

# Krisis

Journal for contemporary philosophy

---

ALBRECHT WELLMER

REREADING RORTY

Krisis, 2008, Issue 2

[www.krisis.eu](http://www.krisis.eu)

When as a young philosopher, equally fascinated by Critical Theory and analytical philosophy, I first encountered Richard Rorty and began to read some of his writings, I was mostly struck by what I perceived as a certain frivolity of his manner of speaking and writing, that is, by what appeared to me then as a certain lack of seriousness concerning deep philosophical problems. When I think about Rorty today what comes first to my mind is that through his interventions in almost all important philosophical debates of the recent past – from the various spectres of analytical philosophy to the most recent developments of continental philosophy – he has changed the parameters of contemporary philosophical discourse in a highly significant way.

He has done this by reshuffling most of the important philosophical positions of the past and the present in an ingenious way and thereby redrawing whatever has been one of the established current ‘maps’ of philosophical positions – in a way which most likely has irritated the occupants of each one of them. To put it differently: Rorty has exploited philosophical schools and traditions which before seemed incompatible and inimical to each other by playing them off against each other and using them to recontextualize them in a new way: Hegel, Dewey, Habermas, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Quine, Davidson, Derrida, Foucault, to name only some of the most important ones, not to speak of Plato or of early European rationalist and empiricist philosophers. The result is an entirely new way to conceive of the philosophical tradition as well as of the liberal culture of the

North Atlantic tradition, concerning not least the possible role which philosophy could play within this culture.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Rorty’s re-interpretation of the philosophical tradition is his ‘deconstruction’ of the radical opposition between the universalist spirit of Christianity and Kantian philosophy on the one hand, and Nietzsche’s anti-universalist, anti-foundationalist, anti-Kantian and anti-Christian philosophy on the other. In his critique of the Christian perspective circling around sin and salvation and of its reformulation in the metaphysical constructions by protestant philosophers, and in particular of Kant’s moral universalism, Rorty agrees with Nietzsche, while at the same time he re-locates the Dionysian aspects of Nietzsche’s philosophy and his idea of the ‘Übermensch’ in the emerging universalism of a liberal-democratic form of solidarity. Rorty’s ‘Übermenschen’ become the strong poets and the utopian revolutionaries as the heroes of a *liberal* culture. It is precisely in this bridging of the gulf between ‘Christ’ and ‘Anti-Christ’ that the specific American sources of Rorty’s way of thinking and, if I may say so, the experiences of a New York born intellectual, become most productive.<sup>1</sup>

As to the role of philosophy, Rorty conceives it in a modest and emphatic way both at the same time. On the one hand, he compares it to the role of the engineer and the lawyer, namely, as having the task to solve specific problems in specific situations, the specific situations which call for philosophy being those in which ‘the language of the past has come into conflict with the needs of the future.’<sup>2</sup> This conception of philosophy is directed against the ambitions of past philosophers to provide a sort of transhistorical conceptual framework which could serve as a meta-theoretical – metaphysical, ontological, epistemological or ethical – foundation for scientific, moral, social or political thought.

On the other hand, Rorty still shares an emphatic conception of philosophy not only inasmuch as he agrees with Hegel that philosophy should be the historical present conceived in thought, but also insofar as he agrees with Dewey in that philosophy’s role is not only to do away with the garbage of the past, but occasionally also that of opening up ‘visions of the future’, which, by being articulated, may help to bring about this future.<sup>3</sup>

Certainly Rorty's own philosophy can be seen as being both modest and emphatic in this sense.

While I admire the productive and radical impulses behind Rorty's often provocative re-interpretation of the philosophical tradition, I still feel puzzled about the way he sometimes replaces old conceptual 'maps' by new ones, all of them related to Rorty's emphasis on the contingency of 'vocabularies'. As a consequence, my present paper will reflect my admiration as much as my puzzlement.

I.

In what follows I shall focus on a theme which, at least implicitly, is present in all of Rorty's writings; it is what Rorty calls the 'recognition of contingency'. This is also the basic theme of his book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, the first three chapters of which are devoted to a preliminary outline of what this recognition of contingency means with respect to language, selfhood and modern liberal culture. Let me briefly remind you of Rorty's basic theses: In a way the basic move which Rorty takes against the rationalist as well the empiricist traditions in philosophy is already contained in his insistence on the contingency of language. Languages, or as Rorty uses to say, vocabularies, once they have been adopted by a community, define criteria of good and bad argument, of valid inferential moves, and therefore provide a framework for the practice of giving and asking for reasons; but the creation of new vocabularies and their adoption by a linguistic community is not governed by arguments or due to a 'rational choice' precisely because their adoption amounts to a *changing* of the criteria of rational choice and of what counts as good and bad arguments. They are *invented* and not *inferred* on the basis of a given framework of conceptual norms and the corresponding practice of rational argumentation.

Conceived in this way, languages, of course, do not only signify linguistic practices, but also all those forms of non-linguistic practices which go with them: they are 'language games' in the Wittgensteinian sense. Occasionally Rorty also describes languages as tools for coping with the world, and as such turning out to be more or less *useful*: but he also notices the

limited usefulness of this metaphor, since a new language in the more interesting cases also defines new *goals* and *purposes* regarding this 'coping' with the world, goals and purposes which could not have been conceived of on the basis of an old language.

When Rorty argues against Enlightenment rationalism and a universal conception of reason, what he wants to say is that reason is always 'embodied' in particular language games and that precisely because of that historical and moral progress cannot be conceived of as *rational* progress. New languages and new practices emerge as a response to problems and contradictions which grew out of the context of established vocabularies and practices; 'Revolutionary achievements', as Rorty says, 'in the arts, in the sciences, and in moral and political thought typically occur when somebody realizes that two or more of our vocabularies are interfering with each other, and proceeds to invent a new vocabulary to replace both.'<sup>4</sup> But new vocabularies and practices are *invented* and never *inferred* from what was previously given – this is true for scientific progress, political revolutions as well as for artistic creation; and because their emergence is neither predictable nor inferable on the basis of what was previously given, Rorty speaks of the *contingency* of language. As a consequence, Rorty can also say that *imagination* and not *rationality* is what is characteristic for human beings as creators of their own history. 'What the romantics expressed as the claim that imagination, rather than reason, is the central human faculty was the realization that a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change.'<sup>5</sup>

Now, if I have said a moment ago that according to Rorty historical and moral progress cannot be conceived of as *rational* progress, a comment is needed: Rorty does not want to deny that we can tell narratives of such progress which, as narratives of a cultural *progress* leading up to our form of life with its peculiar institutions, forms of reasoning and moral convictions, are narratives of a 'reasonable' progress according to our own lights, simply because this progress has led to the form of life we affirm. However, such narratives, he would insist, are always told *retrospectively* from the standpoint of our own particular form of life, a standpoint from which specific historical developments can be seen as steps toward what

we have become; but this, quite apart from its being an ‘ethnocentric’ narrative, is something entirely different from conceiving historical or moral progress as being ‘rational’ from the inside, as it were, such as if its different stages followed each other either according to a universal conception of rationality or according to a teleological logic built into the process of historical development. It is precisely such conceptions of historical or moral progress that Rorty rejects for the reasons I have indicated.

Since Rorty conceives of individuals as well as societies as ‘incarnated vocabularies’ the contingency of selfhood is for him in *some* sense a mere corollary of the contingency of language; in another sense however, he also sees it as due to the particular contingencies of our upbringing – contingencies which are more like those of particular family histories. Although the two sorts of contingency certainly interfere with each other, I want to distinguish them here because they point to two different senses of creative ‘self-overcoming’ which Rorty discusses. In both cases Rorty follows Nietzsche in claiming that self-overcoming is the only genuine sense of self-knowledge. The two cases are those of the creative poet and that of the psychoanalytic patient. As far as the poet is concerned, it is the constraints of a given language which, as being felt to be constraints and thus leading to what Rorty calls ‘Bloom’s horror of finding oneself to be only a copy or replica’, motivates the attempt of self-overcoming and to create a new language. Rorty generalizes this case to that of the modern ironist who is not concerned with public matters but with private self-creation.

Later on I shall come back to this theme, while at this point I only want to deal briefly with Rorty’s discussion of the second case I have mentioned, that is with Rorty’s remarks about Freud’s role regarding the contingency of the self. ‘We can’, as Rorty says, ‘begin to understand Freud’s role in our culture by seeing him as the moralist who helped de-divinize the self by tracking conscience home to its origin in the contingencies of our upbringing.’<sup>6</sup> Now ‘conscience’ is, as one might say, a *public* category, or at least not a merely private one. Therefore the contingency of the self in the Freudian sense is already related to other senses of this contingency as, for instance, to the ones explored sociologically by Pierre Bourdieu. Rorty

emphasizes mainly the *similarities* between the case of the poet and that of the psychoanalytic patient who tries to overcome unconscious constraints which have been caused by the contingencies of her upbringing. Freud, as Rorty says, ‘de-universalizes the moral sense, making it as idiosyncratic as the poet’s inventions. He thus lets us see the moral consciousness as historically conditioned, as much a product of time and chance as of political and aesthetic consciousness.’<sup>7</sup> And: ‘he thinks that only if we catch hold of some crucial idiosyncratic contingencies in our past shall we be able to make something worthwhile out of ourselves, to create present selves whom we can respect. [...] He suggested that we praise ourselves by weaving idiosyncratic narratives – case histories, at it were – of our successes in self-creation, our ability to break free from an idiosyncratic past. He suggests that we condemn ourselves for failure to break free of that past rather than for failure to live up to universal standards. [...] He has provided us with a moral psychology which is compatible with Nietzsche’s and Bloom’s attempt to see the strong poet as the archetypal human being.’<sup>8</sup>

What Rorty neglects in his account is that the contingencies of our upbringing are also responsible for an emergence of that sort of moral sense, the sense of solidarity, which is the precondition for *public* freedom as the essence of a liberal culture. When Rorty says that ‘the commonsense Freudianism of contemporary culture’ allows us ‘to identify the bite of conscience with the renewal of guilt over repressed infantile sexual impulses – repressions which are the products of countless contingencies that never enter experience’<sup>9</sup>, he seems to identify what he criticizes as Kant’s moral universalism with this irrational ‘bite of conscience’ which motivates the attempts of self-overcoming. But even if we, contra Kant, insist on the contingency of moral consciousness, it would be self-defeating for a liberal, even a liberal ironist, if she *identified* a universalist moral conscience with that moral conscience which Freud described ‘as an ego ideal set up for those who are not willing to forgo the narcissistic perfection [...] of childhood’<sup>10</sup>, and which therefore deserves to be overcome. As we shall see, Rorty himself points to a universalization of moral consciousness in modern liberal culture, which he approves of in spite of its contingency; it is therefore tempting to complete his picture of Freud’s role for contemporary liberal culture by saying that Freud, by revealing a

*compulsive* character of moral conscience, at the same time has paved the road for the emergence of a genuine, because non-compulsive, form of moral consciousness. And this, of course, is what I have called the *public* dimension of Rorty's concern with the contingency of selfhood.

Given the contingency of language and of selfhood Rorty's thesis about the contingency of liberal culture can be hardly surprising. What has still to be clarified, however, is what contingency means in all these different contexts. As far as liberal culture is concerned, it seems clear what the 'contingency thesis', as I want to call it, is directed *against*. It is directed against a teleological view of history as well as against a conception of history as a history of rational progress. By the same token, it is directed against Enlightenment rationalism as well as against a universalist conception of reason. And all of this implies for Rorty that liberal culture neither has nor does it need a 'transhistorical' philosophical justification. A philosophical justification, as Rorty understands it, would be a justification, as it were, from a standpoint *outside* this liberal culture, a justification based on a universalist conception of human beings, of language, or of the bases of morality. In contrast, what Rorty wants to say is, that a 'justification' of liberal culture can only be a circular one, based on a prior acceptance of basic principles of a liberal society.

But all of this leaves the concept of contingency still to be explained. And this is how Rorty does explain it: 'I can develop the contrast between the idea that the history of culture has a *telos*—such as the discovery of truth, or the emancipation of humanity— and the Nietzschean and Davidsonian picture which I am sketching by noting that the latter picture is compatible with a bleakly mechanical description between human beings and the rest of the universe. For genuine novelty can, after all, occur in a world of blind, contingent, mechanical force. Think of novelty as the sort of thing which happens, when, for example, a cosmic ray scrambles the atoms in a DNA molecule, thus sending things off in the direction of the orchids or the anthropoids. [...] Analogously, for all we know, or should care, Aristotle's metaphorical use of *ousia*, Saint Paul's metaphorical use of *agape*, 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.'<sup>11</sup>

I must confess that I can take Rorty's thesis about a 'bleakly mechanical [...] relation between human beings and the rest of the universe' only as a pun— as one frequently has to do with Rorty. Rorty's argument obviously is that even in a natural universe governed by laws genuine novelty can occur, although in an unpredictable way. But this obviously does not mean that what is unpredictable as novel in human history is unpredictable despite the *mechanical* laws governing human history as part of the natural universe. For there are no such laws, not even statistical ones. As far as history is concerned, I would therefore understand Rorty's conception of contingency rather in the following way: (1) We can never have a knowledge of all the causal determinants which are responsible for historical events and changes; (2) As far as the invention of languages, institutions, scientific theories or works of art are concerned, we can never— apart from an indication of causally *necessary* conditions— predict them or causally explain them, nor can we explain them as being 'inferred' rationally from pre-existing conditions. Such inventions are *contingent* in the sense of neither being predictable nor inferable, given the conditions which precede them. This is the reason why Rorty can say that not rationality but imagination is the decisive human faculty which makes human progress possible, that the invention of new vocabularies is the motor of human progress, and that 'the heroes of liberal society are the strong poet and the utopian revolutionary.'<sup>12</sup>

To be sure, as far as the utopian revolutionary is concerned, it seems at first sight that for Rorty his role is basically a matter of the past; for at one point he claims that 'contemporary liberal society already contains the institutions for its own improvement [...] Indeed my hunch is that Western social and political thought may have had the last *conceptual* revolution it needs.'<sup>13</sup> Later on I shall try to show why and in which sense the word 'conceptual' in the last sentence is essential and that Rorty is by no means the complacent liberal that he occasionally appears to be, and that he is much more of a radical leftist than one may be tempted to think when reading sentences like the one I have quoted.

However, in Rorty's book *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* from which I have quoted so far, the emphasis, as far as the idea of a liberal community is concerned, certainly is on the role of newly invented vocabularies as means for creating new 'private' selves, on the theme of *self-overcoming*. Nietzsche, Foucault, Heidegger and Derrida are philosophers whom he thinks one should not consider as *politically* relevant philosophers but only as relevant for an achievement of private *autonomy*. Rorty uses the term autonomy consistently to signify a process of private self-overcoming, of the creation of a new private self. When he speaks of freedom as the basic goal of a liberal society he understands freedom with Isaiah Berlin basically as *negative* freedom, as the freedom to realize individual autonomy as distinct from, although, as he insists, compatible with, a *public* demand for solidarity. However, although he speaks throughout this book about an *ideal* liberal society and its contingency, the themes of solidarity, justice and democracy do not have a prominent place in this book. We shall see, however, that when Rorty really talks about social and political matters the emphasis changes; for now problems of democracy, justice and solidarity become focal in a way which also brings him closer to Habermas's thesis about the interrelationship of private and public autonomy.<sup>14</sup>

For the time being, however, I want to stay with the theme of contingency and its correlates. The most important correlate of what Rorty calls the recognition of contingency is his 'ethnocentrism'. What he means by that is that societies as well as individual persons are 'incarnated vocabularies' and that we, as 'incarnated vocabularies', can never argue from a standpoint outside the particular language which is ours. What Rorty wants to say is, that we do not have access to a standpoint which would be 'universally valid' in the sense that we could expect our arguments to be acceptable to every human being as such – provided good will and the absence of self-deception or ignorance on the side of our interlocutors who speak a different language or belong to a different culture. In a way this is certainly a trivial truth, but the implications Rorty draws from them are not trivial. One consequence is that the menace of 'relativism', according to Rorty, should dissolve into nothing: 'To say that convictions are only 'relatively valid' might seem to mean that they can only be justified to people who hold certain other beliefs – not to anyone and every-

one. But if this were what was meant, the term would have no contrastive force, for there would be no interesting statements which were *absolutely* valid.'<sup>15</sup>

The game of giving and asking for reasons in the inferentialist sense outlined, for instance, by Robert Brandom, can function only – this is what Rorty wants to say – under the conditions of a shared vocabulary, while a clash between different vocabularies cannot be resolved on a common ground, that is 'rationally' in the way in which conflicts of opinion may be resolved by using arguments on the basis of a shared vocabulary. This is also why, as Rorty says, there cannot 'be reasons for using a language' in the sense in which we can give 'reasons within languages for believing statements. This amounts to giving up the idea that intellectual or political progress is rational, in any sense of 'rational' which is neutral between vocabularies.'<sup>16</sup> Again and again Rorty emphasizes that the emergence and acceptance of new ways of speaking is a process which cannot be understood as 'rationally' motivated, if 'rational' here means something like an inferential transition from an old to a new vocabulary.

Now obviously Rorty operates with a very restrictive conception of 'rationality' here, and if understood in this way his thesis, I think, again is trivially true. But even if we should question this restrictive conception of rationality (as I shall do later on), I think Rorty is right when he claims that from the standpoint of the particular 'language game' of modern liberal democracy we cannot have access to arguments for the principles and institutions of liberal democracy which would be universally valid in the sense that they could be rationally compelling for people who do not share the language and the practices of liberal democracy. And this, of course, is why philosophical 'justifications' of liberal democracy, even if they claim to be persuasive for all 'rational beings', can never achieve more than a coherent self-description in the sense of an *internal*, i.e. *circular* reconstruction of its basic principles, postulates and beliefs. This, then, is the way in which Rorty understands Rawls's as well as Habermas's theories of liberal democracy. But as far as Habermas, for instance, aims at more than this, Rorty sharply disagrees with him; he refers to John Dewey and John Rawls not only as having undermined the idea of 'transhistorical' philosophical foundations of liberalism, but also as having understood

this undermining not as weakening, but rather ‘as a way of strengthening liberal institutions. [...] Their pragmatism is antithetical to Enlightenment rationalism, although it was itself made possible (in good dialectical fashion) only by that rationalism. It can serve as the vocabulary of a mature (de-scientized, de-philosophized) Enlightenment liberalism.’<sup>17</sup>

Rorty quotes Isaiah Berlin quoting Joseph Schumpeter who said ‘to realize the relative validity of one’s convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian’, and then Berlin going on to say: ‘To demand more than this is perhaps a deep and incurable metaphysical need; but to allow it to determine one’s practice is a symptom of an equally deep, and more dangerous, moral and political immaturity.’<sup>18</sup> What Rorty objects to is only the use of the term ‘relative’ in this context, a use which misconstrues the implications of the fact that human beings are always in some sense ‘incarnated vocabularies’, or, as Rorty also says: ‘centreless webs of beliefs and desires’<sup>19</sup>, for whom no neutral and in this sense ‘universal’ standpoint is available.

To be sure, what Rorty is concerned with is an *ideal* picture of a liberal community and not the present state of North Atlantic democracies. Or to be more precise: He accepts Hegel’s definition of philosophy as ‘holding your time in thought’ and construes it to mean ‘finding a description of all the things characteristic of your time of which you most approve, with which you unflinchingly identify, a description which will serve as a description of the end toward which the historical developments which led up to your time were means.’<sup>20</sup> And this is how he describes an ideal liberal community: ‘A liberal society is one whose ideals can be fulfilled by persuasion rather than force, by reform rather than revolution, by the free and open encounters of present linguistic or other practices with suggestions for new practices. But this is to say, that an ideal liberal society is one which has no purpose except freedom, no goal except a willingness to see how such encounters go and to abide by the outcome. It has no purpose except to make life easier for poets and revolutionaries while seeing to it that they make life harder for others only by words and not deeds. It is a society whose hero is the strong poet and the revolutionary because it recognizes that it is what it is, has the morality it has, speaks the language it does, not because it approximates the will of God or the nature of man

but because certain poets and revolutionaries of the past spoke as they did.’<sup>21</sup> And: ‘in its ideal form, the culture of liberalism would be one which was enlightened, secular, through and through.’<sup>22</sup>

What is striking about these descriptions of an ideal liberal society is that Rorty does not talk about democracy, justice or solidarity; he does not speak as a *political* philosopher at all; it is only in the last chapter of the book from which I have quoted so far that he takes up the idea of solidarity as a basic one for a liberal democracy. But again he is mainly concerned here with spelling out what solidarity can mean under the conditions of a ‘recognition of contingency’. That is, he argues against universalist, quasi-Kantian ideas of solidarity based on a conception of human beings *qua* human beings. Solidarity and the moral obligations which go with it are, so he argues, primarily a matter of a particular ‘we’ – ‘we New Yorkers’, ‘we Christians’, ‘we Americans’ and so on, and not a matter of equal moral obligations to all human beings.

Empirically speaking, this probably is more or less trivially true. The reason why Rorty emphasizes this truism is, ‘that feelings of solidarity are necessarily a matter of which similarities and dissimilarities strike us as salient, and that such salience is a function of a historically contingent final vocabulary’<sup>23</sup> (a ‘final vocabulary’, as Rorty understands it, is the vocabulary which is the basic one with regard to our self-understanding and our relation to the world and our fellow human beings); and what he wants to say again is, that there is no a priori philosophical basis for a universalist conception of human solidarity in the sense in which it is implied by Kant’s categorical imperative. And that means that a gradual extension of the scope of people to whom we owe solidarity is a function of historically contingent changes in our ‘final vocabularies’. ‘The view I am offering says that there is such a thing as moral progress, and that this progress is indeed in the direction of greater human solidarity.’<sup>24</sup> But this progress rests, as Rorty says, on ‘the contingencies which brought about the development of the moral and political vocabularies typical of the secularized democratic societies of the West. As this vocabulary has gradually been de-theologized and de-philosophized, ‘human solidarity’ has emerged as a powerful piece of rhetoric. I have no wish to diminish its power, but only

to disengage it from what has often been thought of as its ‘philosophical presuppositions’.<sup>25</sup>

So according to Rorty it is not the idea of human beings as rational beings which is the source of a universalist conception of human solidarity; the emerging universalism of human solidarity is rather connected with ‘the ability to see more and more traditional differences (of tribe, religion, race, customs, and the like) as unimportant when compared with similarities with respect to pain and humiliation.’<sup>26</sup> In the end, disregarding questions of *justification*, Rorty’s universalism is not really different from that of Habermas, as becomes clear when he argues for a ‘cosmopolitan human future’, that is the idea of a ‘world-comprising democratic society, for which the torturing of a human being or the closing down of a university or a newspaper at the other end of the world would be as much an occasion for outrage as the same things when happening in our own country.’<sup>27</sup> So the emerging universalism of human solidarity might also lead to a situation in which certain moral and political arguments which so far have had only an ‘ethnocentric’ validity would *become* universally valid in that they would be acceptable to all members of a ‘world-comprising democratic society’. Rorty’s basic difference with Habermas is that we cannot speak of a universal validity of truth claims just because *we* accept these truth claims as justified; for if we do, we neglect the contingency of *our* language and presuppose a common bond of rationality between all human beings *as* rational beings. And what Rorty argues is, that such a common bond of reason can only, if at all, be the result of the historical emergence of a universalist form of human solidarity.

While in his book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* the main focus is on the implications, which according to Rorty the recognition of contingency has for a ‘mature’, non-foundational self-understanding of liberal communities, one of its themes is also the possible role of philosophy in the modern world. I have already quoted Rorty’s allusion to Hegel’s idea that philosophy, as it should be, is its time conceived in thought. For Rorty this also means that neither epistemology, nor the problem of ‘objectivity’, nor the look for universal conceptual frameworks, should be the concern of philosophical reflection, but that the main task of philosophy is to contribute to a clarification of the *practical* project of liberal de-

mocracy. Consequently he has argued for a priority of democracy to philosophy and a priority of solidarity to objectivity<sup>28</sup> – in a way renewing the Kantian priority of practical reason to theoretical reason in a non-foundational, Deweyan way. And not only that: the legacy of Dewey also becomes apparent when Rorty does not speak merely as a philosopher, but as a politically engaged citizen who is concerned with current problems of democracy, justice and solidarity. Only then it can be seen that he is by no means the complacent liberal philosopher who seems to ‘idealize’ the present institutions and practices of existing democracies while shrinking away from genuinely political questions.

That Rorty, quite to the contrary, is a *radial* liberal becomes obvious when he speaks directly as a political animal, for instance in his book *Achieving our Country*.<sup>29</sup> Here he speaks as a political leftist, who complains about the prevalence of a merely *cultural* left in the present academic institutions of the United States and about the decline of the political Left since the sixties. ‘Many members of this Left specialize’, as Rorty says, ‘in what they call the “politics of difference” or “of identity” or “of recognition”’. The cultural left thinks more about stigma than about money, more about deep and hidden psychosexual motivations than about shallow and evident greed.<sup>30</sup> Rorty does not deny the achievements of the cultural Left, he only complains of its having replaced a genuinely political Left. ‘Encouraging students to be what mocking neoconservatives call “politically correct” has made our country a far better place [...] Nevertheless, there is a dark side to the success story I have been telling about the post-Sixties cultural Left. During the same period in which socially accepted sadism has steadily diminished, economic inequality and economic insecurity have steadily increased.’<sup>31</sup> That is to say: the cultural Left has no answers to the problems of globalization; the weakness of the *political* Left, however, could well lead to a destruction of political democracy.

Rorty sketches a truly nightmarish perspective on the possible outcomes of an unimpeded capitalist globalization: ‘If the formation of hereditary castes continues unimpeded, and if the pressures of globalization create such castes not only in the United States but in all the old democracies, we shall end up in an Orwellian world. In such a world, there may be no supernational analogue of Big Brother, or any official creed analogous to

Ingsoc. But there will be an analogue of the Inner party – namely, the international, cosmopolitan super-rich. They will make all the important decisions. The analogue of Orwell’s Outer Party will be educated, comfortably off, cosmopolitan professionals – Lind’s “overclass”, the people like you and me [...] For the aim of keeping the proles quiet, the super-rich will have to keep up the pretense that national politics might someday make a difference [...] The aim will be to keep the minds of the proles elsewhere – to keep the bottom 75 percent of Americans and the bottom 95 percent of the world’s population busy with ethnic and religious hostilities, and with debates about sexual mores. If the proles can be distracted from their own despair by media-created pseudo-events, the super-rich will have little to fear.<sup>32</sup>

So much for Rorty as *radical* liberal. But what interests me at this point is not so much Rorty’s demand for a resurrection of the political American Left and its creation of a political platform, a ‘People’s Charta’<sup>33</sup> to deal with the problems of globalization and for reinvigorating American democracy, as rather the way he speaks about democracy, justice and solidarity in this explicitly political context. For here he speaks explicitly about democracy as ‘the principal means by which a more evolved form of humanity will come into existence’<sup>34</sup> as well as about justice and solidarity as basic ideals of liberal democracy, about civic virtues and responsibilities and about active citizenship as a basic prerequisite for the functioning of democracy.<sup>35</sup> I think the reason why in his more philosophical writings Rorty rarely speaks explicitly as a philosopher of *democracy* – like, for instance Dewey, Rawls or Habermas – is that he more or less agrees with those writers, while his main philosophical concern is with attacking foundationalist conceptions of liberal democracy.

To be sure, Rorty in his dealing with the problems of globalized capitalism in a way ‘moralizes’ these problems when he talks about the prevalence of ‘greed’ as the basic problem of contemporary capitalist economy; he is, however, quite aware that this is an institutional problem which could only be solved by political interventions. Although he rejects Marxist conceptions of overcoming capitalism as well as radical conceptions of ‘participatory democracy’ that ignore the complexities of modern industrial societies, and therefore opts for a strategy of ‘piecemeal reform’<sup>36</sup>, one

could easily overlook his more radical long-term perspectives.<sup>37</sup> This perspective becomes explicit in an essay on ‘Unger, Castoriadis, and the romance of a national future’<sup>38</sup>, an essay which also shows that Rorty, when he says that ‘Western social and political thought may have had the last *conceptual* revolution it needs’, by no means excludes the possibility and the necessity of radical political changes in Western democracies. But again Rorty insists that not reason, but imagination is the source of radical social and political changes, since reason, as he says, ‘usually means, working according to the rules of some familiar language-game, some familiar way of describing the current situation. We liberals have to admit the force of Dewey’s, Unger’s and Castoriadis’s point that such familiar language-games are themselves nothing more than “frozen politics”, that they serve to legitimate, and make seem inevitable, precisely the forms of social life (for example, the cycles of reform and reaction) from which we desperately hope to break free.’<sup>39</sup> Consequently, as Unger and Castoriadis argue, a ‘release from domination, if and when it comes, will come not in the form of “rational development” but through something unforeseeable and passionate.’<sup>40</sup>

Of course, what Rorty calls the ‘romantic impulse’ to overcome the constraints of a familiar language game was, as he notes, also ‘common to Mussolini, Hitler, Lenin and Mao’<sup>41</sup>, but his point is that no ‘philosophical reworking of the notion of “rationality”, or any similar notion, is going to help us sort out’<sup>42</sup> the democratic and liberal from the fascist or totalitarian experiments. What is relevant to distinguish between such different forms of social and political change is rather, as Rorty says, the freedom of speech with all its implications: ‘Whether a given romantic, once in power, allows such freedom (of newspapers, universities, public assemblies, electoral choices, and so on) is, though not an infallible index, the best index we have of whether he or she is likely to do his or her nation a good.’<sup>43</sup> In any case radical social and political change would always be an experiment whose success could not be guaranteed by any theoretical justification. Rorty quotes Castoriadis, who said ‘that an autonomous society ought immediately to adopt, in the era of “requital”, an absolute equality of all wages, salaries, incomes etc.’ and continues that ‘this springs neither from some idea about any natural or other “identity/equality” of men, nor from theoretical reasoning [...] this is a matter of



the imaginary significations which hold society together and of the *paidea* of individuals.’<sup>44</sup>

This is what Rorty calls a ‘risky social experiment’ and here is his comment: ‘Suppose that somewhere, someday, the newly-elected government of a large industrialized country decreed that everybody would get the same income, regardless of occupation or disability. Simultaneously, it instituted vastly increased inheritance taxes and froze large bank accounts. Suppose that after the initial turmoil, it worked: that is, suppose that the economy did not collapse, that people still took pride in their work (as street cleaners, pilots, doctors, cane cutters, Cabinet ministers, or whatever) and so on. Suppose that the next generation in that country was brought up to realize that, whatever else they might work for, it made no sense to work for wealth. But they worked anyway (for, among other things, national glory). That country would become an irresistible example for a lot of other countries, “capitalist”, “Marxist”, and in between. The electorates of these countries would not take time to ask what “factors” had made the success of this experiment possible. Social theorists would not be allowed time to explain how something had happened that they had pooh-poohed as utopian, nor to bring this new sort of society under familiar categories. All the attention would be focused on the actual details of how things were working in the pioneering country. Sooner or later, the world would be changed.’<sup>45</sup>

II.

*Achieving our Country*, although it sheds some new light on Rorty as a philosopher, is not a philosophical book, but the book of a politically engaged American citizen. It is the sort of book, Rorty thinks, which, together with the writings of journalists and poets, is more important, as far as social and political change is concerned, than social and political *theory*, since in his opinion only writings of this sort can stifle the moral and political imagination of citizens and might ‘conceivably alter one’s sense of what is possible and important.’<sup>46</sup> I assume he is thinking here of theories like that of Marx or Parsons or of positivist social and political science. Anyway he is not quite consistent on this point, as his discussion of Unger and Castoriadis shows, and I suppose he should have been persuaded that

theories *can* play a productive role with respect to social and political progress. However, I do not want to argue this point here. I rather want to come back to Rorty as a philosopher. Much of what Rorty has done as a philosopher amounts to what a follower of Derrida might call a ‘deconstruction’ of traditional conceptual oppositions, like that of moral vs. prudential arguments, rational vs. irrational forms of persuasion, relativism vs. absolutism or – more problematical – the ‘moral’ vs. the ‘aesthetic.’ But then Rorty himself has introduced a number of new conceptual oppositions which in turn might need some sort of ‘deconstruction’ as well. At least this is what I shall argue. I am thinking of oppositions like that between inferential and dialectical forms of argumentation, between ‘private’ and ‘public’ uses of language, between reason and imagination, or between conceptions of human beings as either rational beings or beings which are susceptible to pain and humiliation. I do believe that such ‘deconstruction’ would strengthen rather than weaken his position. In what follows I want to begin by having a closer look at his conception of a ‘vocabulary’.

If we talk of human beings and of societies as being ‘incarnated vocabularies’, what is meant is not only that they are using certain words; having a vocabulary rather also means to have certain convictions, being engaged in specific practices and being bound by certain rules of inference, that is by specific forms of giving and asking for reasons. In addition, what is part of a vocabulary is that there is always a large space of not yet decided questions, questions which, if they come up, *may* be decided according to the inferential rules according to which the game of giving and asking for reasons takes place. However, to think of vocabularies as ‘closed spaces’ of possible inferential moves – a closed space of possible ‘rational arguments’ – seems rather questionable. For a common vocabulary does not and can never guarantee a consensus about its *application* or about the basic convictions which are formulated in its terms. This means, however, that vocabularies are never ‘closed’ in the way Rorty occasionally seems to suggest.

Robert Brandom has argued this point by referring to ‘the Socratic procedure of exploring, querying, and grooming our concepts by eliciting novel claims and producing novel juxtapositions of commitments his interlocu-

tors were already inclined to undertake so as to expose their potentially incompatible consequences. [...] Engaging in these characteristic exercises in Socratic rationality typically changes our dispositions to endorse claims and make inferences. Where these changes are substantial, the result is a change in the conceptual norms to which one acknowledges allegiance: a change in vocabulary. Such changes can be partially ordered along a dimension that has something that looks like a change of meaning at one end, and something that looks like a change of belief at the other.<sup>47</sup> Speaking more generally, 'every claim and inference we make at once sustains and transforms the tradition in which conceptual norms that govern that process are implicit. The vocabulary [Brandom's expression to refer to Rorty's use of the term 'vocabulary', A.W.] that replaces meaning-belief talk must express our realization that *applying* conceptual norms and *transforming* them are two sides of one coin [...] To use vocabularies is to change it. This is what distinguishes vocabularies from other tools.'<sup>48</sup>

Rorty has distinguished inferential argument from dialectical argument by saying that with regard to inferential argument the units of persuasion are propositions, while with respect to dialectical argument the units of persuasion are vocabularies. What Brandom argues is that Rorty misconceives the inferentialist side of this opposition. Inferential reasoning, if understood as what is taking place as a practice of giving and asking for reasons under the conditions of a shared vocabulary, never is confined to a closed space of conceptual norms; rather, moving within such a space of conceptual norms it changes it at the same time. Now if vocabularies are not 'closed' in the sense suggested by Rorty, another consequence would be that the *sharing* of a vocabulary is hardly ever a matter of all or nothing, so that one of the goals with regard to the more interesting forms of argumentation would be to partially restore the always precarious sharing of a common language. The more interesting cases of argumentation, therefore, would be cases in which partly different and yet widely overlapping vocabularies confront each other, and especially cases where conflicting beliefs give rise to re-examining the language in which these conflicting beliefs have been formulated. Indeed I would claim that any interesting situation of argumentation contains elements of such a constellation. For even in our own language it is not usually possible to isolate ar-

guments from their context, and the more interesting and significant they are, the less the practice of argumentation conforms to a formal conception of rationality, according to which rational argument would conform to a fixed set of inferential moves. There are always elements of holism, of innovation and of difference involved in our more complex forms of argumentation. When we argue, we often have to create the context that gives our arguments their force – if they have any; argumentation often involves the attempt to let an old problem or a familiar situation appear in a new light. Consequently a 'holistic' element of redescription and linguistic innovation is part of the more interesting forms of argumentation, even where one would not yet speak of the invention of a new vocabulary. This is not to deny the element of contingency which belongs to the emergence and the working out of a genuinely new vocabulary; what I want to say, however, is that a process of reasoning in the broader sense I have argued for, usually will be present all the way down in the working out of such a vocabulary.

But if all of this is true, it does not make much sense to think of 'reason' as only applying to inferential moves within a fixed space of conceptual norms. To be sure, the concept of rationality has often been understood in this way; thus far Rorty's critique of Enlightenment rationalism has a good point. However, his distinction between inferential and dialectical forms of argumentation now turns out to be useful only to describe two extreme cases, while the ordinary practice of argumentation seems to be located rather somewhere in between these two extreme cases. And if this is true – as I think it is – the opposition between reason and imagination as two different faculties of human beings seems to collapse, since reason *without* imagination seems to signify something which comes down to something close to stupidity. To be sure, Rorty has a point if he rejects the conception of human beings as rational beings; but if we reinterpret this conception by the old Greek formulation of the human being as a *zoon logon echon* – a definition which comprises the faculties of speech as well as that of reasoning – it loses the ring of a narrow rationalism and begins to also signify the reverse side of a being which is susceptible not only – like other animals – to physical pain, but also to humiliation. Evidently such a broader understanding of human beings as 'rational beings' is also involved in Rorty's conception of human beings as 'incarnated vocabular-

ies' and it is, moreover, the precondition of that *emerging* universalism, which Rorty spoke about, getting a foothold also in non-Western cultures.

If it is true that linguistic innovation and reasoning are only two sides of one coin, as Brandom argues, then it seems that also Rorty's opposition between 'public' and 'private' uses of language needs some revision. As Brandom says, 'we should not think of the distinction between routine speaking of the language of the tribe and creative discursive recreation of the individual – pursuit of old purposes and invention of new purposes – in terms of the distinction between discourse that takes place *within* the boundaries of a vocabulary and discourse that *crosses* those boundaries and enters a new vocabulary [...] *Every* use of a vocabulary, every application of a concept in making a claim, *both* is answerable to norms implicit in communal practice – its public dimension, apart from which it cannot mean anything (though it can cause something) – *and* transforms those norms by its novelty – its private dimension, apart from which it does not formulate a belief, plan, or purpose worth expressing.'<sup>49</sup>

Of course, what Brandom argues is *not* that there is no valid distinction between a concern with what Rorty calls 'private autonomy' on the one hand, and a concern with the public issues of freedom, justice, and solidarity, on the other. What he argues, is rather that every interesting discursive practice, including the ones initiated by Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida, never crosses the boundary of a communal discourse without, at the same time, *also* taking place *within* the boundaries of such a communal discourse, and in *this* sense will have a public dimension, 'apart from which it cannot mean anything.' And this means, of course, that those philosophies, which Rorty calls relevant only with respect to private self-creation, are as much contributions to a *public* discourse and subject to critical scrutiny as are philosophies which deal with democracy, justice and solidarity. Rorty himself treats them this way, for instance when he criticizes their ambition to say something relevant about the public issue of a liberal culture, when he interprets the later Heidegger as powerfully arguing for the contingency of language<sup>50</sup>, or when he argues that 'Freud's metaphors' have enabled us 'to assimilate Nietzsche's, James's, Wittgenstein's or Heidegger's for a rethinking of lib-

eral culture. 'All the figures of this period', he says, 'play into each other's hand.'<sup>51</sup> If this is true, however, all of them must obviously have been important for rethinking liberal culture, even if some of them have been hostile to it. As far as Rorty calls their philosophies 'private' ones, what he means is that their contribution to our modern self-understanding only concerns the aspect of individual selfhood and autonomy as well as the recognition of contingency concerning language and selfhood, while as political philosophers he considers them as mistaken or irrelevant. But even so, that is because of their contribution to rethinking important aspects of a liberal culture; Rorty obviously thinks them, at least in one sense of the word, to be *publicly* relevant.

When, however, in another sense of the word, he *denies* this public relevance, what he denies is that the ironist's problem of self-creation has anything to do with her being a member of a liberal culture and with the functioning of a liberal democracy. When Rorty describes Nietzsche and Heidegger as 'ironist' philosophers, he is critical of their turning the ironist motif of self-creation into something of public concern, that is into an *anti-liberal* philosophy. Irony, however, as Rorty says, 'seems inherently a private matter.'<sup>52</sup> That also means that there hardly could be a culture 'whose public rhetoric is ironist. I cannot imagine a culture which socialized its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization.' But since even a liberal ironist must have gone through such a socialization, while her irony is 'inherently a private matter', the question is, how her liberal 'identity' is related to her private irony. Rorty rejects one possible way of thinking about it, when he criticizes the figure of what he calls a 'liberal metaphysician' – as, for instance, Habermas – for 'the belief, that the metaphysical public rhetoric of liberalism must remain central to the final vocabulary of the individual liberal, because it is the portion which expressed what she shares with the rest of humanity – the portion that makes solidarity possible.'<sup>53</sup> Rorty argues that the opposite is true, namely that 'it does not matter if everybody's final vocabulary is different, as long as there is enough overlap', that is to say 'overlapping words like "kindness" or "decency" or "dignity".'<sup>54</sup> This sounds odd, however, if liberal society, as Rorty says in a different context, is an incarnated vocabulary, that is a language game,

which to share, of course, means much more than sharing a few words like ‘kindness’, ‘decency’ or ‘dignity’.

As Rorty himself says: ‘What binds societies together are common vocabularies and common hopes.’<sup>55</sup> But if we think about what this sharing of the vocabulary of a liberal society is, even if we understand this sharing more or less as a ‘know how’, as Rorty suggests, what comes to mind first is, that it is, as it were, always a conflictual sharing. One aspect of this conflictual sharing, and perhaps in our context not even the most important one is, that the boundaries between what is of public concern and what is essentially private are often controversial, and that means that the drawing of these boundaries is itself a matter of public concern. Think of homosexuality, which until recently has been considered to be a crime – that is a matter of public concern –, of incestual relationships which only in these days have been again declared to be illegal by the German Constitutional Court, or of the contested boundary lines between the public and private aspects concerning the upbringing of children, or finally of the conflicting lines between different forms of life in multicultural societies and existing public regulations.

What I want so say is that a liberal culture is also a culture of conflict, and not least about the boundary lines between the public and the private. Rorty’s own critique of the present capitalist economy is a case in point. Correspondingly, the sharing of the vocabulary of a liberal society will never be a ‘watertight’ one, since the concrete meaning of its values and principles as well as the consequences to be drawn from them will always be a matter of public discourse and often of public conflict. And this is why a reflection on the working of democratic institutions is essential even for a *philosophical* account of a liberal culture. I am sure that Rorty would not deny this, but I think it is worthwhile to remember this point, since otherwise his picture of an ideal liberal culture might appear as a rather simplistic one.

But let us assume that we do not have to worry about the boundaries between what is private and what is public. After all it is clear that Rorty speaks about the private as what can and should be left to the ironist’s self-creation. Let us, then, talk about the role of the ‘strong’ poet in liberal

culture. Rorty calls her a hero of liberal culture because of her new way of speaking and her transcending the constraints of an established, common vocabulary. A hero, of course, she usually is not because of her exemplary self-creation, but because of the exemplary work she creates. Philip Roth has made this one of the themes of his novel *Exit Ghost*, in which he reflects on the irrelevance of the biography of an author with respect to the appraisal of his work. So one might say that the poet is a hero (not only) of a liberal culture, because her work opens up new perspectives, new ways of speaking, and in this way contributes to a questioning of frozen ways of thinking, perceiving and judging, and thereby also contributes to her readers transcending the clichés of routine linguistic and non-linguistic practices – and in this way, perhaps, also of opening up new avenues for private self-creation. But this means that usually it is the public role of the poet’s work and not that of her exemplary self which makes her a hero. And a corollary of this is that the boundaries between the private and the public again become blurred. The work as being public – addressed to a ‘we’ – interferes with the routine vocabularies of its readers, and this may be relevant for their perception of public issues as, for instance, the suffering or humiliation of fellow human beings or the forms of cruelty built into current institutional procedures, as well as for a re-weaving of their private selves.

Rorty himself discusses exemplary cases of both of these possible effects of literature in the latter parts of his book on *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. But if the ‘heroic’ role of the poet in liberal society is reconceived in the way I suggested, Rorty’s ‘deconstruction’ of the opposition between the moral and the aesthetic loses its point. For the great poets could play the role they played only because they created works of art which ‘speak’ in a different way than the writings of journalists, moralists or historians do. Rorty does not usually speak about music, film, theatre or painting, but only about the poet as a writer. This may be one of the reasons that the idea of the artwork as an *aesthetic* category, but of private as well as public *relevance*, has no place in his thinking and that he occasionally tends to confound the creation of artworks – a *public* category – with the *private* self-creation of their authors.

When, on the other hand, Rorty also calls the utopian revolutionary a hero of liberal culture, this hero, in the case of his new vocabulary finally leading to new practices and therefore to a common vocabulary in the sense of a new language game (which in its beginnings it can never be), produces effects which will be most likely public as well as private. For this new vocabulary will be part of what Rorty calls a ‘final vocabulary’ for those who have adopted it. ‘All human beings’, as Rorty says, ‘carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. I shall call these words a person’s “final vocabulary”.’<sup>56</sup> It is with respect to this idea of a final vocabulary that Rorty introduces the figure of the ‘ironist’, who, I would say, is the figure of Rorty himself as being aware of the contingency of language, selfhood and of liberal culture. ‘I call people [...] “ironists” because their realization that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed, and their renunciation of the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between final vocabularies, puts them in the position which Sartre called meta-stable; never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves’, and Rorty goes on to say that ‘the opposite of irony is common sense’<sup>57</sup>, meaning by that a lacking awareness of the contingency of final vocabularies as well as a lack of imagination, which for him also means, basically, the non-intellectuals.<sup>58</sup>

The ironist in Rorty’s sense is not necessarily a liberal, but she *can* be a liberal as well. Now if what I have said about the liberal’s sharing a common vocabulary of liberal democracy is true, being a *liberal* ironist must mean two different things: On the one hand, it means being aware of the contingency of her self, an awareness which motivates her continuing reweaving of herself; on the other hand it means being aware of the contingency of a liberal culture while at the same time endorsing it in the sense in which Rorty quoted Berlin: ‘To realize the relative validity of one’s convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly, is what distin-


guishes a civilized man from a barbarian.’<sup>59</sup> Rorty, however, in the context from which I have quoted a moment ago, does not put it this way. He rather refers to Judith Shklar’s definition of liberals as people for whom ‘cruelty is the worst thing they do.’<sup>60</sup> Now this, again, like sharing words as ‘kindness’, ‘decency’ or ‘dignity’, can mean all sorts of things, since what *counts* as cruel in the sense of what should not be done changes together with the ‘final vocabularies’ people have. So again much more would have to be said to ‘define’ a liberal in the sense of the liberal culture Rorty is arguing for. And this ‘more’ can hardly be said without touching the ideas of freedom, justice and solidarity as they belong to the vocabulary of modern liberal democracies. But then the liberal ironist cannot be defined by some vague abhorrence of cruelty, but only as certain kind of citizen, to whose self-understanding belongs the affirmation of at least some basic ‘values’ of a liberal democracy. And this affirmation will also be part of her self-understanding as a liberal self. As Rolf Zimmermann argues, referring to Rorty: ‘What it means to have the moral identity of the citizen of a liberal community shows itself at what for her would be an occasion for moral outrage and what she cannot accept: Nazism, hostility to strangers and racism, the repression of minorities, torture etc., as well as disadvantages for women, discrimination of homosexuals etc.’<sup>61</sup> And apart from this moral identity, I suppose – talking about an ideal liberal culture – a *liberal* ironist also has a *political* identity.

All these qualifications are not meant to question Rorty’s emphasis on the ironist’s motivation to reweaving her private self. But maybe the idea looks a bit different now, at least as far as the *liberal* ironist is concerned. For the reweaving of her self will not occur in complete isolation, but in a context of communicative relationship with others, exposed, as it were, to the ‘public’ sphere of other individuals with whom she lives together; it may become exemplary, inspiring for others, or also fail altogether; in short, it will not be as far removed from the public sphere of a liberal culture as Rorty occasionally seems to suggest. Moreover, Rorty’s idea now seems to be closer than he might like it to what Habermas has in mind when he distinguishes between moral and ethical issues, the former ones requiring a public consensus, while the latter ones must be left to individuals or groups of individuals. And this distinction, I think, remains

valid even if, as I have argued, the boundaries between the public and the private are not as clear cut as Rorty seems to assume.

My critical comments should be considered as what Brandom has called a ‘friendly amendment’<sup>62</sup> to Rorty’s position regarding the contingency of language, selfhood and liberal culture. Although I disagree with Rorty at some other points – particularly about his version of naturalism and his causalist conception of experience<sup>63</sup> – my attempt to ‘deconstruct’ some of the conceptual oppositions he introduces were rather meant to strengthen his position in those basic aspects I have discussed. Even if, for instance, I have questioned the way in which he opposes ‘inferential’ to ‘dialectical’ argument, this was not to question the decisive importance he attributes to ‘new ways of speaking’, that is to the ‘world-disclosing’ use of language as a motor of cultural progress, and in particular it was not to question his distinction between two different forms of philosophical writing: One which moves more or less within a given vocabulary by clarifying the intuitions and concepts embodied in this vocabulary; a form of philosophy the virtue of which is argumentative clarity and stringency – that is what I *aimed* at in this essay –; and ‘strong’ or ‘revolutionary’ forms of philosophy which, by introducing a new vocabulary, open up a new perspective on old problems and thereby *change* the parameters of philosophical discourse in a significant way. If we call these forms of philosophy *strong* philosophies, I think that the most important philosophies, those which have left their mark in the cultural discourses of the tradition, have been ‘strong’ philosophies in this sense. And despite all my critical remarks I consider Rorty’s philosophy to being a strong philosophy in this sense.

Albrecht Wellmer is emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the Free University of Berlin. He wrote several books, including *The Persistence of Modernity. Essays on Aesthetics, Ethics, and Postmodernism* (1993), *Endgames. The Irreconcilable Nature of Modernity* (2000), *Sprachphilosophie* (2004) and *Wie Worte Sinn machen* (2007). In 2009 his monograph *Versuch über Musik und Sprache* will be published.

 This work is licensed under the Creative Commons License

(Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0).

See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/nl/deed.en> for more information.

---

<sup>1</sup> I am referring to New York here, because living in New York for quite a while, and before I began to read Rorty, I was struck by the coincidence of a highly agnostic spirit with a sense of democratic solidarity which appeared occasionally, for me quite unexpectedly, in everyday as well as academic situations. In this coincidence I sensed already then something like an attractive coexistence of ‘Nietzschean’ motifs with the spirit of liberal democracy. I must confess that only much later I have understood that something like this experience finds its philosophical expression in Rorty’s philosophy.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Rorty, ‘Philosophy & the Future’, in: Herman J. Saatkamp (ed.), *Rorty & Pragmatism. The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*. Vanderbilt University Press 1995. I have retranslated the quote from the German edition Richard Rorty, *Philosophie und die Zukunft* (M. Grässlin, R. Kaiser, Ch. Mayer and J. Schulte eds.), Frankfurt am Main 2000, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> See loc.cit. p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, Cambridge University Press 1989, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> loc. cit. p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> loc. cit. p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>8</sup> loc. cit. p. 33f.

<sup>9</sup> loc. cit. p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup> loc. cit. p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> loc. cit. p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> loc. cit. p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Habermas, 'Reconciliation through the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls' Political Liberalism', in: *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XCII, No. 3. March 1995, pp. 129ff.

<sup>15</sup> Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, loc. cit. p. 47

<sup>16</sup> loc. cit. p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> loc. cit. p. 57.

<sup>18</sup> loc. cit. p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> loc. cit. p. 88.

<sup>20</sup> loc. cit. p. 55.

<sup>21</sup> loc. cit. pp. 60f.

<sup>22</sup> loc. cit. p. 45.

<sup>23</sup> loc. cit. p. 192.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem. I should mention that I am not quite convinced by Rorty's construal of the opposition between Kant's moral universalism and his own conception of moral progress. I rather think that a more productive reading of Kant would lead to an understanding of moral progress which is quite similar to the one advocated by Rorty. See my 'Ethics and Dialogue: Elements of Moral Judgement in Kant and Discourse Ethics', in: Albrecht Wellmer, *The Persistence of Modernity*, Cambridge(Mass. 1991. Rorty's uncompromising critique of Kantian universalism is, I think, related to his opposing Kant's conception of human beings as rational beings by a conception of human beings as susceptible to pain and humiliation. Later on I shall question the plausibility of this opposition.

<sup>27</sup> 'Philosophie & die Zukunft', loc. cit. p. 23 (my re-translation).

<sup>28</sup> Richard Rorty, 'The priority of democracy to philosophy', and 'Solidarity or objectivity?', in: Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. Philosophical Papers* Vol. 1, Cambridge University Press 1991.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Rorty, *Achieving our Country*, Cambridge/Mass. 1998.

<sup>30</sup> loc. cit. pp. 76f.

<sup>31</sup> loc. cit. pp. 82f.

<sup>32</sup> loc. cit. pp. 87f.

<sup>33</sup> loc, cit. p. 99.

<sup>34</sup> loc. cit. p. 142, footnote 12.

<sup>35</sup> As to the 'civic religion of which Whitman and Dewey were prophets' Rorty says: 'That civic religion centered around taking advantage of traditional pride in American citizenship by substituting social justice for individual freedom as our country's principal goal.' (AaO. S. 101). About the role of universities in the context of the old political Left Rorty says: 'The period in which the state universities of the Midwest emerged as power bases for redistributivist social initiatives was

also the era of the first great strikes. These strikes were examples of the kind of solidarity, and of comradeship in suffering, which Americans had previously witnessed only in wartime. Now Americans were making sacrifices, and sometimes dying, not to preserve the republic from political division, but to preserve it from dividing into a nation of rich and a nation of poor.' (S. 50) Criticizing the role which Levinas and Derrida have played for the cultural Left, Rorty says: 'The notion of "infinite responsibility", formulated by Emmanuel Levinas, and sometimes deployed by Derrida – as well as Derrida's own frequent discoveries of impossibility, unreachability, und representability – may be useful for some of us in our individual quest for private perfection. When we take of our public responsibilities, however, the infinite and the unrepresentable are merely nuisances. Thinking of our responsibilities in these terms is as much a stumbling-block to effective political organization as is the sense of sin.' (96f.)

<sup>36</sup> loc. cit. p. 105

<sup>37</sup> 'Someday, perhaps', he says, cumulative piecemeal reforms will be found to have brought about revolutionary change.' Ibidem

<sup>38</sup> In: Richard Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others. Philosophical Papers Vol. 2*, Cambridge University Press 1991.

<sup>39</sup> loc. cit. p. 189.

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>42</sup> loc. cit. p. 190.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>44</sup> loc. cit. p. 191.

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>46</sup> Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity., loc. cit. p. 82.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Brandom. 'Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesizing Naturalism and Historicism', in: Robert Brandom (ed.), *Rorty and his Critics*, Malden/Mass. and Oxford 2000, p. 176.

<sup>48</sup> loc. cit. p. 177.

<sup>49</sup> loc. cit. p. 179.

<sup>50</sup> See 'Heidegger, Contingency and Pragmatism', in: *Essays on Heidegger and Others, Philosophical Papers Volume 2*, Cambridge University Press 1991. 'Being', as Rorty says, is what final vocabularies are about. A final vocabulary is one we cannot help using, for when we reach it our spade is turned.' (aO. S. 37). Accordingly 'Seinsverständnis' would be the same as a final vocabulary (aaO. S. 39). The essay, I think, is an impressive example of Rorty's ability for a 'strong' reading of philosophical texts, a reading which allows him to sort out the 'revolutionary' aspect of Heidegger's thinking from his reactionary politics and thereby to save him for a pragmatist tradition, whose hero for Rorty is John Dewey.

<sup>51</sup> Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, loc. cit. p. 39

<sup>52</sup> Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, p. 87.

<sup>53</sup> loc. cit. p. 92.

<sup>54</sup> loc. cit. pp. 92f.

<sup>55</sup> loc. cit. p. 86.

<sup>56</sup> loc. cit. p. 73.

<sup>57</sup> loc. cit. pp. 73f.



<sup>58</sup> loc. cit, p. 87. I think it is somehow misleading if Rorty speaks of the liberal ironist as an intellectual, and, at the same time, characterizes the liberal ironist by her concern with self-creation. If ‘self-creation’ is understood in the broad sense in which Rorty speaks about it, it would not only apply to what we usually would mean by ‘intellectuals’ but to a much broader range of people who in our societies can be said to ‘reweave’ themselves by ‘experimenting’ with their social identity and their private form of life. And indeed Rorty suggests such broader understanding of the concern with self-creation if he interprets the psychoanalytic process as a process of ‘poetic’ self-creation (*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, loc. cit. p. 42) and if he even says that we should ‘think of any human life as the always incomplete, yet sometimes heroic, reweaving of such a web. We shall see the conscious need of the strong poet to *demonstrate* that he is not a copy or replica as merely a special form of an unconscious need everyone has: the need to come to terms with the blind impress which chance has given him, to make a self for himself by redescribing that impress in terms which are, if only marginally, his own.’ (loc. cit. p. 43)

<sup>59</sup> loc. cit. p. 46.

<sup>60</sup> loc. cit. p. 74.

<sup>61</sup> Rolf Zimmerman, *Philosophie nach Auschwitz*. Hamburg 2005, p. 63 (my translation)

<sup>62</sup> ‘Vocabularies of Pragmatism: Synthesizing Naturalism and Historicism’, loc. cit. p. 179.

<sup>63</sup> See Albrecht Wellmer, ‘Rorty on Truth, Justification, and Experience’, in: Lewis E. Hahn (ed.), *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty. Library of Living Philosophers*. Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Illinois 2008. My contribution to the Volume of the ‘Library of Living Philosophers’ dedicated to Rorty was written already in 2001, while the publication of the book was delayed for technical reasons. Although I think that I still agree with most of the critical points I have raised against Rorty in this earlier article, my overall perspective on Rorty’s philosophy in the present article is a different, broader and much more positive one.

From this broader perspective some of my former criticism appears to me as having less weight than I assumed at the time of writing. What appears to me most relevant from my present perspective – not speaking about those points to which I come back in the present article – is my critique of Rorty’s version of naturalism and of his causalist conception of experience in my former writing.