the uses of the term secular to France, and subsequently to its connotations, created within the Catholic Church, of separation of property and persons from within the domain and control of the Church proper. In this sense, secularization was a term best understood from within the perspective of the Church itself, rather than from within the perspective of those who were centered, roughly speaking, outside of the Church. That is to say, secularism was not about a separation of quotidian affairs from religious affairs generally speaking, but was a term that, initially, was deployed to deal specifically with a phenomenon within the Christian (Catholic) Church. Initially, in France, the term began to be understood in this way. According to Jan Bremmer:


As a noun, secularization originated in France. In the second half of the sixteenth century, we already find *sécularisation* and the corresponding verb *secularizer*, meaning “the transfer of goods from the possession of the Church into that of the world.” The time of the word’s origin cannot be chance. It was in the religious struggles caused by the Reformation that the problems suddenly became acute, as it would remain for a very long time. The terms did not immediately gain general acceptance in France, however. In 1611, the Latin term for the same process, *saecularisatio*, was still qualified by *ut dicunt*, “as some people call it.” . . . In the nineteenth century, there are no new semantic developments in this particular field in Germany. Admittedly, we find an extremely differentiated vocabulary for what we nowadays call “secularization,” but the German equivalent of that term was accepted only in the twentieth century. During the whole of the nineteenth century, German thinkers virtually always used the term *Verweltlichung*, even though Marx already uses *Säkularisation* in a context that suggests the possibility of a development toward the development of the modern notion; similarly, the philosophers Paul York von Wartenburn and Wilhelm Dilthey occasionally use the verb *säkularisirin* to indicate development toward a world in which man leads a life independent of the Church.179

We begin to see here a grand narrative—a grand Western, European narrative—that evolves slowly from a particular historic moment, in Europe, concerning the European church, a narrative that has been universalized and that has come to mean “nonreligious” in general, rather than simply “outside of the Church.” This master narrative evolved in disregard of the fact that there is nothing necessarily inimical between religious belief and practice and the quotidian affairs of life, as was known, for example, in Greek piety,\(^{180}\) as well as in Asian, Native American, and African forms of religious devotion. That is, it was Europe that established the dualism—in Derridian terms, this binary opposition—that centers the one prong of the binary called “the secular,” and marginalizes its imagined opposite or antithesis, which, in modernity, “loses” the claim of relevance to the master narrative. This is important to keep in mind, since the master narrative of secularization reifies a present moment, a present perspective on the world, as though it were inevitable. The power of the result of this historic moment is felt throughout contemporary Western culture.

John Sommerville outlined six uses of the term “secularization” in the social scientific literature, in a now somewhat famous article.\(^{181}\) The first five are more along the lines of definitions while the sixth is more of a clarification of use: 1. Differentiation:


Secularization can be understood as a reference to “differentiation”, or the specialization of the functions or aspects of society; 2. Institutional Appropriation/Exteriorization: The term secularization is a reference to the morphing of a religiously identified institution into one that is not religiously identified. For example, many colleges and universities began their lives as religious, even established for the training of clergy, but later gave up these associations for other missions (Harvard, for example); 3. Activities: Here, secularization means the movement of Church-sponsored activities into non-Church institutions, such as government institutions. For example, the welfare state eclipsed the Church in caring for those who are unable to meet the material needs of life, an activity once centered within the Church; Mentalities: This is perhaps the most commonly thought of notion of both the secular and of secularization. It speaks to, in somewhat Tillichian language, the movement of the focus from ultimate concerns to proximate concerns, or quotidian concerns; Populations: This tracks the extent of a population’s commitment to religious practices; and, finally; Religion: Secularization may only speak to religion generically (emphasis added). 182

In the referenced article, Sommerville also wrote that “secularization simply [means] the separation of religion from particular aspects of life . . . . In historical societies, the secular and the religious have always coexisted, so that the degrees of

182 Sommerville, pp. 249-53.
secularization are relative and not absolute.\textsuperscript{183} But note also that secularization has come to treat of religion generally, i.e. decontextualized from its first meanings regarding a transfer of property and affairs from the Christian Church to the outside world. It is a word that has come to mean much more than that, that has come to mean that we have moved from one age into another, from one mode of thought into another, and those who seek to preserve the “non-secular” are seeking to preserve an age that is a part of a world well lost.

The point of this sketch of secularism and secularization theory is to point out how what we commonly understand as a neat separation between religion \textit{in general}, on the one hand, and political and civil institutions, on the other hand, has a complex history rooted in specific, contingent historical events – \textit{in Europe}. If, as Sommerville informs us, that secularization may be understood as a separation of religion from \textit{particular aspects of life}, it is hard to quarrel with such a view of secularization. It is hard to see how religion could \textit{not} be separated from “particular aspects of life,” just as it is hard to see how archery, polo, square dancing, or commodity trading could not be so separated. There are functional boundaries in life and society. But the problem with the idea of secularization as it has commonly come to be understood is of something far more robust than that – a splitting of life into two distinct realms, the religious and the nonreligious. Sommerville actually makes a distinction between secularization as a social phenomenon

\textsuperscript{183} Sommerville, pg. 252.
and “secularism,” which he calls an ideology: “The term secularism was coined around 1852 to describe an ideology organized to counter religious loyalties. Some might see an irony in the fact that secularism betrays the marks of a quasi-religious ideology, on any functional definition of the religious.”184 This splitting of life into spheres or realms also splits the human personality into compartments that are to be incommunicado from one another, addressing specific tasks and concerns relegated to each. As James, Peirce and Dewey suggested (and as Carl Jung would decry) in different ways, this compartmentalization of the personality is nothing less than self-abuse. It is anti-pragmatic and a violence on the very idea of experience. We can dispense with Rorty’s call for a secular utopia, then, and do away with the dualism in the process, while placing pragmatist cosmopolitans and other holistic thinkers back in dialogue with the religious forms of our various cultures, so pervasive in human experience. We are, of course, not to jettison the knowledge we have gained through engagement with bad and totalizing forms of religion, religion filled with dogmas that close off all roads to inquiry, even theological ones. The enemy is dogma, whether religious or non-religious. Many religious people are happy to keep inquiry open and alive, and many are searching for newer and richer vocabularies with which to be religious. The Peircean motto that one should not block the road of inquiry (often repeated by Rorty) must apply to all dimensions of human culture, including religion. Philosophers have an opportunity to help in this regard, should we so wish.

184 Sommerville, pg. 251.
Cosmopolitan hope rests in philanthropy, not in misanthropy. The secularism of the modern age – its “white mythology” – is no less than misanthropic, having no answer to give to the deepest cries for existential meaning, and so it is anti-cosmopolitan in its failure to pay due regard to other life-worlds and forms of life that are religious in nature. Our species finds the religious forms that it invents highly useful, salutary, and rewarding, as its members, each in his or her own way, try, of necessity, to answer a question posed by the Italian poet Giacomo Liopardi, at the end of his *Night Song of a Wondering Shepherd in Asia* (which I quote in part):

What doest thou in heaven, O moon?
Say, silent moon, what doest thou?
Thou risest in the evening; thoughtfully
Thou wanderest o'er the plain,
Then sinkest to thy rest again.
And art thou never satisfied
With going o'er and o'er the selfsame ways?
Art never wearied? Dost thou still
Upon these valleys love to gaze?
How much thy life is like
The shepherd's life, forlorn!
He rises in the early dawn,

He moves his flock along the plain;
The selfsame flocks, and streams, and herbs

He sees again;

Then drops to rest, the day's work o'er;

And hopes for nothing more.

Tell me, O moon, what signifies his life

To him, thy life to thee? Say, whither tend

My weary, short-lived pilgrimage,

Thy course, that knows no end?

And old man, gray, infirm,

Half-clad, and barefoot, he,

Beneath his burden bending wearily,

O'er mountain and o'er vale,

Sharp rocks, and briars, and burning sand,

In wind, and storm, alike in sultry heat

And in the winter's cold,

His constant course doth hold;

On, on, he, panting, goes,

Nor pause, nor rest he knows;
Through rushing torrents, over watery wastes;
  He falls, gets up again,
And ever more and more he hastes,
  Torn, bleeding, and arrives at last
  Where ends the path,
  Where all his troubles end;
  A vast abyss and horrible,
Where plunging headlong, he forgets them all.
  Such scene of suffering, and of strife,
  O moon, is this our mortal life.
  In travail man is born;
  His birth too oft the cause of death,
  And with his earliest breath
He pain and torment feels: e'en from the first,
  His parents fondly strive
  To comfort him in his distress;
  And if he lives and grows,
  They struggle hard, as best they may,
With pleasant words and deeds to cheer him up,
  And seek with kindly care,
  To strengthen him his cruel lot to bear.
This is the best that they can do
For the poor child, however fond and true.

But wherefore give him life?

Why bring him up at all,

If this be all?

If life is nought but pain and care,

Why, why should we the burden bear?

O spotless moon, such is

Our mortal life, indeed;

But thou immortal art,

Nor wilt, perhaps, unto my words give heed.

Yet thou, eternal, lonely wanderer,

Who, thoughtful, lookest on this earthly scene,

Must surely understand

What all our sighs and sufferings mean;

What means this death,

This color from our cheeks that fades,

This passing from the earth, and losing sight

Of every dear, familiar scene.

[308]
Well must thou comprehend
The reason of these things; must see
The good the morning and the evening bring:
Thou knowest, thou, what love it is
That brings sweet smiles unto the face of spring;
The meaning of the Summer's glow,
And of the Winter's frost and snow,
And of the silent, endless flight of Time.
A thousand things to thee their secrets yield,
That from the simple shepherd are concealed.

Oft as I gaze at thee,
In silence resting o'er the desert plain,
Which in the distance borders on the sky,
Or following me, as I, by slow degrees,
My flocks before me drive;
And when I gaze upon the stars at night,
In thought I ask myself,
"Why all these torches bright?"
What mean these depths of air,
This vast, this silent sky,
This nightly solitude? And what am I?" 185

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