

Opening Truth to Imagination:  
The Pragmatism of John Dewey and Richard Rorty

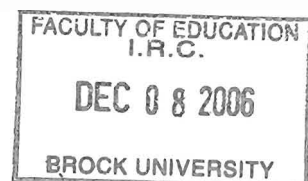
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## **Abstract**

This study explores in a comparative way the works of two American pragmatist philosophers—John Dewey and Richard Rorty. I have provided a reading of their broader works in order to offer what I hope is a successful sympathetic comparison where very few exist. Dewey is often viewed as the central hero in the classical American pragmatic tradition, while Rorty, a contemporary pragmatist, is viewed as some sort of postmodern villain. I show that the different approaches by the two philosophers—Dewey’s experiential focus versus Rorty’s linguistic focus—exist along a common pragmatic continuum, and that much of the critical scholarship that pits the two pragmatists against each other has actually created an unwarranted dualism between experience and language. I accomplish this task by following the critical movement by each of the pragmatists through their respective reworking of traditional absolutist truth conceptions toward a more aesthetical, imaginative position. I also show how this shift or “turning” represents an important aspect of the American philosophical tradition—its aesthetic axis. I finally indicate a role for liberal education (focusing on higher nonvocational education) in accommodating this turning, a turning that in the end is necessitated by democracy’s future trajectory.

**I dedicate this work to my mother.**

## Acknowledgement

Chapter Two of this dissertation is a revised version of my Master work. The first three subsections I have used here while the fourth is new. This chapter (minus the fourth subsection) has been accepted for publication, forthcoming this summer 2006 in *Academic Exchange Extra* (AEE).

Chapter Five of this dissertation is also a revised version of my Master work and is published in *Education and Culture: The Journal of the John Dewey Society*, Vol. 21 (2). Both published manuscripts are printed here with permission of the editors.

If the best one can hope for from an advisor is that he or she be a guardian angel then I found my guardian angel in Dr. John Novak. His patient guidance through the PhD, and his endless supply of opportunities, readings, and edifying conversations fuelled my imagination and kept me happily engaged and focused throughout. My infinite gratitude goes to him.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

One of the great joys of my undergraduate degree in literature was the exposure I received to hitherto unexamined dimensions of the human story. I found many of my own deep-seated convictions and taken-for-granted assumptions shaken up by the sheer diversity and richness of the narratives that were my required academic reading. I came slowly and painfully to be able to read Shakespeare and appreciate the power of metaphors for conveying such utter human diversity and muddiness. I immersed myself in the Romantic poets, finding therein rich qualitative reservoirs of my own being that I never knew existed. Through the modern novel I came to love grappling with difficult books that equally could realign one's purposes and make a shambles of one's antecedent structures. When I look back at all that shaking up and the faculty that had their own ways (sometimes harsh) of shaking you up if the literature was not doing the trick, I see I was in a place that was concerned about my forming, about my movement into adulthood. The university as an institution of higher learning had become like a sanctuary for me. It was a place where I could search around for I know not what – many journeys with few destinations.

I did have a few fairly solid intentions, however. I thought that I might like to be a literature teacher myself. But what the rigors of an undergraduate degree giveth with one hand they taketh with the other. My marks proved uncompetitive for teachers college at that time, but a position on the university's custodial staff provided some needed income for a fresh graduate and newlywed. Serendipity works in strange and seemingly mysterious ways, as my custodial job found me working fulltime in the Faculty of Education cleaning up after all those students who did find their way into teachers

college. How I got into the Master of Education degree when I was previously unsuccessful in getting into Teachers College is only the slightest unorthodoxy when viewed against this most humane fact; that when you are able to talk to *people* rather than bureaucratic number crunchers, you get seen as a person, and in my case I guess I appeared as someone who had something to offer higher education. Thus I moved from the humanities discipline to the education discipline. The shift was not without its traumas.

I did not realize that education was a social science. I thought education covered *everything*, encompassing all the disciplines, and that, at the very least, I might still be able to continue engaging in what I would now refer to as my wisdom journeys without overly burdening myself with worries about destinations. It appeared that even at the graduate level I was still searching for I know not what. Now the path of the lifetime student is a precarious one for a married man with three children. But I had retained my employment as a custodian and even got promoted to the classification of Service Person before my Master degree was completed. So I spent my time divided between my studies, my job, and my family – my holy trinity. As a student in education I was not happy. I knew I was not a social scientific researcher, quantitative or qualitative. I yearned for something of what turned me on in my undergraduate days, and if it was not for my hitherto undiscovered advisor bringing to my attention that there was something called “philosophy of education” and an important philosopher of education by the name of John Dewey, I know not what I would have done. I had noticed this name John Dewey popping up a lot in the educational literature, but when I was turned to his works explicitly my (academic) world opened up again.

Dewey it seemed to me was telling a big human story. He was a philosopher, not a novelist or poet, but the effect on me was pretty much the same as that I received from my Humanities experience – I was once again grappling with a large thinker who was fueling my imagination and my spirit. Dewey reinvigorated in me that human *eros* of reading and thinking that I had come to love. The more I read of his work, the more deeply what he had to say resonated with my own humanistic educational bearings. I thus set myself on a path of reclaiming something of the comprehensive integrity of Dewey's work. The nature of so many contemporary social problems necessitated the potential value of doing so. Dewey still is enormously relevant for speaking to the nature and potential reconstruction of contemporary social problems. And so I set about reading as much Dewey as I could handle and dove into the vast secondary literature as well. Having tapped into what I thought was the most profound element of Dewey's work, namely his aesthetical pragmatism, I completed a thesis that was well received by my peers.

Yet, I still recall the response by many prior to my defending my finished work. "You can't do that!" was the bold comment offered me by most of my fellow students and a few faculty as well, upon showing them a rough draft of my thesis some six years ago. "Where's your literature review section, your methodology section?" they asked, scanning my table of contents somewhat in dismay. I explained that I was not trained in the Social Sciences, and that my background in the Humanities, with its slightly different modes of engaging texts, and its different modes of writing represented, for me, an alternative and viable approach to research in the Education discipline. I told them that my literature review was buried in the content of my analyses and arguments, that my

methodology, too, was a function of the content and more importantly, the process of writing, *unfolding*, as it were, in the process of investigation. Generally speaking, mine was a mode of philosophical writing, and my advisor encouraged me onward in such a mode. Yet, it was obvious to me by these otherwise near unanimous responses that such an approach was oddly strange and foreign in education. “You’re really allowed to do this?” people continued to probe. I told them I was quite pleased and pleasantly surprised as well, with the result, because I had not, in the beginning, set out with a clear pre-defined blueprint. But, nor had I set out blindly.

Whatever the progressive function of Social Scientific research (in its many varieties), I was struck, by what in retrospect I might call a Heideggerian impulse, that there was occurring an ever thickening theoretical layering that was covering or burying—with what seemed to me an almost reckless abandon—important educational foundations. Now one might consider a healthy foundation to be like a healthy habit, present as a kind of tacit support, and largely unthought because so secure. But I did not view Dewey as being properly understood as to warrant such secure foundational status, regardless of how often he was cited as such. In this sense the progressive scientific element within much social scientific research—the near impatience to thrust ahead in novel ways, the near singular fetish for contemporaneity of sources—belied the fact that Dewey, for all his *seeming* status as a foundational educational philosopher, was in fact being buried beneath much theoretical rubble. My reading of him led me to conclude that this was a grievous oversight perpetuated, at least in part, by a singularly unself-conscious sense of history in much educational research. The near absence of a robust conservative and custodial function with regard to the foundational element (typically

associated with Humanities modes of investigation) was utterly disturbing to me, and it reinforced that perhaps a different kind of writing and research was needed to provide balance within the Education discipline.

My interlocutors' queries told me I was on the right track, that, indeed, my Humanities background might serve some function in this regard. One even asked, sensibly enough, why I was doing a M.Ed. and not a M.A. in Philosophy or Literature. I responded that Dewey was not (typically) found in Humanities syllabuses either (here in Canada, at least), and that much of what was going on in the Humanities was itself historically threadbare and overly professionalized. Dewey's Pragmatism was, it seemed to me, radical in its implications for both the Humanities and Education disciplines, but because the Education discipline had a more explicit concern for theories of practice I felt I had chosen the right field. I also recall saying something about philosophy (historically) conspiring with the forces that have led to our pressing sense of (Nietzschean) nihilism, and that new spaces were needed for re-visioning what philosophy, generally speaking, might be good for in our world now. And Dewey's philosophical democratic vision had just such a reconstructive impulse at its core. In short, I was arguing that with some reconstructive surgery philosophy could still be educationally relevant. Importantly, I thought it was very relevant to study Dewey more comprehensively so as to move more intelligently past him—past the specifics of his time and place—to those specifics of my own that were and are in need of critical attention. And so, feeling often like a square peg fitting myself into a round hole, I wrote the kind of thesis that I felt I needed to write and was happy I did. I now know with certainty that there is an important place in education

for this kind of philosophical writing, and that those who think there is not will have to make room.

Moving past the specifics of Dewey's historical position led me straight into the works of Richard Rorty, a contemporary pragmatist. If Dewey resonated with me in a way that tended to verify the rigorous comforts I had felt in my earlier studies, then Rorty resonated even more with my own liberal educational leanings. But, he also shook up certain habitual comforts I had with regard to Dewey's works. The comprehensive pragmatic hero Dewey had become for me started to look a bit disheveled under Rorty's lights. No doubt, Dewey was a hero for Rorty as well, but not without some critical accusations from the pupil. So I set about reading as much Rorty as I could. In the end I came to understand and sympathize with the critical slamming Rorty was receiving from the broader philosophical community, especially Deweyan scholars. Much of what they said made sense given my own reading of Dewey's central works. Rorty had, whether through a conscious creative misreading or not, misread certain elements of Dewey's pragmatism. And yet, the more Rorty I read the more I felt he was getting Dewey right in all the important ways. I started to think about my own internal tensions in the education field, tensions that were manifesting themselves in the conflicting affiliations I felt to both conservative and progressive educational functions.

I found myself wanting to conserve Dewey in education from too hasty a burial, even as Rorty kept front and center what was most compelling about Dewey—his thoroughly progressive turn to the future and the notion that consequences mattered as much or more than antecedent rules, laws, principles, truths, etc. Rorty's reading of Dewey was conflicting with my conservative side while simultaneously fuelling my



progressive side. I was not sure if Rorty was intentionally playing undertaker to dead philosophical preoccupations in order underhandedly to keep them (and the conversation) alive, or if he in fact wanted to move beyond what he saw to be intractable philosophical dilemmas. I still think there is a bit of both going on in Rorty's works. At any rate, he was immensely enjoyable to read and I constantly felt that he was keeping alive the very best elements of Dewey—what I would call a democratic artfulness. My PhD journey was well under way with these two pragmatists, and the work that follows is my attempt to highlight what by both of their lights is the best in pragmatism—the democratic nature of which looks ahead to imaginative possibilities heretofore undreamt.

### **Pragmatism: Some General Background**

Outside of synoptic textbooks, it is altogether improbable that “Pragmatism” can be understood as a unified or homogenous school of philosophical thought. While it is relatively safe to point to it as a particularly American philosophical initiative, it would yet be entirely misleading to attribute to it any overarching structural integrity. Such is the danger, I suppose, of ascribing to many a complicated thing, one title. But the title sticks, and for the adventurous investigator, entering into a serious engagement with the principal texts within this school proves a difficult endeavor. Yet, I need to reiterate I have not set as my task an explication of all the classical pragmatists and their texts. That is not the purpose of this work. That being said, however, in no way alleviates me from providing at least a cursory and general introduction to the broader philosophical terrain called pragmatism, simply because the two pragmatists I do focus on elicit broad pragmatic themes and dimensions in their respective works. What I hope to provide here, then, is a brief overview of what I will very loosely call the school of pragmatism more

generally before I move to an overview of what I will be exploring in Dewey and Rorty in particular.

What is now referred to as classical pragmatism emerged out of the writings of three American thinkers: the natural scientist and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), the psychologist and philosopher William James (1842-1910), and the philosopher, psychologist, and educationist John Dewey (1859-1952), although in slightly more peripheral ways, the psychologist and philosopher George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) and the philosopher Clarence Irving Lewis (1883-1964) also are considered to have made important contributions to the development of pragmatism (Biesta & Burbules, 2003).

Pointing out that the evolution of pragmatism was continuous with the rest of developing America, Campbell (1995) notes that it is important to distinguish it from two other “strains” of so-called pragmatism in American society. First, philosophical pragmatism should not be confused with the overly mythic sense of America’s practicality and simplicity—that anti-intellectualism that posits action as fundamentally “useful” and speculation as fundamentally “useless.” While anti-intellectual, such a view does harbor a sense of America’s ceaseless drive in the early years to conquer the American continent. Signaling the difference between this kind of pragmatism and philosophical pragmatism, Addison Webster Moore wrote:

We insist that [Pragmatism] does not call upon the scientist to turn out every week a new flying machine or a new breakfast food. It has nothing but the approval for the investigator who shuts himself up with his ‘biophors,’ his ‘ions’ and ‘electrons,’ provided only he finally emerge with some connection established

between these 'idols of the den' and the problems of life and death, of growth and decay, and of social interaction. (cited in Campbell, 1995, p. 14)

A second rather unsavory pragmatic strain within American society, though one that can be seen as more or less strong in all societies, is highlighted by Campbell as the shallow opportunism associated with the self-styled "pragmatists" in any field of endeavor. This more corrosive form of competitive individualism, harbored by those who seek personal victory at all costs, is condemned by William James as "the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS" (cited in Campbell, p. 14). Indeed, when Bertrand Russell attempted to equate pragmatism solely with shallow American commercialism, Dewey had this to say in response:

The suggestion that pragmatism is the intellectual equivalent of commercialism...is of that order of interpretation which would say that English neo-realism is a reflection of the aristocratic snobbery of the English; the tendency of French thought to dualism an expression of an alleged Gallic disposition to keep a mistress in addition to a wife; and the idealism of Germany a manifestation of an ability to elevate beer and sausage into a higher synthesis with the spiritual values of Beethoven and Wagner. (cited in Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 4)

In contradistinction to these more myopic ascriptions to "pragmatism," and transcending mere association with nationality or commercialism, philosophical pragmatism, as developed by Peirce, James, and Dewey, offers theories of meaning and theories of truth grounded in a vision of improved human existence. The plural "theories" is relevant here as this represents a complicated, and from early on, diverse aspect of

philosophical pragmatism. One might speak very broadly and say that what they all share in common is a rather problematic philosophical inheritance—in its modern manifestations principally a Cartesian and Kantian inheritance—that needs relatively drastic pragmatic reconstruction. Second, and commensurable with this reconstruction, pragmatists each exhibit a general acknowledgement and embrace of the practical consequences of conduct and action. Indeed, what can be claimed as knowledge, or otherwise as retaining some form of meaningfulness and value, is engendered by the consequences elicited in the very process of their developing. In other words, everyday practical consequences become the test of epistemic and potentially metaphysical meanings. Hillary Putnam (1992) puts the point succinctly when he writes, “epistemology is hypothesis” (p. 186).

Another thoughtful expositor of American pragmatism, John J. Stuhr (1997), notes that the complex features of philosophical pragmatism might be broadly defined as “the unity and continuity of belief and action” (p.23). That is, belief, for philosophical pragmatists, as called forth by “genuinely doubtful and problematic situations, is primarily and irreducibly an instrument in, through, and for action” (Stuhr 1997, p. 23). To this extent belief arises within human experience, and experience, in turn, “supplies an adequate method for judging belief as it functions to regulate further experience” (p. 23).

Within classical pragmatism it is important to note that its birth in the ideas of Peirce, James, and Dewey coincided with unprecedented industrial, technological, and social changes throughout the entire western world. Discoveries in both the physical and biological sciences were substantially altering the assumptions of philosophers and educated people everywhere. While the scientists informed us that, against vital and

deeply rooted philosophical and religious traditions, we humans could no longer be considered to have a privileged position in the universe, Darwin informed us that he had undermined many basic assumptions about human nature. It appeared that the very ingenuity of the human species harbored also our alienation in the face of a cold and inhospitable universe. With this came a radical new kind of fear, and our socio-political and economic structures manifested this accordingly (and still do) as expressing the volatility and precariousness of these sea changes in thinking (Gouinlock, 1994). It comes as no surprise, then, that the classical pragmatists all argued to varying degrees that philosophy had to take into account the methods and insights of modern science and therefore make explicit the intimate connection between knowledge and action. Dewey, for example, thought that the experimentalism at the heart of modern science held enormous significance for humanity's ability to act on and solve real-world, day-to-day problems, not only acquiring knowledge, but intelligently shaping new and more humane futures (Biesta & Burbules, 2003).

Returning, then, to what I said at the start, "Pragmatism" is a name for something not easily defined. Of course, it is rather natural to seek definition in such matters, but the elusiveness of such a task is palpable. However, for Pragmatism such elusiveness is not so much a matter of lack of definition as it is of proliferation. Goodman (1995), pointing to William James's book *Pragmatism*, notes that this one book alone, published in 1907, contains "at least six accounts of what pragmatism is or contains: a theory of truth, a theory of meaning, a philosophical temperament, an epistemology/metaphysics stressing human interest and action, a method for dissolving philosophical disputes, and a skeptical anti-essentialism" (p. 3). Even as far back as 1908, Arthur O. Lovejoy had published his

now famous essay, “The Thirteen Pragmatisms,” which early on put into question pragmatism’s philosophical unanimity.

In spite of the proliferation of definitions, I am in substantial agreement with Cornel West (1993) when he cites this passage from C. I. Lewis as being one of the best characterizations of pragmatism ever formulated. Lewis writes:

Pragmatism could be characterized as the doctrine that all problems are at bottom problems of conduct, that all judgments are, implicitly, judgments of value, and that, as there can be ultimately no valid distinction of theoretical and practical, so there can be no final separation of questions of truth of any kind from questions of the justifiable ends of action. (p. 109)

With the words, “the justifiable ends of action” in mind, we clearly see that pragmatism’s philosophical impulse is inextricably tied to temporal consequences, with the idea that the future is of ethical significance. In addition to Lewis’s overview we can add these words from Dewey. West calls our attention to Dewey’s essay “The Development of American Pragmatism,” in which Dewey says:

Pragmatism, thus, presents itself as an extension of historical empiricism, but with this fundamental difference, that it does not insist upon antecedent phenomena but upon consequent phenomena; not upon the precedents but upon the possibilities of action. And this change in point of view is almost revolutionary in its consequences. An empiricism which is content with repeating facts already past has no place for possibility and for liberty....Pragmatism thus has a metaphysical implication. The doctrine of the value of consequences leads us to take the future into consideration. And this taking into consideration of the future takes us to the

conception of a universe whose evolution is not finished, of a universe which is still, in James' term "in the making," "in the process of becoming," of a universe up to a certain point still plastic. (p. 111)

In what ways, then, is "neo-pragmatism" comparable and different from the "classical pragmatism" outlined in the passages above?

To approach an answer to this, albeit for my purposes here, a very broad answer, it is important to note why pragmatism faded off of the philosophical map during the midpart of the twentieth century and did not reappear in earnest until relatively late (during the 1980s and 1990s). Clearly, what was going on philosophically on the European continent had an impact. As Biesta and Burbules (2003) point out, occurring along a roughly commensurate timeline with the classical pragmatists was the work of important continental thinkers in the areas of phenomenology (Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty), existentialism (Jean-Paul Sartre), and neo-Marxism (Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Jürgen Habermas). In the Anglo-Saxon world analytic philosophy reigned supreme in the works of Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell, Alfred North Whitehead, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. These analytic philosophers wrote extensively on logic and language and would be a major influence on members of the so-called "Vienna Circle" made up originally of Moritz Schlick, Rudolf Carnap, and Otto Neurath (Biesta & Burbules). When Carnap, Russell, and Wittgenstein made their presence felt in the United States, they brought with them a heavy emphasis on logic and language analysis. Indeed, according to Hillary Putnam, the complex systems of these three thinkers were put forward as all-out attacks on metaphysics, but were really "among the most ingenious, profound, and technically

brilliant constructions of metaphysical systems ever achieved” (cited in Goodman, 1995, p. 1). What would come to be called the “linguistic turn” signified a turning away from the experiential philosophy of the early pragmatists (given their supposed entrapment in old-style metaphysics) as well as from the broader moral and social philosophy of both James and Dewey, and quickly led, in the 1940s and 1950s, to the classical pragmatists fading off the radar screen. The analytic philosophy that these thinkers developed would come to dominate the American philosophical scene for most of the rest of the twentieth century.

Yet, as analytic philosophy went about doing its philosophical work, key analytic philosophers like W.V.O. Quine, Donald Davidson, and Hillary Putnam would all come to question from the inside many of the fundamental assumptions within the analytic tradition, leading Hillary Putnam finally to say that “at the very moment when analytic philosophy is recognized as the ‘dominant movement’ in world philosophy, it has come to the end of its own project—the dead end, not the completion” (cited in Goodman, 1995, p. 1). Contemporary or neo-pragmatism would find its revival in the later work of Putnam, but especially in the work of Richard Rorty, whose groundbreaking *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, written in 1979, almost singlehandedly put pragmatism, and his self-proclaimed hero, John Dewey, back on the philosophical map. As Goodman makes clear, the revival of pragmatism late in the twentieth century represents, not the emergence of new, more up-to-date metaphysical systems, but rather a convergence of twentieth century thought in the classical pragmatism of Peirce, James, and Dewey and the European/Continental thought of Heidegger and Wittgenstein. Clearly, the neo-



pragmatists blend elements from all these writers and others. As Goodman goes on to say,

they know their Dewey but also their Derrida; their Peirce but also their Freud; James's 'Stream of Thought' but also Wittgenstein's discussion of a necessarily private language. The new pragmatic consensus that emerged in the 1980s has its source not only in philosophy but in literary criticism, legal theory, feminism, and political theory. (p. 2)

Yet, using the word "consensus" here is a bit misleading, as Rorty's particular use of classical pragmatist thinking (especially Dewey's) in conjunction with his reading of various Continental thinkers (especially Heidegger, Foucault, and Derrida), along with his acceptance of the "linguistic turn," led him to readings of his classical pragmatic forebears that cut strongly against the grain of staple pragmatic positions. Especially in reference to Dewey (Rorty's self-claimed pragmatic hero), Bruce Wilshire puts the matter succinctly in his forward to Tony Johnson's (1995) book:

Rorty says some interesting and timely things. But he guts Dewey of his real—metaphysical and existential—punch, and refuses to face the deepest issues left to us by the [classical] pragmatists—truth, learning, self, subconscious experiencing, technological society, the depth of consumerism and alienation—all that we must face if we would be serious educators. (p. xiii)

The tenor of Wilshire's comments is echoed by throngs of Dewey scholars who, in spite of throwing kudos Rorty's way for reviving interest in Dewey, otherwise think he has done more to eliminate what is best and most powerful in Dewey's work. At any rate, my

point thus far has been only to give my readers a sense of the general terrain that traverses this thing called Pragmatism.

### **Placing Dewey and Rorty**

Given, as I have mentioned above, that Pragmatism suffers not from a lack of definition but rather from an overly ripe surplus, I am inclined, pace the good advice of Boisvert (1998), to read the pragmatism of John Dewey and Richard Rorty in the spirit for which anyone should want to read any philosophy—“because [it] sheds light on the issues that dominate our own time.” Boisvert continues:

We, like Dewey, find ourselves moving into a new century. Like him, we wonder how to realize democratic aspirations in a large, technologically advanced, multi-ethnic society. We worry about the inadequacy of our schools, and seek for ways to resolve the tensions between big business, big government, and the public interest. The problems of incorporating the discoveries of the sciences with the everyday search for the good life, of overcoming the disjunction between art and ordinary life, and of sorting out the opposition between an overly rationalized secularism and a closed-minded religiosity, are as real today as they were in Dewey’s time. (pp. 11-12)

What, then, can we say philosophy might be good for? Can philosophy help us grapple with these big social and moral problems? From a pragmatic perspective, it is not unreasonable in our own time to take stock of the serious undermining that has been undertaken by classical and neo-pragmatists against that classical Greek “queen of the sciences,” PHILOSOPHY, and wonder what is left to work with, philosophically speaking. If, indeed, Philosophy has lost its Platonic status as “queen of the sciences”

should this be construed as an educational benefit or an educational curse when it comes to dealing effectively with our big social and moral issues? As a pragmatist I tend to think it a benefit, but a mixed benefit to be sure. But, here again, the proliferation of definitions proves a difficulty, for even those hunkered down in the pragmatist camp, are unable to agree in just what measure a de-throned, more pragmatic philosophy is able to shed “light on the issues that dominate our own day.”

Of importance, we need to be aware, generally speaking, just what the de-throning of the “queen of the sciences”—Philosophy—means. As Critchely (2001) says, the birth of modern science in the seventeenth century had the consequence for philosophy of turning it into a purely “theoretical enquiry into the conditions under which scientific knowledge [was] possible” (p. 5). For the Greeks, and this is crucial, theoretical knowledge and practical wisdom were unified. The quest for wisdom (philosophy) was a mode of reflective practice that inhered in the polis (the public realm) and, as such, was an eminently practical activity. However, with the advent of the new science, theoretical knowledge and practical wisdom were sundered (Critchely). What has come to us through the centuries establishes itself now predominantly as a *felt* (rather than *known*) gap between knowledge and wisdom, and it is this felt gap that for many manifests in a (for the most part vague) sense of crisis and alienation (Critchley). It needs to be stressed that it is indeed a *felt* gap rather than a *known* gap because I think there is a fair amount of consensus among pragmatists, old and new, as well as among continental thinkers, that when it comes to dealing with big questions about the meaning of life, the universe, and our place in it, such things are not reducible to strictly empirical investigations. As

Critchely says, “it is just not a causal matter” (p. 6). He goes on to indicate, I think rightly, that

“[if] all epistemic worries are to be resolved empirically by scientific enquiry, then we might feel that even if—one fine and beautiful morning—all those worries were resolved, then this would somehow still be irrelevant to the question of wisdom, to the question of knowing in what exactly a good human life might consist” (p. 6).

And so it is in the quivering of this “*felt gap*” between knowledge and wisdom that I enter into this study on the pragmatisms of John Dewey and Richard Rorty. In Chapter Two I open with Dewey’s interpretation of the history of science and how his interpretation indicates his own grappling with this so-called felt gap between knowledge and wisdom. The whole chapter offers an indication of some very Deweyan pragmatic possibilities for closing this gap, or at least articulating the gap in such a way as to indicate a more productive pragmatic (nondualistic) relationship between science and philosophy. Dewey’s pragmatic philosophy thus establishes itself as being against all those artificial dualisms (foundational or transcendently hypostasized absolutes) that tend to block the road of inquiry. Knowledge and wisdom tend to get established within such a context as hardened and irreconcilable opposites. Dewey’s pragmatism consists in making functional conceptual distinctions out of the lived matrix of everyday experience in which such distinctions are lived as a concatenation of feelings and knowings.

Knowledge and wisdom can then become expressive of different phases of our experiential comportment in the world, alternating between precariousness and stability, between *had* felt qualities and *known* outcomes or consequences. The main point for

Dewey is that whatever distinctions are made, they are functional or working distinctions drawn from lived social life. And it is from that lived life that such distinctions must seek their warrant as distinctions, that is, must return to the primary sociopolitical ground from whence they were drawn as distinctions to begin with in order to test their functional status *as* distinctions. For Dewey, science is a part of that lived experiential matrix—a part of the larger potential artfulness of living. Scientific inquiries arise out of and are conditioned by day-to-day lived experience, and therefore it becomes hard to establish in any rational way that there exist pure scientific Truths outside of experience as we live it. For Dewey, then, philosophy, rather than being an underlaborer for science, is instrumental for helping tell a larger human story wherein science is itself a valuable human art.

If the gap between knowledge and wisdom is a gap reflecting vaguely some sort of felt crisis in our late modern times, indicating a matter of philosophical import, then in Chapter Three Richard Rorty is turned to in order to problematize a bit the notion of gaps. Turning to his autobiographical essay, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids” (1999b) I follow Rorty’s exploration of his own past philosophical preoccupation with closing gaps. The words he uses to express the rough equivalent of the knowledge/wisdom gap are “reality” and “justice.” Through his autobiographical account, Rorty renders the philosophical trajectory of his own efforts (borrowing from Yeats) to “hold reality and justice in a single vision.” The shift in Rorty’s thinking that eventually leads him to turn away from such an effort ends up being a decisive shift for pragmatism generally. Rorty’s neo-pragmatism, as a “linguistic turn” form of pragmatism, instantiates some confounding elements into the notion that closing up philosophical gaps is a necessary or

required preoccupation for confronting our pervasive late modern vague feelings of alienation and meaninglessness. As Rorty tells us in his autobiographical piece, the more philosophy he studied, the more he saw that the attempt to “hold reality and justice in a single vision” (or knowledge and wisdom) was an attempt to get to the top of Plato’s “divided line,” to some position of metaphysical and epistemological certainty “beyond hypothesis.” As a pragmatist unable to sustain such a pursuit, Rorty comes, like Dewey, to institute some working pragmatic distinctions, not the least of which manifests itself as a pervasive public/private distinction. A problem arises however for Rorty’s pragmatism insofar as his distinctions represent a jettisoning of Deweyan notions of experience. Dewey’s organic experiential philosophy which attempts to institute the functional space for qualitative, noncognitive and nonlinguistic experience, Rorty sees as a hangover of old metaphysical yearnings. Experience is linguistic top to bottom (and side to side). There is no point in talking about that which in Dewey’s account is noncognitive and nonlinguistic. Rorty thus establishes his public and private distinction as itself a functional distinction necessitated by different language games, rather than different qualitative and quantitative dimensions of lived experience. Lived experience *is* linguistic experience in Rorty’s pragmatism.

Rather than taking up immediately the tension between the *classical* (experiential) pragmatism of Dewey and the *neo*-(linguistic) pragmatism of Rorty, I go on in Chapter Four to continue to use Rorty as proxy for pragmatism generally, in particular, as expressing what is central to the entire American pragmatic tradition—namely, its turn against absolutist conceptions of Truth. I use Rorty to show that this turning represents pragmatism’s strong turn from past antecedent conventions to future artful possibilities

for social improvement. I also enlist the work of James Edwards (1997) for his articulation of what he calls “normal nihilism.” This is the condition in which we all find ourselves during these late modern times (whether we know it or not), and it is the result of the collapse of our once highest and most perdurable (and most taken-for-granted) religious and philosophical Truths. I align Edwards’s notion of “normal nihilism” with Rorty’s notion of ‘irony’ to show how each is articulating something that resonates with what Critchley (2001) refers to above as the knowledge/wisdom gap—that vague feeling of alienation that sets in once you can no longer justify your highest values to yourself in good conscience. Yet, the results need not be the automatic tailspin into chaos, moral relativism, or pervasive ennui, even as we witness examples of such on our evening news. Picking back up on the strong pragmatic turn from past establishments to future possibilities, I highlight the reversal of the now insubordinate imagination, establishing its own disciplining force over truth, and the shift therein from the necessity of absolutist Truth conceptions to more pragmatic notions of truthfulness disciplined by imagination rather than some or another antecedent absolute. Truthfulness then becomes a necessary element of our sincerest and most authentic comportment in day-to-day life that recognizes the conditioning sources of past cultural conventions, but that also now recognizes that such conventions must face the rigors of temporality’s ongoing march—the requirements, that is, to imagine *ourselves* anew.

I then turn in Chapters Five and Six to that which is necessitated by pragmatism’s great turning from past to future—its aesthetic trajectory. I deal with Dewey’s aesthetic turn in chapter five and Rorty’s in Chapter Six. In chapter six in particular I try to articulate that many of the differences between Dewey’s experiential and Rorty’s

linguistified pragmatism appear slightly overblown when the future is taken seriously as an artful/poetic necessity of living. I believe both offer powerful and dominantly privative accounts of this artful/poetic requirement that they then translate (via their functional distinctions between public and private spheres) into practical piecemeal reforms at the public level. Their respective aesthetical positions thus reject the extreme positions of leftist social revolutions and rightist conformism. The functional distinction between private and public realms allows for poetic revolutions in the private sphere that might or might not lend themselves to slower and saner reforms in the public sphere. I also try to establish the ways in which both Dewey's and Rorty's aesthetical modes require qualitative starting points (or some indeterminate-event trajectory) as a condition for any poetic/novel movement into the future. I show how Dewey's notions of "pervasive quality" and "indeterminate situation" resonate with Rorty's notion of metaphor, and that finally Rorty does in fact (wittingly or not) harbor a place for the noncognitive and nonlinguistic via, interesting enough, a linguistic device. How Rorty uses his notion of metaphor (inspired very much by Donald Davidson's groundbreaking work) starts very much to take on the feel of what Dewey meant by "primary" experience.

In my conclusion I turn to some educational implications of this large turning from past to future, to the necessity of the demands of what Rorty calls a literary (as opposed to a religious or philosophical) culture. The implication for Rorty's distinction between socialization in the primary grades and individualization at the nonvocational higher educational level becomes another important functional distinction in the pragmatist's lexicon. In an age of normal nihilism we must guard against some negative



aspects of living in such an age. As more people jump into the frenetic demands of what Edwards (1997) calls a “runaway humanism” wherein the marketplace becomes a site for the exchange of values with ever shorter half-lives, society starts to suffer from a nagging restlessness. Nothing ever satisfies. Alternatively, as more people jump willingly into blind conformism to one or another value system, and once there, set up dogmatic camp, society starts to erect hard walls between competing value systems, and productive communication into the future becomes difficult if not impossible.

## CHAPTER TWO: DEWEY ON EXPERIENCE, SCIENCE, AND METAPHYSICS

John Dewey (1925/1994) asks this question in his magnum opus *Experience and Nature*: “If philosophy be criticism, what is to be said of the relation of philosophy to metaphysics?” (p. 334). Margolis (2002), taking up this question, states unequivocally, “there cannot be an end to metaphysics there” (p. 115). He continues:

Dewey’s theme, of course, is the unrelieved “contingency” of nature and how its discovery is “the beginning of wisdom.” This is what separates Dewey from the classic metaphysicians. There is no postmodernism there, because there are no absolutes to provoke it. Dewey has defined a tenable middle ground, and metaphysics remains in full play. (p. 115)

This chapter will attempt to show just what “metaphysics remaining in full play” entails for Dewey’s philosophy. Such an exploration is important, a kind of ground-map, if you will, for more properly locating Dewey’s larger philosophical and educational challenges as well as locating central criticisms brought against Dewey by fellow pragmatist Richard Rorty—issues that will be taken up in subsequent chapters. By engaging here Dewey’s epistemological and metaphysical reconstructions (the two not so easily separable in a contingent universe), the sheer radicality of Dewey’s larger philosophy will have the necessary footing from which to emerge. The first three sections deal with Dewey’s own historical overview and pragmatic analysis of epistemological issues, pointing to the tense relationship between science and philosophy. The last section deals explicitly with the metaphysical implications of Dewey’s reconstructed epistemology and the further implications for his larger philosophical vision.

## **The Greek Inheritance**

At the outset I need to make clear I am not investigating in a comprehensive way the full complexity of Greek thought as it came down through history. I will focus almost exclusively on Plato and Aristotle and at times will use them almost synonymously in reference to general Greek thought. I am conscious of the reductionism of doing this, but it is justified only to the degree that Dewey tended to do the same, and I am, after all, interested only in conveying Dewey's take on the Greek inheritance. It is important to note that Dewey was primarily concerned with conveying the general nature of the philosophical problems, especially the problems inherent within the quest for epistemological certainty, as they were passed down from Greek culture. Dewey was not interested in conveying the full implications of Greek philosophy in general, but rather in highlighting some of the problematic philosophical issues that arose out of Greek philosophy and continued to have a prevalent influence in future scientific and philosophical thought. He was interested primarily in providing support for his own philosophical reconstruction. He therefore tends to refer to "the Greeks" when in fact he is referring to Plato and/or Aristotle.

We might say, then, that Dewey used Plato and Aristotle as generally representative of Greek philosophy only because their respective philosophies manifested not only the more general philosophical issues prevalent within that culture but also the specific issues that Dewey needed to take up in his own philosophical project. The content that Dewey draws from Plato and Aristotle is I think appropriate and would stand up to historical scrutiny, but it is that content that is most important. We might forgive

Dewey, then, for his tendency to take the specific Greek content relevant to his own philosophical project and equate it with “the Greeks” in general.

Fundamental to an understanding of how Greek philosophy set in motion the tendency of dualistic thinking, as it has come down through history, is their postulation of a hierarchical model of being. This model distinguished between inferior and superior realms of human experience, the lower workaday realm representing the material, contingent, and temporal qualities of practical life and the higher eternal realm representing the imperishable, perfect, and timeless qualities of true reality. Having inherited the mythical dimensions of truth from earlier religious thinking, the Greeks sought to supplant these mythical conceptions by giving them a rational philosophical conception. In this, Plato and Aristotle undermined the mythic forms of earlier Greek religious belief, but not its substance: “The belief that the divine encompasses the world was detached from its mythical context and made the basis of philosophy” (Dewey, 1929, p. 13). In denying the mythic status of earlier thought/belief, Plato and Aristotle provided the ideals of science via a life of reason, but they did no disservice to the dichotomy between “a higher realm of fixed reality of which alone true science [was] possible and of an inferior world of changing things with which experience and practical matters [were] concerned” (Dewey, p. 13).

Thus Greek philosophy became a science of Being, and the resulting metaphysics was such that the cosmically real was equated with the finished and perfect, made up of pure transcendent forms, while the less real was made up of the contingent material of everyday human experience. For Dewey, what was most interesting was how the two realms were related, for the inferior realm justified and made possible the existence of the

superior realm. This posed some serious difficulties for both Plato and Aristotle, who had to maneuver their metaphysical systems in such a way as to justify the life of reason at the recognized expense of an entire underclass of artisans and servile workers whose very work made the idea of eternal forms (along with a leisured class of philosophers for whom such forms were not alien) possible. For eternal forms, to put it rather simply, needed inspiration, and this inspiration *was* the contingent flux of everyday life that, paradoxically, was deemed less real (inferior) by virtue of its manifest relation to the realm of true Being. Those who worked in the material world, who labored in the practical (industrial and political) arts, engaged their activities in such a way that eternal form was manifested as the rational end of their labor, but it was an end rendered alien to them by virtue of their work being the stuff of material change. Only the class of rational thinkers (philosophers) could perceive and enjoy the perfect fruits of their leisured contemplation.

It was truly disturbing to Plato that the artisan class could not perceive the pure forms of their labor. Their ignorance was deemed the commonplace of anything having to do with the world of ongoing change. This was enough to justify the regulation of the habits and practices of those who worked, by an enlightened elite who were, by nature, above entanglement in change and practice. Aristotle in turn escaped this dilemma “by putting nature above art, and endowing nature with skilled purpose that for the most part achieves ends or completions. Thus the role of the human artisan whether in industry or politics became relatively negligible, and the miscarriages of human art a matter of relative insignificance” (Dewey, 1925/1994, p. 78). By endowing nature with skilled

purpose Aristotle transferred the role of artist to that of nature itself, which worked its canvas from within instead of from without:

Like other artists, nature first possesses the forms which it afterwards embodies.

When arts follow fixed models, whether in making shoes, houses or dramas, and when the element of individual invention in design is condemned as caprice, forms and ends are necessarily external to the individual worker. They preceded any particular realization. Design and plan are anonymous and universal, and carry with them no suggestion of a designing, purposive mind. (Dewey, p. 78)

Essentially, Aristotle rendered the activities of human artisans mindless in order that he might constitute mind as the end of nature and establish philosophers as the only class capable of the “immediate possession and celebration [that] constitutes consciousness” (Dewey, p. 79). The Greek elite needed most those for whom they had the lowest opinion, namely artists, for they provided for and operated within the very conditions that made rational science possible and necessary. Artists mimicked the world of flux, but philosophers had access to what was behind the imitation, to reality in its purity.

As Dewey (1925/1994) points out, the Greeks confused, on principle, the aesthetic and the rational and “they bequeathed the confusion as an intellectual tradition to their successors” (p. 75). It might be argued that Greek rationalism represented a species of fear based on the overwhelming need to escape the contingencies and inherent precariousness of daily life. The qualitative dimensions of lived experience flourished as the *sine qua non* of Greek art, but it was a language Greek philosophers could only attribute to mind as a realization of nature in perfected form. This was Greek science, but it was a science in which its conception of experience afforded “no model for a

conception of experimental inquiry and of reflection efficacious in action” (Dewey, p. 79). The Greek unity of knowledge and wisdom, in other words, was transcendently inscribed under an umbrella of final, indubitable causes.

By positing a transcendent plane of absolute reality, the Greeks introduced the idea of the ends of nature as intrinsically good, whole, and self-sufficient. While this superior reality was deemed an absolute end in and of itself, it depended on means, subservient in nature, for its realization. By positing a gaping distinction between means and ends the Greeks were able to successfully separate the inferior and superior realms. Inquiry itself became an inferior species of the good, entangled as it was in the material flux of the workaday world. However, knowledge accumulated through inquiry—inquiry to be understood as embodying the work of the arts—was in the final instance the stuff of rational mind attaining the level of the really real. As already mentioned, this is what the Greeks called the science of Being, and it had its justification in the qualitative dimensions of aesthetic production. It could not, of course, be understood as science in the modern experimental/hypothetical sense because Plato’s and Aristotle’s systems had no room for the possibility that ongoing experimentation could be capable of providing objects of knowledge. Experimentation or the creative arts were mere means to the realization of absolute ends, and therefore were deemed inherently defective and dependent. Those things embodying the inferior realm of mere means, as Dewey (1925/1994) says,

can never be *known* in themselves but only in their subordination to objects that are final, while [transcendent ends] can be known in and through themselves by enclosed reason. Thus the identification of knowledge with esthetic contemplation

and the exclusion from science of trial, work, manipulation and administration of things, comes full circle. (p. 105)

With the Greeks, therefore, the distinction between inferior and superior realms establishes a hierarchy of Being. Sensitive as the Greeks were to the immediate qualitative dimensions of human experience, a sensitivity furnished by their recognition in the arts of “esthetic objects with traits of order and proportion, form and finality,” they most naturally built their hierarchical system of Being upon this qualitative sensibility (Dewey, p. 79).

Dewey, it should be said, was quite sympathetic to the Greek philosophers (especially Aristotle). While he faulted them for their demeaning (in its most literal sense) of the workaday world of human striving and flux, he nonetheless recognized that this need to establish some reality safe from the hazards and vicissitudes of a contingent world was natural enough, especially given that there had yet to be developed effective scientific tools for controlling, to some stable degree, an otherwise precarious world. What precluded the Greeks from a more rigorous experimental approach was not that they had “more respect for the *function* of perception through the senses than has modern science, but that, judged from present practice, they had altogether too much respect for the *material* of direct, unanalyzed sense-perception” (Dewey, 1929, p. 72).

Epistemologically, the Greeks knew that there were defects in this approach, but they felt that they could correct any defects through purely logical and rational means. By eliminating the contingent qualities of ordinary perception, they could reach perfected and immutable forms (ends) and then deem these forms truly real by virtue of their manifest relation to the particular characteristics available to ordinary perception.



In this sense, because the Greeks had not developed what we understand today as being more rigorous scientific procedures, its physics were more or less in harmony with its metaphysics, because its metaphysics were teleological and qualitative. By the seventeenth century, however, the “doctrine that objects as ends are the proper objects of science, because they are the ultimate forms of real being, met its doom” (Dewey, 1925/1994, p. 80). With the advent of the seventeenth century, an unprecedented level of growth was ushered in as science began to establish more instrumentally effective methods whereby human beings could begin for the first time to exercise some intelligent control over the changes of their world. With this experimental turn, science could be used to figure out how and why the world worked the way it did, and it no longer needed the asylum of an a priori perfect reality.

### **The New Science**

This more effective instrumentalism represented for Dewey a watershed development in the human ability to potentially understand and exercise a more reasonable degree of control over the ongoing changes that animated the world. The work of Sir Francis Bacon was especially revolutionary in its implications for human inquiry and progress. Bacon was the first to react strongly against the Aristotelian dogmatism passed down through medieval scholasticism. His reaction was one that fundamentally attacked the correspondence theory of truth as it was inherited from antiquity. The Greek notion of a priori truth, which could be attained by the best philosophical minds, was flawed because it aimed at the understanding of mind rather than of nature. What was passed along from the Greeks and what remained relatively unchanged until the seventeenth century was the notion that all inquiry had to correspond to the Aristotelian

method, which was based on a faulty spectatorial logic whereby knowledge was equated with the contemplation and demonstration of preexistent truth.

Bacon was interested in something far more ambitious. He had little use for received truth as the best test of knowledge. He proposed an experimental approach in which the guiding logic was that of discovery rather than demonstration. Old truth was useful insofar as it led to the detection of new truth. He was interested more than anything else in finding out how best to go about intelligently finding new truths rather than relying on the antiquated prescriptions of already-had truths. This was a radical conception, because the key to success lay not in testing theories as corresponding to the respected authority of Aristotle, but in testing them against the benchmark of common experience through the use of rigorous and repeatable experimentation. Bacon refuted the idea that *growth* of knowledge, implicated as it is in the world of becoming and change, in learning new things about the world, was somehow inferior to the *possession* of knowledge preexistent and infinitely stable. Science, as Dewey says in reference to Bacon, was an “invasion of the unknown, rather than repetition in logical form of the already known” (Dewey, 1920/1952, p. 49).

Bacon’s call for new rules of intelligent hypotheses and rigorous experimentation and testing thus drew on a distinction between perception/observation and conception/theory. It was based on the necessity of being able to sort between good and bad theories and, importantly, these rules had to be rooted in the world of common experience. The advancement of knowledge therefore was about making intelligent theoretical guesses and then rigorously testing those guesses through experimentation. Bacon’s new critical empiricism advanced a metaphysics expressing the idea that reality

was independent of our experience and judgment and claims about this reality could not be reduced to our experiential reports. The epistemological import of Bacon's thinking was that our claims about reality had to be supported by evidence. Science thus had a powerful new method, and it was well on its way to deciphering more rigorously how the world worked. It was no longer a purely contemplative affair, but instead was operative, practical, and experimental. It engaged the world of change by inducing further changes in order to gather better knowledge for inferring more accurately how the world worked. That which showed signs of apparent fixity and stability blocked the path to knowledge and needed to be broken down and put under a variety of circumstances in order to get at the true character and behavior of that which was under investigation.

Modern science thus made a tremendous advance when it recognized the limitations within Greek science of a heavy-handed aestheticism. The new science was a forward looking rather than an upward looking mode of investigation and as such needed to strip nature of its qualities in order to understand the hidden workings within nature that made such immediate things possible. In essence, the new science sought to get behind or underneath the immediate objects of qualitative experience in order to conceptualize the nonimmediate workings of nature on which the immediate, self-sufficing objects of perception depended. The new science saw as a roadblock to inquiry the Greek emphasis on immediate qualities as indicative of transcendent and timeless perfection. Inquiry was about determining how and why the objects of immediate qualitative experience were the way they were, and this involved peeling away their qualities in order to determine the processes operating underneath, processes unavailable to ordinary sense perception. Knowing in this sense became less contemplative

(contemplation being more properly associated with aesthetic enjoyment and appreciation) and more practical. Knowledge, if it could be had, inhered in the world of change and becoming—the very world the Greeks had deemed inferior—and what the new science was quickly discovering was that nature operated on fundamentally mathematical and mechanical principles. Science thus began down a new path of abstraction wherein nature gained in significance and power by virtue of what it could teach via its own processes. “It is a transaction,” says Dewey (1925/1994), “in which nature is teacher, and in which the teacher comes to knowledge and truth only through the learning of the inquiring student” (p. 127). Human experience of the world now reached down into nature. Via the new instrumentalism, change was harnessed and shown to have signifying power. It was no longer a matter of change being arbitrary and corrupt, but rather a matter of change itself exhibiting the capacity to indicate and imply new and possibly better things.

This new experimental method was, as Dewey (1925/1994) says, “imperious and impatient” (p. 112) in its attack against the old Aristotelian methodology, but this in itself was not a matter for great concern. Dewey’s overall optimism about this advance of a more effective instrumentalism is tempered by a sober recognition that in spite of the increased possibilities that this advance procured, there were still some lingering problems. The major problem, as Dewey saw it, was the inheritance of a bad metaphysics that continued to equate what was known cognitively with what was purely real. What did concern Dewey was the persistence of the classic epistemology wherein knowledge was understood as the immediate possession of real being. Even with the new experimental method, knowledge was still equated with insight into and grasp of real

being, and other modes of experience were, by this measure, deemed inferior and imperfect. Furthermore, the new science came to understand itself within the logic of mathematico-mechanical operations. Science came to speak the language of Physics. For Dewey, this presented a serious problem:

If the proper object of science is a mathematico-mechanical world (as the achievements of science have proved to be the case) and if the object of science defines the true and perfect reality (as the perpetuation of the classic tradition asserted), then how can the objects of love, appreciation – whether sensory or ideal – and devotion be included within true reality? (Dewey, 1925/1994, p. 113)

The implications of this for achieving knowledge, and especially the assumption that knowledge is automatically equated with absolute reality, are enormous. The fact that science did come to see itself as inhering ultimately within the logic of physical processes, and equated these processes as the only indubitable reality, resulted in a faulty reductionism that ended up having serious consequences for scientific investigation. The consequences were particularly serious for philosophy, which still desperately tried to speak to important human values, many of which were suddenly outside the purview of reality.

The major obstacle that the new science saw itself overcoming was severing the philosophical link that inhered between the superior and inferior realms in Greek science. The new science now had no need for conceptualizing a transcendental realm of absolute being; it now engaged the “inferior” world of change in order to locate its own brand of (epistemological) certainty. Unfortunately, by equating what was known with what was absolutely real, the new science committed the same philosophical error as the Greeks,

only inversely. The new science in effect replaced a transcendent realm of pure forms with a physical realm of indubitable knowledge and ended up in turn designating the world of common sense just as inferior as it had been for the Greeks. Knowing was thus itself “transformed...into a morally irresponsible estheticism” (Dewey, 1920/1952, p. 103). The Greek unity of knowledge and wisdom was sundered. The key to understanding Dewey’s take on the scientific revolution lies in paying close attention to his balanced reasoning as to why this need not be the inevitable mode of scientific advance.

As Dewey understood it, the need of science to strip nature of its qualities in order to get at its underlying (mathematico-mechanical) relationships did not in itself pose any great problems. This is exactly what made the new science so revolutionary. Its empiricism was wholly progressive in nature, and it introduced a new way of regulating human experience by delivering it from the limitations of ordinary sense perception which, as the sole (classical) mode of attaining knowledge was complicit in the perpetuation of stale custom and dogmatic habit. Alternatively, the new science was a forward-looking mode of experimental investigation that necessarily had to breach immediate quality in order to progress, that is, locate those relations that lent what was immediate its effective quality. In this sense, immediate qualities sustained underlying relations that could be known. It was these underlying relations that could be known (in their mathematico-mechanical capacities) that science mistakenly understood as the only true reality apart from which any other mode of experiencing the world must be judged inferior. This is one plausible interpretation of what science was about, but could there be another? Dewey argues that indeed there is another interpretation that makes a great deal

more sense. Analyzing Dewey's alternative conception will take us to the heart of the widening disparity between science and philosophy (knowledge and wisdom) as well as offer some clues as to how that disparity might be bridged.

### **Epistemology's Error**

In a way, the history of the relationship between science and philosophy is an intimate one, but the underlying dysfunction as it developed was based on a profound misunderstanding of what each was about. This misunderstanding was in turn exacerbated by the fact that both science and philosophy misunderstood what experience in general was about. Nowhere was this more apparent than in science and philosophy's acceptance of the ubiquity of cognition. Only those experiences that could be known were deemed absolutely real and certain. In this sense, it was not the operations of science per se that were the problem, but rather science's entanglement within a lingering metaphysics that could not and would not abandon the idea of absolute certainty. It was essentially a philosophical problem.

This philosophical problem involved a fundamental confusion between primary and secondary qualities within experience. Borrowing William James's terminology, Dewey refers to "experience" as "a double-barrelled word" (Dewey, 1925/1994, p. 10). That is, "it recognizes in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but contains them both in an unanalyzed totality" (Dewey, pp. 10-11). We can look at this phase of experience as being pretheoretical in its constitutive integrity. This is at the heart of Dewey's refined empiricism, and it is necessary to a proper understanding of his larger body of work. We find here the critical empiricism of the seventeenth century taken a step deeper, implicating the more complex dimensions of

experience. While experience (primary) is double barrelled in its recognition of unanalyzed, total experience, object and subject are single barrelled (secondary) because “they refer to products discriminated by reflection out of primary experience” (Dewey, p. 11). We might call this phase of experience theoretical. Only when these distinct but inextricable phases of experience are recognized can there be a truly empirical method, for a properly aligned empiricism alone “takes this integrated unity as the starting point for philosophic thought” (Dewey, p. 11).

Nonempirical methods, on the other hand, are reckless with primary experience, when and if they recognize primary experience at all. Nonempirical methods start off with the results of reflection (secondary experience), discriminations made, and then posit them as if they were primary and already given. This is the philosophic error committed in science. The weakness of its empiricism is not in its modes of experimental inquiry and hypothesis testing, but rather in taking its discoveries or results as *a priori* givens and, as such, primarily real. Given that science is rooted in the Latin word *scientia* (knowledge), this weakness becomes fundamentally an epistemological weakness and can be found in any number of areas of inquiry. It is what Dewey refers to generally as the “conversion of eventual functions into antecedent existence: a conversion that may be said to be *the* philosophic fallacy: whether it be performed in behalf of mathematical subsistences, esthetic essences, the purely physical order of nature, or God” (Dewey, 1925/1994, pp. 27-28).

It is this general philosophical problem that has lent a degree of arbitrariness to the particular investigations of the natural (physical) sciences. It is not that the progress made within the physical sciences has been slowed down by this philosophical



shortcoming. A cursory look at the history of its discoveries makes this obvious enough. What it does mean is that those discoveries have not become fully implicated or blooded within the all-important territory of human valuation and meaning. This is where philosophy should become most relevant. Unfortunately, philosophers have been so busy attempting to secure an otherworldly realm for all those human qualities that do not fit neatly into a physicalist conception of the universe that they have failed to understand that they might have something of great relevance to say on behalf of human interest and value about the appreciation and the potential uses of science's discoveries.

It is in this sense that the discoveries of science are left dangling in mere logical space, left that is, in a *technical* stage of advance, with no more than a coincidental connection to human values and the ends that might more efficaciously expand human meaning and general well-being. In short, knowledge is severed from wisdom. For Dewey, the reflected products or acquired knowledge of science are merely part of the story. To leave such outcomes dangling in logical space without making revised connections back to the primary experiential flux from which these outcomes evolved is to effectively stunt our ability to guide and test our knowledge more widely and thus more wisely. Dewey drives this point home when he writes that the reflected outcomes of inquiry (or science),

define or lay out a path by which return to experienced things is of such a sort that the meaning, the significant content of what is experienced, gains an enriched and expanded force because of the path or method by which it was reached. Directly, in immediate contact it may be just what it was before—hard, colored, odorous, etc. But when the secondary objects, the refined objects are employed as a method

or road for coming at them, these qualities cease to be isolated details; they get the meaning contained in a whole system of related objects; they are rendered continuous with the rest of nature and take on the import of the things they are now seen to be continuous with. (Dewey, 1925/1994, p. 8)

In calling for wisdom to be enjoined with knowledge, Dewey is here starting to map a larger terrain of philosophical meaningfulness in which our knowings (reflective outcomes) are continuous with a larger experiential context. He is attempting to indicate that our experience in its primary integrity changes when we reflect, investigate, evaluate. The key point, however, is to refer outcomes back to the primary experiential flux in order to realize out of that flux determinate consequences. Are the original dumb qualities enlarged or enriched, or are they worse off than they were when merely in their dumb state? Qualities, whether they remain dumb or not, occur and have existential impact and thus are implicated in possibilities and consequences.

Unfortunately, too often philosophy has played the role of the stranger. In leaving the outcomes of science alone and granting them a kind of epistemological autonomy and ubiquity, philosophy has become an overly abstracted enterprise. Such, of course, has been as bad for science as it has for philosophy. Under these estranged conditions it is not a far step, given this lack of philosophical guidance, for scientists to start believing that indeed they are, through their physical investigations, tapping into the primary and only true reality of the world. As a result, both philosophy and science end up adopting a myopic approach to the human condition and the world in which that condition finds its place. Caught up in pronouncing the objects of its inquiries as primarily given and thus certainly real, science unfortunately undermines its own

empiricism, unwittingly trading in for a nonempirical approach. This is when science proper turns into a more imperious scientism. I have already highlighted what was positive and progressive about science's mode of investigation. It may be good at this point to clarify this a bit further. It is important to note that scientific inquiry, as a mode of enlightened hypotheses, rigorous experimentation, and thorough testing was for Dewey, *the* method of intelligence.

To reiterate, scientific reflection and discrimination were vital to the idea of progress. As Dewey says in regard to this more robust empiricism:

To a truly naturalistic empiricism, the moot problem of the relation of subject and object is the problem of what consequences follow in and for primary experience from the distinction of the physical and the psychological or mental from each other. The answer is not far to seek. To distinguish in reflection the physical and to hold it in temporary detachment is to be set upon the road that conducts to tools and technologies, to construction of mechanisms, to the arts that ensue in the wake of the sciences. That these constructions make possible a better regulation of the affairs of primary experience is evident. Engineering and medicine, all the utilities that make for expansion of life, are the answer. There is better administration of old familiar things, and there is invention of new objects and satisfactions. Along with this added ability in regulation goes enriched meaning and value in things, clarification, increased depth and continuity—a result even more precious than is the added power of control. (Dewey, 1925/1994, p. 12)

Here we might recognize conduct of the intelligent variety (Dewey's naturalistic empiricism), and this brand of conduct implicates human beings within a more expansive

web of value and meaning. For the physical sciences, nature is *what* is experienced (having realist implications) and experience is *how* nature is converted to objects through human mediation and reflection (having idealist implications). The key is to recognize that the “what” and the “how” are necessary to one another, and meaningless when set apart in separate, and utterly discrete realms, hardening instead into a dualism.

The physical sciences, in specific, were responsible for “the enlarging possession by mankind of more efficacious instrumentalities for dealing with the conditions of life and action” (Dewey, 1925/1994, pp. 12-13). The philosophic fallacy, as it set in to physical science’s understanding of itself, might best be delineated by the distinction between its intelligent methodology and its imperious clinging to reason’s quest for certainty. Science’s neglect (a neglect that is philosophical) of the connection of its objects with the affairs of primary lived experience thereby resulted in a dichotomous picture of the world, a picture of objects “indifferent to human interests because it is wholly apart from experience” (Dewey, p. 13). Intelligence, on the other hand, represents a way of knowing in a world that provides no certainty. It is, as Dewey (1929) says,

associated with judgment; that is, with selection and arrangement of means to effect consequences and with choice of what we take as our ends. A man is intelligent not in virtue of having reason which grasps first and indemonstrable truths about fixed principles in order to reason deductively from them to the particulars which they govern, but in virtue of his capacity to estimate the possibilities of a situation and to act in accordance with this estimate. In the large sense of the term, intelligence is as practical as reason is theoretical. (p. 170)

The necessity, therefore, of trading a loss of theoretical certainty for a gain in practical judgment gives “intelligence a foothold and a function within nature which ‘reason’ never possessed” (Dewey, p. 170). Reason, as it came to be understood in most philosophical thinking (principally in its Aristotelian, Cartesian, and Kantian expressions), was always a mere spectator outside of nature and therefore could never, in principle, participate in nature’s changes.

If science engaged the world of change by stripping nature of its qualities, and if this stripping of qualities is what lent a potential increase of value and control to human experience, then science undermined its power only insofar as it conflated experience in its integrity with knowing. We begin to see Dewey’s alternative philosophical conception taking shape when he says:

If and as far as the qualitative world was taken to be an object of knowledge, and not of experience in some other form than knowing, and as far as knowing was held to be the standard or sole valid mode of experiencing, the substitution of Newtonian for Greek science (the latter being but a rationalized arrangement of the qualitatively enjoyed world of direct experience) signified that the properties that render the world one of delight, admiration, and esteem have been done away with. There is, however, another interpretation possible. A philosophy which holds that we experience things as they really are apart from knowing, and that knowledge is a mode of experiencing things which facilitates control of objects for purposes of non-cognitive experiences, will come to another conclusion.

(Dewey, 1929, p. 79)

Science, properly conceived, is not (or should not be) about denying the relevance of primary qualities within nature. Scientific investigation simply sets aside concern with immediate qualities in order to get at their underlying relations. Immediate quality is in this sense an effect of underlying relations. Knowing these relations could afford science a greater degree of control over effects as well as expand their variety in positive and purposive ways. These underlying relations, therefore, are “hardly a competitor to the thing itself” (Dewey, 1929, p. 105). To discover the underlying objective relations that lead to certain qualitative effects is not logically to banish those effects from existence. It is simply determining how and why a given effect at a given time has *that* particular quality. Science’s knowledge is thus instrumental, and this instrumental knowledge cannot replace that which is noncognitively had, that which is immediately perceived and enjoyed or suffered, with something wholly derivative and secondary. That is, there is no mere replacing of one state (immediate/precognitive) with another (reflective/cognitive). Rather, there is a change of meaning within the whole context in which reflection draws immediate qualities into dynamic relations hitherto unacknowledged. Such discriminations, necessary as they are, nonetheless arise from the primary context, the integral practical context, and it is this context that must be returned to in order to effectively gauge consequences. Theory is thus itself a form of practice for Dewey.

We can get at this complexity if we understand with Dewey that the process of knowing is a matter of predication, that is, a propositional mode having subject-predicate form. Knowing thus “marks an attempt to make a qualitative whole which is directly and nonreflectively experienced into an object of thought for the sake of its own

development” (Dewey, 1930b/1960, p. 188). This is what *theory* does. Using the proposition “that thing is sweet,” Dewey explains:

A certain quality is experienced. When it is inquired into or thought (judged), it differentiates into “that thing” on the one hand, and “sweet” on the other. Both “that thing” and “sweet” are analytic of the quality, but are additive, synthetic, ampliative, with respect to each other. The copula “is” marks just the effect of this distinction upon the correlative terms. They mark something like a division of labor, and the copula marks the function or work done by the structures that exhibit the division of labor. To say that “that thing is sweet” means “that thing” will *sweeten* some other object, say coffee, or a batter of milk and eggs. The intent of sweetening something formed the ground for converting a dumb quality into an articulate object of thought. The logical force of the copula is always that of an active verb. It is merely a linguistic peculiarity, not a logical fact, that we say “that is red” instead of “that reddens,” either in the sense of growing, becoming, red, or in the sense of making something else red. Even linguistically our “is” is a weakened form of an active verb signifying “stays” or “stands.” (Dewey, pp. 188-189)

The quality of a thing is thus a result of the relations it sustains. Human experience of the world adds a level of complication to the implicit potentialities within nature. The difficulties that attend the problem of predication, therefore, are the result of a long epistemological tradition that supposes that terms and their connections have meaning apart from their implications within organic lived experience. The only alternative to this supposition, says Dewey, “is the recognition that the object of thought, designated

propositionally, is a quality that is first directly and unreflectively experienced or had....it forms that to which all objects of thought refer...it is the big, buzzing, blooming confusion of which James wrote” (p. 189).

### **Living Metaphysics**

In the previous three sections I have provided a brief overview of Dewey’s historical analysis of some of the principle epistemological and metaphysical issues that are at stake in his philosophy overall—indeed, for which his conception of philosophy itself is at stake. My primary target in this historical overview has been epistemological in scope. That is, by indicating some of the salient evolutionary factors in the historical development of science, I have hopefully also indicated, through the connection of knowledge to human experience, a sense of Dewey’s radical natural organicism. At this point I would like to explore this organicism and locate its expression in Dewey’s reconstructed metaphysics, providing an enlivened sense of some of the implications of the foregoing epistemological considerations. In this way a clearer picture of Dewey’s larger pragmatic project should start to emerge.

To begin, it cannot be stressed enough the extent to which Dewey inverted the traditional philosophical priorities pertaining to metaphysics. We can start to get at this by stating what his metaphysics was not. It was not an attempt to get beyond the physical, nor was it an attempt to situate “being” in some atemporal suprasensible realm. If anywhere, “being” occurs within primary experience, within the day-to-day realities of lived life. Dewey did not seek to establish a neutral Archimedean standing point from which to view reality in an untainted way—to establish the absolute ultimate traits of what could be considered really real. Dewey was also uninterested in building the kinds



of metaphysical systems that philosophers in the past thought possible. As Boisvert (1998) points out in this regard, highlighting Dewey's metaphysics as a kind of mapping project rather than as a kind of system building:

Philosophical systems, since Descartes, have sought to discover a central, unassailable starting point (sense data, atoms, protocol sentences, innate ideas) upon which can be erected a logically consistent, rigorously developed system. The guiding image has been that of an edifice meticulously constructed upon the single foundation. (p. 150)

It may appear, then, absent any kind of transcendental or absolute foundational goal that Dewey did away with metaphysics altogether—and, indeed, from the perspective of much traditional philosophy, he did. But Dewey never was one to abandon older ways root and branch. His was always a tempered criticism that recognized strengths as well as weaknesses in past modes of thought. So, for example, when it came to his understanding of the Greek inheritance (outlined above), his metaphysics retained virtually nothing of the Platonic longing for otherworldly perfection, its hierarchical mode. Yet, in both Plato's and Aristotle's ancient wisdom, Dewey would continue to appreciate the generous and inclusive scope of their metaphysics, recognizing that even their "highest flight[s] of metaphysics always terminated with a social and practical turn" (Dewey, 1930a/1960, p. 13). Even Kant's revolution, which consisted in an attack on earlier metaphysical systems, could not avoid artificial hierarchies and ended up establishing free-floating "reason" as categorically separate from the world of sensation, in essence reversing the old hierarchy of metaphysics and epistemology. The seemingly intractable dualisms that

Kant's revolution instantiated was what Dewey's metaphysics sought to supersede through a new and more pragmatic revolution.

Needless to say, Dewey was quite conscious of the realism/idealism debates generated by Kant's legacy of dualisms and was early on quite sympathetic to Hegel's subsequent attempts at organic reintegration of many of those dualisms. But Hegel's own dialectical syntheses inhered in a strong (absolutistic) idealism. This clearly resonated with the early Dewey's spiritual questioning. Dewey wrote that Hegel's philosophy satisfied

a demand for unification that was doubtless an intense emotional craving, and yet was a hunger that only an intellectualized subject-matter could satisfy. It is more than difficult, it is impossible, to recover that early mood. But the sense of divisions and separations that were, I suppose, borne in upon me as a consequence of a heritage of New England culture, divisions by way of isolation of self from the world, of soul from body, of nature from God, brought a painful oppression—or, rather, they were an inward laceration. (Dewey, 1930a/1960, p. 10)

Hegel, as a post-Kantian philosopher, thus offered syntheses that rehumanized the world against Kant's a priori transcendental ego, and this appealed to the early Dewey's own yearning for unification. Through his collapsing of so many dividing walls, Hegel provided Dewey with an intense spiritual liberation. Yet, Dewey's metaphysics as it came to develop could not have survived had it retained solely its Hegelian deposit, no matter how much that deposit invigorated the younger Dewey and even necessitated his eventual and more mature metaphysics. As Dewey started to drift further from Hegel's strong idealism so too did Dewey drift from idealistic metaphysics. His early philosophy of

immanence (his particular neo-Hegelianism) which sought to unify organic selves with an absolutized uber-self, nature with spirit (in essence, Dewey's own quasi-theistic or pan-psychist metaphysics), slowly was to give way to his concern with science wherein metaphysical considerations gave way to (or at least had to make room for) more practical methodological considerations. Other influences were shaping Dewey's thinking as well.

Key among these early influences was Dewey's move away from the purely ideational processes of Hegel to the more naturalistic processes of Darwin. Through Darwin's attack on the notion of fixed species in biology, Dewey found a naturalistic mode for attacking fixities of all kinds, not the least of which entailed philosophers' proclivities for finding or establishing fixed truth. Compelled by Hegel's unifying synthetic, Dewey came to appreciate in Darwin's work a way of grounding Hegel's idealistic excesses via emergent and process-oriented inquiry. Rooting intelligence in the world of flux and change spelled a key emancipation from a long philosophical tradition that sought after fixed origins as well as fixed finalities. Life's qualities and the values that arose through the very act of living sounded a death-knell for the kind of teleology that located every earthly human action under the dispensation of remote causes and eventual absolute final goals. Dewey thus arrived at a more radically naturalized sense of the importance of temporality, a sense that was able to exceed Hegel's particular dynamism. As Dewey says, this radical shift in perspective is

from the wholesale 'essence back of special changes to the question of how special changes serve and defeat concrete purposes; shifts from an intelligence that shaped things once and for all to the particular intelligences which things are even

now shaping; shifts from an ultimate goal of good to the direct increments of justice and happiness that intelligent administration of existent conditions may beget and that present carelessness or stupidity will destroy or forego. (Dewey, 1909, p.11)

There can be no clearer statement of Dewey's intention to naturalize and reanimate (that is, to make practical) our *human* world, to make it safe for thoroughly grounded modes of inquiry. Dewey's naturalized and temporalized organicism also became integral to a vital realignment and reconstruction of his metaphysics.

The reevaluation of a viable metaphysics came by way of Dewey's association with a new colleague, Frederick Woodbridge, at Columbia in 1905.<sup>1</sup> Woodbridge would prove a deep influence on Dewey's thinking about metaphysics, leading Dewey to consider seriously a uniting of his own scientific (methodological) considerations with the possibility of an empirically situated metaphysics. The mature metaphysics that Dewey would come to develop, different from his earlier idealistic metaphysics and hinted at in the above three sections, would place Dewey as one of pragmatism's ablest expositors. It can be argued that this is a position he still retains, the radical nature of which is still being mined these many years later. So what is it that makes Dewey's metaphysics different and viable, if, indeed, it can be considered as such? This dimension of Dewey's work has not been without its controversies over the years. In his own day, Dewey squared off against many critics<sup>2</sup> and even today there is still vocal reaction to Dewey's metaphysics, not the least of which comes from the neo-pragmatic ruminations by Richard Rorty himself. That Dewey's metaphysics can be tricky and elusive to grasp, even perhaps in some ways problematic, does not lessen the benefit of trying to

understand his rich thought in this regard. Typically scholars will bring Dewey's metaphysical position alive by highlighting the arguments against him and then showing how Dewey deftly outmaneuvers and undermines each in turn. The only critic of Dewey's metaphysics I want to deal with is Rorty. He stands sufficiently, I think, as proxy for the many others. But I plan to take up that criticism explicitly in later chapters. At this point I wish only to look at Dewey's own position, at what makes his metaphysics radical and revolutionary, and when I come to take up Rorty's counterposition later, a fuller illumination should start to emerge.

If we return to the experiential account highlighted in the previous three sections, we begin to see the vital role experience plays in Dewey's overall philosophy. It's as though Dewey's own "inward laceration" is an expression of the kind of laceration he sees in the world. His pragmatic surgery uses experience as the thread for closing this old wound. But experience was not without its problems for Dewey. Many of his major works had the word "experience" in their titles, for example, *Experience and Nature* (1925), *Art as Experience* (1934), and *Experience and Education* (1938). Yet, late in his life, as he ruminated on the word in the context of his metaphysical magnum opus, *Experience and Nature* (1925/1994), he regrets having used the word at all, determining that he should have used the word "culture" instead.<sup>3</sup> Whether the word "culture" would actually have fared any better is difficult to determine. I would think it doubtful. At any rate, there is little denying from our own vantage point that "experience" was the most central concept in Dewey's entire philosophy and integral to his metaphysics. For Dewey, experience is what occurs as a result of the transactions between living organisms and their environment. Dewey had attacked the Kantian dualism in which experience was

seen as a veil shutting persons off from nature, in which there was a world-in-itself (nature) that could not be known and a world created by our senses, *representing* the only world to which we could have access. Collapsing this dualism entailed abandoning any notion of a static and wholly separate reality. Experience thus *was* the indication that reality was a time-bound and dynamic process imbued affair.

The reconnection of philosophy to lived experience and our modes of knowing is thus of paramount importance and can be achieved only if we give up the epistemological conception that “being” and “being known” are one and the same thing. Recognizing that experience involves a relationship in which experiencing subject and experienced object inhere in one another highlights Dewey’s metaphysics as situating experience *in* nature and not apart from it. Knowledge comes by way of the connection between subject and object, not by way of their separation. It is neither solely a private (purely individual) subjective affair (idealism), nor is it solely an external (purely abstracted material) objective affair (realism), if that affair be construed as a mind transparently and passively receiving the objects of the world in an unmediated way. Thinking (inquiry) as a mode of initiating and embodying our experience within the world, that is, as a mode of mediating nature’s intimations and penetrating nature’s depths, is thus construed as a way of making what is dumb or only implicit within nature (its quality) manifest through mediated articulation and reflection. The world changes by virtue of our experience within it, and our experience necessarily implicates us as reflective beings capable by virtue of our reflective habits of expanding experience’s potential, thereby enriching meaning within our world.

To be engaged in thinking is “to participate,” as Kaufman-Osborn (1991) makes clear, “in the activity through which some things, issues, and affairs become apparent within experience, while others recede” (p. 107). Kaufman-Osborn goes on to show quite nicely the way in which Dewey confounds the traditional appearance-reality dualism:

The term “appearance,” consequently, does not refer, as it did in classic and medieval philosophy, to a realm of being infected with the defect of non-Being. Nor does it refer, as it does in modern epistemology, to the ontological gulf between things as they really are and things as they seem to be, where “seeming” designates what exists only in virtue of the subject’s distortion of the single kind of Being that remains when the ancients’ graded cosmos is denied its sense. Neither of these two understandings can acknowledge that things appear and disappear only because temporality, altering the relations among nature’s interwoven affairs, presses experience past what would otherwise be contemplation’s blank stare. The term “appearance,” accordingly, denotes the fact that at any given moment in time some matters are showing and hence conspicuous, while others are latent and hence withdrawn. Its antonym is not reality but disappearance. (p. 107)

So construed, our experience is an embodied, time-bound transaction within nature.

When reason severs experience from nature, as Dewey makes clear,

“experience itself becomes reduced to the mere process of experiencing, and experiencing is therefore treated as if it were also complete in itself. We get the absurdity of an experiencing which experiences only itself, states and processes of consciousness, instead of the things of nature” (Dewey, 1925/1994, p. 13).

Here we have the baggage of a faulty metaphysics that makes theory alone the guardian of meaning and values in timeless abstraction. Such a faulty metaphysics takes experience's goals (ideals), its ends and outcomes, and turn them into absolute and timeless antecedent existences, thus providing experience its causal justification. In short, there is a denial of the temporal quality of reality. As Dewey says,

“such a theory is bound to regard things which are causally explanatory as superior to results and outcomes; for the temporal dependence of the latter cannot be disguised, while ‘causes’ can be plausibly converted into independent beings, or laws, or other non-temporal forms” (Dewey, p. 124).

Human values, represented as timeless absolute ends, are thus dialectically whisked away to a realm safe from the temporal flux of the lived world.

One of the single most important philosophical moves that Dewey makes with regard to his pragmatic (naturalized) metaphysics is to make a distinction between primary and secondary modes of experience. I have spoken briefly to this above, but it is now necessary to rehearse in more detail what this distinction entails. It is necessary for a proper alignment of Dewey's metaphysics to his broader philosophy. One of Dewey's most astute readers, John E. Smith (1978), points out that it is easy to conflate what Dewey means by philosophy with what he means by metaphysics. The distinction, however, is an important one. As Smith states, metaphysics for Dewey meant “reflective analysis aimed at disclosing what he called the ‘generic traits of existence’ or the pervasive features which manifest themselves in *every* specific subject matter which defines or marks off a distinct field of inquiry” (p. 143). While each subject matter (say, insects as the subject matter of entomology) is distinct and individual, there are



nonetheless generic traits that cut across all discrete subject matters, thus forming the subject matter of metaphysics itself. Philosophy, alternatively, is to be understood as a

“reflective enterprise of *criticism* pointing in two directions. There is first the task of interpreting or functioning as a liaison between the technical languages of special areas of inquiry, and secondly, a focusing on the goods or values ingredient in science, art and social intercourse” (Smith, 1978, p. 143).

This was Dewey’s way of keeping philosophy aligned with its traditional (if not etymological) function, that is, as being concerned with wisdom. Wisdom, as such, is not reducible to knowledge, but nor can knowledge be deemed merely the province of science and thus dispensable for philosophy. Dewey’s organicism is root and branch. His metaphysics, then, becomes what Dewey characterizes as a “ground-map of the province of criticism” (Dewey, 1925/1994, p. 334). If philosophy has a central critical function, as it must, then metaphysics in Dewey’s lights becomes a way literally of grounding criticism. It was also his way of accessing the richer dimensions of experience and restoring reality to all of them as such.

Those familiar in any way with the history of metaphysics will immediately call into question Dewey’s delineation of the generic traits of existence. This facet of his work sounds suspiciously like good-ole-fashioned metaphysics, but is it? Well, to the extent that Dewey is positing generic traits across distinct subject matters, he is in fact engaging in a traditional *style* of metaphysics, but to the extent that such traits are not only practical, but also thoroughly practicable, the *substance* of his metaphysics is revolutionary. He is, in fact, delineating the empirical space (i.e., the concrete practical sphere) in which science and philosophy are blooded, so to speak, and where knowledge

and wisdom are operant in close correspondence, and in which experience manifests the possibilities of intelligent inquiry. Experience is a real part of the world. A quick look at some of the generic traits themselves makes it clear that Dewey had no otherworldly aspirations. A short list includes: stability, continuity, repetition, interaction, change, openness, possibility, irregularity, quality, variation, certainty, and precariousness, to name only a few. Such a list is also and always provisional. How could it be anything other than provisional?<sup>4</sup> But to get back to the way in which Dewey's conception of experience is integral to his existential metaphysics, the way in which all of his metaphysics inheres in a kind of logicability, we need to grasp what he meant by an "indeterminate situation."

Dewey's Darwinism is, in effect, a radical anti-Cartesianism. Integral to this Darwinism is Dewey's positing of an "indeterminate situation." Margolis (2002) highlights this aspect of Dewey's work, stating that "[Dewey's] invention of the 'indeterminate situation' was pragmatism at its leanest and existential best" (p. 116). With this important and compact clue, we can start to gauge the way Dewey effectively bypassed the realism/idealism debates that still plague analytic philosophy today. His anti-Cartesianism as it is expressed via his working out of an "indeterminate situation," fuelled by his Darwinian turn, still places Dewey's experiential account as thoroughly radical in scope. Margolis, in five compact points, captures this radical point:

[Dewey] maintains that "experience" is a real ingredient in the world; that it never constitutes or constructs the "independent world"; that the world, when "known," is known under the condition of the inseparability of the subjective and the objective; that knowledge of the world emerges from some real but non-cognitive

experience (or “ingredient”) of (and in) the world; and that whatever we view as the features of the “independent” world are, epistemically but not ontically, artifacts of our evidentiary sources. (p. 112)

This is as compact a statement as you can get for properly situating Dewey’s metaphysics, which in the end, entails and endorses a form of pragmatic constructive realism.

Dewey’s genius, and the genius, I think, of his metaphysics, was to establish a realist footing for emergent (rather than teleological) cognition. This realist ground was what he called an “indeterminate situation.” An indeterminate situation is a natural event. It is also the situational space from which all inquiry develops (including scientific). The oft-cited passage from Dewey’s (1938a) *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* reads as such: “*Inquiry is the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole*” [italics in the original] (p. 108). What is important is that the “indeterminate situation” is noncognitive, but as a natural event (Dewey’s vital intuition of existential import), it can gradually transform into a problematic situation. A problematic situation arises out of an “indeterminate situation” that has evolved an existential impasse for the human subject, a felt quality that something is out of sorts.

Once a situation is *felt* (not known) to be problematic the impetus for inquiry is established from which future cognition (potential knowing) emerges. Of importance, if there was no “indeterminate situation” noncognitively *had* (rather than known)—which already establishes the brute embodied integrity of primary experience—then cognition

(secondary experience) would retain a merely Cartesian (and arbitrary) facultative status. As Margolis (2002) points out, this noncognitive ground has realist status that does not privilege the cognitive as a starting point for inquiry. To note this fact,

is to see at once the advantage of Dewey's characterization of knowledge in terms of practical know-how, of *savoir-faire*, rather than of *savoir*. In effect, theoretical knowledge is itself a form of practical knowledge, and its realist standing depends on the continuum that runs, *via* a "problematic situation," from non-cognitive impasses engaging our animal existence, the emergence of animal cognition from *that*, and the emergence of linguistically structured cognition (and science) from *that*. In this way, Dewey deftly obviates the entire Cartesian aporia. (p. 113)

What I hope is becoming clear is that Dewey's metaphysics is itself a form of inquiry and can make sense only if it starts out of actually living existential situations. Dewey's metaphysics is functional to the extent that it never starts with theory, but rather what Margolis calls "the non-cognitive conditions of animal survival" (p. 113). All of the provisional generic traits that Dewey established as being indicative of this more Darwinian existential reality established his own metaphysics as thoroughly pragmatic and progressive. It allowed for the bravest kind of philosophical inquiry—inquiry *as* criticism—and to Dewey being able to supply new kinds of questions, effectively placing philosophy in a more fruitful relation to human life as it is actually lived. He suggests the following as,

a first-rate test of the value of any philosophy which is offered us: Does it end in conclusions which, when they are referred back to ordinary life-experiences and their predicaments, render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make

our dealings with them more fruitful? Or does it terminate in rendering the things of ordinary experience more opaque than they were before, and in depriving them of having in “reality” even the significance they had previously seemed to have? Does it yield the enrichment and increase of power of ordinary things which the results of physical science afford when applied in every-day affairs? Or does it become a mystery that these ordinary things should be what they are; and are philosophic concepts left to dwell in separation in some technical realm of their own? (Dewey, 1925/1994, pp. 9-10)

Clearly, Dewey’s metaphysics entwines epistemological considerations and makes possible an empirically realist philosophy that retains the wisdom that comes by way of the recognition of the radical contingency that is all of our lives.

We shall see how this holds up as we move to an exploration of Richard Rorty’s brand of pragmatism. I will maintain that the majority of what makes both Dewey’s and Rorty’s pragmatisms pragmatic is their strong antiepistemological and antimetaphysical stances—anti, that is, in the sense necessary to a thoroughgoing pragmatism that has turned sharply against absolutist conceptions of Truth. But clearly, as I hope I have shown, Dewey’s reconstructive impulse mitigates against total and complete abandonment, whereas Rorty is far less patient. Yet, it may turn out that the differences between the two pragmatists are not as severe as many expositors of their works have maintained. It may be merely a linguistic peculiarity that one says it this way while the other says it that way and a close look at their respective ways of stating their pragmatic positions may indicate that they are saying more or less the same thing—differently. The way I propose to make this option a practical and viable one will entail indicating the

plausibility that Rorty's linguistified pragmatism is indeed experiential through and through, that the so-called "linguistic turn" never could make much sense as a turn away from experience, even if it was a turn away from a preference for *talking* about experience. There is a great deal at stake, especially for Rorty's philosophy, if my hunch is correct. In the next chapter, however, I turn to an introductory overview of Rorty's pragmatism, taking my lead from his own autobiographical account. In the following chapter after that, I will stick with Rorty and use his particular (hard) turn against absolutist conceptions of Truth as more or less an expression of pragmatism's turn generally and as being in line with Dewey's turn specifically. I am interested in articulating the mood that such a turning has generated, and so Rorty will stand in as my effective voice for other pragmatists old and new.

### **CHAPTER THREE: THE NEO-PRAGMATISM OF RICHARD RORTY**

In the previous chapter I have provided a brief survey of Dewey's interpretation of the scientific legacy within the Western philosophical tradition and philosophy's role therein—his (and pragmatism's) epistemological and metaphysical inheritance. I also indicated the ways in which Dewey's pragmatic philosophy turned against many of the central epistemological and metaphysical premises bolstering that tradition while maintaining a pragmatic and reconstructive desire to rework certain elements of that tradition to fit what Dewey saw as the major sea-changes occurring all around him, changes highlighting the growing (and existentially weighty) awareness of the “unrelieved contingency” of the world and our station in it. Clearly, Dewey's pragmatic reworking of metaphysics, necessitated by the recognition of a general philosophical shift from a classical to a Cartesian and finally to a Darwinian worldview, was itself a result of his radical critique of the epistemological tradition, which provided the space for his thoroughly experiential core focus. This further entailed, as a result of that focus new, yet still empirically valid methods for inquiry. I have been able only to hint at Dewey's fully fleshed theory of inquiry (itself a fully fleshed theory of practice)<sup>1</sup> via my focus on his pragmatic epistemological and metaphysical reforming of the Western tradition. In turning to Richard Rorty's strong antiepistemological and antimetaphysical version of pragmatism, I will highlight the extent to which his version is working within a Deweyan pragmatic framework as well as at counterpurposes to it. But first I would like to begin, by way of introduction to Rorty's pragmatism, with an overview and analysis of his only autobiographical work, “Trotsky and The Wild Orchids” written in 1993. The clues offered in this personal statement by Rorty are, on the whole, enlightening for his overall

philosophical project. I shall then progress in the next chapter to an explicit analysis of his strong antiepistemological and antimetaphysical position.

### **Rorty on Reality and Justice**

It was perhaps necessary that by the 1990s Richard Rorty should publish an autobiographical piece. He was by then receiving varied and often hostile criticism from all points along the political and philosophical spectrum—enough, anyway, to warrant some kind of a more personal response. The result of that effort was his autobiographical “Trotsky and The Wild Orchids” (1999b) wherein Rorty sought to clarify for his largely disgruntled readership that he did indeed have reasons (or motivations) for writing the way he did and espousing the positions he supported, philosophical and otherwise.

Rorty was born in 1931 to parents who were “Trotskyites,” a tag given them by the *Daily Worker*, and one that they “more or less accepted” after having abandoned the American Communist Party in 1932. His father was actively involved with the Dewey Commission of Inquiry into the Moscow Trials, and he was nearly able to accompany Dewey to Mexico to act in a public relations capacity for the Commission that Dewey chaired. Rorty was an only child and by the age of 12 was showing all the signs of preteen precociousness. With a reading repertoire that would make today’s Game Boy generation’s heads spin, Rorty was well on his way at that ripe young age of starting to work out what would become central philosophical issues in his later adult life. In a way, adulthood came early for Rorty, not necessarily because of the fact that by the age of 15 he had enrolled into the University of Chicago, but more likely because of the playground bullies who drove him there to begin with. At any rate, by age 12 Rorty knew “that all decent people were, if not Trotskyites, at least socialists” (Rorty, 1999b, p. 6). Working



during the winter of his 12th year as an unpaid office boy delivering drafts of press releases on behalf the Workers' Defense League (where his parents worked), Rorty was early on to become well versed in the leftist documents that he was charged with delivering, learning from what he read therein "that the point of being human was to spend one's life fighting social injustice" (Rorty, p. 6). So in terms of Rorty's formative development we learn that a concern for social justice played a vital role.

Another important formative feature in the young Rorty had nothing to do with social justice per se (though in the light of his advanced philosophical work we might come to question this assumption) and everything to do with what he refers to as "private, weird, snobbish, incommunicable interests" (Rorty, p. 6). When he was not on the subway reading leftist literature about the necessity of liberating the weak from the strong (or physically experiencing such a necessity on the playground), he was engaged in more Romantic pursuits consisting primarily of a fascination with the wild orchids that grew in the mountains of northwest New Jersey. He had at that time no idea why they were so important to him, but he was aware that they were significant of something different from his other, more political exposures, sensing in fact that this "orchidaceous" preoccupation was "socially useless." And yet he had read and reread a nineteenth century book on the botany of orchids that grew in the eastern U.S., and had located 17 of the 40 species that grew there—no small feat. These "Wordsworthian moments," as he referred to them, in the woods around Flatbrookville offered the young Rorty what he referred to as "something numinous, something of ineffable importance" (Rorty, p. 8); (bearing a striking tonal resemblance to Wordsworth's own "Lines: Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," in which he writes of "a sense sublime/Of something far more deeply

interfused”).<sup>2</sup> By age 15 when Rorty headed off to the University of Chicago, he had the inklings of a project in mind—namely finding a way to (borrowing Yeats’s phrase) “hold reality and justice in a single vision.” “Reality” for Rorty here indicated those Wordsworthian moments of private ineffable bliss while “justice” indicated his leftist upbringing and his yearning to publicly do his part to help, generally speaking, save the poor and weak oppressed from the rich and powerful bullies. Another way of putting this is to say that Rorty was interested in holding both his *private* and *public* interests in a single vision. Surely, a solid university education steeped in philosophy would show the way. That Rorty would, after years of philosophical study find no plausible way of uniting reality and justice into a single vision becomes central to his pragmatism and all his mature work, as we shall see later.

At the University of Chicago in 1946 there had occurred a sharp turn against the “quaint” progressivist pragmatism of John Dewey (who up to that point was widely considered to be America’s philosopher), and Rorty’s teachers, who included Mortimer Adler and Richard McKeon, as well as “awesomely learned refugees from Hitler” like Leo Strauss, all thought and taught that Dewey was not deep enough or weighty enough a thinker to handle the evils of Nazism. They all were of the academic disposition that

to say, as Dewey did, that ‘growth itself is the only moral end’, left one without a criterion for growth, and thus with no way to refute Hitler’s suggestion that Germany had ‘grown’ under his rule....Only an appeal to something eternal, absolute, and good – like the God of St. Thomas, or ‘nature of human beings’ described by Aristotle – would permit one to answer the Nazis, to justify one’s choice of social democracy over fascism.” (Rorty, 1999b, p. 8)

Influenced by this take on his own pragmatic inheritance, Rorty would spend the next 5 years moving away from the philosophically progressivist leanings of his parents, instead trying “very much to be some kind of Platonist.” He determined that becoming a good philosopher meant getting to the “top of Plato’s ‘divided line’ – the place ‘beyond hypotheses’ where the full sunshine of Truth irradiates the purified soul of the wise and good: an Elysian field dotted with immaterial orchids” (Rorty, p. 9). We are moved, then, to the center of Rorty’s early philosophical yearnings—his first Platonic yearnings for certainty (where many a great philosopher has started off on what Rorty would later come to consider a futile journey). As it turned out, Rorty was unable to hold on to any serious convictions about achieving his goal of holding reality and justice in a single vision by following Plato. He simply could not see how one could achieve “noncircular justifications” and thus defensible certainty in arguing for one’s most cherished philosophical convictions. As Rorty states:

The more philosophers I read, the clearer it seemed that each of them could carry their views back to first principles which were incompatible with the first principles of their opponents, and that none of them ever got to that fabled place ‘beyond hypotheses.’ (p. 10)

It was dawning for Rorty that there was no neutral standpoint from which to evaluate alternative philosophers’ “first principles,” and so the “whole Socratic-Platonic idea of replacing passion by reason, seemed not to make much sense” (Rorty, p. 10). Shifting away from the Platonic quest for certainty, Rorty still felt optimistic that he could defend philosophical truth (which could effectively unite his reality and justice distinctions) by looking to the test of coherence, which entailed avoiding contradictions. As soon as he

realized, however, that the best way to avoid a contradiction was to make a distinction (St Thomas's classic advice) and thereby "wriggle out of [any] dialectical corner" you might find yourself backed into, philosophy became merely a game of exhibiting one's talents in this regard, a talent, as Rorty points out, for "redescription" (Rorty, p. 10). That is, if you could just redescribe the terrain "in such a way that the terms used by your opponent would seem irrelevant, or question-begging, or jejune," then you would effectively win (Rorty, p. 10). Rorty quickly realized that good philosophers were good at this kind of gamesmanship, and as such, he realized he was a very good philosopher indeed. But, at the same time, it was not a skill (though perhaps an important skill for a professional philosopher) that seemed to be able to deliver him any further down the road of achieving his sought-after goal. At this point Rorty found himself thoroughly disillusioned.

It was in this disillusioned state that Rorty left Chicago to pursue a Ph.D. at Yale, and he did so wondering what philosophy could be good for, if anything. He soon discovered Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* (a novel, he says, that effectively took the place of his beloved orchids), and in these books Rorty was reenergized with a sense that philosophy could still be useful. Both Hegel and Proust shared, in their own ways, a radical sense of "irreducible temporality," and, as such, were strong anti-Platonists, which Rorty knew he must also be. The otherworldly yearning for Platonic certainty had proved a sham, but there was this lived-in world, and suddenly the "skill" of out-redescribing your philosophical opponent could be put to use in redescribing also your philosophical predecessors. Hegel's historicist notion that the best that philosophy could do was to "hold its own time in thought" might just prove good enough to make philosophy a socially useful enterprise after all, in spite of Hegel's

Absolute Spirit supposedly hanging over all history. Rorty thought that the strong historicist parts of Hegel's philosophy and Proust's novel opened up the kind of space necessary for weaving the "conceptual fabric of a freer, better, more just society" (Rorty, 1999b, p. 11). At any rate, philosophy was now rejuvenated for Rorty. Hegel and Proust seemed each to be able "to weave everything they encountered into a narrative without asking that that narrative have a moral, and without asking how that narrative would appear under the aspect of eternity" (Rorty, p. 11). This was a complete about-face for Rorty and represented the return of that pragmatism respected by his parents, as well as his strong turn against Platonism that would evolve over the next 20 years.

Over the ensuing 20 years Rorty slowly returned to Dewey, who was no longer the soft, irrelevant philosopher peddled by Adler, McKeon, and others, but rather a serious philosopher who had learned all there was to learn from Hegel about giving up on the quests for eternity and certainty, but who had also "immuniz[ed] himself against pantheism by taking Darwin seriously" (Rorty, 1999b, p. 12).<sup>3</sup> Rorty came to read Continental philosophers as well, particularly Derrida, who led him back to a serious reading of Heidegger. Wittgenstein was also a source of inspiration for Rorty, and it struck him just how much Dewey, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein resembled one another when it came to their criticisms of the Cartesian tradition with its mind-body problem. This led to the writing of Rorty's (1979) classic and controversial book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. There, Rorty worked out a great number of philosophical issues he had been thinking about (the mind-body problem, philosophy of language problems about truth and meaning, the contributions of Thomas Kuhn's philosophy of science, etc.). The book was not well received by philosophers, particularly analytic philosophers, as many

viewed it as an attack on their profession. Certainly, it was in many ways just such an attack, but that has a great deal to do with Rorty's strong anti-Platonism and strong Pragmatism, as well as with what Rorty saw as the internal self-devaluating of analytic philosophy (it had been busy, with eloquence and grace, undermining itself via the logic of its own instruments for the better half of the twentieth century).<sup>4</sup> But in terms of Rorty's long sought-after goal, what he originally went to university to fulfill, this book did little if anything to advance the desired unification of reality and justice. Indeed, Rorty had decided that such a desire was in fact a mistake, infected as it was with a Platonic longing. Religion represented the only sort of "nonargumentative faith" that might do the trick, but Rorty was a devout secularist. What had originally been a desire to unite now became a desire to separate, and his book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989) was written to say something about "what intellectual life might be like if one could manage to give up the Platonic attempt to hold reality and justice in a single vision" (Rorty, 1999b, p. 13). This then becomes the central theme of "Trotsky and Wild Orchids"—the movement away from a unified vision toward the necessity of the separation of the public and the private spheres, the political from the philosophical and idiosyncratic.

To return, then, to what motivated Rorty to write this autobiographical piece, it would appear that the at times harsh criticisms arising from both the left and the right in response to Rorty's writings up to that point were not the primary reason. Rorty actually considered this a more or less healthy sign that he was in fact in good shape. Certainly, such criticisms would not have been enough to warrant an autobiographical response (Rorty I think was, like Dewey, probably uncomfortable with the task). An admirable

aspect of Rorty's body of work is the way he handles his critics with grace and patience, responding in turn to most of his serious critics (who more typically are from the left than from the right) with well thought out and well crafted responses.<sup>5</sup> His graciousness in this regard puts him in league with his hero John Dewey, who was also very responsive to his critics. In this sense Rorty is every bit a good conversationalist and a good scholar. What in fact necessitates in him an autobiographical response is a growing chorus that he is just in this business to be frivolous (not, after all, an impossibility in these so-called postmodern times). Rorty is indeed candid when he writes that it hurts that there are those who think he will "say anything to get a gasp, that [he is] just amusing [himself] by contradicting everybody else" (Rorty, 1999b, p. 5). Why, then, does Rorty not just ignore this particular line of criticism? Why does he feel compelled to respond to and get personal about what any close reader of his works must recognize as itself a frivolous accusation (though perhaps not frivolously made)? I think, in part anyway, that Rorty has, contrary to his early yearnings for unity, always advocated circumventing those numerous philosophical dead ends (the pursuit of absolute truth, the search for unassailable epistemological foundations, etc.) that are more or less wastes of energy, and one would have to say, from Rorty's perspective, frivolous pursuits. So, when the charge of frivolity is leveled against Rorty himself, it must sting a bit. On the more generous side, I think he feels compelled to respond autobiographically because he must recognize that when you shake up people's worlds, when you confront them with their own musty, antiquated purposes and propose better ways, none of which, by the way, can be objectively grounded or adhered to in light of rational first principles, well, people tend to get pretty edgy. And those on the right get edgier than those on the left. This is because

(to put the matter very simply) the right is traditionally conservative while the left is progressive. But even on the left, there is plenty of edginess, because they think this poetically revolutionary stance must have a concomitant revolutionary political stance, and for Rorty it simply does not! His sharp separation of philosophical from political matters (an expression of his broad separation of the public from the private spheres) throws curves at his readership left, right, and center, and garners his status as an elusive thinker. For example, Rorty tells us that some postmodernists “who initially took [his] enthusiasm for Derrida to mean that I must be on their political side decided, after discovering that my politics were pretty much those of Hubert Humphrey, that I must have sold out” (Rorty, p. 18).

So there is an elusive quality to Rorty’s works, or at least there is to those who are accustomed to reading others’ positions as needing to be based in strong arguments, which Rorty’s, again, are not. Arising out of Rorty’s “redescriptive” philosophy, the traditional argumentative approach is substantially weakened, and by way of that, so too is the very conception of philosophy. Rorty is not against argument per se, and if an argument proves fruitful in gaining agreement or solidarity with an interlocutor, then he will argue. But this kind of philosophical argumentation that Rorty advocates involves what he would consider rather mundane cases, quibbles within an already entrenched and more or less accepted vocabulary. Really interesting philosophy, which for Rorty is always revolutionary philosophy (keeping in mind that the same does not apply to politics), does not and should not rely on argumentation as a method of persuasion. Interesting philosophy “outflanks” old descriptions via redescription (keeping in mind the lesson he learned early on in university) by throwing something radically new out there to



an unsuspecting audience. An audience expecting a solid knockdown argument is an audience (or so Rorty would “argue”) who is really just looking for a variation on a theme, and nothing starkly new. This is an important point for Rorty. When you provide arguments, you risk becoming trapped in the very language game you’re trying to move beyond. As he says in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989):

On the view of philosophy which I am offering, philosophers should not be asked for arguments against, for example, the correspondence theory of truth or the idea of the “intrinsic nature of reality.” The trouble with arguments against the use of a familiar and time-honored vocabulary is that they are expected to be phrased in that very vocabulary. They are expected to show that central elements in that vocabulary are “inconsistent in their own terms” or that they “deconstruct themselves.” But that can never be shown. Any argument to the effect that our familiar use of a familiar term is incoherent, or empty, or confused, or vague, or “merely metaphorical” is bound to be inconclusive and question-begging....Interesting philosophy is rarely an examination of the pros and cons of a thesis. Usually it is, implicitly or explicitly, a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary which vaguely promises great things. (pp. 8-9)

One starts to get a sense of why certain “traditionally” trained philosophers get edgy. This is no less than a radical repositioning of what philosophical inquiry should be and what philosophy (if it can still be called that) might yet be good for. Philosophy, now as a vehicle of poetic self-creation, moves sharply from objectivist to historicist understanding and from scientific to literary modes of discourse. Yet, and this is important, Rorty *is* a

philosopher. Only he does not consider himself a philosopher in a philosophical culture, but rather a philosopher in a literary culture.<sup>6</sup> Culture has moved on, and philosophy is now one “literary” mode among others (like literature, science, history, biology, physics, and every other traditionally inscribed discipline one wishes to consider). The philosophical and educational ramifications of this will become more explicit later, but for now I want to stick to his autobiographical piece in order to begin developing more explicitly the tensive relationship between his notions of “reality” and “justice”—in other words, his distinction (can it be called a dualism?) of the public and private spheres.

This autobiographical account can be divided roughly in two halves—the public/political half and the private/philosophical half. In terms of the public/political part of Rorty’s account, the self-professed “ironist” (now an appropriate literary accoutrement for a philosopher) has gotten him into trouble with the intellectual world by offending, first, leftists who think his laid-back ironic liberalism is little more than a form of academic escapism while acting simultaneously as an apology for continued strands of American imperialism, based in “an odious ethos of ‘liberal individualism’” (Rorty, 1999b, p. 4). Rorty’s response to these leftist critics, promoters as he calls them, of the “America Sucks Sweepstakes,” is that he actually is advocating on behalf of a different kind of America, the other America that Whitman and Dewey saw “as opening a prospect on illimitable democratic vistas,” and that in spite of “present atrocities and vices, and despite its continuing eagerness to elect fools and knaves to high office—is a good example of the best kind of society so far invented” (Rorty, p. 4).

Critics from the right charge him with not basing his democratic aspirations in anything solid, for not having, that is, “Objectively Good” and “Rational First

Principles.” As a philosopher, these critics charge, he owes it “to tell the young that their society is not just one of the better ones so far contrived, but one which embodies Truth and Reason” (Rorty, 1999b, pp. 4-5). This left/right polarity amongst Rorty’s critics he further refines down to a culture war between “progressivist” and “orthodox” camps. He clearly aligns himself on the progressivist side:

I see the ‘orthodox’ (the people who think that hounding gays out of the military promotes traditional family values) as the same honest, decent, blinkered, disastrous people who voted for Hitler in 1933. I see the ‘progressivists’ as defining the only America I care about. (Rorty, p. 17)

This is the culture war that Rorty labels as being “important.” The stakes, indeed, are high for Rorty’s America in this battle, because for all of America’s faults, Rorty nonetheless thinks that its progressive movements over time (for example, the Bill of Rights, female suffrage, the New Deal, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the building of community colleges, civil rights legislation, the feminist movement, and the gay rights movement) indicate a trajectory of increasing tolerance and equality that is well worth continuing along. It is also important, because as an indication of his public/private split, such “progressive” movements are not and should not be made the expressive outcomes of “objectively good” and “rationale first principles.” Politically, then, Rorty is an advocate of *progress without principles*, and thus progress without philosophy inasmuch as establishing unassailable foundational principles (read as moral laws) has been a longstanding philosophical preoccupation.<sup>7</sup> If philosophy is to have anything whatsoever to do with progress in the future, it will not be under the misplaced tutelage of philosophical first (or last) principles. Still, this is a trickier point than it may at first

appear and will involve a brief analysis that moves away briefly (though not in spirit) from his autobiographical sketch.

Rorty is not dictating the end of all metaphysical speculation (which is the particular branch of philosophy concerned with discovering first and last principles of all kinds), or all traditional (epistemological and metaphysical) philosophical preoccupations. He may not explicitly engage in such pursuits himself, nor may his pragmatism endorse such pursuits as being of any value (he is in fact quite consistently outspoken against them), but he is not saying anything to the effect of “ban all such pursuits from here on in” or “philosophy as we know it must, at all costs, come to an end.” All such philosophical speculators and their speculations can now, as they ever have, take the stage and compete with other vocabularies, other language games, for future social utility, and if in some future time certain competitors fade from the stage and disappear, so be it (even if this includes Rorty himself). It will not, however, be due to the better argument, as has been suggested above. It is pointless to argue against the metaphysicians’ lofty speculations (Rorty can even accept them on occasion as a kind of spiritual salve). Better just to let them be in time and see how they fare. In a pragmatic literary culture, ideas come and go, only because in such a culture, temporality necessitates a horizontal spread of competing discourses (an integral component learned from Hegel and Proust, and it might be added, missed in his reading of Dewey) rather than what was in traditional cultures more vertical quests for changeless transcendence or absolute foundational depth. On the now horizontal plane, the antonym of *appearance* (say, on some stage of competing discourses) cannot properly be understood as *reality*, a central and persistent dualism (even still) of the *hierarchical* philosophical culture, but

rather, simply, *disappearance*, indicating temporality's spread.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, it is important to note that Rorty's politics on this "important" side is democratic through and through. But it is democracy explicitly temporalized (as perhaps it must ever be, no more and no less, than something ever more about to be). It is a decisive shift, well exemplified by the early pragmatists every bit as much as Rorty's contemporary pragmatism, to a future orientation that turns against the possible stagnations and dogmatisms of traditional vertical assessments. This brings us to the other, less important, culture war and back to "Trotsky and The Wild Orchids."

The other culture war that Rorty thinks is "not very important," what he calls a "tiny, upmarket cultural war," is in-house and is waged between progressivists. He lumps the so-called "postmodernists" on the one side and left-wing Democratic "pragmatists" like himself on the other. It is a battle waged primarily in Humanities departments in universities and the stakes that count also are political and involve the viability of modern liberalism (note, Rorty has little by way of opposition to postmodernists philosophically—he says they are for the most part right philosophically, but wrong politically). It seems that the political upshot for many philosophical postmodernists necessitates revolution against liberalism with all its baby "isms"—"humanism," "individualism," and "technologism." Liberalism with its place in the Enlightenment project is, from the strong postmodernist position, fatally flawed and needs replacement. This politicized neo-Marxist branch of postmodernism arising out of a deconstructive impulse Rorty thinks gives away far too much, or at least would potentially do so, in its revolutionary zeal. He says 'Deweyans' like himself are "sentimentally patriotic about America—willing to grant that it could slide into fascism at any time, but proud of its

past and guardedly hopeful about its future” (Rorty, 1999b, p. 17). He is willing to keep what was and still is good in socialism, but, alas, welfare capitalism appears the best America has come up with thus far, and tinkering reform is politically more practical (and less dangerous supposedly) than out-and-out revolution. Rorty might just be right on this point, as any honest look at the twentieth century’s ideological body count must indicate. Whether such staggering numbers are actually due to revolutionary impulses or the lack thereof is, perhaps, a debatable point. But I think Rorty’s moderate conservatism in this regard arises out of genuine horror rather than frivolity and is, as such, defensible. Rorty is of the strong conviction that good philosophical intentions have often led to barbaric results when married to politics. If he is right in this (and its difficult to see how he is not), then his conservatism is not a contradiction but actually part of his thoroughly progressive outlook and consonant with his broader philosophical work.

At this point it might be good to recap a bit. Rorty originally hoped to unite “reality” and “justice” in a single vision. These two components representing his sense of purpose were a part of his own acculturation, divided between the public/political inheritance from his parents and their social(ist) milieu and the private/idiosyncratic inheritance derived largely from nature and his solitude within it. Such a hope drove him to university and the study of philosophy at a young age. Over the course of his university education right up through the PhD Rorty came to learn that the hope of uniting reality and justice was a futile (and even dangerous) dream. What necessitated this turnabout for Rorty came primarily from his inability to reconcile Plato’s otherworldly aspirations (indubitable context-free justification for one’s belief/s leading to certain knowledge) with what went on in this world. Reality and justice became for

Rorty a necessary public/private distinction, a necessity born out of his own dawning awareness that philosophy and philosophers could be of no use “if you want confirmation that the things you love with all your heart are central to the structure of the universe, or that your sense of moral responsibility is ‘rational’ and ‘objective’ rather than just a result of how you were brought up” (Rorty, 1999b, p.20). So what are some important implications of this turnabout for Rorty’s work? I shall now put forth some themes that are relevant to my larger project but that for my aims here shall serve introductory purposes.

### **What of Philosophy in a Public and Private World**

Philosophy, itself, comes to take on a distinctively different public and private shape. Publicly, philosophy is useful because it is important to expose the younger generations to what has been written before them, some of the “great” ideas that have been played out and contested on the human stage throughout history, and great only because they made the stage. For Rorty, such are historical narratives and are important *as* narratives rather than *as* a series of ever-progressing (and therefore increasingly accurate) theoretical instruction. Publicly, philosophy has an important historical and educational role to play because as narrative history, philosophy can be used for primarily inspirational rather than didactic or instructional purposes. Rorty is clear that “ideas do, indeed, have consequences.” As he says of his own education in “Trotsky and The Wild Orchids” (1999b):

If I had not read all those books, I might never have been able to stop looking for what Derrida calls ‘a full presence beyond the reach of play’, for a luminous, self-justifying, self-sufficient synoptic vision. (p. 20)

What we infer from this in terms of public philosophy's utility is that it should continue to be read by the young but that we should stop continuing the effort to co-opt the younger generations into the useless idea that philosophy's longwinded preoccupation with establishing *absolute* epistemological and metaphysical certainty or "rightness" is the best path to stay on. Doing so sucks the life out of the inspirational value that can be had (as a literary virtue) from works of all kinds, wherein the "kind" of work it is is secondary to the inspirational impact it might have. Rorty is trying to abandon the notion that there have to be absolute criteria (the development of which has been philosophy's traditional charge) lending various works their instructional merit. Contrary to charges that Rorty is a rampant moral relativist, he never hesitates to make distinctions between right and wrong or true and false. He simply refuses, as any pragmatist does, to ground any given judgment of right or wrong, of true or false, in any kind of absolutist foundation that consists of indubitable and context-free justification. This is a result of pragmatism's taking seriously (as part of its Hegelian inheritance) our temporalized status in *this* world, and the notion that any judgment of right or wrong or true or false is good for a time and a time only (in some cases perhaps a very long time) and is subject to changing in some unforeseen and unforeseeable future. However, absolutes aside, this is not to say that there may be better and worse ways of thinking about epistemological and metaphysical philosophy that preclude their abandonment outright. This is where, as we shall see in the next chapter, Rorty gets into trouble, not only with orthodox conservatives but with his fellow progressivist pragmatists as well. For taking inspiration from the literary critic Harold Bloom, and as a part of his own talent for redescription, Rorty



endorses what Bloom calls “strong” or “creative misreading” of one’s predecessors. This has had a marked impact on Rorty’s reading of Dewey,

At any rate, the necessary turn to the recognition of temporality is a turn also for philosophy by Rorty’s lights, inasmuch as the future (though unforeseen and unforeseeable) nonetheless establishes our human imaginations as having revolutionary poetic potential (as witnessed by the move from instruction to inspiration as a leading motivation). That is to say, this is where the private philosophical sphere comes to life. We do not give up on the future simply because we cannot have clean, clear, and accurate visions of it as if in a crystal ball. This is moral relativism that even pragmatists would charge because of its nihilism of the future tense. So if historically philosophy has an important public role, we would not be off the mark to say that such an importance is rather conservative on the whole for Rorty. Again, it is important to stress that such is a conservatism endorsed for *philosophy’s* political role only and not an indication that Rorty is as a capital “C” conservative all around. It is the conservatism of liberal education, conserving, that is, what has in the past made it onto the stage of competing ideas and continuing to conserve future texts yet to be written that might also have such success. Such conservatism in the end serves a thoroughly progressive function for Rorty. But it is the thinnest strand of liberal education that makes such conservation important, for all “great” ideas are parts of our narrative history, retaining inspirational significance. Should they cease to inspire, then they will disappear, and for all intents and purposes, the criteria of greatness (a problematic notion for pragmatists to begin with) will be a moot point. But that is always for the future to determine. For now, we continue to *expose* the young to these historical narratives in order to determine the waxing or

waning of their inspirational force, while at the same time resisting the temptation to *indoctrinate* younger generations into particular theoretical strangleholds. It is to conserve the play of presence of ideas that have generated attention over the years, to see how some survived for longer or shorter periods, and how they died and even yet are dying. And it is, after all, how they die that is central for Rorty.

In a bit of confusion necessitated by his public/private split, we need to see Rorty's use of "death" (read as death of ideas or vocabularies) as consisting of two different entailments (just when we thought death was an absolute we could still hold on to). For death in Rorty's dichotomous universe can still mean a certain kind of life. A "dead metaphor" for example, central to Rorty's (Davidsonian) aesthetics (which will be explored in detail later), is the death of certain revolutionary private creations *into* a certain stable public utility. What is stable, then, in Rorty's parlance is for all intents and purposes, dead—but dead in the publicly utilizable sense. It is in the private sphere that stability represents a real form of poetic death. Death is always the result of life, and every career (read as moving at full speed, rushed) has and needs its full stop. I am reminded of James's notion of "flights" and "perchings" and Dewey's recognition of life as both precarious and stable. Precariousness or flight is ushered in by novelty and, for Rorty, this is the preferred state, the most creative state, only then followed by a possible desire that whatever new purpose(s) arise might become normalized into stable, even routine action. The death of a metaphor, then, is a kind of public success that is nonetheless relatively unexciting for those who are of a poetic/creative temperament, for while such individuals need the sense of normalcy brought on by stable conditions, they will almost immediately feel compelled to create new private poetic revolutions. For

stability is at once a time for appreciating, even savoring, what is stable and imagining (in the more creative/poetic sense) new and, hopefully, better futures. Stability cannot be equated with absolute stasis, for there is always movement during even the most stable periods. It is stable, perhaps even habitual, action. Rorty shares, I would say, this spirit with Dewey, though each tends to place his emphases on different sides of the poetic/stable (read private/public) distinction. I will eventually make the case that in spite of differences of emphasis between Dewey and Rorty, such are not differences of kind—that there is plenty in common between their pragmatisms (more than many critics have given credit for—perhaps itself due to misplaced emphasis).

How are we to tell what Democracy demands more of—conservative stability or revolutionary poetic novelty, authority or autonomy? Perhaps equal measures of both are needed, but what I hope to indicate as this work progresses is that Rorty always prefers the later options as a necessity of the private sphere, and the former as necessary in degrees for a publicly progressive society. In terms of his philosophical disposition and what for him is of most interest philosophically, it is clearly the sphere of poetic autonomy that Rorty emphasizes. That is, philosophy is a potentially poetic (and poeticizing) activity and works toward accepting the openness of the future and thereby accepting the possibility of making it better than the present or the past. What is entailed, however, by philosophy as a potentially poeticizing force of culture, as a particular vocabulary of *making* as opposed to *finding* or representing, is that it must do battle (the important culture war for Rorty) with other cultural forces—philosophical and political—that habitually demand absolutist justifications via decontextualized and ahistorical imperatives. So philosophy is never severed from culture through sheer acts of novel

creation. It battles in the here and now with real cultural forces in order to keep alive the very possibility that the future might be something wonderfully different and hopefully better than what is or has been. The fight really is to be able to redescribe what is taken for granted, to question assumptions, not by providing knock-down arguments that in the end beat around the same bush, but by putting out starkly new metaphors that are nonetheless derived literally from older vocabularies. This is why the progressive function of philosophy is important to Rorty in a way that the conservative function is not. A poeticized philosophy attempts to produce new utopian vocabularies which may or may not inspire people and which may or may not be taken up and normalized in the public sphere. This is philosophical energy well spent. On the other hand, philosophy that busies itself trying to conserve past modes by way of providing unassailable rationalizations and foundations for those modes is energy not well spent. Rorty's point in making this distinction is that so long as new poetic advances are being generated within a culture of ever-widening democratic vistas, then the politics (calling always for concrete policies and programs) will take care of the public sphere, conserving what needs to be conserved and getting rid of what is useless or destructive to further progress. Politics can make use of philosophy, in other words, only because politics now looks different in a poeticized culture that resonates in a more fitting way with its own democratic aspirations. The literary (poetic) aspects of a culture run ahead of the political, but at the same time depend on the acculturating forces (political and otherwise) that provide the material for such poetic advance.

What is of most interest to Rorty, generally speaking, and what reduces philosophy to one of many competing vocabularies, are the dynamics that either lend to

or work against a free and open democratic society. There is a contrast, then, in Rorty's work between two speeds of progress—between revolutionary private self-creation that is restless, almost frenetic in its desire for novelty, and a more piecemeal progress in the public sphere that appreciates notions of conservation and tinkering political reform. One might think of the pace of poetic creation and recreation as being like the second hand on a clock, while political reform is more like the minute hand or even the hour hand.

Reform in the political sphere is often slow and barely perceptible, but there is movement nonetheless. And often it is appreciated retrospectively in a “my, where has the time gone?” sort of way and the hope is that such retrospective insight is of beneficial change. Such slow change allows for a culture to take stock from time to time of its own progress in a way that is not overly shocking (though sometimes still it might be). Reform can occur even as the surrounding milieu has the feel of stability. This is not to say that from time to time shocks within a seemingly “normal” milieu do not occur. The union movements in the past to protect workers' rights to dignified working conditions and livable wages (ever still under attack), the equal rights movement of African Americans and women just to achieve the status of *human*, have all generated shocks to the system, even violent revolutionary and counter revolutionary conflict. But of importance, such shocks are not typically the result of de-contextual philosophical quests. They are political movements to make absences present, and have nothing in back of them save the pragmatic desire to be afforded the same respect and dignity worthy of any free citizen who lives and participates in a democratic society.

Political revolutions can still occur, then, when in the slow, normalized course of events there arises some level of consciousness of grievous flaws in the normalized flow

of a society. At this point the normal is superseded by a dawning sense that hidden in the texture of the normal is some sort of dogmatic blindness that needs to be addressed. Such awareness arises as a result of our day-to-day contact with the dynamic pragmata of lived life rather than intuitional insight based on some lofty philosophical truth or theory. The kinds of political revolutions generated by such philosophical speculations are, as I have stated above, dangerous to the degree that they tend to exchange one dogmatically blind and totalizing system for another. So we get a sense that revolution is not merely the property of the private sphere, though we must ever protect that sphere's right to generate as many novel and potentially revolutionary metaphors as can be created. Whether such creations take hold in the political/public sphere, whether they generate political revolution or slowly become piecemeal additions to a new sense of normalcy or stability, will all depend on how they gel with and shape the existing pragmatic context. This is why even revolutionary impulses that become a part of the previously normal pragmatic context will still need time to work things out, and this is best done through a course of tinkering reforms within the real and dynamic pragmata of the situation. We should not expect, even from our revolutionary impulses, that everything be changed in a root-and-branch way. Total change is usually the yearning of one or another totalizing system. Tinkering reforms can still make good use of revolutionary impulses even as there is retained a practical sense of conservation.

Democracy, in the absence of what C.S. Peirce called the "irritation of doubt," will tend toward becoming some sort of totalizing system. The Socratic notion that often when we think we know, we in fact know less than we think, and that wisdom comes in part from knowing how little we know, lends to the idea that "opening a prospect on

illimitable democratic vistas” is a turn to the future and away from dogmatic entrenchments in the past. It is an overly simplified reading to say that Rorty’s pragmatism (or Dewey’s for that matter) turns away from the past altogether. There is no such thing as novelty *ex nihilo* as I have been suggesting above. We are acculturated human beings, and there is no turning that would eradicate all the subtle nuances of our acculturation. But acculturation itself indicates temporality and change as real components of living. As Rorty says in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (1991a),

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...splits which supply footholds 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. (pp. 13-14)

This brings us back to Rorty’s gradual loss of interest in holding “reality” and “justice” in a single vision, and his subsequent public/private split. Such splits we now know “supply footholds for new initiatives.” The distinction is not a dualism, as such, but rather a method of protecting what is different—and valuable because different—in each sphere. Poetic self-creation is the leading edge of culture, but there is always a surplus of material in back of it, fuelling it, and impelling it forward to be new. The private sphere is to be protected because that is where individuals do their creative thing and offer up new

possibilities for potential public allegiance (in the best case scenario anyway). But that is not the reason creative individuals create. They are not driven by potential public solidarity. They look for, or more properly, they create splits that can become potential footholds within the existing culture for new initiatives. They create in order to put something new out there that is different and potentially better than anything that was ever there before. As such novelty settles through the cracks and fissures of a culture and plays out in multifarious ways into the future, it may become a focus of public solidarity or it may not. Rorty's central point, I think, is to protect the sphere of poetic self-creation so that potentially new and ever renewing and widening solidarity between individuals and cultures is *possible*.

I turn now to a more explicit understanding of what, for Rorty, gets in the way of this sort of progressive movement. This I will locate in his strong pragmatic turn against absolutist conceptions of Truth. As his pragmatism thereby turns against most of the staple concerns of the philosophical tradition, he seeks to humble philosophy's yearnings and pragmatize them by making philosophy merely one of many competing discourses that can potentially help us move productively and humanely into the future. The foregoing has, I think, served my introductory purposes. It needs to be said, however, that what I have written thus far is not unproblematic. Rorty's public/private split is far from straightforward, and the critical problems posed therein are real and consequential for his pragmatism. A comparison to Dewey is hugely difficult, because there is so much to compare. By focusing in the next chapter on Rorty's pragmatic turn against absolutist conceptions of Truth, I will open up the largest terrain of commonality between him and Dewey. While I will focus pretty much exclusively on Rorty, his negative critique of



Truth stands in proxy for the larger pragmatic tradition and speaks for it. That is to say, I cannot find any great difference between Rorty and Dewey in their respective turns against absolutist Truth conceptions, even though each provides different articulations. Neither, as we shall see, abandons truth outright. That would make them severe antirationalists, which they are not. To put it rather simply, both Rorty and Dewey are much aligned in articulating what they are against (philosophically). Where their respective pragmatisms diverge is in how they articulate their future projections. Dewey is a philosophical reconstructionist while Rorty is a poetic (or literary) nominalist. Yet, as we shall see in Chapters Five and Six, both end up articulating primarily aesthetic pragmatic positions in their latest works. The implications of this for their respective positions and any major differences that may be there will be explored at that point. For now, I turn to Rorty's strong attack against absolutist conceptions of Truth in order to place what is most radical about the pragmatic movement as a whole. My eventual end-point hopes to elucidate a largely favorable comparison between the two philosophers that places each as outstanding spokesmen for Democracy along an aesthetic trajectory of the American pragmatic tradition.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: RICHARD RORTY: TRUTH, NIHILISM, AND HOPE**

Housed within Rorty's turn against absolutist conceptions of Truth is his strong antiepistemological and antimetaphysical position, what was referred to more generally in the previous chapter as his strong anti-Platonism. This may represent the least interesting facet of his overall philosophical project. Albeit a necessary and important component of his work, it represents the largely negative critique he needs to put forth in order to clear the ground for his more optimistic and poeticized utopian prospects (though as we shall see it is never simply a matter of clearing away one thing and replacing it with another). At the same time, from a thoroughly pragmatic perspective, this negative critique has become a necessary, even central element of much of his work, if only because his antiepistemological and antimetaphysical stance has generated the most heated responses from his fellow philosophers. A great deal of his writing, then, has been the sort of gracious writing that I referred to in the last chapter—writing that is responsive to his critics. And because of that graciousness, a great deal of his writing is in fact philosophical to the core, albeit put forth largely as a negative critique of traditional philosophy. When one reads Rorty, in spite of his proclaimed literary affiliations, there is always the feel (at the very least) that one is reading a philosopher. Philosophy, as a large discipline-based enterprise, is not so easily circumvented if you have something to say about traditional philosophical matters, good or bad. That being said, we should not underestimate the amount of subtlety (and play) in the way Rorty uses what he is against in order to insinuate what he is for (end-of-philosophy rhetoric notwithstanding). Much of his success in this regard (if he is indeed successful) has to do with his turning traditional philosophical matters into historical narratives.

We need to keep in mind that Rorty employs a very particular model of deconstruction (taken from the best part of Derrida's thinking) that is in no way methodological, but temporal. That is, Rorty denies hierarchical status to all those binary oppositions (reality/appearance, object/subject, world/language, being/nonbeing, literal/metaphorical, logical/rhetorical) that have effectively fueled the Western philosophical tradition with its aggressive epistemological and metaphysical yearnings. For each binary relation in the above listing, Rorty wants us to be aware that the tradition has hierarchically privileged the former concepts in each grouping and that now in these so-called postmodern times there are no good reasons for doing so. He escapes the methodological entrapments of deconstruction that he tells us even Derrida was prone to, by historicizing the whole philosophical game—granting past hierarchical epistemological and metaphysical projects narrative, rather than substantive status. That is to say, the whole notion of hierarchical privileging is itself turned into a historical narrative, thereby opening the space for Rorty's preferred method of circumvention. To reiterate, this is his strategy of using redescription in order to move around, rather than through, entrenched vocabularies.

It is, problematically, as David Hall (1994) tells us, a method that leads inexorably to circumlocution. That is, Rorty's historical narratives become (literally) narratives because of his nominalism. And Rorty's default nominalism leads him, in the process of *circumventing* what he refers to as the "useless lumber that blocks our highways of thought" to *circumlocutions* that, as Hall points out, are "personal, self-encapsulating stories which permit Rorty to avoid having to meet a conversant on his

terms” (p. 234). Hall also makes an important critical point in regard to Rorty’s so-called historicism:

I believe Rorty ought to reconsider his claim to be a historicist. For one of the consequences of allowing himself greater sympathy with the poet than the philosopher, is that his narratives are more like epics or novels than histories. It is far better...to take full responsibility for one’s literary pretensions than to mask them by claims to historicist practice. (p. 63)

Taking such responsibility may have spared Rorty only slightly the burden of having to meet a conversant on his or her terms. It is potentially problematic for Rorty’s notion of solidarity in the public sphere, to say the least. To fellow philosophers it can be downright irksome. Arbitrarily changing the topic of a given conversation can come across as flippant to those who are otherwise trying to engage you in serious dialogue or debate. But, to be fair, Rorty’s poetic energies are put forth in order to change *what* is talked about rather than just *how* something is talked about and are directed at philosopher-talk specifically. Such a poetic mode is not intended to imply a standard of conversability in the more mundane daily public sphere. Rorty is circumventing (or circumlocuting) certain philosophical ways of talking, and if that is annoying to certain philosophers who want to keep beating around the same old philosophical bushes, then Rorty is not apologetic. What is it, then, that Rorty wants to move beyond or get past?

### **Truth and Knowledge**

Rorty has placed himself quite self-consciously within a particular stream of American thought dating back to the poetic articulations of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman as well as to the philosophical pragmatism of William James and John

Dewey. This is Rorty's espoused American pragmatic lineage and one in which he takes a great deal of pride in extending (Rorty is also the self-professed heir of Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche—that Continental influence will be explored in the next section below). Rorty (1999c) articulates the central message of pragmatism that has caused so much controversy amongst philosophers:

Pragmatists – both classical and 'neo-' – do not believe that there is a way things really are. So they want to replace the appearance-reality distinction by that between descriptions of the world and of ourselves which are less useful and those which are more useful. When the question 'useful for what?' is pressed, they have nothing to say except 'useful to create a better future'. When they are asked, 'Better by what criterion?', they have no detailed answer, any more than the first mammals could specify in what respects they were better than the dying dinosaurs. Pragmatists can only say something as vague as: Better in the sense of containing more of what we consider good and less of what we consider bad. When asked, 'And what exactly do you consider good?', pragmatists can only say with Whitman, 'variety and freedom', or, with Dewey, 'growth'. 'Growth itself,' Dewey said, 'is the only moral end.' (pp. 27-28)

What inspires Rorty about the pragmatic tradition and the poetic modernism he ascribes to it is its wholesale turn to the future. He self-consciously places himself in a tradition that has power less in virtue of its being a tradition and more in virtue of its necessity of continuous extension and flexibility. Concepts such as "reality," "reason," and (human) "nature," bandied about by philosophers as absolutist skyhooks for the human lot to take hold of, start to lose their luster and appeal. They become the encumbering deadweight of

the past, and though Rorty will not provide an argument for their complicity in feudalism and slavery (to name a few unsavory past actions), it is hard to imagine such philosophical absolutes as being totally absent from those now pernicious elements of America's history.

What we get from the past, good and bad, is what we get. It is less important than what can be hoped for the future by way of a newly enlivened and flexible pluralism.

Rorty (1999c) quotes from Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* with approbation:

America, filling the present with greatest deeds and problems, cheerfully accepting the past, including feudalism (as indeed, the present is but the legitimate birth of the past, including feudalism) counts, as I reckon, for her justification and success, (for who, as yet, dare claim success?) almost entirely on the future....For our New World I consider far less important for what it has done, or what it is, than for results to come. (p. 27)

Accordingly, Rorty's faith, like Dewey's and Whitman's before him, comports well with democracy—but democracy understood less as a substantive thing and more as open possibilities fuelled by hopefulness. Democracy is the story always about to be written, always about to be acted out. Quoting Whitman again, Rorty (1998a) says:

"Democracy is a great word, whose history...remains unwritten, because that history has yet to be enacted" (p. 19). Democracy is a great word because it is not an "it," rather something always about to be. The sheer futurity of democracy so understood makes contingency, openness, freedom, and hope its cardinal virtues. In comparing this "Whitmanesque Americanism" to classical and "neo"-pragmatist philosophy, Rorty (1999c) says that the crucial link,

is a willingness to refer all questions of ultimate justification to the future, to the substance of things hoped for. If there is anything distinctive about pragmatism it is that it substitutes the notion of a better human future for the notions of 'reality', 'reason' and 'nature'. One may say of pragmatism what Novalis said of Romanticism, that it is 'the apotheosis of the future. (p. 27)

Of course, one might reasonably say that democracy certainly has had a history since Whitman coined the above sentiments—a history of the people electing buffoons to office more often than not, of the people's penchant for greed and material extravagance, of an unbridled massification of the people via consumerism driven by an equally unbridled and often unruly "free" market, etc., etc. One could say these things and provide good evidence for joining in what Rorty earlier called the "America Sucks Sweepstakes." Rorty, once again, is not about to provide rationalizations or arguments against such things in order to show their falsity. Democracy as a series of artifacts, events, policy decisions etc. is historically substantive. Rorty knows something of the history of democracy since Whitman and Dewey proclaimed their inspiring narratives. Bad things are a part of the great American democratic story; of that there is no doubt. But a turn to the future, and a turn to the hopefulness made relevant by such a turning, is, for Rorty, the very default mode of keeping democracy alive. Anyway, there are no reasonable grounds for assigning to the past a comprehensive evil in spite of its atrocities. Yet, even such noble democratic impulses, necessitating a pragmatic turn to the future, are not without trouble. Philosophically, a turn to the future is, for Rorty, a turn away from traditionally acceptable notions of knowledge and truth.

In a recent essay called “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre,” Rorty (2004) says this about truth:

Questions such as “Does truth exist?” or “Do you believe in truth?” seem fatuous and pointless. Everybody knows that the difference between true and false beliefs is as important as that between nourishing and poisonous foods. Moreover, one of the principal achievements of recent analytic philosophy is to have shown that the ability to wield the concept of “true belief” is a necessary condition for being a user of language, and thus for being a rational agent. (pp. 5-6)

The point Rorty is making here is apparently a commonsensical one—his way of countering the invariable charge of relativism brought against his particular conception of truth. To take a position against certain philosophical conceptions of truth is not to be divested of any ability whatsoever to make judgments about true and false beliefs. The more serious charge against Rorty’s position, as we shall see below, is not relativism *per se*, but antirationalism.<sup>1</sup> The last sentence in the above quotation about “true beliefs” is meant as a response to such antirationalist charges. Whether or not Rorty is successful in so defending himself will become clearer as we progress.

When it comes to establishing his pragmatic position on Truth, Rorty in fact distinguishes two different conceptions of truth—the “everyday” and the “redemptive.” The above quoted passage reflects Rorty’s retention of an everyday understanding of truth, but Rorty is quick to point out that when people ask the kinds of questions stated above, what he calls “fatuous and pointless” questions, they do so under the pretense of the more-than-everyday implications they assume to be buried in truth talk. In our time, asking such questions as these comes to “play the role once played by the question ‘Do



you believe in God, or are you one of those dangerous atheists?” (Rorty, 2004, p. 6). When philosophers, especially, ask these truth questions looking for their more-than-everyday answers, they are really inquiring about a potentially indubitable stability governed by epistemological and metaphysical criteria. Such criteria offer up the possibility of accurate reflection of and correspondence to a reality otherwise hidden behind a veil of appearances. They ask, in effect, if there is “a natural terminus to inquiry, a way things really are, and that understanding what that way is will tell us what to do with ourselves” (Rorty, p. 6). Redemptive truth, then, tries to get more mileage out of the notion of “truth” than Rorty thinks we ever require in the everyday sphere. It is philosophy’s preoccupation to find “a set of beliefs that would end, once and for all, the process of reflection on what to do with ourselves” (Rorty, p. 7). And furthermore, it stresses “the need to fit everything – every thing, person, event, idea, and poem – into a single context, a context that will somehow reveal itself as natural, destined, and unique” (Rorty, p. 7).

It is important to point out that in the couplet “redemptive truth” Rorty is not assigning each term equal negative status. Capital “T” truth is the real villain and drags an otherwise noble yearning for redemption along with it. I will return to Rorty’s attack against “Truth,” but it is first necessary to clarify what he means by the word “redemptive.” To put the point rather matter-of-factly, redemption is something intellectuals worry about. Redemption, as Rorty uses it, means something pretty much the same that Heidegger meant when he talked about the hope for “authenticity” (though Rorty is more forward looking and Heidegger more backward looking) or what Harold Bloom meant when he talked about the intellectual’s yearning for “autonomy.”<sup>2</sup> To

reiterate, it is the intellectuals who yearn for Heideggerian authenticity, or Bloomian autonomy, or what Rorty otherwise wants to call “redemption.” As he says:

Most human beings, even those who have the requisite money and leisure, are not intellectuals. If they read books it is not because they seek redemption but either because they wish to be entertained or distracted, or because they want to become better able to carry out some antecedent purpose. They do not read books to find out what purposes to have. The intellectuals do. (Rorty, 2004, p. 8)

Rorty is here equating the intellectuals as being of a certain “literary” disposition. This is important to note, because the whole point of “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” is to show that the human yearning for redemption has a deep history that has passed through a number of important stages since the Renaissance.

The first stage sought redemption from God, the second stage sought redemption from philosophy (or Truth), and the third stage, which is the present stage, seeks redemption from literature. As we are now in (or still in the process of moving into) a literary culture, both religion and philosophy now appear as literary genres and are, as such, optional. Rorty’s main target is the second stage—the stage of philosophical “redemptive truth”—a stage that by Rorty’s lights began during the Renaissance as a reactionary humanism against the prevalent monotheism of Christianity. For the past 200 years or so (since the Enlightenment), Rorty tells us we have been witnessing a gradual shift away from that philosophical culture toward a literary culture, a culture that has itself since the time of Kant and Hegel slowly lost faith in the notion that redemption can come from acquiring a set of “true beliefs.” Given this gradual, but inexorable loss of faith in “Truth” by those with more literary penchants, all of the genres come to take on a

different hue. Monotheistic religion now becomes a less pernicious “literary” option for Rorty (in spite of its tendency to be a conversation-stopper at dinner parties), because comparable to a literary culture, the notion of *true belief* is not central. That is, “monotheistic religion offers hope for redemption through entering into a new relation to a supremely powerful nonhuman person. *Belief in the articles of a creed may be only incidental to such a relationship*” [italics added] (Rorty, 2004, p. 8). Literary culture, on the other hand, “offers redemption through making the acquaintance of as great a variety of human beings as possible” (Rorty, p. 8). The intellectual reads lots and lots of books in order to do this. Again, true belief is of little importance. But “redemptive truth” represents philosophy’s particular yearning, and here true beliefs are of the essence.

To be redeemed by traditional philosophy is to acquire a set of *cognitive* or *rational* beliefs “that represent things in the one way they really are” (Rorty, 2004, p. 8). Philosophy thus becomes an infecting agent when combined with an otherwise harmless noncognitive faith, be it faith in the power of a superhuman deity or faith in the power of literature. For example, pure religious faith is about possible communion with a beneficent nonhuman person. However, when “the God of the philosophers has begun to replace the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob [only then] is *correct belief* [italics added] thought to be essential to salvation” (Rorty, p. 10). At this point an otherwise noncognitive redemptive faith in God becomes mediated by a philosophical creed (for any creed is a statement of beliefs and principles, and to that extent *is philosophical*). Rorty tells us that philosophers are able to grant a sense and urgency to the otherwise fatuous question, “Do you believe in truth?” by reformulating the question into the more philosophically expedient:

‘Do you think that there is a single set of beliefs that can serve a redemptive role in the lives of all human beings, that can be rationally justified to all human beings under optimal communicative conditions, and that will thus form the natural terminus of inquiry?’ To answer yes to this reformulated question is to take philosophy as the guide of life. It is to agree with Socrates that there is a set of beliefs that is both susceptible of rational justification and such as to take rightful precedence over every other consideration in determining what to do with one’s life. The premise of philosophy is that there is a way things really are – a way humanity and the rest of the universe are and always will be, independent of any merely contingent human needs and interests. Knowledge of this way is redemptive. It can therefore replace religion. The striving for Truth can take the place of the search for God. (Rorty, p. 11)

So philosophy arrives *in medias res*, taking up its station between redemptive religion and redemptive literature, particularly in its modern manifestations since Descartes’ philosophy first concerned itself with the potential redemptive power of Truth via creedal-like and rational argumentation. We humans, in other words, have thought that we could somehow through sheer theoretical finesse, come into vital and definitive contact with the absolute, thus making it to serve us even as we so willingly serve it. Rorty is making the point that there is not much special we can say about the absolute. God as an absolute is just that—absolute. So is Truth. When we decide to philosophize about such absolutes, try, that is, to argue their relevance for our day-to-day ethical comportment in the world rather than just leaving them be as the everything/nothing words they are, we find ourselves never quite able to get past what Rorty in *Truth and*

*Progress* (1998b) calls the “tiresomely ineffable” quality of such philosophical argumentation. Continuing, he says: “[Donald] Davidson has helped us realize that *the very absoluteness of truth is a good reason for thinking “true” indefinable and for thinking that no theory of the nature of truth is possible*” (p. 3). The hope for redemption coming via a set of philosophical beliefs and principles that somehow corral and manage the absolute and make it known or knowable is, from Rorty’s negative critical position the now stale pipe dream of philosophy.

Redemptive truth, then, is the principal target of Rorty’s negative critique of the philosophical tradition. The hope of redemption coming from truth is what bolsters philosophy’s various epistemological and metaphysical quests for certainty. Those pursuits which in their epistemological yearning try to show the knowledge status of some belief or set of beliefs go awry at that very point the beliefs are turned to human definitional purposes. For all such beliefs are now *relative* to such human purposes, and human purposes are always conditioned by time and place. To try to argue from some conditional time and place to some unconditional primary absolute is, for Rorty, asking for unnecessary trouble. This is because “Truth” as an absolute concept is ineffable and noncognitive. There is no *rationalizing* it or *arguing* it into a cognitive shape that guarantees immunity from skeptical doubt and dogmatism and that would thereby guarantee retention of “Truth’s” own special internal nature. The only remaining cash value for truth as a concept is in the mundane, everyday sense hinted at above.

For Rorty truth is always “justified” truth, and justification is the temporally bound language of human purposes. Therefore, *true belief* can no longer be distinguished from *justified belief*. In effect all the wind is taken out of capital “T” truth’s sails, for a

true belief is always a justified true belief, and in this sense “justified true belief” becomes a redundancy better read merely as “justified belief.” Nothing is lost when the word “true” is dropped. But a radical sense of futurity is gained. If philosophy’s yearning has been to find the ever-elusive correspondence between our words and our world—those indubitably accurate reflections caught by the human mind through a veil of false appearances—then our present turn to a literary culture is a turn away from all those binary oppositions that prop up philosophy’s Truth-seeking delusions of grandeur. Such delusions are the product of seventeenth and eighteenth century conceptions of mind and knowledge—conceptions that support the notion that a robust enough theory of truth will grant us access to accurate and indubitable foundations for knowledge.

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), Rorty tells us how philosophy’s preoccupation with pictorial representations has been problematic:

It is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions. The picture which holds traditional philosophy together is that of the mind as a great mirror, containing various representations – some accurate, some not – and capable of being studied by pure, nonempirical methods. Without the notion of the mind as mirror, the notion of knowledge as accuracy of representation would not have suggested itself. (p. 12)

Moving past such representationalism is a move past “Truth” toward justification, wherein anything deemed true is merely “true” for this or that situation, “true” for this or that time and place—it is truth as a tool for getting something done, coming to some agreement with others, rather than as an object (or a noun) of admiration. And the merit

of any given justification is always the “contribution [it makes] to the existence of a more complex and interesting species somewhere in the future” (Rorty, 1999b, p. 27). Keep the word “truth” if you wish, Rorty would say, but recognize that it is no more than a dead metaphor now, a compliment we pay to those propositions that have achieved wide acceptance within and across a community. Keeping the word truth, in other words, no longer can induce us to think we are somehow also keeping the world if by keeping the world we assume we are keeping a one-to-one representational correspondence between some antecedent truth of the world and what we say about it. As Rorty (1989) says:

“Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – cannot” (p. 5).<sup>3</sup> When acceptance or *solidarity* is achieved within a community, this entails nothing grander than the fact of such acceptance. There is no deeper, more profound contact with reality, there is no gradual moving closer to the world’s own story. The world does not have its own story—it is always under our human descriptions. It is holistically our world-stories, and the world cannot independently tell us which stories we must tell if we are to successfully gain access to the real “nature of things.” This is not an uncontroversial position that Rorty’s pragmatism endorses. Its thorough linguistification of the universe runs the risk of linguistic idealism. This controversy will be explored in more detail in the next chapter. For now we need to ask, how does Rorty stave off the charges of relativism that invariably rise like so many legions against such a position? Literary culture or not, Truth

still has a powerful sway over us. Important is that the death of capital “T” truth is not the death of truth-talk per se.

Reinforcing his own method of redescription, Rorty does not believe that the denial of the world’s own story or nature’s nature automatically necessitates a pervasive relativism or linguistic idealism on the part of those doing the denying. Ever since Dewey and James started attacking absolutist theories of knowledge and truth, pragmatists have been under fire from fellow philosophers in particular for confusing, as Rorty (1999c) says, “truth, which is absolute and eternal, with justification, which is transitory because *relative* [italics added] to an audience” (p. 32). This is the simplest form of relativism that applies to Dewey and Rorty, and as pragmatists they happily accept it. But Rorty knows, as Dewey did before him, that most charges of relativism are not of this simple, straightforward sort, though they may arise out of it. If we recall in the previous chapter the charges from scholars like Hutchins, Adler, McKeon, and Leo Strauss against Dewey, that his pragmatism represented a kind of relativism not up to the weighty task of providing absolutist arguments for “why it would be better to be dead than to be a Nazi” then we can get a flavour for the kind of *moral* relativism that critics charge Rorty with espousing. This is weighty to be sure, and far less easy to be light-minded about. Before looking at how Rorty responds to this real challenge, hinted at already in his poetic/narrative approach, I need to make it utterly clear why this is indeed a serious challenge to begin with.

### **Truth, Knowledge, and Nihilism**

It cannot be underestimated, nor is it unproblematic, Rorty’s (and pragmatism’s) aggressive turn to the future. As temporally embodied creatures able to recognize our



status as such, we can be inspired by an as “yet to be enacted” (democratic) future—by the open possibilities of sheer hopefulness. Yet, this is not as straightforward as it might appear. I asked above, how does Rorty stave off charges of relativism? The question is relevant and needs to be asked given Rorty’s (and Dewey’s) pragmatic conception of truth. I have attempted to show, or at least I have implied that Rorty’s conception of truth is commensurable with classical pragmatist (particularly Dewey’s) conceptions. In terms of the theory of truth put forward in Dewey’s pragmatism, it is arguable that there is hardly a difference between Dewey’s and Rorty’s truth conceptions (though Rorty would be impatient about calling it a *theory* of truth). At least there is hardly a difference between the two *when it comes to their respective turns against traditional philosophical preoccupations with attaining absolutist epistemological and metaphysical certainty.*

As negative analyses of shopworn philosophical preoccupations, both sound the same chord. The world’s own story along with the deep philosophical wish that we humans, through sheer theoretical prowess, might be able to attain the requisite God’s-eye or Archimedean point of view to read that story has fallen into disarray. There is no world’s own story that can effectively be accessed so as to provide the criteria for establishing accurate knowledge as opposed to mere opinion or belief. Philosophers have long thought that they could describe such criteria and therein access a language not their own—the language of the “thing-in-itself” or a fully transparent world’s-own language (traditionally via the mathematico-mechanical language of physics). It has been epistemology’s dream, as we saw in Chapter Two, for the absolute necessity of antecedent existences that we reflect accurately in our mind’s eye, thus offering up an indubitably accurate correspondence to what is there to begin with. Dewey shows it to be

a pipe dream when he posits knowledge as an outcome of embodied existential inquiry rather than an already objective antecedent existence just waiting in some pristine state to be received. The implication, of course, is Dewey's synonym, or more accurately, replacement, for knowledge—namely “warranted assertion.”<sup>4</sup> With the loss of antecedent objective knowledge, so too do we lose our concept of foundational truth for which such objective knowledge is accurate and representative. Absolutist Truth becomes otiose. Rorty, as I have shown, is every bit as aggressive in his pragmatic denial of Truth. There is no point, as I have stated, in being light-minded about the matter. It is a serious challenge that pragmatists pose.

It would be easy to say that it merely is a problem for those who speculate in matters philosophical, in effect, recapitulating the unnecessary separation of philosophy from life. In the real everyday world, we all know, of course, that our knowledge is true, don't we? When I say I know something—for example, that there is a picture of my wife and children in front of me on the desk at which I'm writing—I am in effect attributing truth-correspondence to such knowing. To assign truth correspondence in this regard is to make a judgment that something has factual status in the absence of my thinking or saying anything about it. I need not be committed to a psych hospital for assuming the picture is still there when I am not in the room; that is, not saying anything or thinking anything about it. This also means that the picture is not made true by my saying it is there or by otherwise thinking about it. Rather, saying and thinking about it seems to commit me to some concept of truth independent of such saying and thinking. As Luntley (1995) points out, some concept of truth is necessary for making a judgment at all:

The concept of truth is a necessary precondition for the very act of judgment. In making a judgment, we lay ourselves hostage to a notion of that which would show us wrong in our judgment. If we judge something to be the case we must have an idea of what would force us to retract our judgment, the state of affairs that would make our judgment false. (p. 28)

The very act of making a judgment, then, is to acknowledge some notion of independent truth. But what can an independent truth be, other than a certain stubbornness we grant to sensations. Everything after that is under a description of some sort and thus is of greater or lesser interest for us.

I can have a debate about whether that is actually a picture of my wife and children sitting on my desk, but if my interlocutor either has never seen my wife or children before, or has no idea what a picture is, then there will not be much to debate about the facts. The independence of the facts in this case is never a pure independence only because the facts are facts by virtue of being already implicated in my experiential matrix of meaningfulness. The very concept of independence is therefore relative to our interests. Certain nonlinguistic independent facts can retain the status of facts in the most commonsensical, and for Rorty, causal manner, but such always exist at varying interest levels for us. The molecular airy structure of the desk I am writing on is a fact that is of far less interest to me than is the solid object that successfully supports the weight of my computer and the picture of my wife and children. For a scientist studying the molecular make-up of solid structures, his or her interest might be just the opposite. Questions of truth and falsity are generally far less important in these commonsensical situations of factuality. If the scientist says my taken-for-granted solid desk is really mostly air and

backs this up with research evidence, then I can be completely satisfied that the truth of the desk's solidity, for me, exists in that minute percentage of stuff that makes it solid for me. Our desk-interests are merely different—the scientist has a physical interest that is different from my everyday use interest. Should either of us start to argue back and forth over whose view is more accurate, more right, then the issue has effectively devolved into a singularly unpragmatic contest of egos, often mistakenly taken as an epistemic contest over real truth.

At any rate, objectivity is always a question of relatability, and that is all that matters to us. Objectivity, absent any relation, is neither here nor there. What lies on the other side of language is nothing meaningful for Rorty until it impacts our web of interests, needs, and desires. The status of that which is nonlinguistic may be retained as something more than nothing, but only to the extent of its having a thoroughly uninteresting *causal* status that may or may not induce some sort of interest for us in the future. In situations of noncognitive contact with the world, though such situations are of *potential* causal significance, questions of better and worse are not (yet) at issue. That is, the world as an externality has no immediate epistemic significance. On the other side of language there is nothing *meaningful*. As Rorty (1982) says:

I want to claim that 'the world' is either the purely vacuous nothing or the ineffable cause of sense and goal of intellect, or else a name for the objects that inquiry at the moment is leaving alone: those planks in the boat which are at the moment not being moved about. It seems to me that epistemology since Kant has shuffled between these two meanings of the terms 'world,' just as moral philosophy since Plato has shuffled back and forth between 'the Good' as a name

for an ineffable touchstone of inquiry which might lead to the rejection of *all* our present moral views, and as a name for the ideally coherent synthesis of as many of those views as possible. This equivocation seems to me essential to the position of those philosophers who see ‘realism’ or ‘the correspondence theory of truth’ as controversial or exciting theses. (p. 15)

The independence of a fact acquires meaning only to the extent that it acquires a truth-*value*, be it the kind of largely unthinking values we assign to the more mundane, taken-for-granted causal beliefs in our lives or the more complex values we assign to our conscious moral contemplations. Rorty (1991a) uses the notion of causality very exactly – the world, whatever it is for us at any given moment, can “cause us to hold beliefs, *but it cannot suggest beliefs for us to hold*” [emphasis added] (p. 83). This notion of causality allows Rorty to bypass (or perhaps move between) the two problems of *realism* and *idealism* in philosophy. That is, he refuses to grant the external world an intrinsic nature that we can somehow know as it-is-in-itself, while at the same time repudiating that the things we say about the world bring that world into existence. He grants priority to neither of these realist or idealist traps:

The way in which a blank takes on the form of the die which stamps it has no analogy to the relation between the truth of a sentence and the event which the sentence is about. When the die hits the blank something causal happens, but as many *facts* are brought into the world as there are languages for describing that causal transaction....To say that we must have respect for facts is just to say that we must, if we are to play a certain language game, play by the rules. To say that we must have respect for unmediated causal forces is pointless. It is like saying

that the blank must have respect for the impressed die. The blank has no choice, nor do we. (Rorty, 1991a, p. 81)

Truth is thus an eventful tool for deciding what is better or worse in some given situation in which “better” and “worse” are at issue. To give up on the notion of Truth as an *object* that one might love as one loves another person is not to abandon every conceivable notion of truth. As Rorty (1997) says in his Spinoza lecture:

“Nobody, not even the most far-out post-modernist, believes that there is no difference between the statements we call true and those we call false. Like everybody else, post-modernists recognize that some beliefs are more reliable tools than others, and that agreement on which tools to use is essential for social cooperation” (p. 23).

The most Sophomoric charges of relativism—charges arising out of the position that the absence of some absolute transcendent Truth leads invariably to amoral positions that suppose “everybody has a right to his or her opinion” or “any belief is as good as any other”—are exposed quite sternly for the red herrings they really are.

Where things really get difficult is not in the myriad commonsense judgments we make about simple truths/facts (i.e., how many apples are in the bowl, who’s in the picture on my desk, etc.). Following the path of *logos* (reason and rationality), there are certain communal/cultural standards that apply in these kinds of cases, a simple realism I’ll call it. The problem becomes more apparent in the territory of moral judgments or judgments of artistic taste, what, more often than not, is the territory of *pathos* (of emotion, taste, and imagination). If I say abortion is wrong at all times and in all cases, or that the thing you are killing yourself laughing about is not at all funny, then it is far from

simple what the fact of the matter is independent of what I or you say or think. The problem is that our everyday, garden-variety, knowledge-attributing activities, many of which are commonsensical enough in terms of *logos* get so taken for granted, that we become insouciant about our knowledge ascriptions in areas that are more *pathos* driven. In the everyday world we make a huge assumption (so the pragmatists and the postmodernists have told us) that knowledge is merely a humble matter of having beliefs that are true *and that we hold such beliefs in virtue of their being true*. We assume the obviousness of it without thought. The pragmatism of Dewey and Rorty indicate that garden varieties of “true belief” are necessary for allowing us to get by in our environment, offering just enough stability to give us bearings in our constant movement into new, and hopefully better, futures. What is far from obvious for both is the necessity of some antecedent (and absolute) truth-foundation that would render “[holding] such beliefs in virtue of their being true” meaningful. The movement from simple truth ascriptions to capital “T” Truth ascriptions is often a seamless one. But, absent absolute foundations on the capital “T” Truth side, a true belief’s accuracy in virtue of some separate Truth realm that is antecedent to and utterly de-contextualized from our human environs is rendered meaningless. Pragmatists offer a thoroughly temporal and earth-bound realism in this sense. But, both Dewey and Rorty avoid the trap of inverse theoretical speculation, that is, playing the same old language game, by turning, as I have said, to the future rather than to arguments that inadvertently end up sustaining the antecedent.<sup>5</sup> It is, to reiterate, what Rorty is advocating above when he talks about redescription and circumvention. Indeed, turning to the future becomes a way of keeping theory at bay, a way of starting off fresh, so to speak, when the layers of theoretical

sophistication have made it difficult to actually access what we otherwise misleadingly take for granted as the everyday. Quite often what we take for granted cognitively as being the everyday comes to *feel* different to us nonetheless—a vague sense of alienation quietly infuses the taken-for-grantedness of many situations. In other words, *Pathos* makes tension for the taken-for-grantedness of *logos*. And yet, more often than not this hardly makes a dent in our everyday confidence that we are in touch with the world as it is, even as we feel a vague sense of disconnect or alienation from it. Being in touch with the world, it needs to be stressed, is different than being in touch with the world's *own* story. It is the recognition of this vital difference that has been so troublesome (especially to philosophers).

What I have been setting up here is what has come to be called the “postmodern predicament,” though it is hardly the so-called postmodernists who first described it.<sup>6</sup> Classical pragmatists, in a roughly commensurate line with Continental modernist philosophers (Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein), all sons in one way or another of Kant and Hegel, who were sons of Descartes and Plato before them, understood well the implications of what only now we call the postmodern predicament. This predicament is not the academic invention of philosophers, though philosophers have never been particularly shy when it comes to writing about such predicaments. Michael Luntley (1995) notes, I think correctly: “The problem is not an academic problem. It is a problem that arises from reflection upon our ordinary concept of knowledge” (p. 99). The implications of this are enormous if one considers that it is not merely the highbrow theoretical abstractions of philosophers that are being reflected upon in a metaphilosophical way. It is our everyday knowledge assumptions, what we take for



granted as our accurate truth-telling habits that are problematic *upon reflection*. It is a pragmatic problem through and through. Philosophers like Dewey and Rorty, and Nietzsche and Hegel before them, have radically challenged the sanctity and the security of the supposed foundations supporting our knowledge. It is important that they have done so not by showing what is lacking, but rather in showing what is in excess. That is, they have recognized that far from there being merely one truth context, or one explanatory framework, or one language game for establishing the indubitability of our knowledge, there are many—indeed, a great many. It is this very pluralism that wreaks havoc on the notion of Truth. If one hopes to decipher the true from the false, then one can no longer justifiably hope to find the one unassailable criterion for doing so. What this has led to, quite inexorably, is the next (seemingly) short step into the paradox of nihilism, or what may be an even more pernicious state, what Luntley calls antirationalism.

The exposure of the lack of Truth-foundations for our knowledge is one thing. Luntley (1995) likens it to our being put in a state of “stumbling like so many drunks in a dark alley late at night” (p. 100). Yet many drunks still find their way home. The full postmodern predicament (aka the antirationalist predicament) follows from the potentially greatest hazard of a pluralism of competing explanatory frameworks that opens up in virtue of exposing the above mentioned lack—that there is no longer any home to head for, nothing around which we *ought* to stake our beliefs. I quote Luntley at length here so as to convey the full and serious weight of the anti-rationalist possibility:

But, the proliferation of competing explanatory frameworks does not dent our confidence – it shatters it. There seems to be little room to escape the problems

we have now distinguished. In particular, how can we avoid the total loss of truth and rationality without returning to the discredited idea that the language of physics constitutes the transparent language of the cosmic register [nature's own story]? That is to say, how can we avoid the full-blown postmodernist predicament except by denying that there are alternatives to the physicalist description of our experience of the world?

It may be the case that it is beyond the limits of philosophy to provide a criterion for knowledge that would solve the lack-of-foundations problem, but matters are truly desperate if it is beyond the limits of philosophy to address satisfactorily the full-blown postmodernist predicament. If we cannot answer that, a kind of nihilism is all we are left with. We will have no grounds for criticizing those who speak in other tongues, those who adopt competing explanatory frameworks. We will have no scope to criticise so-called para-scientists and they will have no basis on which to criticise the status quo. We will have no resources to criticise fundamentalists wherever they occur, nor they to criticise the liberals who tolerate blasphemy of one kind or another. We will have no grounds to criticise those who grow rich offering deep-breathing cures for life-threatening and wasting diseases like AIDS. And such people will have no scope to criticise received medical science and show what it misses out and why. We will be beset by anarchy and chaos. We will have no notion at all of what we ought to believe. We will have only the traditions of belief into which we are born, those traditions that feel comfortable and familiar. If we ask whether they are right or not, we will get no answer. That silence is the silence of anti-rationalism. It is a profound

nihilism. It is a silence that is now insinuating itself into the general consciousness in these postmodern times. (pp. 100-101)

There is no denying the weight of the moral burden Luntley so starkly presents us with. Though Luntley is citing this only as a possibility, he nonetheless takes it seriously as a potential threat.<sup>7</sup> The threat of antirationalism is just the starkest rendering of the paradox of nihilism that has insinuated its way quite inevitably into our modern consciousness. Is this a charge against Rorty (or against Dewey) that could carry any weight? If nihilism is an inevitable part of our modern consciousness, that is, a reflection of the contingent state of our multifarious valuations in a pluralistic world, then can it even be looked at as a charge as such? If antirationalism is a charge that arises against those who say *in toto* that there is no such thing as truth or knowledge, can it be charged equally against those who have given up only on *theorizing about* truth and knowledge, who have, in effect, changed their philosophical focus, as Rorty has, to more literary concerns? Surely the two are different. We've already noted Rorty's response to simplistic charges of relativism above. But is there more than meets the eye here? Is Luntley's dire possibility of antirationalism describing anything different than just that simple kind of relativism that Rorty's particular understanding of causality has already denied? In what follows, nihilism should be understood as a tension of *pathos* rather than *logos*. The philosophical notion of nihilism is associated with a kind of hyper-consciousness about the collapsed status of previously inscrutable and absolute values. It makes not a lick of difference to the status of our simple truth concepts, which we must always have (and make). Pathos, in this sense, is always driven by a desire for truthfulness in one's day-to-day comportments in the world, and that such comportment is *deeply* meaningful. Never does

Rorty or any other pragmatist argue for arbitrariness as a wished-for state of conduct. But nor do they argue for allegiance to absolutes as the only alternative.

Nihilism is a word that has received a great amount of attention, especially in Continental philosophy. But American pragmatists have not shied away from such a tragedy-soaked concept either. If anything, one of the great differences between the mood of much Continental theorizing about nihilism and its American counterpart is the positive spin that the American pragmatists (broadly speaking, of course) give it. Drawing on the work of James Edwards (1997), I propose that there is a sense of what he calls “normal nihilism” that is accepted by pragmatists. This is not to say that so-called normal nihilism is a basis for pragmatic optimism. That would be a mistake. It is just something intellectuals can no longer ignore—so pervasive a part of modern consciousness it has become. I stress that this consciousness is that of “intellectuals”—those who, as we recall, read lots and lots of books by great philosophers and great literary figures, both living and dead, and who in virtue of such reading cannot help but be some sort of “normal nihilist.” Read Nietzsche once and your life changes even if you deny everything he says. The same, of course, can be said of Dewey and indeed Rorty himself. This is the power, as Rorty would have it, of reading.

As such, the history of nihilism indicates that it is a philosophical concept of some complexity. It can be attributed in its modern use to Immanuel Kant’s critique of metaphysics in his third critique (*Critique of the Power of Judgement*). As Critchley (2001) tells us, there Kant “achieves the remarkable feat of showing both the cognitive meaninglessness of the traditional claims of speculative, dogmatic metaphysics, while establishing the regulative moral necessity for the primacy of practical reason (that is, the

concept of freedom)” (p. 76). Kant, in effect, leaves us with an intractable problem by introducing the concept of human freedom operant within a natural universe governed by mechanistic laws of causality that are otherwise fundamentally irreconcilable with the causal principles of freedom as such. This is Kant’s attempt to meet the skeptical challenge that he sees inevitably arising in the wake of what we might call the great Cartesian failure—that is, the failure of the Cartesian ego to effectively *represent* the reality that exists outside of it. By trying to meet the challenge of skepticism left him by Descartes, Kant comes halfway by arguing, as Edwards (1997) tells us, “that human experience, and thus human knowledge, is partially constituted by the structures and operations of the ego-subject itself” (p. 33). The problem of representationalism leading inexorably to the problem of nihilism is bequeathed to us by Kant (along with the plethora of irreconcilable dualisms that so arise) when he insists that along with the ego-subject’s creative freedom comes the necessity that such freedom must be anchored in the ineffable Ding-an-sich (or thing-in-itself). I will stick to Edwards’ analysis here as he very effectively traces the problem of representationalism leading to the problem of nihilism and the way that the problem of nihilism need not necessarily be an intractable and utterly dire problem. What Edwards comes to call “normal nihilism” also bears a rich, though not uncontroversial, connection to Rorty’s notion of “irony,” which I will explore in more detail below. At this point, following Edwards’s analysis provides a more felicitous historical line for what we now refer to as the “postmodern predicament,” highlighting some real dangers, but not necessarily leading inevitably to the most dangerous state of antirationalism, the possibility of which fuels the dire prognostication outlined above by Luntley (1995). It also indicates the way in which Rorty takes

seriously the Continental influence on the American/pragmatic story he is telling. In so far as that story has Truth as its central target, a failure to grapple with the nihilism that invariably ensues is a failure to grasp the dynamics of a pragmatic culture and at least a component of its mood.

For Edwards (1997), the problem of representationalism arises from Kant's thing-in-itself projected as the necessary transcendental sky-hook for all human creativity. The problem, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, is like that of a wheel that, when turned, turns nothing else. It cannot be a part of the mechanism. The Kantian thing-in-itself thus performs no real function. Much like Dewey's and Rorty's denial of Truth, one can do away with the thing-in-itself with no discernible epistemological loss. As Edwards says: "Objective reality – that opaque and resistant stuff assumed to stand over against the receptive ego and to be spontaneously reflected in its consciousness – has become a will-o'-the-wisp" (p. 34). In epistemic practice, all we are left with is the representations themselves. Following Nietzsche, Edwards says that this "breaks the back of the metaphor of representation altogether." He continues:

If there are only representations, and representations of representations, and representations of representations of representations, then there are *no* representations: the sense of the metaphor itself depends upon the possibility of comparing the representation to what is represented. When that possibility of comparison is void, as it now so obviously seems to be, then the image of representation has ceased to function. The wheel one has been so furiously turning is now found to be unconnected to any real mechanism. The Cartesian account of mind and knowledge has collapsed under its own weight. (p. 34)

The collapse of representationalist theories is responded to thoroughly by Nietzsche, and the legacy of that response is an integral element of Rorty's understanding of the pragmatic tradition, or at least a part of the light in which he wants that tradition to be cast. As he says in his introduction to *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (1991b): "The context in which my essays put post-Nietzschean philosophy is, predictably enough, pragmatism" (p. 2). To ignore Nietzsche's influence on the general trajectory of philosophy on both sides of the ocean is to ignore a great deal of the history that has generated what many think of as merely the product of contemporaneity—namely, the malaise and confusion brought on by the so-called postmodern predicament.

Edwards (1997) is instructive (with an obvious influence from Rorty) in showing us that Nietzsche was the first to posit that it was not spontaneous representation that reflected our status as conscious beings with minds, but rather our powers of interpretation. Interpretation is the "willful imposition of structure and meaning on something – a text, a set of events, a sequence of sense-experiences – that demands it" (Edwards, p. 34). Flying in the face of the Cartesian notion of the human mind as passive receptacle, Nietzsche cleared the way for the notion that we alone are reality's willful creators. We can see the influence on Rorty in these passages from Nietzsche's *The Will to Power*:

"Interpretation," the introduction of meaning – not "explanation."...There are no facts, everything is in flux, incomprehensible, elusive; what is relatively most enduring is – our opinions. (cited in Edwards, p. 34)

A “thing-in-itself” is just as perverse as a “sense-in-itself,” a “meaning-in-itself.”

There are no “facts-in-themselves,” for a sense must always be projected into them before there can be “facts.”

The question “what is that?” is an imposition of meaning from some other viewpoint. “Essence,” the “essential nature,” is something perspective and already presupposes a multiplicity. At the bottom of it always lies “what is that for me?”

(for us, for all that lives, etc.). (cited in Edwards, p. 35)

We can see why for Dewey and Rorty, there is no sense left in the notion of absolute Truth standing in accurate correspondence to an indubitable reality, nor to the idea that our knowledge is a structuring of such truths. Writing in an apparently contradictory prose that indicates his influence on Rorty’s own ironic sensibility, Nietzsche says that: “truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of life [namely, us] could not live. The value for life is ultimately decisive” (cited in Edwards, p. 35). Of course, the whole notion of error here is emptied if error *is judged in relation to a belief’s correspondence to an absolute, acontextual fact*. Everything is in error under such a Platonic/Cartesian/Kantian picture, but nonetheless our human proclivity to judge things as true is reflective of a judgment we cannot stop making so long as we live. The trick, in this post-Nietzschean context, and the one emphasized by Rorty, is to make such judgments in a nonrepresentational way. Every set of true beliefs about our world (our knowledge), for Nietzsche, is no more than (linguistic) coping under an interpretation that, for the time being, works for us and suits our needs. This bears a connection to Rorty’s notion that truth is just “a compliment we pay to those propositions that have achieved wide acceptance within and across a community.” The idea that we impose



truthfulness and meaningfulness on the world indicates the interpretive shift in our status from passive receivers to willful creators. We can justify such willful imposition, not by a passive and accurate correspondence to some antecedent objective fact (or value), but only to the usefulness such creative imposition offers for an improved future. What we create are values based on our needs and interests. Theory, too, is brought down from the clouds becoming what Edwards refers to as “the (unconscious) codification of practice, practice shaped by interests, needs, and desires” (p. 36).

Theory as a codification of practice wherein practice is the state of multifarious human contexts of interests, needs, and desires is itself a sharp turn to the future and informs the pragmatic tradition profoundly. It indicates that life is in dynamic flux and that what Nietzsche calls “the will to power” is the very necessity, life’s necessity, for actively seeking novel ways to live. Again, it is not merely fitting oneself progressively to an a priori and absolutely stable Truth, but creating new truths (or interpretations) by which to live. Of course, divesting Truth of its numinous otherworldly comforts is not an eradication of the notion of truth from the universe. For Nietzsche, it is only to assign truth a *value* status that bespeaks the necessity of our practical comportment within contexts for which our interests, needs, and desires are relevant. Truth has shifted from having a theoretical/representational status to having a practical/interpretive status. Yet, within contexts of interpretation we recognize truth as that necessary error without which we cannot live. In a usage very close to Rorty’s concept of “final vocabulary,” which will be explored in more detail below, Nietzsche establishes that our human comportment in the world, that is, our incessant will to power, furnishes those values that lend structural integrity to any given interpretation. As Edwards (1997) says: “Values are those

fundamental structures of interpretation required and furnished (posited) by the will to power for its own preservation and enhancement; they function...as the basic filters through which raw experience is passed, thereby being modulated into a coherent and livable world” (p. 37). Without such value structures (or vocabularies) human life would be in perpetual chaos. Values thus need to be understood, says Edwards, as those social practices, those “ground-level interpretations,” that “fundamentally constitute and characterize a particular form of life...upon which other interpretations are erected to form the edifice of a culture” (p. 37). The problem, of course, is that those values constructed by our will to power, by the necessity of our relentless desire for novel modes of life, must themselves be understood as contingent artifacts—good, perhaps, for a time, but not so infinitely. Of course, there is no knock-down argument one can make for this, other than to refer to past precedent. As it stands, though, Truth as value is effectively devalued or rather *it is always in a process of devaluating itself*. Clearly, it is denuded of any representational or mirroring status and thus of any authoritative or indubitable ground for our now temporary (because temporally bound) knowledge.

All previously absolute values are devalued in this way—they devalue themselves. This applies no less to the Cartesian ego-subject, that last bastion of *substantial* selfhood. For while Descartes, in the wake of seventeenth century scientific and epistemological revolutions, was able, as Edwards (1997) notes, to undermine “the Idealist forms of Western religiousness he had inherited, Nietzsche has in turn shattered the Cartesian worldview.” He has done so, Edwards (1997) continues,

first of all by ridiculing the philosophical metaphor of mind-as-representation and thus insinuating that the Cartesian ego-subject must be will, not receptivity (i.e., a

force of interpretation, not a medium of mirroring); and second – a more radical attack – by undercutting the philosophical idea of the grounding, centered ego itself, showing it too to be only a unifying interpretation of multifarious experience (i.e., a value, not a *Ding-an-Sich*). (p. 41)

The entire Western tradition's allegiance to one or another form of the "metaphysics of presence" is now put into question with the collapse of the last Cartesian ground of substantial self-presence. This leads us straight to Nietzsche's oft-quoted definition of nihilism from *The Will To Power*: "What does nihilism mean?" he asks: "*That the highest values devalue themselves*. The aim is lacking: 'why?' finds no answer" (cited in Edwards, p. 41). We need to be clear about what this entails for us mere human beings. Recapitulating Rorty's historically varied paths to redemption outlined above we now are in a position to outline the full weight of Nietzsche's influence.

Nihilism is a state wherein our highest values "*devalue themselves*." Nietzsche's use of the reflexive verb here is meant to indicate that it is not through our powers of critical analysis that such values devalue. Rather it is an internal element of their own development that they do so. Such devaluation, when put alongside Nietzsche's most famous saying, "God is dead," scrawled, as Critchley (2001) tells us, "on the former Berlin Wall and on toilet walls the world over," starts to become (for some) ominously clear. Critchley continues:

This does not mean that God has somehow popped his clogs, quietly slipped out the back door of the universe without telling anyone, or that some other God has taken his place. Rather, it means 'we have killed him'. It is we humans who are culpable for the death of God. Nihilism is the breakdown of the order of meaning,

where all that was posited as a transcendent source of value in pre-Kantian metaphysics becomes null and void, where there are no cognitive skyhooks upon which to hang a meaning for life. (p. 80)

In many ways, the Christian moral tradition, whatever of power remains for it to feed noncognitive forms of faith, has committed suicide through its very internal will to truthfulness. That is to say, to the extent that the Christian tradition has taken upon itself the necessity of *philosophical* cognitive standards of rationality, it has killed itself. In its search for transcendent truths, it is led quite inexorably to science, and thus fatally to a search of its own metaphysics. The paradox of nihilism, then, is just this: “the will for a moral interpretation or valuation of the world now appears to be a will to untruth” (Critchley, p. 81). Yet our belief in a world of truth is, as we have noted above, a necessary error we *must* commit in order to live. The most ominous import of Nietzsche’s prognostication of nihilism lies less in what is negated—the myriad of Truth candidates, religious and philosophical—and more in the very turn to the future, because now we must endure what (supposedly) we cannot, a world of sheer becoming. For Nietzsche, this is a dire, if inevitable state. He writes in *The Will to Power*:

But as soon as man finds out how that world is fabricated solely from psychological needs, and how he has absolutely no right to it, the last form of nihilism comes into being: it includes disbelief in any metaphysical world and forbids itself any belief in a *true* world. Having reached this standpoint, one grants the reality of becoming as the *only* reality, forbids oneself every kind of clandestine access to afterworlds and false divinities – but cannot endure this world though one does not want to deny it. (cited in Critchley, p. 81)

It is this dire analysis that sets the tone and the mood of much Continental theorizing. Nihilism is the more or less natural consequence of the Christian and philosophical tradition's self-negation. For Nietzsche, the more or less natural state of nihilism is expressed in our more or less natural reaction that all existence must be meaningless. It is this particular Nietzschean "interpretation" that sets the course, as I have said, for most of the somber-sounding Continental philosophy that Rorty is influenced by. So why isn't Rorty a somber-sounding philosopher?

### **Normal Nihilism to Irony**

There's no denying that the entire American pragmatic tradition shares a common trajectory with Nietzsche. Pragmatism's common trajectory with Nietzsche's thought is based in the sheer similarity of the message that was passed on to Americans by James and Dewey that Nietzsche had passed on to his fellow Europeans. Of importance, it is the negation side of the message that both traditions share and that Rorty has so vitally tapped into across the largely artificial boundaries that have otherwise barred productive communication between these two wings of the Western tradition. The message is pervasive in Dewey as well, because he was as aware as any Continental thinker of the tenor of his times, the trajectory of the post-Enlightenment impulse. In terms of the antiepistemological and antimetaphysical stances of both traditions, as well as the philosophy of language that came about because of those stances, they are virtually unanimous in their rejections. Absolutist Truth candidates fare no better on either side of the ocean—philosophically speaking. The choice of moods that one takes as a result of such vast undermining (keeping in mind that values self-devalue) is decisive in terms of locating the important difference between the Pragmatic and Continental traditions.

As a pragmatist, Rorty is fully cognizant of what the two traditions have in common—namely their shared anti-Cartesianism, their shared antirepresentationalism, and their shared antiessentialism. The refusal to grant to our knowledge the kind of transcendent truth status that would somehow indicate our cognitive grasp of and correspondence to an indubitable reality, the refusal, that is, to accept the picture of our minds as mirrors of reality, leads to the self-devaluation of those values that otherwise have perpetuated that fantasy. From there, there is nothing *essential* to tap into, no thing-in-itself. Everything encountered—‘every thing, person, event, idea, and poem’—is a nexus in a web of relations. There are no unrelated *pragmata*, or at least none that *mean* anything to us. That this has led to a deflation of what philosophy is good for goes without saying, but it is primarily a deflation of those antecedent purposes (admittedly, no small deflation) that have traditionally *rationalized* the discipline. To deny philosophy any future purposes whatsoever runs against the grain of Rorty’s (and Dewey’s) poeticism and represents the kind of simple-minded relativism they reject outright. Who’s to say what philosophy might become, what directions it might take? That is a question of and for the imagination first and foremost. But whatever philosophy does become, it must now be recognized as an activity in which the very values that traditionally fueled its trajectory are devalued. Whatever it will become must now find its energizing source from the very fact of becoming—a turn to the future, in other words, that is self-conscious all the way down. This self-consciousness is the recognition of the contingency of the universe and our place in it as well as the recognition that even our final vocabularies, those vocabularies (like Nietzsche’s “will to power”) that give us our sense of being a part of a stable culture, are not intrinsically inflexible. It is this heightened self-

consciousness (which I shall expand on presently) that puts us in a state of what Edwards (1997) (drawing on a facet of Nietzsche's thinking), calls "normal nihilism" and what Rorty calls "irony." It is not without its difficulties and dangers, to be sure, but nor is it automatically a source of despair. This potential for hopeful melioration within a state of heightened self-conscious awareness, be it referred to as "irony" or "normal nihilism," signals the cardinal difference between the moods in the Pragmatic and Continental traditions.

In outlining what he means by "normal nihilism" Edwards (1997) strikes a chord with Rorty's notion of "irony." The point of Edwards's project, it must be noted, is to defend some form of religiosity in the wake of the self-immolation of our highest (Christian) values. That such devaluation (as outlined above) is equally, and necessarily, applicable to philosophy is an indication of the tense relationship between religion and philosophy. As already pointed out by Rorty, redemption from either has not been successful, if only because of their odd admixture. Religious faith enters perilous philosophical waters, indeed, turns into philosophy, when it becomes thinkable that one might hope to ground one's faith in rational principles, arguments, as well as one or another form of absolutist truth-criterion. The way that such ambitions have turned in upon themselves via a paradoxical drive to untruth signals the pervasive mood of nihilism that has filtered into the fabric of our consciousness in these late modern times. As Edwards says "nihilism is the way the world comes to us, the way its sounds itself out in us; it is the way we comport ourselves to what we are given. *We are all now nihilists* [emphasis added] (p. 46). To the extent that Nietzsche posited nihilism as a (more or less) "normal" condition, Edwards is careful to separate the sense of normalcy associated with

nihilism out from the more pathological interpretations it is often given. He is thoroughly pragmatic in his articulation.

“Nihilism” is often understood as one of two things—it is a pathological condition of individual or society, what Edwards (1997) refers to as “a paralyzing state compounded of pessimism, apathy, weariness, loss of all conviction, ‘recession of the power of the spirit’” or it is understood as a philosophical synonym for sociopathy; the individual who is “altogether without a controlling conscience; a brute who coolly does whatever he wishes” (p. 46). Edwards notes that although Nietzsche sometimes uses the term in these ways, it is not the most compelling of uses, and moreover, something important may be lost by so using it. This leads to the sense of “normal nihilism” that Edwards is outlining:

To be a nihilist is not (necessarily) either to be hopeless and inert (like the catatonic) or to operate brutally and without effective restraint (like Ted Bundy or the Nazi *Gauleiter*); on the contrary, *all* of us now are nihilists, even those among us who are most energetic and most scrupulous. *To say that we are normal nihilists is just to say that our lives are constituted by self-devaluating values.*

What makes these values *values* is that we normally recognize, as our ancestors normally did not, their reality as pragmatically posited filters through which experience must be passed to become manageable; what makes them self-devaluating is that we also recognize – and only with their help, of course – their contingency, their subjection to history understood as the Mendelian evolution of life-forms. (p. 46)



The way Edwards accounts for “normal nihilism” lines up nicely with Rorty’s account of “irony,” though it needs to be said there is an important and subtle public/private difference between their respective intentions.

I think both Edwards and Rorty understand “normal nihilism” as a “public” or “global” condition. When Edwards (1997) says ‘we are all now nihilists’ he is not proclaiming that we all now have hyper-consciousness of the fact, that we are all redemptive intellectuals (in Rorty’s sense) who have read Nietzsche and others and have adjusted our ways accordingly. Both would agree, if I am reading them correctly, that self-consciousness of this condition of normal nihilism is the intellectuals’ self-consciousness only, and it is always a creative on-the-move self-consciousness at that. Clearly, the turn to the future—to some kind of ‘becoming’—is in this regard decisive, and signals a difference between Edwards’ and Rorty’s sense of hopefulness as a result of such a turn. Edwards has some trepidation about the possible public manifestations of normal nihilism. Such a condition seeps into the cracks and fissures of a culture and finds expression regardless of whether or not the public is self-consciously (read ironically) aware of the condition. Indeed, the less self-consciousness there is the more dangerous or potentially demeaning such a condition can be. This is Edwards’s source of fear and trembling—that one or the other outcome might occur as a result of our normal nihilism. The first is that such nihilism will become expressive of what Edwards calls “a kind of runaway humanism” (p. 52). He explains this fear as such:

Confronted with the possibility...that we continually create new and better forms of human life, we can easily fall into an overwhelming restlessness. Life for the sake of life (the Nietzschean dream) becomes change for the sake of change.

Nothing except fatigue and our failures of imagination limit our capacity to fashion ourselves and our world anew, in accordance with whatever purposes we uncover in ourselves. But novelty palls before the ever newer; the half-lives of our enthusiasms become shorter and shorter. And pretty soon we are feeding our habits by eating the earth (and ourselves) in bigger and bigger bites....Our humanism – our sense of limitless inner and outer space to be filled with new selves, new worlds, new pleasures, new values – can thus leave us (and the planet) helpless before our well-confirmed predilections to addiction and to boredom. (pp. 52-53)

Clearly, such a possible prognostication resonates all too well in these late modern times. This is Edwards's fear of the frenetically paced shopping mall of values, where any source of stability is uprooted at the very moment of its instantiation. It is a world of mania and perpetually unfulfilled desires where "memory too easily becomes nostalgia; the past becomes kitsch" (Edwards, p. 53). It represents a frenetic eventfulness wherein "event is obscured by later event, [and] when the past disappears in such forgetting (or into kitschy and commodified memorial), the present can thin out into a jittery mania for pure difference. One becomes Emerson's traveler who says, 'Anywhere but here'" (Edwards, p. 53).

The second and antithetical fear that Edwards (1997) expresses involves what he calls "the triumph of the normal" (p. 53). This is a strong conservative reaction to the fear brought on by "limitless multiplicity." What Edwards foresees (is he really even looking ahead in either case?), and what is just as scary, is what I will call (in a more Deweyan vein) the fear of massification, and what Edwards calls "the triumph of fundamentalism."

That is, he is fearful of what becomes of the world when many choose to blindly or “even joyfully plunge...into some well-defined social and cultural role, letting it define who [they are] and will be” (p. 53). What Edwards sees as a possibility looks thus:

One speaks as “they” speak; one acts as “anyone” would act. One becomes thereby, and enthusiastically, a socially constructed cipher, wearing the right clothes, working at the right job, seeing the right movies, having the right responses to them, doing what is expected by “them” of “anyone.” One is a model of good behavior; even one’s vices are those that “anyone” might have.

Sometimes it is not enough just that one find this sort of comfort for oneself; no, it must be enforced on others as well. One’s own hold on normality is threatened by anything abnormal. Errancy must be condemned and attacked. One can allow to stand only what “they” – the good Christians, the true revolutionaries, the tenured professors of the Ivy League, those who have read Bataille – approve of. (pp. 53-54)

In the first instance, then, we have the public denigrated by frenetic and unquenchable private desires. In this second instance we have the private sinking under the oppressive weight of a conforming blind normalcy. Either extreme represents a frightening prospect for Edwards, and why should they not? What is quite remarkable is that both Edwards and Rorty occupy the same void, have turned against the same antiquated metaphysics with its misplaced comforts—have turned, that is, to the necessity of contingency.

Edwards even quotes a phrase he heard Rorty once speak: “The meaning of human life is the creation of new vocabularies” (p. 55). Edwards cites the phrase, not so much in approbation of what Rorty says, but in a kind of knowing resignation to it. The

decisiveness of Edwards's next words indicate a merging (for him) of painfulness and power. In the light of Rorty's words, Edwards says:

To be sure, there is no way back, short of intellectual and spiritual suicide. The price to be paid for the stunning certainty of some new god stepping out from behind a billboard is far too high. At risk would be more than just our most cherished (and most hard-won) forms of intellectual life; such a revelation would leave us defenseless against our own well-documented need for ravishment....No doubt it's better for us to be normal nihilists, those who in our effective, though also restless and brittle, coping can hold at bay any need to be "saved," than to repopulate the earth with divinities and their demands for obedient submission. (p. 55)

There is no denying, the mall of perpetually on-the-run human values frightens Edwards, but as he here makes clear, there are worse things to be feared.

The repetition of the word "intellectual" is also telling. Reiterating a sentiment that is prevalent in Rorty's works, as we have already articulated above is that intellectuals are on to something that others are not, at least not consciously. For surely, Luntley's (1995) and now Edwards's (1997) dire possibilities arising out of our so-called 'normal nihilism' are not dire possibilities that any reasonably (and ironically) self-conscious intellectual would perpetuate. Surely not! Learned intellectuals who have read all the big books (and such individuals are not solely housed in universities, though many are) have witnessed the great deconstruction, understand the dire possibilities of the Western trajectory, but, and this is important, know the future is theirs. And with great (creative) power, so comes great responsibility. Is this just another form of self-flattery or

elitism? Well, it can be, but if the burden of responsibility that rests heavy on the shoulders of our culture's intellectuals is a thoroughly democratic burden, then it can plausibly be interpreted as entailing the nobler burden of creating the freedom and space for more people to become intellectuals. The hoped-for state is that of a better future wherein more and more of us have evolved past some of our longstanding petty indulgences, our dangerous comportments with each other and the planet we inhabit—have, in other words, become better sorts of persons. Rorty calls these sorts of persons “liberal ironists.” It is in the end an educational project of utmost importance, but for now we need to chart the turn to hopefulness necessitated by the very condition of normal nihilism (or irony) that is all our lot, whether we are conscious of it or not.

It may still seem strange, even paradoxical, trying to articulate a “turn to hopefulness necessitated by the very condition of normal nihilism,” but it is my hope that with the aid of Critchley (2001) and Edwards (1997) I have managed to convey a workable alternative to the otherwise common association of nihilism with one or another form of individual or social pathology. It is a form of optimism finally that has no need for more than temporary comforts, has no need, that is, for either transcendent or radical absolutes. As David Hall (1994) says of Rorty: “Like Nietzsche, Rorty is a Benign Nihilist. And that nihilism expresses itself directly in Rorty's provincialism, ethnocentrism, and heroism. It also shapes his attitudes towards poetry and prophesy – issues central to his narrativist posture” (p. 170). All this being said, there is an inkling of an irritation here, is there not? What I highlighted in the previous chapter by way of articulating Rorty's public/private distinction starts to come to a head in the form of the “Benign Nihilist” as liberal ironist.

As a Canadian, I see Rorty as a strange amalgam of politics. In Canada we have enshrined a multiparty system made up of the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party, the New Democratic Party (NDP), and the Parti Quebecois (PQ). It is remarkably refreshing, even as it is baffling that Rorty for all intents and purposes, is an NDP/PQ in private, a Conservative in public (that is, he shows concern for notions of conservation), and that this amalgam makes him some form of Liberal overall. Fascinating indeed! Perhaps it is even pragmatic the way such divisions collapse and coalesce in Rorty's writings. At any rate, it will not pay to be too political about Rorty the philosopher but nor will it pay to be too nonpolitical either. There are substantial issues at stake in Rorty's liberal ironism. I have chosen to articulate Rorty's liberal ironism principally through Edwards, reading of Nietzsche and the particular Western trajectory of what Edwards prefers to call "normal nihilism." I think it is a rich historical entry into what Rorty means by liberal irony. For Rorty (1989), borrowing from Judith Shklar, liberals are "people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do" (p. xv). What Rorty means by 'ironist' resonates most with the condition of "normal nihilism:"

I use "ironist" to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her most central beliefs – 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. (p. xv)

And so:

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. (p. xv)

I introduced earlier Rorty's notion of a "final vocabulary" as bearing a resemblance to Nietzsche's notion of "values" or "value structures" that filter our 'will to power'—our 'will to power,' in Edwards (1997) words, signaling "life...avidly seeking novel ways to preserve and enhance itself" (p.36). I need now to clarify just what Rorty means with the notion of "final vocabulary," especially as it pertains to his notion of "irony." It is also an entry point, taken up in the next chapter, for Rorty's thoroughly "linguistic turn" philosophy as compared to Dewey's 'experiential' philosophy.

For Rorty, all human beings, inasmuch as they are meaningful entities, are sentential to the core. What Nietzsche referred to as "values" or "value structures" Rorty translates into "words" or "sentence structures," while at the same time maintaining the same necessity as Nietzsche of having to order an otherwise chaotic and fluxive universe (that Rorty's translation, like Nietzsche's, fails fully to escape metaphysics will be taken up in the next chapter). In this sense, what Rorty calls our "final vocabulary" is more than some sentence or set of sentences wielded for getting something done at some given time. It is more like the grand narrative of one's acculturation. It is comparable to Nietzsche's "value structures" or "structures of interpretation," highlighted above—what Edwards (1997) refers to as "organized applications of force." This is how Edwards explains the Nietzschean side (with an influence from Heidegger):

Interpretations, one might say, are *social practices*, relatively determinate patterns of comportment that persist over time so as to constitute human beings and their world in a stable and predictable fashion. *Values* are those basic social practices that most fundamentally constitute and characterize a particular form of life;

values are those ground-level interpretations – patterns of comportment – upon which other interpretations are erected to form the edifice of a culture. (p. 37)

Here is how Rorty (1989) explains ‘final vocabulary’:

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 for our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. I shall call these words a person’s “final vocabulary.” (p. 73)

As I have said, these are comparable passages, but they are not the same. The Edwards passage articulates what might be referred to as a *public* or cultural common sense.

Rorty’s passage, on the other hand, operates at the level of the *private* individual, though it certainly does not preclude the possibility of many individuals sharing similar “final vocabularies” so as to constitute a kind of public common sense. But I suspect Rorty would be uncomfortable with Edwards’ notion of “ground-level interpretations” even though he alternatively calls them “patterns of comportment.” My guess is that, for Rorty, there would be too much “givenness” in this passage and not enough “takenness.” The thorough linguistification of Nietzschean “value structures” by Rorty signals another important element that Rorty takes from Nietzsche’s larger project against capital “T” Truth.

Rorty (1989) cites with approbation Nietzsche’s statement that “truth is a mobile army of metaphors” (p. 27). This is not only the linguistification of truth, but the linguistification of the whole process of self-creation, at least for those ironic enough



individuals who hopefully will become better able to cope with what Harold Bloom calls the “strong poet’s anxiety of influence” (cited in Rorty, 1989, p. 24). This cuts to the pervasive restlessness that is at the heart of Rorty’s ironism. The “strong poet” or the “ironist” is never satisfied to be merely a product of his or her enculturation. His or her behavioral repertoire is not a substantive “given,” sitting ever in one or another pristine state waiting to be grasped, explained, or otherwise packaged. Like Truth is not *out there* waiting, pristinely, to be discovered, so the “words in which we tell...the story of our lives” are not *in there* so waiting.

Yet, the motivations that drive even the ironist’s stories about him or herself have causal significance, they must have, for we can never speak, write, or create *ex nihilo*. The “strong poet’s anxiety of influence,” then, is just the fear among those we call ironists of discovering that they are merely copies or replicas of something or someone who is already there or who has already been. In traditional cultures or strong conservative traditions, we might say that this is not so much a fear as it is a wished-for state. But this would be misleading given the way Rorty views both language and the self as thoroughly contingent artifacts. That is to say, there is nothing stopping us, pace Nietzsche, from tracing our behavior backwards to discover the causes in back of who and what we are. But what we discover is, quite paradoxically, that we are not really discovering any thing *per se*. Discovery is not the issue. Any causal tracing is actually itself an act of self-knowledge and thus self-creation. The tracing of causes is actually the creating of new metaphors. As Rorty (1989) says:

The process of coming to know oneself, confronting one’s contingency, tracking one’s causes home, is identical with the process of inventing a new language –

that is, of thinking up some new metaphors. For any *literal* description of one's individuality, which is to say any use of an inherited language-game for this purpose, will necessarily fail. One will not have traced that idiosyncrasy home but will merely have managed to see it as not idiosyncratic after all, as a specimen reiterating a type, a copy or replica of something which has already been identified. To fail as a poet – and thus, for Nietzsche, to fail as a human being – is to accept somebody else's description of oneself....So the only way to trace home the causes of one's being as one is would be to tell a story about one's causes in a new language. (pp. 27-28)

Self-knowledge *is* self-creation. Anything less would be mere mimicry and therefore would entail no growth. Human beings are not mere photocopy machines. For Rorty, the past is linked causally to the future only in terms of the possibility for self-creation, and hopefully, therein, some sort of improved state or condition. In many ways, then, the past and the future are made, not found.

It is noted by Fishman and McCarthy (1998) that John Dewey once responded to a student's query about the role of emotion in thinking by saying: "Knowledge is a small cup of water floating on a sea of emotion" (p. 21). So too does Rorty understand the role of causality in shaping our self-knowledge. What Dewey calls the "sea of emotion" Rorty, indicating his own Freudian influence, calls the "blind impress" that all behaviors bear. There is no defining or providing prior justification for a given "final vocabulary." As Malachowski (2002) correctly notes: "The fact that final vocabularies have no prior justification is not a sign that there is something deeply wrong with such sets of words. Indeed, given their value to their owners, we should not expect them to depend on

anything more fundamental (otherwise the chances are *that* would have already been incorporated as a better linguistic terminus)” (p. 117). Any articulation of the “blind impress,” then, is not a discovering of some antecedent purity, but rather a new articulation, a new metaphor or set of metaphors. This is where the real excitement is—at the edge of the ever renewing, the ever novel. There is no meaningful nonlinguistic cause *that can be antecedently defined* (though the universe is chock-full of nonlinguistic causes). There is only some present articulation, some present new vocabulary cutting into the future. It is thoroughly pragmatic on Rorty’s part to be concerned with consequences as such. Language is not a medium between self and world; it has no intrinsic purposes. It can only chart contingencies. As Rorty (1989) says:

For all we know, or should care, Aristotle’s metaphorical use of *ousia*, Saint Paul’s metaphorical use of *agapē*, and Newton’s metaphorical use of *gravitas*, were the results of cosmic rays scrambling the fine structure of some crucial neurons in their respective brains. Or, more plausibly, they were the result of some odd episodes in infancy – some obsessional kinks left in these brains by idiosyncratic traumata. It hardly matters how the trick was done. The results were marvelous. There had never been such things before. (p. 17)

The ironist thus fully embraces the contingent status of his or her vocabularies, and as a good liberal, eschews all forms of cruelty. But as an ironist he or she will be unable to provide any kind of “non-circular theoretical backup for the belief that cruelty is horrible” (Rorty, p. xv). The ironist, finally, fulfills these 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. (Rorty, 1989, p. 73)

I have made the long, slow turn from absolutist conceptions of Truth to contingency and language, from past (blindly held) allegiances to future possibilities. The turn against Truth as an absolute is a thoroughly pragmatic turn and charts a trajectory important to both Dewey and Rorty. Indeed, pragmatism generally has followed such a trajectory—a trajectory that, in Walt Whitman’s words cited earlier, “counts...for [its] justification and success...almost entirely upon the future.” I have used Rorty as proxy for the pragmatic tradition generally and for Dewey in particular in order to highlight the pragmatic turn against absolutist conceptions of Truth, central to a thoroughgoing pragmatism with its antifoundationalist and antiessentialist affiliations. This is no doubt heresy to some hard-line pragmatists (most often hard-line Deweyans), but I can see no radical difference in Rorty’s voicing of this central critical theme from other such pragmatic renderings, including Dewey’s. The intrepid turning to the future is itself a kind of faith in truthfulness that comes by way of turning against absolutist conceptions of Truth. The Enlightenment flame that still dimly flickers has lighted a path that has witnessed our highest (absolutist) values, devaluing themselves inexorably via the momentum of their own *logical* trajectory. Pragmatism was born on this trajectory and has articulated perhaps the single most important inversion: The modern imagination once disciplined by Truth (some God or some rational philosophical absolutist

conditioning source) has now itself become the disciplinarian. Truthfulness, a drive that we cannot existentially forgo, at the risk of falling into chaos, must now be disciplined by imagination.<sup>9</sup> The normal nihilism that imbues our present late modern trajectory can be faced courageously only by the discipline of imagination, but an imagination tethered by a fidelity to one's enculturation. The future is never born *ex nihilo*, it is always the result of conditions entailing some element of propriety—the propriety of getting it right, of imagining well, of being genuine and offering a sincere account. These are some bright (though imperfect) lights of our Western enlightenment enculturation, parts of what makes us *us*. This is why the charge that pragmatists abandon truth altogether is a silly one. The intrepid explorer (or the responsible scholar) is always experimenting, always trying for new and better ways of doing things, always searching for better modes of communication. It is never a matter of riding roughshod over past modes, but nor is it a matter of blind or unthinking allegiance. Dogmatism is the enemy of novelty and growth. Truthfulness is thus a part of the eros of living well, disciplined by the ameliorative hope brought on by our ability to always imagine a different and hopefully better future. Such a turn to the future, then, is finally an aesthetic turn, the substance of which infuses the very best elements of Dewey's and Rorty's respective pragmatisms.

The next two chapters take up their respective aesthetic stances, with a particular focus on Dewey's experiential account and Rorty's linguistic account. That Rorty's "linguistic turn" represents a sharp turn against Dewey's experiential philosophy raises some significant and interesting problems, the resolution of which could pay dividends for determining who among them has the superior resources for carrying the pragmatic tradition along into the new millennium. Of course, the notion of "superior resources"

must prove problematic for Rorty, who will deny such resources any antecedent meaningfulness. Superior resources will be deemed superior, if at all, only by some as yet unwritten future account. As we shall see in what follows, a notion of “superior resources” can be retained in Dewey’s philosophy by way of his embodied organic naturalism, which, while recognizing flux and contingency as real components of lived life, nonetheless has room for empirical learning and progress. The problems that arise between the two might also be more modest, with the difference between the two not adding up to much that would otherwise place either of their pragmatisms in jeopardy of burning out. There is an important qualitative dimension to both of their aesthetical positions—Dewey’s experiential and Rorty’s linguistic. What I hope to show is that this qualitative dimension represents the real starting point (and thus the only real practical starting point) for each of their respective philosophical/aesthetic positions. The trick will be showing how Rorty is able to divest language of meaningful, cognitive content (via his notion of metaphor) in such a way that it resonates very well with Dewey’s own qualitative starting point, what he calls the “indeterminate situation.” I turn first to Dewey’s aesthetics and his radical realignment of art *as* experience.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DEWEY'S AESTHETIC PRAGMATISM

But it was not a choice  
Between excluding things. It was not a choice

Between, but of. He chose to include the things  
That in each other are included, the whole,  
The complicate, the amassing harmony.  
-Wallace Stevens<sup>1</sup>

If, as I hinted at the end of the last chapter, the turn to the future in the pragmatic tradition is also a turn to more aestheticized forms of culture, then we must ask, what do such aesthetic modes look like? Clearly, many important Deweyan scholars argue that Dewey's entire philosophical project culminates in an aesthetic pragmatic framework.<sup>2</sup> That Rorty's own "literary" pretensions, looked at briefly already, signal an aestheticized bent in his larger philosophy is also clear. That there is (or appears to be) a trenchant contest between these two aestheticized modes of pragmatism has been captured in much of the literature, particularly as it pertains to Rorty's aggressive "linguistic turn" against the staple Deweyan category of "experience."<sup>3</sup> Given Dewey's attachment to "experience" as an eminently useful philosophical category, it is apparent that Rorty has little patience for what many consider the most important element of Dewey's work. This leads to a kind of bewilderment that anything is even left of Dewey for Rorty to attach his well-known heroic attributions.

The debate is at heart a metaphysical debate, the tenor of which has implications for their respective aesthetic positions. Rorty sees Dewey's adherence to an experiential pragmatism as unnecessarily encumbered in old-style metaphysics, the debates around which pragmatism has otherwise struggled hard to dissolve. There certainly are some elements of Dewey's experiential wanderings that do look suspicious in this regard,

particularly his distinction between the “primary” and “secondary” dimensions of experience, looked at briefly at the end of Chapter Two. Within the primary dimension of experience Dewey lodges his famous nondiscursive, noncognitive foundation for all eventual epistemic outcomes, what he terms the “pervasive quality.” This has been rendered a problematic dimension of Dewey’s metaphysics by some astute Deweyan scholars.<sup>4</sup> I will take up such criticisms in the next chapter, where I turn to Rorty’s own aesthetic pragmatism entailing within it a critique of certain Deweyan themes, not the least of which is against Dewey’s notion of qualitative immediacy or indeterminacy. I then hope to show that against Rorty’s own intentions, he cannot finally do without that very qualitative dimension that Dewey posits as necessary. Qualitative immediacy, I hope to show, is a necessary starting point for any aesthetic trajectory. For now I turn to Dewey’s aesthetic pragmatism in order to bring fully to life the experiential implications that were being developed in Chapter Two.

Dewey’s writings on art and aesthetics have, since the time of their publication, received somewhat modest attention in comparison to the coverage given other important areas of his philosophy. In recent years, however, there has been a gradual recognition that Dewey’s writings on art and aesthetics, written later in his career, exhibit a deeper and more comprehensive synthesizing of the major themes that had been developing throughout his entire philosophy. Failure to come to terms with Dewey’s writing on art and aesthetics is, in many ways, a failure to come to fuller terms with the deeper implications of his entire philosophy. It is my contention, therefore, that Dewey’s writings on art and aesthetics provide the most thoroughgoing and mature rendering of the major themes that preoccupied his entire philosophical project. Experience is the



major theme running throughout Dewey's work, and it is my focus here. The many aspects of his philosophical project are difficult to grasp unless his reconstruction of experience is understood. Attempting to overcome the gulf between theory and practice begun in Greek philosophy and continued throughout much of the history of Western philosophy, Dewey (1925/1994) comes to a bold conclusion. I quote once again in full the passage from chapter 9 of *Experience and Nature*:

But if modern tendencies are justified in putting art and creation first, then the implications of this position should be avowed and carried through. It would then be seen that science is an art, that art is practice, and that the only distinction worth drawing is not between practice and theory, but between those modes of practice that are not intelligent, not inherently and immediately enjoyable, and those which are full of enjoyed meanings. When this perception dawns, it will be a commonplace that art — the mode of activity that is charged with meanings capable of immediately enjoyed possession — is the complete culmination of nature, and that "science" is properly a handmaiden that conducts natural events to this happy issue. Thus would disappear the separations that trouble present thinking: division of everything into nature *and* experience, of experience into practice *and* theory, art *and* science, of art into useful *and* fine, menial *and* free.  
(p. 290)

No doubt, this passage still sounds radical today. A cursory look at how and why it is radical is the intention behind this dissertation.

### Art and The Commons

In his writings on art and aesthetics, Dewey seeks to bring art back into the fold of the sociocultural and the sociotemporal, making aesthetic experience less elite and escapist and more applicable to everyday life experiences. The origin and destiny of aesthetic experience and artistic works is, for Dewey, the commons. The task, for Dewey (1934/1980), “is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience” (p. 3). It is not Dewey’s intention that everybody will, upon following this road, rise to the level of *fine* artist (he has room for the unique qualities, insights, and even the genius of particular artists and their work). He is saying, however, that the creative process and expressive potential so vividly expressed in fine works of art—the complex movement from some vision (end-in-view) through that vision’s manipulation in production toward an aesthetic outcome (consummation)—is a process exemplary of how we intelligently experience and shape our world.

We all have an ongoing aesthetic hunger. This hunger is not easily diminished by faulty personal and social bearings. Understanding that experience’s embodied movement in time constitutes us as the shapers of our world and that our world is a canvas of unlimited possibility, we may begin to appreciate more fully the aesthetic possibilities of an ameliorative stance to the day-to-day problems we face. For when that which is considered cultivated or refined is also remote and disconnected from common life, then “esthetic hunger is likely to seek the cheap and the vulgar” (Dewey, 1934/1980, p. 6). When this occurs experience is degraded and the problems of our world are left to whim and chance or, conversely, fanaticism, and tyranny.

It is, therefore, no mere coincidence that his most mature work deals with art and aesthetics. It is there that Dewey found the subject matter most amenable to the deepest implications of his own democratic vision. *Art as Experience* is the strongest title he gave to any work. Art, when aesthetically charged, is representative of “experience in its integrity.” Continuing, Dewey (1934/1980) says:

Had not the term “pure” been so often abused in philosophic literature, had it not been so often employed to suggest that there is something alloyed, impure, in the very nature of experience and to denote something beyond experience, we might say that esthetic experience is pure experience. For it is experience freed from the forces that impede and confuse its development as experience; freed, that is, from factors that subordinate an experience as it is directly had to something beyond itself. To esthetic experience, then, the philosopher must go to understand what experience is. (p. 274)

Dewey’s point is a particularly modernist one—artful conduct as leading to aesthetic experience is representative *primarily* of the kind of beings we are potentially in the world as well as the kind of world we are beings in. The organic relation between humans and their environment is a transactional affair, and one in which both become equally productive in manifesting the ongoing struggle to endow our world with meaning and value. This begins at an immediate or felt level, and art, at its best, demonstrates this pervasive organicism when it culminates to a level of aesthetic experience, aesthetic experience representing the fullness of experience. It represents a culmination or a consummatory phase in which the organism finds a new posture toward the world, helping to fortify the aesthetic against the anaesthetic.

As a way of deepening my own analysis, I now turn to Dewey's use of the terms "pervasive quality" and "situation." Understanding these terms as he applies them is fundamental to arriving at a less myopic and more complex understanding of what Dewey means by aesthetic experience.

### **Dewey and Qualitative Situations**

Amidst our "undergoing" and "doing" in day-to-day life, our thinking seems to have become severed from the more qualitative dimensions of our experience, what Kaufman-Osborn (1991) calls the "pragmata" of our lifeworld, and thus what we undergo and do tends to be aimless, disconnected, and arbitrary. Rather than any real relation of undergoing and doing from some felt and embodied connection to primary experience, we are tugged and pulled by bloodless abstractions which step in with false promises of meaning and fulfillment.

Central to Dewey's theory of art and aesthetic experience is his thinking on pervasive quality. Without an understanding of pervasive quality as the fundamental feature of any experience, consummatory experience or *an* experience as Dewey alternately calls it, is not properly intelligible. Pervasive quality is a very difficult concept to tease out, because its ineffable features are not easily amenable to description. For any description or attempt at definition is already a step removed from the essential "*isness*" of qualitative experience. One might wonder, then, if we can say anything at all about the pervasive quality of any given experience. Well, in a sense, we cannot. We cannot, that is, say anything of its immediacy, for its immediacy is something *had* or *felt*, wholly prereflective and thus prediscursive. It is that quality of immediate experience which is irreducible and indescribable. Yet, if this were the be-all-and-end-all of experience, we

would find ourselves in no vital connection to our environment, receiving no more than a meaningless barrage of sensory impressions. We can and inevitably must say something out of the pervasive quality that flows in and through experience, but what we say is a reflection of how we have defined, discriminated, and situated ourselves in relation to any particular experience. Language mediates our experience, but the way in which we situate ourselves can be productive of a deeper connection to life-experience or it can remain merely surface and thus stunted. We must be careful not to conflate what we come to know *about* an experience with *the* experience in its immediacy. When we do this we diminish that experience, the qualitative dimensions of which fundamentally shape and give logical force to our knowledge as an achievement.

It is this problem that has plagued much of modern philosophy, and its most prominent manifestation is to be found in modern science. There has been the tendency to ignore or reduce to soft irrelevancy the qualitative dimensions of experience. In this, philosophers and scientists have insisted on a fundamental split between subject and object, wherein the subjective mind somehow has access to a correspondent knowledge of a wholly independent realm of epistemic objects. They have equated, in other words, knowledge of the experience with the experience itself and have thus confused *having* an experience with *knowing* it. With Dewey's more inclusive understanding of experience, he writes:

Many modern thinkers, influenced by the notion that knowledge is the only mode of experience that grasps things, assuming the ubiquity of cognition, and noting that immediacy or qualitative existence has no place in authentic science, have asserted that qualities are always and only states of consciousness. It is a

reasonable belief that there would be no such thing as “consciousness” if events did not have a phase of brute and unconditioned “isness,” of being just what they irreducibly are.... And also without immediate qualities those relations with which science deals would have no footing in existence, and thought would have nothing beyond itself to chew upon or dig into. Without a basis in qualitative events, the characteristic subject-matter of knowledge would be algebraic ghosts, relations that do not relate. (Dewey, 1925/1994, pp. 74-74)

Immediate experience, then, is a quality that inheres neither exclusively in external objects nor exclusively in the contemplating mind of isolated subjects. It is rather the experience as “felt” or “had” by way of our *transaction* with the environment. Saying that there is an immediate quality within experience is not to undermine the possibility or relevance of any kind of mediation. At this point I wish only to emphasize that the pervasive quality of any given experience, as it is felt or had, represents the initial phase of absorption between the organism and its environment. This is the primary phase of experience. The context of the initial or primary phase is noncognitive and it is controlling. Alexander (1992) cites Dewey’s notion that the noncognitive quality of the context is “the vast, vague continuum ... this taken-for-granted whole” (p. 352). As he goes on to add, “the word ‘experience’ is ... a notation of an inexpressible as that which decides the ultimate status of all which is expressed; inexpressible not because it is so remote and transcendent, but because it is so immediately engrossing and matter of course” (p. 352). The organism is caught up in what Mathur (1992) refers to as the immediate “doing-and-undergoing” within “an active and dynamic field of integrated participation” (p. 368).

This active and dynamic field of participation is what Dewey (1930b/1960) calls a “situation” or its “context.” The immediate existence of quality is entirely prereflective, but importantly it “is the background, the point of departure, the regulative principle of all thinking” (p. 198). It is the pervasive quality that defines and unifies each situation as *that* unique situation. As Dewey (1934/1980) writes:

An experience has a unity that gives it its name, *that* meal, that storm, that rupture of friendship. The existence of this unity is constituted by a single *quality* that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts. This unity is neither emotional, practical, nor intellectual, for these terms name distinctions that reflection can make within it. In discourse *about* an experience, we must make use of these adjectives of interpretation. (p. 37)

Each unique situation is made up of both primary and secondary qualities, but the primary fused quality that makes the situation *that* particular situation is what originally binds the organism to its surrounding environment. The organism has not as yet reflected upon the situation but is in the position to do so, as the primary situation is the necessary and controlling guide to reflection also referred to as the secondary phase of experience.

We begin to sense, then, the rhythm within experience as any given experience moves through its successive but wholly interdependent phases. Dewey here envisions a more organic reintegration of the primary and secondary phases of experience in which he attacks the absolutist epistemology of traditional philosophic inquiry that has unfortunately turned the primary and secondary dimensions of experience into an irreconcilable dualism. It is these epistemological absolutes that have little room for the ineffable rhythm and quality of day-to-day life, which, we must remember, represents the

primary source for drawing epistemological conclusions to begin with. When the primary dimensions of experience are denied or ignored, lived experience becomes stunted, not quite whole. We wittingly or unwittingly fail to take experience in its complex fullness when our knowledge and action, reflective outcomes from the pool of prereflective primary experience, fail to get referred back to that primary ground for testing.

Conclusions or ends that fail to return to the primary qualitative ground of experience for testing remain the conclusions of a nonempirical mode of analysis. The potentially more empirical outcomes of organic secondary reflection are thus cut short in the name of indubitable truth, and the sterile dualism between primary and secondary experience is reenforced. The possibility of grounded intelligent action is checked by the overarching desire for absolute epistemological certainty. Those who hunger after indubitable epistemic certainty neglect the recognition that “the situation controls the terms of thought; for they are *its* distinctions, and applicability to it is the ultimate test of their validity” (Dewey, 1930b/1960, p. 181). The primary qualitative situation, Dewey (1934/1980) goes so far as to say, is the very condition of our sanity:

The undefined pervasive quality of an experience is that which binds together all the defined elements, the objects of which we are focally aware, making them whole. The best evidence that such is the case is our constant sense of things as belonging or not belonging, of relevancy, a sense which is immediate. It cannot be a product of reflection, even though it requires reflection to find out whether some particular consideration is pertinent to what we are doing or thinking. For unless the sense were immediate, we should have no guide to our reflection. The sense of



an extensive and underlying whole is the context of every experience and it is the essence of sanity. (p. 194).

Potentially artful conduct, therefore, inheres in the organic and dynamic movement of experience as it passes through various phases toward consummation, toward something that can properly be called a fully embodied experience. What carries us through these various phases might properly be called the materials of our experience.

### **The Materials of Artful Conduct: Habit, Sense, and Imagination**

Every situation inheres in a degree of precognitive meaningfulness, and this meaningfulness is, as Kaufman-Osborn (1991) puts it, the result of “accustomed patterns of culturally transmitted interpretive response, of habits that emerge out of the noncognitive intercourse between agents and the world in which they are heirs” (p. 190).

Every artist uses materials. We typically think of them as brush, paint, and canvas, or as instruments to be played upon, or as marble to be sculpted, but when experience itself is conceived as art then we need to be aware of alternative materials of a more psychological and phenomenological nature. For the transaction between organism and environment that issues experience forward in more or less refined ways depends on drawing from those materials of habit, sense, and imagination. My focus here is not intended to be exhaustive, of course, but these three materials, as I am calling them, are nonetheless centrally important. This, of course, is not intended as an exhaustive list of the so-called materials of experience, but they are some of the centrally important ones. Through them we may come closer to grasping something of the consummatory power of aesthetic experience, for if our movement in the world (conduct) can inhere through

higher degrees of artfulness, then the aesthetic achievements that come on the heels of art give heightened meaning and value to that movement.

Often, we hear the claim that we are creatures of habit. But how often do we stop to think about what this means? Of course, stopping and thinking about habits, in many situations, is entirely counterproductive. Habits, under most stable conditions, embody the pervasive quality that infuses situations and as such are part of the taken-for-granted whole that we feel as this or that particular situation. Habits exercise a certain mechanical power in our lives precisely because, under a great many conditions, we do not have to think about them. As Dewey (1922) says: “If each act has to be consciously searched for at the moment and intentionally performed, execution is painful and the product is clumsy and halting” (p. 51).

In other words, our habits are not self-consciously realized, nor are they intellectually scrutinized. Rather, habits form the background of a situation, providing the taken-for-granted field of meanings, “serving not as external means of identification, but rather as atmospheric media whose entrance into the constitution of every situation provides the ill-defined yet meaningful field upon which specific phenomena are brought before focal consciousness” (Kaufman-Osborn, 1991, p. 190). In a later essay, Dewey (1931/1960) draws the analogy of a picture or a painting in which the “spatial background covers all the contemporary setting within which a course of thinking emerges.” He continues:

That which is looked into, consciously scrutinized, has, like a picture, a foreground, middle distance, and a background – and as in some paintings the latter shades off into unlimited space.... This contextual setting is vague, but it is

no mere fringe. It has a solidity and stability not found in the focal material of thinking. The latter denotes the part of the road upon which the spotlight is thrown. The spatial context is the ground through which the road runs and for the sake of which the road exists. (pp. 100-101)

The habits that constitute the background colour and saturate the foreground, providing the subconscious intelligibility of what is presently in conscious focus. It is part of the noncognitive pervasive quality of the situation. Now, under conventional, untroubled conditions these habits carry us smoothly along. We feel a sense of situatedness without necessarily “knowing” it, for habit, when untroubled, “is too thoroughly implicated in its medium to survey or analyze it” (Kaufamn-Osborn, 1991, p. 192). Habits thus supply a spatio-temporal locational power that act as precognitive guides to everyday experience. Kaufman-Osborn puts the point nicely when he states that

in addition to furnishing a ground for the recognizability of conventional phenomena within everyday life, habits are dynamic potentialities that are vitally present even when not immediately engaged. As patterned dispositions to action whose incorporation of the past navigates each moment into the future and so insures that conduct’s unfolding in time is something other than a meaningless juxtaposition of isolated reactions to discrete situations, habits’ constellation constitutes our effective desires and furnishes us with our practical capacities. As such, the term “habit” does the work more often done by that of “will.” (p. 191)

The smooth flow of habits, under stable conditions, is powerful because it is through them that we come to in-habit our world. They are the effective background and mechanism of stable bearing and meaning in our lives. Yet, if life experience was

perpetually stable, then all situations would be untroubled, and habit would be equated with a state of eternal constancy.

Under such impossible conditions, habit as constancy would be continuous with a state of either absolute inertia or perfect automatism, and we would have reached the pinnacle of our growth. Its logical expression in human terms would be sleep or death, for being awake would be inconceivable as there would no longer be any necessity to think. The very idea of experience and its aesthetic possibilities would thus also be inconceivable because of the absolute absence of tension. For it is only through tension that experience is propelled forward, that life moves.

Although a great many of our habits have staying power, that is, their projective meaningfulness proves adequate to many of the untroubled situations of day-to-day living, nonetheless habits cannot prove indefinitely stable. Those habits that do achieve what we might call a working constancy, nonetheless have a very practical import. They offer sufficient inertia so that, if we are willing to take advantage, we can engage in higher order thinking. For we need to recognize that we are prone to habits of thinking, and these habits can be routine or they can be artful. It is important to emphasize that the habit-laden meaningfulness of any present untroubled situation is itself a result. It is the cumulative effect of some past occasion of thinking, some past tensional situation that has managed to locate a present stable bearing. Habit, if it is intelligently formed, is representative of a deep adjustment of the organism to its environment. This adjustment, if it is intelligently fashioned and adopted, might properly be deemed aesthetic. Master musicians often exhibit a fluid virtuosity in their playing wherein mechanical habit has become fused with thought and feeling. A masterful technician does not perform as a

matter of mere automatism. To do so would make for a mechanical performance. If habits are intelligently formed, they are alive and flexible within the organism's ongoing adjusting to the world. Habit is art when it embodies thought and feeling as its mode of adjustment. The opposite of habit thus conceived is not thought, but deadening routine.

It is only at those moments of instability, when our habitual world threatens to come apart, that we are incited to grow and develop, when we must think, take stock, and become conscious of our dynamic relation to the environment. It is at this point of tension that life incites us to potentially artful conduct, when we might become the crafters a new stability. At this moment of tension, there is a newly released impulse, insisting on some redirection and requalification of old habit. Indeed this is when habit, previously not explicitly conscious, is exposed as subject to temporal movement. We can refer to something as an *old* habit only because our movement in time has manifested a disruption or tensional break that necessitates a new adjustment. Getting to a new point where a situation makes sense represents the crucial phase in the organism's transaction with its environment, wherein the process of making sense can potentially become aesthetically charged, making conscious experience itself more artful. This making sense is intelligence at work. "Sense" is a very important and rich term for Dewey. As he says,

'sense' covers a wide range of contents: the sensory, the sensational, the sensitive, the sensible, and the sentimental, along with the sensuous.... but sense, as meaning so directly embodied in experience as to be its own illuminated meaning, is the only signification that expresses the function of sense organs when they are carried to full realization. (Dewey, 1934/1980, p. 22)

Sense, therefore, is integral to that experiential phase when the organism, having fallen out with its environment because of some tensional rupture in the situation, begins to consciously focus on the relations that make up that situation. The organism, through tension, has come to a stage of reflection on and within the situation. It is important to note that this reflective phase of experience has its own quality, but it is different in kind from the original pervasive quality that binds the organism to the primary objects of its environment. This original quality is vague and indefinite, whereas sense via reflection has a recognized reference; “it is the qualitative characteristic of something, not just a submerged unidentified quality or tone” (Dewey, 1925/1994, p. 213). What sense now picks out is the relation between the primary and secondary qualities of objects within the environment as the situation becomes consciously focused within the thinking subject.

Dewey understands “sense” as an active/dynamic capacity wherein, as a focal point of consciousness, it both illuminates a situated moment and also opens the body to the world in exploratory and receptive intensity. As Dewey (1934/1980) explains: “Perception is an act of the going-out of energy in order to receive, not a withholding of energy” (p. 53). If we recall the analogy of a painting in “Context and Thought,” we remember that a situational field has a foreground, a middle distance, and a background. It is the foreground in which we locate that part of the road that is illuminated by the shining light of sense. Yet, we remember also that the pervasive qualitative context is that through which the road runs and “for the sake of which the road exists.” Sense, therefore, signifies the organism’s embodied movement in the *light* of a troubled situation, wherein the body itself becomes a lived meaning, moving in a spatial and temporal drama where body and mind become unified in heightened sensitivity to the possibilities of where the

road might lead. In other words, if making sense is to result in some kind of aesthetic value, then imagination must be viewed as integral.

When an otherwise stable situation becomes tensional, when new impulses are released, old habits are immediately brought to conscious attention, new paths of action explored. This exploration is what deliberation is about. It is, as Dewey (1922) says, “a dramatic rehearsal (in imagination) of various competing possible lines of action” (p. 132). Activity in this sense does not cease in order that reflection may take the fore. Rather, “activity is turned from execution into intraorganic channels, resulting in dramatic rehearsal” (Dewey, p. 133). Aspects of impulse and habit are put in various combinations, experimental trials so to speak, in order to determine what an action would be like if it were entered upon. Thinking at this point is wholly hypothetical. It is the safety mechanism of imaginative deliberation that thought “runs ahead and foresees outcomes, and thereby avoids having to await the instruction of actual failure and disaster. An act overtly tried out is irrevocable, its consequences cannot be blotted out. An act tried out in imagination is not final or fatal. It is retrievable” (Dewey, p. 133).

The interpenetration of subject and object releases potential avenues of overt activity via the imagination. For even imaginative rehearsal achieves its content and meaning only when its activity involves a process of trying out various avenues of potentially fruitful conduct: “In imagination as in fact we know a road only by what we see as we travel on it” (Dewey, 1922, p. 134). The subject, rehearsing the possibilities of some future overt conduct, partakes of experience’s objects in imagination. Objects object to the movement, thus necessitating activity’s new direction, or they do not, thus providing activity’s point of rest. There is, essentially, no difference between this process

as it occurs in the imagination and as it might take place in overt activity. It is equally dynamic and organic. The only thing that makes imaginative rehearsal more sensible is that the consequences of going down any chosen road are not overtly real, although they implicate any real choice that might be made as a result. When a choice is *really* made, it is “not the emergence of preference out of indifference. It is the emergence of a unified preference out of competing preferences” (Dewey, p. 134). Choice comes at the moment when imagination envisions the objective consequence of an action and deems that consequence fruitful and just. Overt action is released. All deliberation therefore is a search for the best action, its “office is to facilitate stimulation” (Dewey, p. 134). If a choice be a reasonable choice, then the human subject travels a road of intelligent conduct, and experience is given new direction, new depth, and new meaning.

This cognitive dynamic highlights the creative capacity of the human imagination. The quality of meaning and value in our lives is funded by our ability to imagine possibility. The radical import of Dewey’s aesthetic thinking is that imagined possibilities or ideals represent the capacity to mediate and improve upon observed actualities. It is not a separate faculty that works autonomously, independent of experience’s embodied temporal movement. The quality of working imagination is a universal quality of wholeness and unity, but that quality gets its life-energy from the local act, the observed and limited here and now. The temporal drama enacted in imagination is a virtual expansion and refinement that utilizes what *is* in order to manifest what might *be*. The observed here and now becomes stunted to the degree that the organism fails to recognize the universal quality of extension that impels the imagination’s ongoing relation to a vital present, which is itself a manifestation of past experience. Imagination becomes pure



fancy when it becomes disconnected from the energizing capacity of the here and now, forging for itself castles in the air. Imagination projects ideal possibilities and therefore reflects the creative and expanding capacity of human intelligence. It is in this sense that imagination provides the infusing stuff of aesthetic experience.

The object of thought stimulates a unification and harmonization of competing tendencies in which each competing tendency is reduced to a component in a reformed action exhibiting a transformed quality. Human conduct thus draws from a profound reservoir of preparatory competence. The competence of conduct's unfolding in time is a matter of embodied deliberation leading to intelligent and humane outcomes. For Dewey (1922) it is a human wonder:

Nothing is more extraordinary than the delicacy, promptness and ingenuity with which deliberation is capable of making eliminations and recombinations in projecting the course of a possible activity. To every shade of imagined circumstance there is a vibrating response; and to every complex situation a sensitiveness as to its integrity, a feeling of whether it does justice to all facts, or overrides some to the advantage of others. Decision is reasonable when deliberation is so conducted. There may be error in the result, but it comes from lack of data not from ineptitude in handling them. (p. 135)

Reasonable conduct thus comes by way of a vital harmonization of competing desires (impulses, habits), and the age-old dualism between reason and desire collapses.

Traditional philosophical thinking has pitted desire against reason, when in the light of artful conduct the fact is they are tightly interrelated. Reason is, as Dewey (1922) maintains, "a quality of an effective relationship among desires rather than a thing

opposed to desire” (p. 135). Reason, rather than being an antecedent, bloodless abstraction, actually gains its vital energy through passion. Deliberation’s science, its experimental mode, is at the same time deliberation’s art as reason becomes fully implicated in the passionate phase of activity. Rationality is what remains when we make a reasonable choice, and choice is reasonable when it results in reasonable conduct. Rationality is the effect of complex processes that involve the thinking, feeling human subject. It is not, as traditionally understood, the antecedent base of all thought and feeling. This is a radical aspect of Dewey’s thinking and shows that the cultivation of intelligence is art. Art’s outcome, the result of conduct’s manifestation through cultivated intelligence, is reason, and reason itself becomes the dynamic realization of experience’s consummatory potential. Life’s art is achieved through our embodied transaction with our environment in which both organism and environment coalesce in crafting experience’s deeper possibilities. Artful conduct is the manifestation of experience in its integrity, and its outcome is properly called aesthetic.

The dynamic relation then between past meaning (habit) and future expectation (imagination) is what gives direction to the present, gives it its sense. To the degree that the organism’s senses are alive to this transactive movement in time, the experience becomes one of “heightened vitality.” It is during such moments of “heightened vitality” that experience is consciously manifest, and to the extent that the experience becomes aesthetically charged, such represents the richer depths of meaning and value that are sensed within and through the experience. At this point an experience becomes truly consummatory. Temporal quality pervades every situation, and sense lights its way. Heightened sensitivity is sensitivity to the relational meanings consciously becoming

manifest within a moving situation, wherein the original pervasive felt quality becomes enriched by and infuses the consciousness of temporal movement. As Stuhr (1997) points out, “the quality is active and regulative — that is, intrinsically inclusive of its future transformation or negation” (p. 196). As a situation is transformed from a state of disequilibrium into one of equilibrium, where the organism intelligently develops a new posture to the world, it is the original state of disequilibrium (a problematic or tensional situation) that is both the quality condition and the quality control of the situation’s movement toward consummatory close. It is through tension and resistance, then, that we come to sense life’s quality and rhythm, that we get a “feel” for life. As Dewey (1934/1980) says: “Friction is as necessary to generate esthetic energy as it is to supply the energy that drives machinery” (p. 339). Rather than mere intellectual relations, life’s qualitative dimensions give consummatory moments their poignancy, and make possible the aesthetic within experience. As Dewey states:

That which distinguishes an experience as esthetic is conversion of resistance and tensions, of excitations that in themselves are temptations to diversion, into a movement toward an inclusive and fulfilling close. (p. 56)

### **Art Works**

In determining why art is important to life, it is no understatement to consider with Dewey that art, to a great degree, *is* life. Our temporal and embodied transactions with and within our environment may not under a great many social and cultural conditions manifest art’s potential, but this is not an inevitable and inherent condition of our living in the world. Social and cultural conditions press externally on individual experience, and to the degree that these external pressures emanate from some vital

connection to the conditions of their own development, so the potential baseness or fineness of what experience might become hangs in the balance.

What I have attempted to show thus far is that art is “prefigured in the very processes of living” (Dewey, 1934/1980, p. 24). Art signifies our capacity to grow and develop, and growth and development are what occur in any medium of tension and recovery. The human organism is born, and its subsequent growth and development are the accumulating result of its transactions with its surroundings. As with the individual, so too are social and cultural developments the accumulating result of transactions between organism and environment. In capturing something of the “psychology” of artful conduct—the potentially artful movement of habit, sense, and imagination—I have attempted to convey the complexity of our embodied status within our environment and within time. I have attempted to capture something of the depth implicit in this statement by Dewey (1934/1980): “Art celebrates with peculiar intensity the moments in which the past re-enforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what now is” (p. 18). Art works much like the human organism works in its daily doings and undergoings. Whether art’s working manifests what can justifiably be called a work of art, that is, something exhibiting aesthetic, consummatory, and expressive refinement, depends on the degree to which art’s working arises from an enhancement of experience as it is lived in connection with its surroundings. In this sense, if art is not working it is merely a product, static and dumb.

As I have been hinting, we need to look at the word “works,” not as a noun but rather as a verb. For art is a working movement, and its culmination in an aesthetically charged work does not bring art’s working to a close. If the final work is something

having depth and substance, then it will continue to work within the community. The substance of a work of art is to be found in *what* it communicates within a community. If an artwork exhibits fineness of form, then we have determined something of *how* the work communicates within a community. Completion of a work by the artist is like a new birth within the community, as that work is dependent on ongoing communal engagement for its survival. It becomes expressive, and its continued expressiveness is the sign of its continued constructive possibility, its continued working.

Art is simply a refined expression or language exhibiting experience's aesthetic capacity, manifesting our temporal movement as being capable of greater depths of meaning. This profounder wellspring of meaning implicates human beings in a world of ongoing potential development in which we partake of our material surroundings and in doing so extend our expressive nature in socially significant and meaningful ways. As Dewey (1934/1980) says:

The *material* out of which a work of art is composed belongs to the common world rather than to the self, and yet there is self-expression in art because the self assimilates that material in a distinctive way to reissue it into the public world in a form that builds a new object. (p. 107)

The artwork fails to communicate something new, or for that matter, anything at all, when it is consigned to a collector's vault where, at most, it can be only potentially expressive.

Although art museums are considered "public" venues, Dewey tends to view them more as public mausoleums. The modern history of the development of museums is, for Dewey, too thoroughly implicated in the capitalist creation of "*nouveaux riches*" who

tend to denigrate art's potential by exhibiting it not as a refined expression of common experience out of which it is born, but rather as a refined symbol of their cultural and economic status. Dewey (1934/1980) tells us: "Generally speaking, the typical collector is the typical capitalist" (p. 8). Art thus gets severed from its place in the life of the community and takes on all the accoutrements of acquisitiveness and "high" status. They become "specimens of fine art and nothing else" (Dewey, p. 9).

It was not that Dewey had an utter distaste for museums. He was, after all, gainfully employed for a time at a museum at the Barnes Foundation. What did worry Dewey about the museum conception of culture was that it tended to create and reenforce "a chasm between ordinary and aesthetic experience" (Dewey, 1934/1980, p. 10). As Alexander (1998) points out, there are two standing and interrelated temptations (not inevitabilities) when we participate in the museum's conception of fineness:

First we are tempted to isolate our museum experiences from other experiences in life at large. Thus, we fail to see how the works we encounter in museums (or their equivalents for other artforms, such as concert halls or classrooms) have actually grown from those common conditions in life which we share with the artists who made those works. Having done this, we may make a second mistake. In believing that aesthetic experience belongs to a segregated realm, we fail to see how the artists' success in making expressively meaningful, intrinsically fulfilling objects from the raw material of life can be applied across the whole spectrum of human existence. The great moral to be learned from the arts for Dewey is that *when ideals cease to be confined to a realm separated from our daily, practical*

*experience, they can become powerful forces in teaching us to make the materials of our lives filled with meaning.*[italics in original] (pp. 5-6)

In attempting to steal art back to the commons, we may more properly conceive of the ways art is potentially expressive and how this expressiveness is vitally connected to common life experience.

Of all modes of human inquiry art most exemplifies the human capacity to elevate life's expressive potential. Our temporal embodiment within nature signifies life's rhythmic movement. The very idea, therefore, of order, balance, and harmony can make sense only as life's rhythm is engaged and expressed. The more intelligent this engagement and expression, the more life's artful potential is realized. The aesthetic in experience is the result of experience's differentiation out of an otherwise undifferentiated stream of impressions. The aesthetic marks an experience as *an* experience only because "the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment" (Dewey, p. 35). Life's rhythm thus gains consummatory potential as its expressive capacity is realized through the organism's "dynamic organization" of the materials at its disposal (Dewey, 1934/1980, p. 55). The quality of our growth within life's rhythmic movement is thus a matter of intelligent conduct. Our "undergoing" within this rhythm signals us as vulnerable to suffering. We are open to the precariousness that attends and is an integrated part of any rhythmic development. Our "doing" signals our ability to channel what we undergo into a newly refined integration. Life's rhythm is thus complemented by the degree of order we are able to establish with and within our environment. Order itself is developmental. However, achieving the aesthetic out of this rhythmic movement is something more than just an intellectual achievement. It is the embodied realization of

harmony. The “material of reflection is incorporated into the objects as their meaning” (Dewey, p. 15). The aesthetic thus results from a movement from disturbance to harmony, and that moment of harmonization is “that of intensest life” (Dewey, p. 17).

The expressive potential, therefore, of a work of art is realized through this rhythmic development, and for this realization to achieve deepened aesthetic value and meaning it must inhere in a higher degree of conscious refinement and control. This refinement and control are saved from the haphazard only as it is an intensified transaction between organism and the encompassing materials of experience. As Dewey (1934/1980) says: “The expressiveness of the object is the report and celebration of the complete fusion of what we undergo and what our activity of attentive perception brings into what we receive by means of the senses” (p. 103). Expressive art is exemplary of an intensification and amplification of this transactional dynamic, and it brings subject and object into refined relation. For Dewey:

The moments when the creature is both most alive and most composed and concentrated are those of fullest intercourse with the environment, in which sensuous material and relations are most completely merged. Art would not amplify experience if it withdrew the self into the self nor would the experience that results from such retirement be expressive. (p. 103)

The expressiveness of a work of art is thus exemplary of life’s artful potential as levels of aesthetic consummation become realizable by virtue of the spatio-temporal dynamics that give life its rhythm. However, artworks are not merely static achievements. They provide the fuel for enhanced communication, and thus the social importance of art comes to the fore.



In *Experience and Nature* Dewey (1925/1994) explicitly makes the point when he says “that a genuinely esthetic object is not exclusively consummatory but is causally productive as well. A consummatory object that is not also instrumental turns in time to the dust and ashes of boredom” (p. 296). Staving off this all-too-common ennui is art’s power. As I have already highlighted, the power of any aesthetic consummation can be fully achieved only as it recognizes the part played by the ineffable, the immediate. But life’s art, the fullness of its consummations, is also a fullness born out of and into new possibilities. Our temporal status has us constantly “on the go,” so to speak. Being on the go, of course, can be frenetic and arbitrary; but this occurs only when “doing” becomes disconnected from “undergoing.” The implications for communication are enormous. When “doing” is elevated for its own sake, we tend towards a chaotic and frenetic pace. A cursory look at contemporary society shows this all too clearly. However, when “undergoing” is taken up for its own sake, separated from any resultant activity, it tends towards mere contemplation and imaginative fancy, with no real embodiment in action. Dewey (1934/1980) reminds us that “an experience has pattern and structure, because it is not just doing and undergoing in alternation, but consists of them in relationship.... This relationship is what gives meaning; to grasp it is the objective of all intelligence” (p. 44).

It is this relationship that leads also to the fine art of communication. To get at communication’s finer potential we need a better understanding of Dewey’s instrumentalism, for it is through his instrumental understanding of art that the relation of consummation and productivity gains its communicative potential. Bringing the instrumental into a discussion of art and aesthetics may seem odd if not downright

disturbing to those of a strong aesthetic bent. We are accustomed to thinking about the instrumental in the strong scientific sense, with its use of hard tools for the achievement of narrow ends. Dewey (1925/1994) reminds us that “the sciences were born of the arts” (p. 107). If art rested only in what immediately is, and failed to pay attention to what is made possible out of what is immediately enjoyed or suffered, art would never have become an “intellectual” achievement. For the instrumental in art is its character of intellectual meaning, and as such, involves art “in transforming purely immediate qualities of local things into generic relationships” (Dewey, p. 108). Art as “the greatest intellectual achievement in the history of humanity” is singly important to our understanding of science, itself an intellectual achievement of fine art (Dewey, 1934/1980, p. 25). It is in this sense that the relation of the consummatory and the instrumental is the heartbeat of communication.

When communication occurs between two or more parties, there is always a change to all involved—there are consequences. The communicative effect of art is just what it is, an effect. It is not necessarily a moral/instrumental intention on the part of the artist. The way art communicates is the effect it has on those who partake of it. The art object is thus invariably caught up in its consequences for further reflection, communication’s art. When the implications of this are taken up within the community at large, we begin to get a sense of art’s vital educational role in expressing what Dewey calls “the collective individuality” of any given culture (Dewey, 1934/1980, p. 330). As he says:

The level and style of the arts of literature, poetry, ceremony, amusement, and recreation which obtain in a community, furnishing the staple objects of

enjoyment in that community, do more than all else to determine the current direction of ideas and endeavors in the community. They supply the meanings in terms of which life is judged, esteemed, and criticized. For an outside spectator, they supply material for a critical evaluation of the life led by that community. (Dewey, 1925/1994, pp. 168-169)

Because art is at once consummatory and instrumental, its power of communication resides not only in conveying the mores of a community or culture but also in impelling them imaginatively forward in new directions, toward new relationships. Art subtly shapes our experience of the world by educating new possibilities. If it simply conveyed what is customary and familiar, there would be little tendency to reflect. The general result would be stasis and the entrenchment of dogmatic habit. This is all too prevalent throughout history where rituals often become entrenched dogma. Rituals themselves can be springboards to deeper experience or death marches toward experiences cut off and sapped of meaning. The power of works of art is that they “are means by which we enter, through imagination and the emotions they evoke, into other forms of relationship and participation than our own” (Dewey, 1934/1980, p. 333).

Of importance, the language of art is an acquired language, and to the degree that the arts of any community or culture fail to flourish, to the degree that they are denigrated by any variety of external forces, marks the failure of effective education and communication. Life’s art is manifested when, through consciousness of a larger field of meanings and values, we are able to imaginatively enter into new experiences. Art sustains conscious activity, “and thereby exhibits, so that he who runs may read, the fact that consciousness is not a separate realm of being, but is the manifest quality of

existence when nature is most free and most active” (Dewey, 1925/1994, p. 318). The lack of this fuller communication as it now exists between nations is steadily becoming an inner cultural phenomenon as well. The cultural politics so prevalent in today’s societies, more than anything else, speaks to the erosion of full communication. It is not that cultural subdivisions are inherently bad, but if these divisions are not informed by fuller communication, that is, by a consciousness of the larger field of meanings and values flowing within the culture at large, then there develops a corrosive isolationist tendency. Under such conditions there is a marked disposition toward impulsive brutality as a way of dealing with experience’s emptiness brought on by the inability to artfully communicate. These are deadening divisions, but add conscious and conscientious communication, and deadening divisions might be transformed into productive distinctions. Life’s art becomes more fully realized under these conditions. Dewey (1934/1980) extends art’s full potential when he states:

Instruction in the arts of life is something other than conveying information about them. It is a matter of communication and participation in values of life by means of the imagination, and works of art are the most intimate and energetic means of aiding individuals to share in the arts of living. Civilization is uncivil because human beings are divided into non-communicating sects, races, nations, classes and cliques. (p. 336)

We see the structure of another stale division begin to crumble—that between the individual and the social.

Dewey clears the path for a more pragmatic exploration of our political experiences. This becomes even more pressing in our contemporary global society where

it is not just a matter of “non-communicating sects, races, nations, classes and cliques,” but rather the proliferation of insidious, noncritical forms of communication that are successfully uniting masses of people with superficial consummations. Dewey’s notion of artful experience, I think, shoulders well the burden of our most profound personal and social experiences. Needless to say, artful conduct is not easy in today’s world, but with Dewey’s complex and detailed reworking of the philosophical tradition, I think we have something that we have not seen a great deal of since Dewey’s time—a *working* philosophy.

## CHAPTER SIX: RORTY AND DEWEY: QUALITY AND ARTFULNESS

Ah! then, if mine had been the Painter's hand,  
To express what then I saw; and add the gleam,  
The light that never was, on sea or land,  
The consecration, and the Poet's dream...

-William Wordsworth<sup>1</sup>

The primary and secondary experiential distinction that plays such a powerful role in Dewey's aesthetics represents much of the (philosophical) hostility thrown his way by Rorty. This needs to be explored in more detail, investigating Rorty's strong antimetaphysical point. But Rorty's own professed linguistic overcoming of metaphysics may not be as clean and clear as it looks, especially if Rorty assumes to have successfully dissolved the possibility of there being anything meaningful that can be said about Dewey's noncognitive and nonlinguistic starting point. Such an ineffable starting point is a *functional* component of Dewey's broader realism (his organic naturalism), indeed, is the most *practical* (because most thoroughly embodied) of starting points. Rorty denies such a practical starting point any kind of meaningful practical status beyond the merely causal, assuming all truly practical (read relevant and meaningful) functions to be linguistic (or sentential) in scope. This is the basis of Rorty's linguistic nominalism that is meant to surpass Dewey's naturalism, which now, apparently, is a cleverly disguised form of metaphysics, if not mysticism.

Critics have in turn charged Rorty with harboring an essentially theoretical starting point due to the supposed fact that any linguistic base is already a facultative outcome and therefore theoretical in scope.<sup>2</sup> Rorty's philosophy, in their eyes, fails to be really practical at all in-so-far as he reinstitutes a theory/practice dualism that Dewey otherwise worked so diligently to dissolve. I'm not so sure that this is a charge that can stick, however. A close look at Rorty's linguistified account shows him expending much

effort to divest language of its theoretical entanglements, especially when language is being used creatively and privatively—that is, metaphorically. Language itself (words and sentences) becomes so qualitatively saturated so as to take on the feel of the kind of ineffable noncognitive, nonlinguistic starting point that plays such a primary role for Dewey.<sup>3</sup> It thus occurs to me that both thinkers retain a practical starting point, which in each case must be understood as some sort of theory of practice. But I would like to put forward that it is a starting point that might more usefully be described as a *qualitative starting point* (QSP). Calling it qualitative (rather than practical—though the qualitative in each case I would argue is eminently practical) avoids the often too easy step into dualistic thinking that artificially separates theory and practice. Of course, the challenge in Rorty's case is to take a linguistically structured concept like metaphor, central to his creative poetic aestheticism, and show how it appears to function in a predominantly nonlinguistic way, playing a role comparable to the role played by Dewey's own notion of "indeterminate situation." The question, however, is not the inherent nature of the ineffable, qualitative starting point—that would surely lead us straight into some form of (old style) metaphysics, but rather where does it all go? Pragmatism is a temporally bound mode of inquiry and is concerned first and foremost with consequences, and therefore one must ask what are the "ends in view" (to use Dewey's terms)? What shapes up in virtue of our immediately qualitative contact with the world that might be instrumental in bringing about some sort of improvement? It is not the ineffable that matters most (in an *in-itself* kind of way), but what becomes of it, what results accrue from it. It is in this sense that both Rorty and Dewey come to a comparable conclusion—that improving our modes of communication is an aesthetical imperative for pragmatism

and for democratic flourishing. Whether one can make a judgment of which of the two thinkers gets to this point more productively—who between them has the better resources—is the only difference that matters philosophically speaking. And if such differences matter philosophically, there is no automatic entailment that they necessarily matter as much aesthetically.

### **Creative Misreading**

What should be clear from the previous chapter dealing with Dewey's aesthetics is the utter centrality of human "experience" to human flourishing and growth. Dewey traces experience along a trajectory that ranges from some sort of qualitative indeterminacy to some sort of (hopefully) consummatory close. The whole process is indicative of human artfulness wherein even the way we do science, with its experimental modes of inquiry, must be viewed as part of our larger conduct towards some as yet undetermined (or perhaps underdetermined) artful closure or stability. Like all good pragmatists, Dewey foregoes positing some foundational or transcendental absolute as that which is either given or taken as the guide for our artful conduct. There is no absolute antecedent that decrees any artful movement as a foregone conclusion of some given situation, and therefore no absolute teleology either—in other words, no first or last principles showing us the way. There is no *a priori* reality that we represent in some one-to-one correspondence. Our destinies are ours, we its creators. What tremendous abilities we have, and what tremendous potential as well, for crafting ourselves and our societies in better ways. The contest between Dewey's and Rorty's respective aesthetical positions really comes down to *how* we go about so creating ourselves. As I noted above, Rorty and Dewey come to a comparable pragmatic and aesthetic (that is, working) conclusion,



but their respective articulations as to how they arrive at such a point puts them, seemingly, worlds apart. If, as this whole project has tried to show, pragmatism gains its most powerful force by turning to the future, or at least relying for its justification on the future, it might be said that its most trenchant, and perhaps most intractable philosophical debates have been about the past—that is, about the processes (experiential or linguistic) that make such a move into the future most relevant and meaningful. In short, it is a metaphilosophical problem (as it must be for us late moderns). Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), who inspired much of what Nietzsche went on to say, said this: “It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards, we suspect our instruments” (cited in Poirier, 1995, p. 271).

That Rorty’s pragmatism has situated itself at odds with what many Dewey scholars consider the heart of Dewey’s entire philosophical project—his notion of experience – cuts, in turn, to the heart of much of the criticism brought against Rorty’s own aestheticized position. Getting this part of Dewey’s philosophy wrong, so the standard critical line goes, transgresses even a responsibly oriented “creative misreading.” Some misreadings just go too far, especially if there is the danger of the younger generation starting to see the predecessor who is being creatively misread in a predominantly misguided way. Surely, a philosopher of Dewey’s stature needs to be protected from such rogue misreaders. I must admit that I grow weary of this line within predominantly Deweyan scholarship, though I do appreciate the spirit of it. The beauty and the danger of inspired reading is that one can easily get off the path of the pilgrim and onto the path of the disciple.<sup>4</sup> Yet, it depends who you are reading. Students of

Dewey must be students of Dewey rather than primarily students of others who are students of Dewey. They must engage his original works for themselves, and therefore the charge that Rorty is tainting the reception by neophytes of Dewey's work (or tainting the reception of pragmatism generally) is not Rorty's problem per se. The best that the self-appointed guardians of Deweydom can (and should) do (and I consider myself in their camp) is turn their students to the very difficult engagement that needs to be taken up with Dewey's primary works. Admittedly, this can easily turn into a life's work itself, but I say more Dewey readers, not fewer—and yes, more Rorty readers too.

So, perhaps discipleship is not such a bad thing, nor has it ever been (how many among us, after all, are really pilgrims in the strongest poetic sense?). Discipleship contains its own rigors. "In fact," as Emerson noted, "it is as difficult to appropriate the thoughts of others as it is to invent" (cited in Stuhr, 1997, p. 234). Clearly, in both Dewey's and Rorty's cases, there are rigorous demands for the would-be disciple. But this kind of inspired reader (myself included) suffers a different sort of agony than the reader who suffers what Harold Bloom (1973) famously called "the agony of influence."<sup>5</sup> Those who suffer 'the agony of influence' (a dis-ease that both Dewey and Rorty can be said to suffer) manifest in their own works a kind of rebellion against death, death representing (as noted earlier with Nietzsche) a failure to create something new—most importantly oneself.

Most of us inspired disciples construe our own agony, not so much as the "agony of influence," but more as the agony *to get it right*. We read our heroes quite self-consciously and quite carefully so as to avoid egregious misreadings. This more or less straightforward take on Emerson's line quoted above says that self-conscious, careful

reading is the very difficulty of appropriating the thoughts of others. It is not necessarily the case that there is only one right reading of some given text, but nor is it the case that anything goes. But to put a Nietzschean/Bloomian spin on Emerson's line and see the inspired reading of one's heroes as entailing the "agony of influence" is to see that appropriating the thoughts of others is the difficulty of invention. In other words, there is no appropriation that is merely an inherited copy of what was there before. There can only be some sort of (necessary) creative misreading. This is a decisive shift for the most original pragmatists. They have all suffered the "agony of influence," itself a kind of terror, but the results have been wondrous, lending further evidence to the notion that the pragmatic tradition has a powerful aesthetical axis. Rorty has captured it as a matter of critical import for pragmatism, and in the process has forged a new poeticized pragmatism itself.<sup>6</sup> He captures the spirit of such aesthetical agony in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989):

In this Nietzschean view, the impulse to think, to inquire, to reweave oneself ever more thoroughly, is not wonder but terror. It is, once again, Bloom's "horror of finding oneself to be only a copy or replica." The wonder in which Aristotle believed philosophy to begin was wonder at finding oneself in a world larger, stronger, nobler than oneself. The fear in which Bloom's poets begin is the fear that one might end one's days in such a world, a world one never made, an inherited world. The hope of such a poet is that what the past tried to do to her she will succeed in doing to the past: to make the past itself, including those very causal processes which blindly impressed all her own behaviors, bear *her*

impress. Success in that enterprise – is success in what Bloom calls “giving birth to oneself.” (p. 29)

To repeat, this represents the agony of the poetic genius. Most of us, alas, never achieve such a status and therefore never suffer in quite the same way. Our agony, as I said above, is the agony to get something right. We disciples are concerned, after all, with retaining some degree of *discipline* in our otherwise inspired reading. I would argue, then, that the majority of critical hostility thrown Rorty’s way is the criticism of the disciple—it is a criticism that expresses more than anything else the *agonal* awareness that Rorty has failed to get important elements of Dewey’s, and perhaps more broadly, philosophy’s work right. And from such a disciplined purview, they (we) are right. Under the disciplined agony to “get it right” it is clear, for example, that Rorty has gotten Dewey’s metaphysics wrong. Of this there is not much of critical debate left. Dewey scholars are virtually unanimous that in this regard Rorty was the most undisciplined reader of Dewey’s works—those fine works of inquiry into inquiry that witnessed Dewey positing revolutionary reconstructions of such tradition-soaked philosophical terrain as logic and metaphysics—works like *Experience and Nature* (1925) and *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938). Rorty, so the indictment goes, has egregiously misread these works, and has, on no good grounds, summarily dismissed them. This is not to say that there is unanimous agreement among Dewey scholars’ readings of these particular works—there is, in fact, still much disagreement, but most are agreed that Rorty is so far off as to be not in the picture at all (see Garrison, 2001; Hildebrand, 2003; Margolis, 2002; Sleeper, 1985, 1986; Stuhr, 1997).

The question is, is such an egregious misreading of certain thematic elements in Dewey's work by Rorty a fatal blow to pragmatism? I hardly think so, but who really knows? Pragmatism could be just another passing vocabulary, to be replaced by some other, more advanced 'ism.' Or maybe it is the last gasp of 'isms,' sooner or later to be replaced by some sort of non-ism. Whatever, the case, what I am taking some pains to articulate here is that there are two important streams in the American pragmatic tradition that implicate some possible directions that tradition might take. I have expressed these two streams under the auspices of two trajectories; the first is represented by the poet's "agony of influence" (most important to Rorty), and the other is represented by the more common "agony of getting it right." Now it might be argued that Dewey was such a capacious thinker, and wrote so much on so many different topics, that the two streams exist in his work together—flowing constantly between the precarious (poetic) and the stable (getting it right). He is anxious to get something right even as he boldly and poetically reinvents much of what he comes into contact with. For example, he was a bold philosophical visionary who managed virtually to reinvent the entire western tradition, but he was also an educator concerned that such radical philosophical reinvention entailed perhaps getting something right when it came to the education of our young. In Dewey's work there is the continual dynamic play between the precariousness of poetic novelty and the stability that comes by way of the feeling that you have gotten something right, even if such rightness lasts but a fleeting moment. Those who read Dewey closely see that his "creative misreadings" are never egregious misreadings, more like patient reconstructions, that nonetheless often have revolutionary implications. This is so because as soon as you zoom in on what Dewey is trying to get right, even his most

patient reconstructions, you will find him defending some set of *conditions* for continual growth. The only manner in which “conditions for growth” is saved from spinning into some sort of contradiction, is by recognizing something like an “agony of influence,” thus resulting in the very pragmatic notion that conditions themselves are constantly changing so as to satisfy their own conditionality for *growth*.

As far as our twin trajectories go, they are not just American trajectories. They might be said to be Enlightenment or modern or Western trajectories. The most convenient expression of these has come down to us in our scientific and literary impulses. When C.P. Snow presented his famous Rede Lecture in the Senate House in Cambridge in 1959, he set the intellectual world afire. His message was fairly straightforward, but the controversy that was ignited came to indicate just how deep the divide was between the two trajectories I have highlighted—what for convenience I will now refer to as the *scientific* and the *literary*. So vociferous was the attack against Snow’s 1959 lecture that he wrote this response in his “The Two Cultures: A Second Look” (1963). I quote at length to get the spirit of what Snow was saying:

In our society (that is, advanced western society) we have lost even the pretense of a common culture. Persons educated with the greatest intensity we know can no longer communicate with each other on the plane of their major intellectual concern. This is serious for our creative, intellectual and, above all, our moral life. It is leading us to interpret the past wrongly, to misjudge the present and to deny our hopes of the future. It is making it difficult or impossible for us to take good action.

I gave the most pointed example of this lack of communication in the

shape of two groups of people, representing what I have christened “the two cultures.” One of these contained the scientists, whose weight, achievement and influence did not need stressing. The other contained the literary intellectuals. I did not mean that literary intellectuals act as the main decision-makers of the western world. I meant that literary intellectuals represent, vocalize and to some extent shape and predict the mood of the non-scientific culture: they do not make the decisions, but their words seep into the minds of those who do. Between these two groups – the scientists and the literary intellectuals – there is little communication and, instead of fellow-feeling, something like hostility.

This was intended as a description of, or a very crude first approximation to, our existing state of affairs. That it was a state of affairs I passionately disliked, I thought was made fairly clear. (p. 59)

I do not know whether Snow was at all familiar with Dewey’s work, but it might be said that the same animating criticism is at work in Dewey’s pragmatism—the hope for communication across largely artificial boundaries. But in the end we must still come back to that radical notion of “growth” that infuses Dewey’s work and that finally establishes the aesthetic dimension of his pragmatism as the most important. Perhaps it is a response to Snow’s lecture that Rorty makes in a footnote in his *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982) that is most telling. Rorty states:

The opposition between the literary and the scientific cultures which C.P. Snow drew...is, I think, even deeper and more important than Snow thought it. It is pretty well co-incident with the opposition between those who think of themselves as caught in time, as an evanescent moment in a continuing

conversation, and those who hope to add a pebble from Newton's beach to an enduring structure. It is not an issue which is going to be resolved by literary critics learning physics or physicists reading the literary quarterlies. It was already drawn in Plato's time, when physics had not yet been invented, and when Poetry and Philosophy first squared off. (I think, incidentally, that those who criticize Snow along the lines of "not just *two* culture, but many" miss his point. If one wants a neat dichotomy between the two cultures he was talking about, just ask any Eastern European censor which Western books are importable into his country. The line he draws will cut across fields like history and philosophy, but will almost always let physics in and keep highbrow novels out. The nonimportable books will be the ones which might suggest new vocabularies for self-description). (p. xlvii, n50)

In a sense, then, novelty is always dangerous. We turn to the comforts of past habitual modes, and lack an abiding trust in our abilities to create new futures and thereby recreate ourselves. We have little faith in our poet-selves, and this in turn can devolve into a kind of institutional malaise or dogmatism.

Perhaps the metaphors of pilgrimage and discipleship are suggestive of this tension between stability and precariousness. While Dewey's more robust organicism entails an appreciation of both the stable and precarious nature of our lives, his pragmatism (right up through his most elaborate aesthetical writings), is a search for stability, or more appropriately, is a prolonged inquiry into the art of *inquiry* itself, and the ways inquiry, as such, can establish some sort of stable bearing within our world as well as with our fellow human beings. In his aesthetical writings looked at already, the



most desired state of equilibrium is a result of those moments of aesthetic intensity, what he calls moments of “heightened vitality.” His entire notion of consummatory experience is meant to signal the power of *an* aesthetic experience that is indicative of some kind of closure and fulfillment, that is, some sort of achieved (albeit powerful, perhaps even profound) stable bearing. Because Dewey retains experience as an existential category of embodied contact with the world and others, even his most aesthetical writings have empirical implications, as I hope my overview of habit, sense, and imagination indicates. Dewey is certainly interested in how things work, how we come to acquire knowledge about things and ourselves. In other words there is a lot we can learn about bringing some control to bear on the precarious flux that is also a part of our existential reality.

Rorty, on the other hand, relishes the precarious and the unstable. He is less interested in those forces that stabilize and more interested in those forces that destabilize—forces that shake up and disorient an otherwise taken-for-granted or dogmatic situation or context. There is, of course, a strong sense in which Dewey’s notion of consummatory experience, while indicative of some kind of closure or fulfillment, is also a disorienting of the taken-for-granted—the artful inquirer who achieves some kind of consummatory fulfillment has, in many ways, *made* a new world. But Rorty’s disorienting poeticism is much more radical in that it is divested of any sort of antecedent structural meaning. And equally little is offered, by way of theoretical guidance, for how a novel disorientation might become oriented into some future stable situation. Novel self-creation, as we noted earlier, is also a matter for the private sphere, for the individual. Whatever comes by way of such stark novelty in the public sphere is a political more than an aesthetical matter (although aesthetical elements may, hopefully,

be retained), and substantially different forces are at work (as highlighted in Chapter Three).

Yet, this difference between Dewey and Rorty's aesthetic emphases might appear greater than it really is. Much has been made, to be sure, of Rorty's "linguistic turn" against Dewey's "experiential" philosophy, but a closer look at this so-called "linguistic turn" may show there to be less difference than at first appears. There are no absolutes, so Rorty's turn should not be construed as a denial of experience per se, and it would be senseless to construe Dewey's turn to experience as representing a denial of language. There is a tendency, when closely analyzing the poetic/aesthetic aspects of these pragmatists' works, to fall into what I will call the trap of linear closure. We are comfortable with linear projections—the following or tracing of some precognitive experience through to some sort of cognitive (rational/logical/meaningful/linguistic) closure. We are more comfortable reading a novel (or a dissertation) with a clear beginning, middle, and conclusion. We are shaken into discomfort trying to read more experimental stream-of-consciousness novels like Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* or Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*. We seem acclimated to linear closure. Indeed, my previous chapter might be just such an indication. There is a kind of neatness to the way I show Dewey's linear development of an experience out of some precognitive, prelinguistic indeterminate situation toward some eventual consummatory close, the development, that is, of an experience into *an* experience.

But let us keep in mind Dewey's notion of growth as an ongoing process rather than as an outcome achieved once and for all. The dynamic of living a life is an ongoing concatenation of precariousness and stability—what Dewey (1925/1994), borrowing

from William James, refers to as “flights and perchings” (p. 323). We can say with some precision that Rorty relishes the precarious (as a poetic force) where Dewey relishes stability (as a force for richer forms of communication in the *polis*), but we have not therein rendered the political irrelevant to Rorty and the poetic irrelevant to Dewey. We emphasize different things along the linear paths we chart as being good for different purposes, but every consummatory closure opens into a new indeterminate situation (at some point), and every starkly new poetic metaphoric interjection has a chance of being picked up and made normal (or dead) within a community. As Dewey says: “A consummatory object that is not also instrumental turns in time to the dust and ashes of boredom. The ‘eternal’ quality of great art is its renewed instrumentality for further consummatory experiences” (p. 296). The only tension worth debating about between these two pragmatists, and it is one that I think is worked out, more or less, in their aesthetical positions, is between their respective starting points, or rather, more precisely, how they express their respective staring points. We must return, then, to the notion of qualitative immediacy that comes to infuse what Dewey refers to as the “indeterminate situation.” I will argue that Rorty’s notion of metaphor is virtually synonymous with Dewey’s notion of “pervasive quality” and “indeterminate situation,” that is, Rorty institutes a linguistic device in the service of a qualitative event that can initiate problems that might find potential refinements in some future communal reckoning. But what gets potentially reckoned with or normalized in some unknowable future does not divest the “indeterminate situation” or the metaphor-event of its immediate practical power as a qualitative starting point.

### Experience and Metaphors

David Hall (1994), one of Rorty's most astute readers, places Rorty squarely in that stream of American pragmatic thinking he calls "aesthetic pluralism" (p. 66). This stream dates back to the Puritan theologian Jonathon Edwards (1703-1758) and extends through the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), William James (1842-1910), John Dewey (1859-1952), and Alfred North Whitehead (1862-1947). What makes this aesthetic axis of American thought particularly relevant is that all these thinkers presupposed the same problematic. As Hall says:

Each of them at least implicitly asked, given the plurality and complexity of experiencing, how one might realize order without the undue exclusion of particularity at the ontological, epistemological, and practical levels.

American philosophy is pluralistic. Thinking remains legitimately pluralistic only if it discovers some means other than logical or rational organization to realize the appropriate ordering of the insistent particulars which comprise our psychological, social, and natural environs. This is the basis of the aesthetic orientation of American philosophy. (p. 73)

Such an aesthetic axis necessitates in some strong measure a turn to the future that I have been highlighting as the most important turn of the American pragmatic tradition. Such a turn recognizes and values the aesthetic pluralist thrust of the tradition that tries to protect "particularity" against an overly aggressive and ordering conformism. Against such a backdrop, Rorty's distinction between the private and the public does not look all that controversial. Such a distinction is an indelible part of the tradition, for Dewey no less than for any of the others. So what is it about "particularity" that is worth protecting and

valuing? Is particularity a particular kind of thing? Or is it no thing in particular? We might say that the particular is the individual—the messy, ever-complicated, and complicating individual. Aesthetic pluralism recognizes the space of a plurality of messy, complicated, and ever-complicating individuals. Whatever order comes about, whatever richer modes of communication are developed that lead to hopefully richer communities, there is no denying the individual as the irreducible focal point of all such creative potential.

Hall (1994) further refines this aesthetic axis by distinguishing between the “systematic pluralists” and the “interpretive pluralists” (p. 79). Each group, representative of late modern intellectuals, establishes a metatheoretical stance in the face of our ever-thickening theoretical layering (what we might more generally call the theoretical attitude of the sciences). We have become, indeed, we have had to become, hyperconscious in the face of such a plurality of often mutually incompatible theoretical language games. The “systematic pluralists” recognize diversity as an integral element in the American ethos, but are also cognizant of the dangers of relativism. They therefore advocate taxonomical approaches to our sophisticated and multifarious theoretical environments that, in the manner of toolboxes, place every theory in its appropriate box and then designate which few boxes out of the many are best to rely on.<sup>7</sup> Such taxonomists have provided us with the many “isms” that dot the philosophical landscape. This has led to the closed-shop mentality that exists throughout much of academia, each theoretical enclave doing its own thing with not much communication across boundaries (pace Snow’s observation above). Rorty is a metaphilosopher whose principal goal is communication that denies the toolbox taxonomic approach, only because there is no way of intra- or

intertheoretically dissolving or resolving differences. Refinement of theory usually leads to deepened incompatibilities rather than heightened clarity between opposed theoretical camps. The task for Rorty is not better and more refined philosophical theories that can then be pigeonholed into their proper philosophical toolbox, but rather just the construction of more and more tools that might lend to richer and more diverse channels of communication without concern for what the right box is that such tools must be slotted into. The “interpretive pluralist” is therefore Rorty’s true pragmatist.

Interpretive pluralists eschew toolboxes but love to invent or identify tools for any variety of interpretive projects. They are the artists that turn to the future and away from what we might call the de-creative impulse to nail everything down into its proper antecedently defined place. True progressives, interpretive pluralists try to come up with more imaginative ways of engaging with reality, but importantly, engaging reality is not through some form of representationalism. Facing the future boldly and imaginatively is an intellectual liberation. As Rorty (2000a) states in a talk given at the Museum of Modern Art in reference to the work of Jacques Derrida:

I think of this [intellectual liberation] as it appears within philosophy as a repudiation of representationalism. What binds Derrida to the American pragmatists, and both to Nietzsche, is the idea that thought and language are not attempts to get in touch with reality, but attempts to find more imaginative ways of describing reality. What binds Derrida to Wittgenstein is the idea that linguistic meaning is not a referential relation between words and world but a relation between the uses of some words and the uses of other words. What binds both Derrida and Wittgenstein to such contemporary analytic philosophers as Davidson

and Brandom is that the latter have developed a way of talking about language that defines reference in terms of the acceptability of inferences, and makes this acceptability a matter of changing social practice. (pp. 2-3)

Apart from being a consummate namedropper, we can see Rorty's point. The most important tools for imaginative advancement in the interpretive pluralists' arsenal are words. And so, if the larger culture is reducible to the messy individuals that make up that culture, then individuals are further reducible to the words (tools) they use. There is no need for further reduction past that. Of course, this is problematic for Dewey's experiential pragmatism, because although Dewey recognized the necessity of language for suiting our purposes, such *articulation* was itself an epistemic outcome. Prior to words there was some sort of organic precognitive and prelinguistic transaction with a surrounding environmental milieu. This is perhaps the most intriguing area of debate when it comes to comparisons of Dewey's and Rorty's pragmatism—is it language or is it experience? I have provided already an ample survey of Dewey's conception of experience. Let us look more closely at what Rorty makes of language.

Rorty's strong anti-essentialist position holds that the function of words and sentences is always a function of the contingent contexts in which words and sentences are being used. As I have mentioned above, there is no systematic structural aspect to language that establishes it as a medium between us and the world. Language does not objectively represent an outside reality, nor does it represent some internal human essence. Rather words and sentences are simply "strings of marks and noises used by human beings in the development and pursuit of social practices" (Rorty, 1967, cited in Calder, 2003, pp. 27-28). The words and sentences we use are not being used in the

service of solving some big mystery called Truth. That is to say, they are not puzzle pieces slowly and inexorably piecing together the master picture. They are, as Rorty suggests, alternative tools for describing our world, satisfying our needs, and establishing our purposes, and there are as many alternative descriptions as there are words and sentences. This pragmatic/utilitarian account of language eschews the tradition that

has seen language as interposed, like a cushion, between us and the world. It has regretted that the diversity of language games, of interpretive communities, permits us so much variation in the way in which we respond to causal pressures. It would like us to be machines for cranking out true statements in “direct” response to the pressures of reality upon our organs. Pragmatists, by contrast, think the metaphor of language as cushioning the effect of causal forces is not one which can fruitfully be spun out any further. But if that metaphor goes, so does the traditional notion of an ideal language, or of the ideal empirical theory, as an ultrathin cushion which translates the brutal thrust of reality into statement and action as directly as possible. (Rorty, 1991a, p.81)

For Rorty’s pragmatist, the causal forces that impact us are just that, causal forces. As such they are not under any description, only our explanations can be under descriptions. Nature and reality then drop from the picture as being describable things—that is, the nature of Nature, the nature of Reality, the nature of Humanness—have no accurate or absolutely perdurable one-to-one description that would indicate our cleanest of knowing. The point is, Rorty says in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (1999d):

We shall never be able to step outside of language, never be able to grasp reality unmediated by a linguistic description. So both are ways of saying that we should



be suspicious of the Greek distinction between appearance and reality, and that we should try to replace it with something like the distinction between 'less useful description of the world' and 'more useful description of the world'....If you put the two slogans together, you get the claim that all our knowledge is under descriptions suited to our current social purposes. (p. 48)

One of Rorty's most basic challenges to the tradition comes when he says that we have no access to analyzing the conditions of possibility. Note that this does not entail that there are no conditions of possibility. But we must recognize, pace Rorty, that such conditions are, as already noted, merely causal. They are not *analyzable*. They impact us, causing a shaking up (or not) of our present purposes, our present beliefs and desires. We are not impacted by some antecedently representable and describable Truth. Every impact is a possibilizing of some new future. This is not to say, in response to the invariable charge of relativism, that our descriptions are merely arbitrary, that we, as Calder (2003) says, "simply do what we like in a world of our own making" (p. 42). There are always constraints on our descriptions, and these constraints are embodied in the norms, mores, and customs of whatever community we live in. To reiterate, these cannot be construed as absolute constraints, but they do impact our descriptions in-so-far as these constraints are themselves descriptions to which any future description will be relative. We never create *ex nihilo*. Calder continues by citing this passage from Rorty in which Rorty stresses that the tools we use are not random or the product of blind (*ex nihilo*) invention:

Nor do I think that language is 'an arbitrary system of signs,' any more than that the constellations are *arbitrary* arrangements of stars. Given the conditions we live in, they are among the arrangements of stars that it is useful for us to talk

about. More generally, given the conditions we live in, the language we use is the obvious way for us to talk. There may be better ways, but they will not be discovered by analyzing the ‘conditions of possibility’ of present ways....They will be discovered by somebody proposing a new idiom, its being tried out, and its being found to work better than its predecessor. (pp. 42-43)

Clearly, the traditional notion of “discovery” as an antecedent finding is shaken up. Here discovery is conflated with invention, in the very process of “proposing a new idiom.” This brings us to Rorty’s pivotal notion of metaphor and the way metaphor situates the creative individual within the larger social context.

We have developed a sense thus far of how Rorty comes to linguistify Dewey’s larger experiential matrix, and why. There has arisen substantial debate about Rorty’s linguistified pragmatism (or poeticism)—that somehow there is a part, at least, of the larger pragmatic story that he has neglected. Substantive critiques by thinkers well versed in the pragmatic tradition have led to what many consider a trenchant undermining of Rorty’s linguistic position. Such thinkers as Sleeper (1985), Margolis (2002), and Hildebrand (2003) have leveled serious charges against Rorty’s linguistic pragmatism, the general tenor of which posits Rorty’s position as harboring a *theoretical starting point* (TSP) as opposed to a more organic and embodied Deweyan *practical starting point* (PSP). What I intend to show is that these critics have overstated their case, even as they stand as some of the ablest readers of Dewey’s pragmatism. Construing Rorty’s works along the lines of a TSP and Dewey’s along the lines of a PSP unnecessarily confuses what is most important (and most pragmatically artful) about starting points—namely, that they are thoroughly qualitative. All starting points in a pragmatic universe are

qualitative starting points (QSP). As such, a QSP is an indeterminate event that can cause some future event(s) to unfold, that is, can either cause some present normality to suffer a (sudden or shocking) rupture that will need working out (via conscious, reflective inquiry) or alternatively can cause present normality to slowly take on a different hue by seeping into the minds of more and more members within the larger community (much like an artist's work occasionally does).

I will focus, to begin, on Hildebrand's (2003) work. His can stand as proxy for the others, if only because his is the most recent and perhaps the most comprehensive attack on Rorty's position yet written. Hildebrand (2003) is an able reader of both Dewey and Rorty. His book, *Beyond Realism and Anti-Realism*, claims that Rorty's linguistic starting point contravenes Dewey's more embodied experiential practical starting point (articulated in Chapters Two and Five of my own work above as the dimension of *had* rather than *known* experience). Hildebrand argues that because every thing, person, and poem in Rorty's universe is under a description, Rorty can only ever be speaking from some sort of *knowing* (or epistemological) starting point, in short, a TSP. In this way, our richer experiential contexts of immediately *had* qualities gets short shrift, indeed, gets veritably amputated from the equation of blossoming life. In Rorty's world, so Hildebrand's interpretation goes, the pragmatist creates problems rather than finding them to be there, and this in turn provides "tremendous latitude for creative thought" (Hildebrand, 2003, p. 183). Hildebrand then cites this passage from Rorty's *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982) as an example:

We should relax and say, with our colleagues in history and literature, that we in the humanities differ from natural scientists precisely in *not* knowing in advance

what our problems are, and in not *needing* to provide criteria of identity which will tell us whether our problems are the same as those of our predecessors. To adopt this relaxed attitude...is to admit that our geniuses invent problems and programs *de novo*, rather than being presented with them by the subject-matter itself, or by the “current state of research.” (p. 183)

Hildebrand then goes on to emphasize Rorty’s suggestion in the above quoted passage that we “admit that our geniuses invent problems and programs *de novo*, rather than being presented with them by the subject-matter itself” as being indicative of a TSP, “for only theoretically,” Hildebrand continues, “could it be possible for an individual, no matter how brilliant, to absent herself from all of the influences that shape her life and work” (p. 183). I find this a problematic interpretation of what Rorty is saying. There is a marked difference between *de novo* creation and *ex nihilo* creation. It seems as though Hildebrand is attributing the latter rather than the former to Rorty’s meaning, and as such he is making an unwarranted leap. As should be apparent from everything I have articulated above, nowhere does Rorty say that we create *ex nihilo*, but we do create *de novo*, to the extent that the causal pressures of the norms, mores, and customs of one’s community constrain whatever new inventions or metaphors come about. The most one can say about such fresh inventions is that they may *seem* to have come about *ex nihilo*, but this is just a mistaken conflation of novelty with arbitrariness. Nothing comes of nothing, and surely Rorty is not making the mistake of saying that something does.

Clearly Rorty recognized the importance of our acculturated status as being a constraining factor in our unfolding lives. Sometimes the constraint is so pervasive and overriding as to hardly be noticed. In such a state we are in the equivalent of what Dewey

called a habitual mode wherein such habitual residing is largely untroubled. In other cases we may feel something vaguely to be out of sorts. In these cases we are subject to the sense of the situation being indeterminate. Out of this sense of indeterminacy (which is the QSP) the situation may evolve to a *problematic* phase wherein it is becoming consciously manifest for some future unfolding, and hopefully resolution, of whatever the problem comes consciously to be understood as being *the problem* of that given situation. The important point with regard to Rorty's fit in this otherwise Deweyan experiential rendering (spelled out in greater detail in Chapters Two and Five), is that for him (Rorty) the use of metaphor serves the exact same role of indeterminacy that Dewey's notion of qualitative immediacy serves. One who experiences a metaphor does not *know* it per se, but rather *has* it in much the same way a primary experience is *had* in Dewey's lexicon. Notice how Rorty lays out his understanding of how a metaphor works. He suggests in his essay "The Higher Nominalism in a Nutshell: A reply to Henry Staten" (1986) that we look at metaphor "as a use of language as yet insufficiently integrated into the language-game to be captured in a dictionary definition" (cited in Calder, 2003, p. 45). Words and sentences that come to us this way are, as such, ruleless. There are no antecedent criteria for such metaphors' rational reception. A new metaphoric idiom, upon first reception, is often greeted as just plain weird or strange. For example, says Rorty (1991a):

When the Christians began saying "Love is the only law", and when Copernicus began saying "The earth goes round the sun", these sentences must have seemed merely "ways of speaking". Similarly, the sentences "history is the history of class struggle" or "matter can be changed into energy" were, at first utterance,

prima facie false. These were sentences which a simple-minded analytic philosopher might have diagnosed as “conceptually confused”, as false by virtue of the meanings of such words as “law”, “sun”, “history”, or “matter”. But when the Christians, the Copernicans, the Marxists, or the physicists had finished redescribing portions of reality in the light of these sentences, we started speaking of these sentences as hypotheses which might quite possibly be true. In time, each of these sentences became accepted, at least within certain communities of inquiry, as *obviously* true. (p. 124)

As was mentioned above, the invention of new idioms is the invention of new “marks and noises.” There is no tension, as such, between older meaning and newer meaning. A new metaphorical interjection is not a new meaning. It may over time evolve into a new meaning—may be picked up within a community and so endowed. But in the immediacy of its interjection it is merely a qualitative event (a QSP), the possible cause of some possible effect. Rorty is here drawing on the work of his contemporary, Donald Davidson, and what is quite novel about Davidson’s reading of metaphor is that he denies its traditional (classical) status as a transfer from some literal to some figurative meaning. For words or sentences to have meaning is for them to be already wrapped up in some more or less established language game. Metaphors are meaningless “marks and noises” and therefore do not (yet) have a place in a language game. As Rorty (1989) says:

Davidson denies, in his words, “the thesis that associated with a metaphor is a cognitive content that its author wishes to convey and that the interpreter must grasp if he is to get the message.” In [Davidson’s] view, tossing a metaphor into a conversation is like suddenly breaking off the conversation long enough to make a

face, or pulling a photograph out of your pocket and displaying it, or pointing at a feature of the surroundings, or slapping your interlocutor's face, or kissing him. Tossing a metaphor into a text is like using italics, or illustrations, or odd punctuation or formats. (p. 18)

This account of metaphor, as Malachowski (2002) point out “tips the balance of power in favour of ‘imagination’ over ‘reason’” (p. 102). The central point I wish to make, however, is that Rorty, in so tipping the balance in favor of imagination, is using language to initiate a completely qualitative starting point (QSP) by divesting new idiomatic expressions or new “marks and noises” of any antecedent meaning. In-so-far as these “marks and noises” are meaningless does not entail that no new meaning, per se, has been *released*. Whatever the future makes of it, the future makes of it. It is just, after all, a novel use of otherwise conventional meanings. It is not the inventing of new words (though such is possible—Shakespeare, for example, was a wonderful inventor of new words) that is of the essence. It is the creation of a new quality that is important, and any new quality, by virtue of being a quality, is in some way a subordination of existence to imagination. I would argue that in both Dewey's and Rorty's aesthetical positions, in-so-far as they take a serious turn to the future, the role of what Kestenbaum (2002) calls the “insubordinate imagination” is central.

Kestenbaum (2002) provides a rich analysis of Dewey's *Art as Experience*, one that I think provides a nice link to Rorty's work on metaphor and the necessity in any poetic reconstruction of a thoroughly qualitative staring point. The central point as I read Kestenbaum's argument is that Dewey makes partial use of Keats' notion of “negative capability.” Kestenbaum highlights that it is a partial use because a full endorsement and

use of negative capability as Keats outlined it—what Dewey (1934/1980) refers to as “[the capability] of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (p.33), would take Dewey too far afield of his pragmatic aspirations. So Kestenbaum is careful to call it a “pragmatic negative capability.” In this case the “pragmatic” makes all the difference, but that being said, Kestenbaum is making the argument that readers (proponents and detractors alike) tend still to underestimate the subtle treatment that Dewey gives to the human imagination.

In a tricky and sometimes elusive argument (only because it is elusive to Dewey as well), Kestenbaum (2002) first makes a distinction between two poles of the imagination—what he calls the “insubordinate imagination” and the “natural imagination.” Simply put, the insubordinate imagination “offers alternatives to reality” and the natural imagination “completes reality” (p. 209). Now it is in the early stages of aesthetic experience that the insubordinate imagination does its work—is necessary. It is necessary for aesthetic consummations to have a chance to begin with, because such “negative capability” is the reversal necessary to realizing possibilities not realized in ordinary experience. As Kestenbaum argues, it is “‘negative capability’ [that] gives Dewey the opportunity to be large-minded about reality-deferring acts of imagination, including the make-believe, but it also requires him to find a path, a thread of continuity from make-believe to material objects” (p. 219). Kestenbaum is careful to point out that while Dewey was inspired by the Romanticism of Keats and Emerson (among others), he could not endorse the annihilation of the self that tended to occur in their work. He provides examples of each Romantic's moments of excess, and then shows how Dewey was a pragmatist where they were not. The main tension he sums up as such:



Can imagination survive reality? Can reality survive imagination? Both questions can be answered affirmatively if reality and imagination resist each other. If imagination is not to destroy the self, it must give the self a place to stand, to behold the real world. But such a standpoint cannot be too beholden to the real world. If imagination is to loosen reality's grip, it must offer resistance to the real, stand up to it, penetrate it. Imagination cannot simply turn away from reality. In short, it must be more of a force or center than what is suggested by Emerson's "transparent eyeball." We imagine reality's resistance. (p. 221)

What is implied here is that there is always a contact with reality, but at times of imaginative insubordination we are not "too beholden to the real world."

If we look at another passage from Dewey, we get an even clearer sense of how reality and imagination pressure each other Dewey (1934/1980) says:

Imaginative experience exemplifies more fully than any other kind of experience what experience itself is in its very movement and structure. But we also want the tang of overt conflict and the impact of harsh conditions. Moreover, without the latter art has no material; and this fact is more important for aesthetic theory than is any contrast supposed to exist between play and work, spontaneity and necessity, freedom and law. *For art is the fusion in one experience of the pressure upon the self of necessary conditions and the spontaneity and novelty of individuality.* (p. 28, italics mine)

As I read the last sentence in this quotation—'art is the fusion in one experience of the pressure upon the self of necessary conditions and the spontaneity and novelty of individuality'—I can see no great difference between what Dewey is saying and what

Rorty is saying with his notion of metaphor. As acculturated individuals we live within a web of preformed habits and dispositions, and these necessarily condition us. But as imaginative creators, we also are capable of outstripping common meanings. This capacity brings us, as Dewey (1925/1994) says, “to a consideration of the most far-reaching question of all criticism: the relation between existence and value, or as the problem is often put, between the real and ideal” (p. 336). Rorty cherishes the poetic moments when we pierce through conventions and open up more than common possibilities. Such moments are the establishing of qualitative events, and such new qualitative events offer the only relevant condition for the world in some way becoming new.

Now, in spite of the qualitative events that both Dewey and Rorty establish as the integral starting point, it can be argued that Dewey provides a far richer account of our embodied status in the world, and the way such embodiedness establishes us humans (and other animals) as actually very complex webs of long evolutionary development. Because Dewey retains a working conception of experience, he is able to further develop his very subtle and nuanced articulations of that vast precognitive and prelinguistic domain that he captures in terms like “habit,” “sense,” and “imagination.” Last chapter drew out the compelling and almost counterintuitive way in which our embodiment does all the hard work of living. We tend to think of the hard work arising when we have to consciously think and deliberate about some problem in order to come to or develop some resolution. But what Dewey compellingly shows us (and at a time when advanced cognitive science was not around) is that the real hard work is done by those deep sunk

dispositions to act rightly and behave accordingly that are the result of millennia of small adjustments to our living contexts. As Francisco Varela (1992) says, we are just

waking up to the simple fact that just being there, immediate coping, is far from simple or reflexive. Immediate coping is, in fact, the real “hard work,” since it took the longest evolutionary time to develop. The ability to make intentional, rational analyses during breakdowns appeared only recently and very rapidly in evolutionary terms. (p. 18)

This ties in nicely with this passage from Dewey’s *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922) cited by Varela:

We may be said to *know how* [italics added] by means of our habits....We walk and read aloud, we get off and on street cars, we dress and undress, and do a thousand useful acts without thinking of them. We know something, namely how to *do* [italics added] them....[If] we choose to call [this] knowledge...then other things also called knowledge, knowledge of and about things, knowledge that things are thus and so, knowledge that involved reflection and conscious appreciation, remains of a different sort. (p. 19)

Now Rorty admittedly treats all this in a rather light-minded manner. He basically takes all this evolutionary embodied sophistication and slots it neatly under the heading “acculturation.” He then separates the private from the public realm and further transfers all this richness that Dewey ascribes to the realm of the individual via habit, sense, and imagination to the public realm, indicating how such dispositions have led to the kinds of democratic liberal institutions that we should take some care to protect. That is to say, in a roundabout way, Rorty is defending all this precognitive, prelinguistic dimension, that

Dewey takes such pains to articulate in individual terms, for the public domain. Our Western trajectory has evolved institutions harboring a fair degree of ethical know-how (though much work is yet to be done) that is expressive in an abstract way of comparable individual skills. To say that all this richness (I do not think Rorty would deny that we are embodied in the way Dewey says) is merely causal for our new inventions does sound rather flat. But Rorty is not wrong either. All this richness that Dewey goes into great detail in conveying—the richness of our vast evolutionary predispositions—do in the end, play a causal role in the advent of new artful inventions. Rorty simply wants to emphasize the newness and not from whence the newness came. We must remember that the imagination, in its most powerful capacity (encompassed in the most progressive aspect of what Dewey called “growth”), can even outstrip all of this antecedent prelinguistic richness. The future is the site of pragmatism’s unfolding, and the imagination is so positioned to the future that it can never be “too beholden to the real world” (read as embodying past conventionalized routines and habits) if it is to help bring about a new real world.

For Dewey language was a reflective outcome in the resolution of some indeterminate/problematic situation, our only mode of communicating our results. But every result, every artful consummation, is the release of a new quality, and so life goes on alternating between stability and precariousness, perchings and flights. Rorty’s articulation of metaphor divests words and sentences of any deliberative rational accompaniment, and by this (Davidsonian) invention, he posits a qualitative starting point every bit as qualitative (and pragmatic) as Dewey’s. Rorty helps us to see that language itself is not merely a deliberative, rational enterprise, but a part of our habit-laden

evolutionary disposition to be creative artists of our own existences. Once we get past Rorty's rather unfortunate misreading of Dewey's event metaphysics, a misreading (creative or not) that confuses Dewey's notion of experience, we start to see him doing with language what Dewey was doing with experience. Are these different words for the same thing? I'm not sure. But I think it is clear that Rorty need not have stripped Dewey of his experience-talk to have made his own pragmatic point—especially when he uses language in a (metaphorical) way capable of establishing its own pervasive qualitative experience or event. Perhaps Dewey did get carried away when he posited a pervasive controlling force to qualitative immediacy of situations. But I think he also spelled out admirably the distinction between *had* and *known* experience, and it is a mistake to assume that experience as *had* is a kind of epistemological foundation for what eventually is *known*. As Rockwell (2001) points out: "Dewey wanted to claim that experience is not just vaguely perceived knowledge, but something different in kind from knowledge; something constituted by our habits, skills, and abilities, and necessarily linked to our goals, aspirations, and emotions" (p. 21). I think Rorty, in his own linguistified way, was trying to do the same thing with metaphor. Whether language can serve a comparable task to what Dewey attributed to more behavioral, psychologistic, and embodied concepts like habit, sense, and imagination is a point for further exploration. Perhaps far less can be accounted for by linguistified concepts such as metaphor (in terms of our dispositions and predispositions), but then again, to turn boldly to an open future is, as this whole work as tried to indicate, a shift of emphasis from accounting to creating. And language, as an artistic tool, need not be seen as utterly alien (read rational) to such

purposes. As Dewey clearly indicated all aspects of our daily lives lend to such artful possibility.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: AN EDUCATIONAL CONCLUSION**

It is exceedingly difficult to write a conclusion when it feels as though one is just beginning. The central focus of this work has been to expose a few of the implications that have come by way of the pragmatic tradition's evolution of a rich and complex shift away from many of the foundationalist and absolutist discourses of the Western philosophical tradition. This shift, or "turning" as I have called it, has led, arguably, to a more courageous confrontation with the future and its open possibilities. The pragmatic tradition has thereby loosed itself from many of the taken-for-granted comforts that once were available to philosophy (comforts that were most often constructed or posited by philosophers) and that would seep into larger communities offering various forms of transcendental or foundational guidance. Such comforts, often associated with hierarchical metaphors that offered us "skyhooks" or "toeholds," that is, transcendental or foundational stabilities, had to give way to a more realistic horizontalized (because temporalized) axis that spread from some past established set of habits and conventions (personal and social) through our embodied status in a concatenation of unfolding present moments and onward to ever-unfolding future possibilities. Such a temporal movement makes viable (and possible) pragmatism's dramatic turn to the future and the philosophical necessity that all justification must now take into account some sort of future reckoning. Past modes of conduct are not thereby rendered superfluous by such a shift; they are instead rendered modifiable under the light of some future necessity.

### **Democracy and Truthfulness**

Indeed, the very idea of democracy (in its modernist North American context) has always required such a necessity, and yet, even today, how aggressively we (and some of

our intrepidly foolish leaders) hold on to the (dangerous) comforts of absolutist antecedent existences. Of course not all antecedent existences are bad—nothing can be bad simply in virtue of being antecedent, without some form of prejudicial ageism manifesting itself. But as critical and intentional agents, to blindly give our allegiance to past modes that have their moral footing in a different time and under different sets of social conditions, is to effectively forgo our critical and intentional agency—our capacity for self-creation out of a web of past contingencies. When the whole world seems to be dividing and subdividing into more and more “noncommunicating sects, races, nations, classes and cliques,” what hope for richer modes of communication exists if we are unable to at least loosen the grip of those antecedent conditions which effectively created (though usually unintentionally) such divisions to begin with?

Democracy is a story ever-about-to-be-told, ever-about-to-be-written—it is the necessity of imagination’s freedom against the past’s Truth. But it is never merely a skipping from Truth to Freedom, that is, from one absolute to another, from one essence to another. Imagination is as much a requirement of the past as it is of the future. Reality, as Edwards (1997) says, “rarely gives us that free a hand” to “think or to believe whatever we wish” (p. 229). We imagine our past, in the words of the American poet, Wallace Stevens, “as an inevitable knowledge,/Required as a necessity requires” (cited in Edwards, p. 229). We imagine an ordered past, and in the act of imagining, order the past. Events follow events “as a necessity requires” and our present is infused by a pathos of “inevitable knowledge”—as Luther said, “here I stand; I can do no other” (cited in Edwards, p. 232). But the consciousness of our own historicity greets us too as an “inevitable knowledge.” And the recognition of contingency itself necessitates a further



disciplining of the imagination—let us call it the discipline of invention. The disciplining power of the imagination acts on our sense of truthfulness and insists that truthfulness now requires an inventive or poetic kind of living. Truthfulness has charted the path *here*, to the realization of a new necessity of truthfulness disciplined by the imagination. As Edwards points out, “poetry is a practice that destroys both idolatry and anomie” (p. 234).

The sense of “normal nihilism” as I developed it in Chapter Four, represents the tensive heart of this entire work. I have argued that it is a real, but not devastating result of the journey that has brought us late modern, beginning-of-the-century Western intellectuals to a new place. Pragmatism’s recognition and realignment of truth away from absolute antecedents to a concatenation of contingent presents on to the necessity of an open future is not the abandonment of truth. But the turn is dramatic nonetheless.

Edwards (1997) says this:

We – we [beginning-of-century,] Western intellectuals – find our normal nihilist understanding of “the plain sense of things” impressive because it impresses itself on us in a particular way: we *cannot help* seeing things the normal nihilist way we see them, once we have seen them that way. Even the post-Nietzschean recognition that we see things only as we are *conditioned* to see them, and conditioned not by hard-wired Kantian categories but by tropes and images and grammatical pictures which themselves have a history and can in no way be checked for their “accuracy,” is not – in itself – sufficient cause for us to abandon our hopes and claims of seeing....But this post-Nietzschean recognition of contingency can and will on reflection diminish the *Pathos* of any particular thing

seen, *itself included*; and that is because that recognition, like any such, can and will *itself* be recognized to be “just another way of seeing things.” (p. 230)

But this new place comes with some new (and some old) dangers. The new danger, as was highlighted, is the self’s possible addiction to novel satisfactions, or a “runaway humanism” that increases the proliferation of values in the shopping mall of values, each value having a shorter and shorter half-life. The other older worry is that in the face of such runaway diversity more and more people will settle into some comfortable and blind conformity to one or another belief system, ideology, or marketplace niche.

Clearly, moral relativism arises as a real issue in an age of “normal nihilism” or what Rorty alternately calls “irony” (though, more precisely, I think irony is necessitated by the shift to “normal nihilism”). The shift (at least among intellectuals who have read Hegel and Nietzsche, Emerson and Dewey) is, intellectually speaking, palpable, but how much is to be made of it? If you endorse one or another form of metaphysical idealism (say some form of religious or philosophical dogma) or metaphysical realism (say some form of positivist scientism) and believe that there are only two realities, one entailing necessary absolutes (moral and otherwise) and the other entailing sheer chaos in the absence of such absolutes, then you will make a very great deal out of such a shift. If, on the other hand, you see a turn to the future and to the imagination as not automatically being an endorsement of chaos, then you will be less nervous. Turning to Rorty’s notion of “irony,” let us reestablish what is most humane about it.

There is a mistaken tendency to think of the ironic individual as one who either longs for cynical withdrawal or otherwise cherishes the notion of smashing apart conventions as a form of philosophical sport. Clearly, this overshoots what Rorty is

suggesting with his notion of “irony.” As Malachowski (2002) decisively notes in Rorty’s behalf: “A ‘refined’, ‘sympathetic’ or ‘light’ form of irony may involve a very subtle form of ‘social reserve’ – a ‘distancing’ that far from threatening ‘truthfulness in accountability’, enhances it...such irony is closer to ‘impartiality’ than cynical withdrawal” (p. 149). I think Malachowski is right here. Irony actually enlivens the very notion of “impartiality,” for absolutist conceptions of “partiality” are no longer sustainable. All this is to say that pragmatists have not turned their backs on truth telling, on the idea of the importance of offering a sincere and honest account. We are all acculturated—we all have histories and experiences that have brought us *here*. To be ironic about this fact is just to recognize that your “final vocabulary” might not be the same as someone else’s—that there could be, indeed are, many “final vocabularies” circulating about. Pluralism comes to replace monism under the trajectory of imagination’s own necessity of truthfulness.

Now, as was mentioned, ironic detachment is not for everyone. Intellectuals have the heads-up in this regard. But just because everyone that lives in Rorty’s utopian future is not going to be an ironist, this does not mean that everyone is therefore destined to become some sort of blinkered totalitarian or crazed anything-goes relativist. The minimal requirement for most will be as it is now in Western democracies (albeit in an increasingly precarious way) to respect that your beliefs and the truthfulness of your rendering may not be the same as someone else’s equally truthful rendering, but that also if you have been raised in a particular society, yours and theirs should not be *that* far apart. There can be a nonhomogenous, communal *we* even as the freedom of each *I* is respected. The main thrust of both Dewey’s and Rorty’s works is therefore democratic in

the sense of protecting the freedom to give a sincere and truthful account of oneself, and such accounting makes it difficult to hold on to some overriding absolutist conception of Truth that will invariably decide among competing vocabularies. Whatever gets hashed out between two or more competing vocabularies *becomes* the truthfulness of the matter without reliance on some outside abstract eternal value. Running Truth together with truthfulness is no longer a warranted conflation. Truthfulness must win the day against its own antecedent absolutes. Rorty (2000b) says, in a critical response to James Conant:

Pragmatists are often said not to recognize the political and moral importance of truth-telling. I do not think this charge is even remotely plausible. Truthfulness, in the relevant sense, is saying publicly what you believe, even when it is disadvantageous to do so. This is a moral virtue whose exercise is punished by totalitarian societies. This virtue has nothing to do with any controversy between Realists and non-Realists, both of whom pay it equal honor. My claim that if we take care of freedom truth will take care of itself implies that if people can say what they believe without fear, then...the task of justifying themselves to others and the task of getting things right will coincide. My argument is that since we can test whether we have performed the first task, and have no further test to apply to determine whether we have performed the second, Truth as end-in-itself drops out. (p. 347)

This aligns nicely with a Deweyan conception of “growth” as providing the impetus of its own trajectory, as being its own moral end. To paraphrase what Dewey (1916/2004) made clear, growth is not *having* an end; it *is* an end, its own end. It is in this sense, then, that Truth’s own grand narratives gave birth to the necessity of truthfulness, which in

turn, and in virtue of an inexorable self-propelled logic, rendered Truth superfluous. It is this tricky point that was the focus of my (big) fourth chapter and is the center of this whole work. It is this notion of truth (and truthfulness), which itself tends to render Truth theories problematic, that is still most contentious about the pragmatic tradition. But it is also that which is the condition for its most artful turning to the future.

The pragmatist establishing of truthfulness over Truth is what infuses the aesthetic axis of the American pragmatic tradition. Because pragmatism has forgone the traditional philosophical task of progressively getting closer and closer to some abstract antecedent Truth (“reality,” “reason,” or “nature”), it now fully takes up its task as “the apotheosis of the future.” This has led to certain controversial claims for the political and educational spheres. I developed some of these political implications in Chapter Three, especially with Rorty’s division of the public and the private. Against prevalent criticisms that Rorty was instituting a sterile dualism where Dewey had (more or less) successfully collapsed it, I argued that this too was an overblown reading of what Rorty was saying. Arcilla’s (1995) words I think offer a reasonable corrective reading:

[Rorty] is not interested in separating the public and private realms on the basis of some literal, naturalistic, absolute boundary. He wants only to determine degrees of separation that emerge in certain circumstances, and which can be respected for certain purposes. His critics have misunderstood him if they think that he conceives of the separation in black-and-white terms, for the purposes of making a point of theoretical principle. The public-private distinction is a pragmatic tool that promises to help mitigate conflict between individuals and their society. Even if it proves to be rough and fuzzy when contemplated in abstraction, if in using it

we are able to iron out certain conflicts, then we have all the reason we need to affirm its significance. (p. 124)

I do not see this distinction in any way being at odds with Dewey's collapsing of dualisms. Rorty collapsed philosophical dualisms with as much fervor as Dewey, breaking down absolutist abstract divisions that blocked the paths of inquiry. But equally important, both Dewey and Rorty made relevant distinctions when and where they needed to be made. A distinction does not invariably lead to a dualism. Rather a working distinction fosters our practical engagements with what can otherwise turn into intractable and incommensurable problems. For all the talk about Dewey's collapsing of the dualism between the individual and the social, were there no working distinction between the two spheres in his work, he would hardly have become the pragmatic thinker he became. Some form of mysticism would more likely have been the result. No, the distinction between the public and the private is alive and well in Dewey's works. Indeed the entire aesthetic axis of his work would be unthinkable without it. Let us not lose sight of the power of working distinctions within both Dewey's and Rorty's work. In this spirit I turn now to an educational essay written by Rorty (one of few he's written), and while it is not recent, I still find it to be an inspired piece of writing.

### **Education Left and Right**

The essay, written in 1989 under the title "Education without Dogmas" was republished in Rorty's (1999a) *Philosophy and Social Hope* under the new title "Education as Socialization and as Individualization." In it one can see Rorty following a comparable trajectory to the one he followed in his autobiographical essay highlighted in Chapter Three. In both cases, I would argue, working distinctions play a crucial role in

getting his point across. In his educational piece Rorty opens with the familiar distinction between left and right politics and the way this distinction manifests itself in the educational sphere. Put simply, the right thinks of education in terms of *truth* while the left thinks of education in terms of *freedom*. From the right, if you take care of truth, freedom will take care of itself. From the left, if you take care of freedom, truth will take care of itself. Where the right tends to appreciate the Platonic asceticism associated with truth conservation, the left tends to invert Plato in order to exalt Socratic social criticism.

Now, while Rorty (1999a) aligns his own affiliations with the progressive side more than the conservative side, he says that both the right and the left are beating around the same philosophical bush:

On both the original, rightist and the inverted, leftist account of the matter, there is a natural connection between truth and freedom. Both argue for this connection on the basis of distinctions between nature and convention and between what is essentially human and what is inhuman. Both accept the identification of truth and freedom with the essentially human. The difference between them is simply over the question: Is the present socioeconomic set-up in accordance, more or less, with nature? Is it, on the whole, a realization of human potentialities, or rather a way of frustrating those potentialities? Will acculturation to the norms of our society produce freedom or alienation? (p. 115)

These philosophical variations end up manifesting themselves most interestingly in education in concrete political ways. The right thinks that much of the conventional educational wisdom is a product of reason's trajectory and that the left has turned against important fundamental truths. The left thinks that the society in which we live is, in the

main, unreasonable. As Rorty says, “[the left] regard the conservative’s ‘fundamental truths’ as what Foucault calls ‘the discourse of power’” (p. 116). And so the left thinks that an important part of the job of education is the promotion in the young of those strong critical dispositions that can get them into a position as quickly as possible to question, if not buck, the status quo.

Now clearly Rorty considers himself to be on the progressive side of the divide, but he is also eminently practical. Our acculturation is that matrix out of which the very idea of progressivism is possible. Socialization is a necessity of living in a culture, and therefore in liberal democracies a compromise has been struck between the two sides: The right has kept control of primary and secondary education, and the left has gradually taken control of higher nonvocational education. This general common sense is reinforced by the fact that school boards regulate public school teachers such that they can never stray too far from local consensus (though there is some obvious flexibility that mitigates against totalitarianism), whereas at the University level, academic freedom, established as the *sine qua non* of the professoriate, allows professors to set their own agendas. Truth, taking the form of the moral and political common sense of the society, becomes the mainstay of education up to 18 or 19 years of age, while freedom, taking the form of the moral and political ability to question established conventions, becomes the mainstay of higher education.

For Rorty (1999a), where most of the skirmishes occur with regards to education is at the borders between secondary and higher education:

Even ardent radicals, for all their talk of ‘education for freedom’, secretly hope that the elementary schools will teach the kids to wait their turn in line, not to



shoot up in the johns, to obey the cop on the corner, and to spell, punctuate, multiply and divide. They do not really want the high schools to produce, every year, a graduating class of amateur Zarathustras. Conversely, only the most resentful and blinkered conservatives want to ensure that colleges hire only teachers who will endorse the status quo. Things are difficult when one tries to figure out where socialization should stop and criticism start. (p. 117)

When Rorty claims that the conservatives are wrong “in thinking that we have either a truth-tracking faculty called ‘reason’ or a true self that education brings to consciousness,” he assumes the radicals to be right “in saying that if you take care of political, economic, cultural and academic freedom, then truth will take care of itself” (p. 117). But, Rorty goes on to say, “the radicals are wrong in believing that there is a true self that will emerge once the repressive influence of society is removed” (p. 117). Rorty’s whole philosophical point, made consistently throughout all of his work, is that there is no human nature in the deep Platonic sense, nor is there alienation from such a human nature via societal repression in the deep Rousseauian or Marxist sense. Rorty plants himself, like Dewey, firmly as a moderate progressive, philosophically speaking. Indeed, all of this Rorty tells us is in keeping with Dewey’s own educational views.

Rorty (1999a) says that, “Dewey showed us how to drop the notion of ‘the true self’ and how to drop the distinction between nature and convention” (p. 119). Indeed, some distinctions, if they are based on already unproductive dualisms, are not worth making. Dewey taught us that the only important freedom was the sociopolitical freedom found in bourgeois democratic societies and that this freedom must always be the starting point for any free inquiry. Freedom itself is a quality that is felt, and felt most strongly

when it is absent. It was not a matter, for Dewey, of tracing such freedom back to some account of human nature or the nature of reason. Looking forward, as such, means that the only criterion of truth is that which results from such free encounters. Instead of criteria, Rorty tells us:

Deweyans offer inspiring narratives and fuzzy utopias. Dewey had stories to tell about our progress from Plato to Bacon to Mills, from religion to rationalism to experimentalism, from tyranny to feudalism to democracy. In their later stages, his stories merged with Emerson's and Whitman's descriptions of the democratic vistas – with their vision of America as the place where human beings will become unimaginably wonderful, different and free....Dewey's point was that Emerson [and Whitman] did not offer truth, but simply hope. Hope – the ability to believe that the future will be unspecifiably different from, and unspecifiably freer than, the past – is the condition of growth. That sort of hope was all that Dewey himself offered us, and by offering it he became our century's Philosopher of Democracy. (p. 120)

In spite of this inspiring narrative, Rorty thinks that education, generally speaking, is still in trouble. There have occurred certain educational travesties since the time Dewey wrote his inspiring narratives that he could not have foreseen. Rorty tells us that Dewey did not foresee that his country would decide to pay its teachers one fifth of what it pays its doctors. Nor did Dewey foresee that a greedy and heartless middle class “would let the quality of education a child receives become proportional to the assessed value of the parents' real estate” (p. 121). Finally, Dewey did not foresee that “most children would spend 30 hours a week watching televised fantasies, nor that the cynicism of those who

produce these fantasies would carry over into our children's vocabularies of moral deliberation" (p. 121). I think Rorty's comments here while accurate to what has transpired since Dewey wrote, are still slightly overblown when it comes to Dewey's own foresight. While Dewey no doubt would have been terribly disappointed and depressed with the state of things, it would not have come to him as a palpable shock. He spent much time and energy exploring the very sorts of underlying conditions, what we might in this case call the conditions of detachment, that lead to such educative failures, that such news would only be a rather dreary confirmation for him that certain insidious conditions had won out (see, for example, *The Public and Its Problems*, 1927/1991). At any rate, none of this counts against Dewey's philosophical renderings of truth and freedom, but clearly Rorty is right; the young have been losing contact with the vital narratives that otherwise saturate their time and place and therefore are having a harder and harder time managing, quite literally, their time.

The conservative agenda, then, in its most powerful educational manifestation is not merely about the transfer of sterile information. It should be about enlivening the young to the inspirational fabric of their rich, joyous, barbaric plural heritage. The young need to see, says Rorty (1999a), that they are heirs to "a country that slowly and painfully, threw off a foreign yoke, freed its slaves, enfranchised its women, restrained its robber barons and licensed its trade unions, liberalized its religious practices, broadened its religious and moral tolerance, and built colleges in which 50 per cent of its population could enroll" (p. 121). If this fails to happen, then what is to stop a return to old forms of prejudicial barbarism (do we not see it happening even now)? As it is now, not enough money or inspiration is infusing the elementary and high school levels. Nonvocational

higher education is being asked to take up increasing amounts of remedial work that should be the mainstay of the high school level. There should be no need for Great Books courses or general education courses—at least no *remedial* need—at the higher educational level.

If society at all valued the narratives of its own past trajectory, it would be inculcating the inspirational force of such narratives in its (at least) high school students. Rorty takes to task both the radical left and the fundamentalist right for such neglect—the neglect of a rigorous conservation that harbors its own reformist impulse. It is the most rigorous form of democratic patriotism endorsed by both Dewey and Rorty. There need not be the need for the convulsions of revolution in an inspired democratic culture. When the culture's leftist revolutionaries begin to sound popular to larger and larger numbers of the citizenry, then the vitality of an inspired democracy is drying up. When the fundamentalist right begins to sound popular to larger and larger numbers of the citizenry, then the vitality of inspired democracy also is drying up. The latter wants a return to a simpler more comfortable (absolutist) past, while the former wants the past erased and for poetic revolution to occur on a massive social scale. Rorty, ever the staunch defender of revolutionary poetic creation in the private sphere, I think sensibly recognizes what it can lead to on a broad social scale. History has shown that bad things often happen when the private fantasies of some few become the socio-political movements of the many (an obvious example being Hitler's Germany). Neither option is a good one for a pragmatic democratic society. But nor is apathy and sitting back watching (or just plain ignoring) individuals slipping away into oblivion. It is an educational problem and one that will not be solved overnight. Large social reforms take

time, but the reformist impulse is nonetheless the more expedient in the public/political sphere than is the revolutionary impulse. Such reformist impulses need not be antithetical to revolutionary impulses. In the end perhaps a reformist pragmatic and democratic impulse is just less impulsive—it is revolution taking its time and being careful not to give away too much.

### **Educating Liberal Democracies**

Rorty's (1999a) liberal humanist point is I think still a powerful one insofar as it becomes the very condition for poetic self-growth. To the extent that nonvocational institutions of higher learning have to take on the remedial work not being done at the lower levels represents a diminishment of the democratic potential of a humanistic higher education. Asking the question, "What should [students] learn in college?" is a bad question to be asking at the college or university level. To ask this kind of question, says Rorty, is to "suggest that [non-vocational] college faculties are instrumentalities that can be ordered to a purpose" (p. 125). Rorty continues with these inspiring words:

The temptation to suggest [that faculties can be ordered to a purpose] comes over administrators occasionally, as does the feeling that higher education is too important to be left to the professors. From an administrative point of view, the professors often seem self-indulgent and self-obsessed. They look like loose canons, people whose habit of setting their own agendas needs to be curbed. But administrators sometimes forget that college students badly need to find themselves in a place in which people are not ordered to a purpose, in which loose canons are free to roll about. The only point in having real live professors around instead of just computer terminals, videotapes and mimeoed lecture notes is that

students need to have freedom enacted before their eyes by actual human beings. That is why tenure and academic freedom are more than just trade union demands. Teachers setting their own agendas – putting their individual, lovingly prepared specialties on display in the curricular cafeteria, without regard to any larger end, much less any institutional plan – is what non-vocational higher education is all about. (p. 125)

This is not the same as Edwards's "runaway humanism" where values are the fleeting product of entertainment or infotainment that tend to die at the moment of reception. The university is an intellectual culture. As such, it is meant to draw the forming (rather than the already formed) student into the eros of learning. Professors "putting their individual, lovingly prepared specialties on display" are fulfilling a function of freedom and growth within an intellectual culture. Their task is not to open the tops of their students' heads and dump information in. Their task is to fire their students' imaginations, or at least it is the task of liberal education to do so. It is the task of creating the conditions of novelty (where even science becomes an important art). As Rorty (2000a) said in a lecture at the Museum of Modern Art: "The thing to do with novelty is just to be grateful for it, and to create the socio-political conditions which will ensure that there will be a lot more of it" (p. 5). Getting students to be comfortable with novelty and change is turning into an uphill battle.

Rorty's individual/social distinction serves a liberal educational purpose that resonates with his broader public/private distinction. It is very easy in administrative and government circles to put the majority of efforts into fine-tuning the expectations of what it is a university education should be offering and to lose sight of the individual. In the

name of establishing those relevant “facts” that one should know in order to be considered an “educated” person, or in establishing curricula that will ensure solid career opportunities, students end up becoming mere receptacles for information, the rough equivalent to Rorty’s despised toolboxes. Douglas (1992) is I think correct in his own writing on liberal education, and in his own way strikes a chord with what I think Rorty is driving at. He says:

Unfortunately the receptacle or storage box imagery, while never precisely incorrect, is simply inadequate, misleading, when it comes to pinning down what is meant by liberal education: education for selfhood and citizenship. Liberal education is a domain in which an individual has one foot in the established world of learning and the other foot swinging free, moving towards one’s own selfhood, toward a world of one’s own making. To assume that only the ground on which that first foot is placed constitutes education is to fall prey to a woefully impoverished notion of what higher education is about. (p. 151)

No wonder students get less and less joy out of learning and turn to an ever-increasing variety of quick-fix (and more entertaining) alternatives. As most such entertainment is now the product of the broader marketplace (rather than the intellectual/cultural marketplace of the university) so the university comes increasingly to be viewed and treated by students and their parents as an economic marketplace. One weakness of such a milieu is that the student is reduced to the status of mere buyer, and is open to being cheated or ripped off. As Douglas (1992) says: “One is an outsider, a passerby or passerthrough. One does not form any kind of permanent identity with the

institution or with a particular way of life. The student who comes to buy an education is an isolated being in an alien environment” (p. 165).

One great misfortune then, is that today’s young people who come into the university are from the outset disconnected from the intellectual culture of the university. Young people still have a *joie de vivre* inside the university institution—partyng, gaming, carousing, chatting online, having sex—but less and less are their joys and passions connected to what they learn and the larger intellectual environment of which they are a part. It is not that the other “fun” things are without importance. They are, in fact, centrally important to the forming of young people into adults. But such is only a facet of this forming and surely the university must stake its public reputation on more than just being a funhouse for forming young adults whose intellectual passions are fused by no more than antecedently established career ambitions.

When Rorty writes about the kind of encounters between professor and student that fuel the imagination, he is referring to that important human eros that comes alive in such encounters and fosters a vibrant hope that is the condition—albeit the vague condition—of growth. There is a poetic component of liberal learning that has always appreciated the vague or the making vague of that which is customarily (and potentially dogmatically) clear. The future depends on the vague piercing of imagination’s probing if the future is to be anything different from the past. As Poirier (1995) says, pragmatists have always understood the necessity of vagueness. He goes on to say:

The virtue and necessity of vagueness is brought forward by...pragmatists as an intellectual and poetic necessity, so that what has always been true of poetry and of poetic language is by them made generally so. This vagueness is a function of



sound, of the way the inflected sound of words is manipulated so as to take the edge off words themselves, to blur and refract them....[Even in our day-to-day banter] it has mostly been sound, efforts to create the gel of human relationships, even as the gel is forever melting away. (pp. 274-275)

What we have been led to in the preceding pages is a pragmatic poetics of growth via a strong turn to the imaginative possibilities of an always yet to be written future. The aesthetic axis of American pragmatism is its most vital axis because it is the axis of democratic possibility. Presumably, even Rorty's (2004) literary culture will move beyond itself and become "a self-consuming artifact, and perhaps the last of its kind" (p.27). What is the ideal in such a liberal utopia? Rorty tells us:

[In such a 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. (p. 27)

Now clearly Rorty's educational position comports best with the university level. It is there, after all, that he is most comfortably ensconced, and liberal education is the (dying?) parlance he most comfortably endorses for proffering his own liberal utopian ideals. But has Rorty somehow missed or neglected Dewey's richer educational philosophy? Does Rorty's distinction between socialization and individuation still come

across as simplistic in the light of Dewey's more detailed inquiries into primary and secondary education?

It might profitably be argued that Dewey and Rorty have slightly different views of what socialization means. When Rorty writes explicitly about education he applies the socialization function to K-12 schooling. Dewey, on the other hand, views such schooling as actually serving a rather modest socializing function. For Dewey, schooling is but one of many socializing influences on the young. Political institutions, economic institutions, family institutions, media institutions, and religious institutions all play as much or more of a role in the socialization of our young. Rorty, doubtless is aware of this, but he spends less time articulating this fact when he writes on education explicitly. However, because it is central in Dewey's writing on education, both elementary and primary education become extremely relevant public sites for establishing the democratic dispositions necessary for reflecting intelligently on all our social institutions. For Dewey, the most important socializing function of K-12 schooling is not just enculturation via the inheritance of the common mores and customs of one's cultural tradition(s) (which is, of course, important and necessary), but also, and perhaps more importantly, the establishing of those flexible habits of intelligence that allow for continual growth within one's customary world. Educating the imagination is thus a potentially fruitful and critically relevant endeavor at any level of education, and perhaps even more so at the younger grades. Indeed, As Reich (1996) points out, against Rorty,

we must not consider the imagination to be a faculty of the mind which lays dormant for years only to be stirred to life during college....Younger children, in fact, appear to have quite potent powers of imagination, perhaps because they

have not yet been snuffed and stamped out by a powerful socialization process.

Their great propensity to ask questions and explore both the natural and social world is well documented by psychologists and philosophers alike. It seems that young children are in some sense in the best position to exercise their imagination. (p. 6)

Rorty's distinction does start to look a little simplistic against Dewey's more comprehensive educational vision.

Yet, it is also possible that we readers of both Dewey and Rorty are positing an overly simplistic dichotomy where there really is none. Clearly Rorty's distinction between socialization and individualization appears to lend itself to a neat black-and-white dichotomy. But when we look closely at what socialization (or enculturation) entails it not so apparent that Rorty is all that far off from what Dewey was advocating. Enculturation is not merely the passing on or the piling on of cultural information. Enculturation, above and beyond acquiring the requisite three Rs, is exposure to the rich stories that infuse the collective memory of one's community and culture, or at least it *should* involve such exposure. This is not straightforward information transfer; one is not exposed to a real story of past pain and suffering, without feeling vicariously in some way the story's pain and suffering; one is not exposed to a real story of past joy and liberation without feeling vicariously in some way the story's joy and liberation. If this is information transfer then we are talking about a substantially richer process than we are typically accustomed. In fact, it is the art of communication that keeps a society's collective memory alive and vital. The stories that make up the rich fabric of a culture come to energize that culture's sense of itself, and they energize as well a culture's sense

of what it might become in the future. In the end, Rorty probably is too nonchalant in his distinction where Dewey was more detailed and specific, but never is it implied by Rorty that enculturation is mere information transfer, or at least it is never implied that the most important elements of enculturation is mere information transfer.

There are, nonetheless, important differences between the two thinkers in terms of what they are each willing to put forward in behalf of future community building, their respective democratic visions. Here, education and politics merge as both Dewey and Rorty try to work out what communities of memory and communities of hope actually entail in a now contingently flexible world. Clearly, as I have shown in chapters Five and Six, the aesthetic dimension of each of their works points to the future as being in some important way an extension and enhancement of the ideals infusing any given present. Communities and individuals are inextricably enmeshed in an ongoing temporal drama. Drawing on the work of Josiah Royce, Alexander (1993) highlights this temporal dynamic:

The interpretative meaning of an individual's present experience is set within a context of memory and anticipation; so too a community is constituted insofar as its members share a "*community of memory*" and a "*community of hope*." The members identify themselves in terms of accepting a certain history as their own, a history which helps explain who they are and which articulates a range of values, meanings, and practices. Part of the shared human project of self-understanding requires that we have a shared past as well as an individual past. This is the interpretive act of discerning the "*community of memory*." But communities, like individuals, live forward: the shared range of hopes and

expectations constitutes the “community of hope.” These are interpretive horizons without which the community of the present could not exist, and they function as the means whereby a continuous process of action is possible. (p. 215).

Crafting unity (community) *with* plurality (individuality) is far from easy. Dewey’s democratic educational vision sought just such an ongoing dynamic. It might be said that Rorty’s educational vision does as well.

Clearly, however, there is a difference of emphasis between the two pragmatists. It can be argued that both Dewey and Rorty share a common emphasis when it comes to “communities of memory.” Each of their respective educational democratic visions establishes such communities as being vital to the rich processes of enculturation. The richness of such enculturation should lead to “communities of hope” rather than dogmatically held (dead) ends. But communities of hope arising out of communities of memory vitalize the present, and there are no unassailable philosophical criteria, apart from (hopefully) developing habits of humane action, that might ensure stable unity with plurality in the future. To care for others, to attend with maximal care so as to not inflict undue physical or psychological pain on others seems to me an integral, if not central component of any democratic community (of both memory and hope). But future society is perpetually unwritten and not so amenable to being engineered even under the noble banner of Dewey’s Great Society. It is a hoped for wish fuelled by maximally free individuals. It is therefore not entirely fair to insinuate that because Rorty tends to emphasize maximally free individuals paying attention to their own private idiosyncrasies, that he is endorsing some sort of future state of Babel. His equal (Deweyan) emphasis on communities of memory and hope work against such a

possibility. Indeed, truthfulness, as I have delineated it throughout this dissertation, works against such a possibility.

I think both pragmatists thought that society could profitably educate the democratic vision of its young people. The thinking is that a community of memory in such a rich, barbaric, proud, evolving heritage should quite naturally be a community of hope and increasing carefulness. But the future nonetheless is never more than vaguely inscribed. It, like wisdom, “lies beyond knowledge of the actual” (Garrison, 1998, p. 80). We need take care, but above all we need take care that individuals are allowed to grow and that such is the primary condition of any potentially meaningful and rich communities that might form. Any community of hope is thus a function of the quality of individual imagination, which because it is fuelled within a community of memory is made resistant to becoming a quality of solipsism. Garrison highlights this passage from Dewey’s *Art as Experience* as centrally relevant:

Imagination is the chief instrument of the good....The ideal factors in every moral outlook and human loyalty are imaginative....Hence it is that art is more moral than moralities....The moral prophets of humanity have always been poets even though they spoke in free verse or by parable. Uniformly, however, their vision of possibilities has soon been converted into a proclamation of facts that already exist and hardened into semi-political institutions. Their imaginative presentation of ideals that should command thought and desire have been treated as rules of policy. Art has been the means of keeping alive the sense of purposes that outrun evidence and of meanings that transcend indurated habit. (p. 80)

Perhaps educating vision is educating for more democratic poets, more seers of democracy like Emerson, Whitman, Stevens, and yes, Dewey and Rorty. In spite of the much discussed differences between Dewey and Rorty I think they each ended up in the same fertile soil trying to sow the same seed. But how future democracy will thrive and flourish (if at all) is, of course, nothing we can guarantee in advance. Education, in the best sense of artfulness, is the forming of those creative and imaginative dispositions that energize democratic conduct and favor continuous growth. Both Dewey and Rorty thought that communities of memory leading to communities of hope served as an important condition for growth, if only because growth is temporal and always context dependent. The aesthetic axis in each of their works makes clear that such a condition can effectively promote the kind of artful communication necessary in a milieu of ever complicating webs of relations. Neither thinker, in the end, could endorse some absolute criteria or absolute principles that would ensure success. But they knew also that the abandonment of such absolute guarantors did not automatically entail unintelligent meandering.

This, in the end, is the heartbeat of pragmatism's aesthetic axis and its trajectory for the hopeful and ongoing amelioration of our most seemingly intractable social problems. Communities of hope which are necessarily fuelled by the most robust and active memories, are powerful for a thriving democracy precisely because they can still fail. That is what motivates the trajectories of individual growth and betterment within increasingly complex webs of relations, and educating democratic vision as such must take utmost caution to avoid the false promises that would claim to annul such risk, even as it promotes increasingly nuanced and careful forms of intercommunicability. The

pragmatism of John Dewey and Richard Rorty help us see that there are ways of truthfully (artfully) moving into the future together that have no need for the kinds of absolutes that once were thought to be absolutely required. This work has tried to show how this is a viable pragmatic possibility.

And so, I find myself returned to what inspired me most about my undergraduate days (or was it daze?). I have come to the end of my dissertation journey and still feel that it is the journey that matters most. This is not intended as a cliché; I consider it to be a veritable miracle that what brought me to this point I still love—namely reading big books by big thinkers. Nowhere throughout do I feel that I have focused my scholarly lens to such a fine degree so as to have blocked out everything else. But the two pragmatists that have been my focus have allowed such expansiveness, for they are expansive—they contain multitudes. I might have focused in a more empirically research-friendly way on some small component of their work, but that is not what inspires me most. Educators have spent precious time adding copiously to the knowledge stacks of the universities, but if wisdom “lies beyond knowledge of the actual” then we might reasonably question if we have been educating vision so as to forge richer democracies that are up to the task of enlivening communities of memory and hope. As I hope to have shown this is not principally an information processing task that relies on one or another absolutist principle or criterion of success.

Critics will continue to hash out fine grained differences between Dewey’s and Rorty’s works, and this is good. But the sheer genius and capaciousness of their thinking should ensure that pragmatism continues “suffering” from a surplus of definitions for a long time to come. And this also is good—leading to many journeys and many



destinations. I agree full heartedly with Rorty that students in university need to see professors who are free to put their “lovingly prepared specialties on display in the curricular cafeteria.” But professors who specialize should also continue to be what I have elsewhere referred to as “generating generalists” (McClelland, 2002, p. 11). To put it simply, a generating generalist is someone who loves learning, who is imaginatively enlivened to ideas, both great ideas from the past as well as those being generated in the present, and who wishes to impart this love to his or her students. Such a love draws the student out, patiently and with care, into a world of imaginative possibility where future horizons are projected in hope and in deepening thoughtfulness. It is fair to say that taking our young undergraduates and setting them on a fast track to narrow specialization does a great disservice to their generative potential. It closes the world in on them too quickly and suffocates the very kind of love and zest for life and learning that is requisite to any kind of healthy specialization. Our young are not yet full-fledged adults, they are fledglings, and if for us adults as the poet William Wordsworth (1793/1807) said, “the world is too much with us; late and soon” it should not be too much with our young. For the generating generalist, as for the unformed student, the world is both half real and half imagined—we are in a constant process of becoming.

These words from Alfred North Whitehead (1929) sum up nicely what sustained me as a young undergraduate and what, thankfully, I continued to receive from reading John Dewey and Richard Rorty as a graduate student.

The justification for a university is that it preserves the connection between knowledge and the zest for life, by uniting the young and the old in an imaginative consideration of learning....A university which fails in this respect

has no reason for existence. This atmosphere of excitement, arising from imaginative consideration, transforms knowledge. A fact is no longer a bare fact; it is invested with all its possibilities. It is no longer a burden on the memory: it is energizing as the poet of our dreams and as the architect of our purposes. (p. 97)

I yet feel an *eros* for learning, and what better should be expected at the end of a dissertation journey, but that the journey should continue. That is, after all, what is most compelling about the future; its mystery laden prospects—enough mystery, anyway, to sustain the human imagination's yearning to make something better of ourselves and our world. Both Dewey and Rorty should prove fruitful for a long time to come.

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(original work published 1807)

## Endnotes

### Notes to Chapter 2

<sup>1</sup>For a brief overview of Woodbridge's influence on Dewey's thinking about Metaphysics see Westbrook, R. (1991). (pp. 118-119).

<sup>2</sup>See Hildebrand, D.L. (2003). *Beyond realism and anti-realism: John Dewey and the neo-pragmatists*. This book is a valuable resource in its overview of some of Dewey's early debates regarding his metaphysics – debates with B.H. Bode (1906), George Santayana, (1925), W.P. Montague (1937), and Roy Wood Sellars (1939).

<sup>3</sup>Dewey writes in 1951: "Were I to write (or rewrite) *Experience and Nature* today I would entitle the book *Culture and Nature* and the treatment of specific subject-matters would be correspondingly modified. I would abandon the term 'experience' because of my growing realization that the historical obstacles which prevented understanding of my use of 'experience' are, for all practical purposes, insurmountable. I would substitute the term 'culture' because with its meaning as now firmly established it can freely carry my philosophy of experience." Cited in Campbell, J. (1995).

<sup>4</sup>See Cunningham, C.A. (1995). The metaphysics of Dewey's conception of the self. Therein, Cunningham offers a nice treatment of Dewey's notion of "generic traits of existence."

### Notes to Chapter 3

<sup>1</sup>For an excellent overview of Dewey's theory of inquiry, especially as it relates to educational research, see Biesta, G.J.J. & Burbules, N.C. (2003).

*Pragmatism and educational research.*

<sup>2</sup>Wordsworth, W. (1798). Lines: Composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey. In Perkins, D. (Ed.). (1967). *English romantic writers*. (pp. 209-211).

<sup>3</sup>For a good account of Dewey's turn away from pantheism to Darwinism see Campbell, J. (1995). *Understanding John Dewey*. (pp. 26-31). See also Margolis, J, (2002). *Reinventing pragmatism: American philosophy at the end of the twentieth century*. (p. 108-130). Margolis, in particular shows what Dewey got right about Hegel and what Rorty seems to have missed. But I'm not sure the "experiential" account Dewey gives of his move from Hegel to Darwin, and Rorty's "linguistic" account of the same add up to as much as Margolis thinks it does. I explore this in more detail in chapter 6.

<sup>4</sup>Rorty (1979). *Philosophy and the mirror of nature*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. Therein, of the analytic tradition, Rorty says this: "I do not think that there any longer exists anything identifiable as "analytic philosophy" except in some such stylistic or sociological way...The analytic movement in philosophy (like any movement in any discipline) worked out the dialectical consequences of a set of assumptions, and now has little more to do. The sort of optimistic faith which Russell and Carnap shared with Kant – that philosophy, its essence and right method discovered at last, had finally been placed upon the secure path of science – is not something to be mocked or

deplored. Such optimism is possible only for men of high imagination and daring, the heroes of their times.” (pp. 172-173)

<sup>5</sup>It might be said that much of Rorty’s writing, rather than arguing one or another thesis, is an ongoing conversation/debate with his critics. He is tremendously gracious in his far-ranging responses to critics. See for example the edited volume by Brandom, R.B. (2000). *Rorty and his critics*, and the edited volume by Saatkamp, H.J. Jr. (1995) *Rorty and pragmatism: The philosopher responds to his critics*.

<sup>6</sup>I explore in more detail in the next chapter Rorty’s notion of a literary culture. In his recent essay *Philosophy as a transitional genre* (2004), Rorty says: “Philosophers have often described religion as a primitive and insufficiently reflective attempt to philosophize. But...a fully self-conscious literary culture would think of both religion and philosophy as relatively primitive, yet glorious, literary genres. They are genres in which it is now becoming increasingly difficult to write, but the genres that are replacing them might never have emerged had they not been read as swerves away from religion, and later as swerves away from philosophy.” (p. 13)

<sup>7</sup>Fellow leftists have called Rorty a political conservative in the most pejorative sense. This is a mistaken take on Rorty – he is progressivist through and through, though having, sensibly enough, and in good pragmatic fashion, a respect for conservation. For a few typical responses along these lines see McLaren, P., Farahmandpur, R., & Suoranta, J. (2001). *Rorty’s self-help liberalism: A Marxist critique of America’s most wanted ironist*, and Warehime,

N. (1993). *To be one of us: Cultural conflict, creative democracy, and education*.

For Rorty's response to this political strand see his *Achieving our country* (1998a).

<sup>8</sup>Kaufman-Osborn (1991) is thoroughly pragmatic when he makes this correction in regards to the traditional philosophical appearance/reality dualism: "The term "appearance," consequently, does not refer, as it did in classic and medieval philosophy, to a realm of being infected with the defect of non-Being. Nor does it refer, as it does in modern epistemology, to the ontological gulf between things as they really are and things as they seem to be, where "seeming" designates what exists only in virtue of the subject's distortion of the single kind of Being that remains when the ancients' graded cosmos is denied its sense. Neither of these two understandings can acknowledge that things appear and disappear only because temporality, altering the relations among nature's interwoven affairs, presses experience past what would otherwise be contemplation's blank stare. The term "appearance," accordingly, denotes the fact that at any given moment in time some matters are showing and hence conspicuous, while others are latent and hence withdrawn. Its antonym is not reality but disappearance." (p. 107)

#### **Notes to Chapter 4**

<sup>1</sup>Many critics have responded to Rorty's strong antiepistemological position. For a robust challenge along these lines see Allan, B. (2000) along with Rorty's response in *Rorty and his critics*.

<sup>2</sup>Rorty cites Bloom, H. (2000) *How to read and why*, and Heidegger's (1967) *Sein und zeit* as being influential to his own notions of "autonomy" and "authenticity."

<sup>3</sup>As we shall see in chapters 5 & 6, Rorty's linguistified pragmatism shares a tense relationship to Dewey's experiential-focused organic pragmatism.

However, the way words and sentences are connected to the world, for Rorty, as dynamic constituents and constituters of the world, is not that far removed from Dewey's experiential organicism, especially when looked at against the fluxive dynamism of time's ongoing movement between problems and consummations.

<sup>4</sup>In Dewey's (1938) *Logic: A theory of inquiry*, he says: "What has been said helps to explain why the term 'warranted assertion' is preferred to the terms *belief* and *knowledge*. It is free from the ambiguity of these latter terms, and it involves reference to inquiry as that which warrants assertion."

<sup>5</sup>Clearly, Rorty thinks that Dewey falters from time to time in this turn to the future, not quite willing to give up outdated language games, getting himself caught up in them in spite of himself. I think this is because Dewey has more of a pragmatic emphasis on stability whereas Rorty has more of a pragmatic emphasis on novelty. I explore this in more detail in chapter 6. That Dewey, in spite of this modest pragmatic difference of emphasis, was not doing old-style language games in the old style is just something Rorty ignores. That it doesn't amount to much in terms of what both pragmatists were trying to say is something Rorty's critics do not want to see.

<sup>6</sup>See Critchley, S. (2001) *Continental philosophy: A very short introduction* for an intriguing tracing of the postmodern predicament back to around the late 1780s when the problem of the authority of reason first manifested itself. What heated up as the central debate at that time was that between the rational atheism of the budding Enlightenment and its rejection through some irrational leap of faith. It is this rationalism/irrationalism debate that is at the heart (still) of the so-called postmodern predicament.

<sup>7</sup>It needs to be stressed that Luntley is in no way endorsing or acquiescing the inevitability of antirationalism. His suggestions for ways out of the mess are actually quite pragmatic and not far removed from Dewey's suggestions, though a little more critical of Rorty's.

<sup>8</sup>What Edwards posits to Nietzsche, here, resonates with Rorty's notion of culture—that a sense of “us” precedes autonomous self-creation. It also contains a hint of metaphysics which Rorty would deny. But I think Nietzsche's “will to power” was a kind of metaphysics, an *event* or *process* metaphysics that is alive in the pragmatic tradition. In this regard, Dewey was more honest than Rorty. I think Rorty just developed a sheer aversion to the word, loaded as it is with shopworn historical baggage, and refused to use it in any productive pragmatic way. Needless to say, refusal to use the word does not make the notion of it disappear from the universe, which lends further weight, perhaps, to the robustness of experiential over linguistic accounts of our comportment in the world.



<sup>9</sup>I take the notion of “truth disciplined by imagination” from the last chapter of Edwards (1997) *The plain sense of things: The fate of religion in an age of normal nihilism*. (pp. 195-239).

### Notes to Chapter 5

<sup>1</sup>Stevens, H. (Ed.) (1972). *Wallace Stevens: The palm at the end of the mind, selected poems and a play*. New York: Random House Inc., (p. 229).

<sup>2</sup>For two recent writers who have taken Dewey’s aesthetics quite seriously, see Alexander, T.M. (1987). *John Dewey’s theory of art, experience, and nature*, and Shusterman, R. (1992). *Pragmatist aesthetics: Living beauty, rethinking art*.

<sup>3</sup>For good examples of this ongoing debate see Sleeper, R.W. (1986). *The necessity of pragmatism: John Dewey’s conception of pragmatism*, Stuhr, J.J. (1997). *Genealogical pragmatism: Philosophy, experience, and community*, and Hildebrand, D.L. (2003). *Beyond realism and anti-realism: John Dewey and the neopragmatists*.

<sup>4</sup>Shusterman, R. (1999) offers an intriguing, but in the end, I think misplaced critique of Dewey’s notion of “pervasive quality” in his Dewey on experience: Foundation or reconstruction? (p. 193-220) See also Rorty’s (1982) Dewey’s metaphysics, in his *Consequences of pragmatism*, and Rorty’s (1998) Dewey between Hegel and Darwin, in his *Truth and progress*.

## Notes to Chapter 6

<sup>1</sup>Wordsworth, W. (1805). Elegiac stanzas: Suggested by a picture of Peele Castle, in a storm, painted by George Beumont. In. Perkins, D. (1967). *English Romantic writers*.

<sup>2</sup>See especially Hildebrand's (2003), *Beyond realism and anti-realism*.

<sup>3</sup>The more I read both Dewey's and Rorty's works, the more I find myself torn between the use of the prefix "non" in *noncognitive* and *nonlinguistic* experience and the prefix 'pre' in *pre-cognitive* and *pre-linguistic* experience. In much of the literature they are used interchangeably. Given the kind of linear way Dewey shows experiences developing, my own intuition tells me that it makes better sense to use "pre" when talking about the qualitative dimensions of experience. Of course, Rorty has little patience for either of these choices because their experiential qualitateness cannot be rendered linguistically. Yet, his use of metaphor (as I shall show in this chapter), as a linguistic poetic device seems to divest itself so thoroughly of any cognitive meaningfulness as to warrant the prefix 'non.' It seems to me to establish the relevance of a qualitative starting point for both of their aesthetical positions.

<sup>4</sup>I take the notion of "discipleship" and "pilgrimage" from the title of Tony Johnson's book *Discipleship or pilgrimage: The educators quest for philosophy*.

<sup>5</sup>Rorty quotes Bloom from *The anxiety of influence* in his *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* as saying "every poet begins (however 'unconsciously') by rebelling more strongly against fear of death than all other men and women do."

<sup>6</sup>Of course, Rorty extends his use of “poet” beyond those who, strictly speaking, write verse. He is using in a large generic sense “so that Proust and Nabokov, Newton and Darwin, Hegel and Heidegger, also fall under the term. Such people are also to be thought of as rebelling against ‘death—that is, against the failure to have created – more strongly than most of us” (Rorty, 1989, p. 24).

<sup>7</sup>Hall refers specifically to the taxonomical approaches of Stephen Pepper and Richard McKeon. Hall refers to them as “metatheoretical pluralists” and places them in the pragmatic aesthetic tradition. For more detail in this regard see Hall (1994). Richard Rorty: Prophet and poet of the new pragmatism. pp. 73-76.