

“Locating” Rorty’s Utopia

The title of this chapter announces itself as a small paradox, owing to the etymology of the word “utopia.” From the Greek meaning, literally, “no place,” utopias seemingly cannot be “located” because they exist as concrete realities nowhere in time or space. Nevertheless, they may exist in the *writings* of political philosophers. This is surely what Leo Strauss meant when he said that Socrates’ “just city” exists only in speech.¹ If this is so, it should be possible to “locate” a given political philosopher’s “utopia” by tracing the pattern of thought that lead to its development. That is what I have attempted in this chapter.

Rorty’s liberal utopia is more or less fully developed in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. But the groundwork for that development was laid at least a decade earlier with the publication of Rorty’s first book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979). Accordingly, the first section of this chapter discusses Rorty’s early philosophy—focusing particularly on *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* and some of his early writings. The second section attempts to connect this early philosophy to the philosophical *assumptions* in Rorty’s later political theory. Specifically, I attempt to trace what I see as the relatively tight connection between the *new* task for philosophy sketched in the last third of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*—roughly the task of merely “keeping the conversation

1. See Leo Strauss, “Plato,” in *History of Political Philosophy*, eds. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 55.

going"—and the *new* way of viewing our language and ourselves sketched in the first third of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*—roughly the view that our language and ourselves are both *entirely and exclusively* products of the conversation. Taken together, these sections are meant to demonstrate how Rorty attempts to redescribe our culture as one that has moved (or at least *should* move) from the end of (traditional) philosophy—which focuses on showing us how to get in touch with a Truth larger than ourselves—to the beginning of irony—which urges us to drop the search for ultimate truth and simply accept the contingent nature of our existence.

The End of Philosophy

It may be true that philosophy begins in wonder. But in Rorty's view, twentieth-century, Anglo-American, analytic philosophy has ended in highly technical, intellectually sterile, socially irrelevant discussions about "*pseudoproblems*"—like the problem of how *exactly* we can know the difference between a thought and the mental state that corresponds to that thought. Pseudoproblems of this type appear not only in the domain of analytic philosophy but throughout all of "constructive philosophy"—that is, philosophy that holds that knowing the Truth requires that we be in *agreement* with some *nonhuman* reality. Simply put, Rorty wants us to abandon constructive philosophy altogether. He thinks we can "slough off" the pseudoproblems that constructive philosophers have forced on us by simply sloughing off the vocabulary in which those problems are phrased. Doing this would of course put constructive philosophers *as such* out of a job. To see more clearly what types of individuals are threatened with unemployment, it might be helpful briefly to sketch the image our culture has of constructive philosophers. This image is common not only to *constructive* philosophers but, I will assert, to nearly all those within our culture who called themselves philosophers.

My guess is that for most individuals the term *philosopher* continues to conjures up the image of a serious-minded fellow toiling diligently to discover Truths about Man and Society. Again, my guess is that those who have given any thought to the question of *how* philosophers arrive at these Truths would probably say that philosophers do so by rigorously and methodically applying Reason and Logic to the important questions we humans face. The appearance of the terms *Reason* and *Logic* in this sketch draws our attention to the close connection Western culture

makes between what *philosophers* do and what *mathematicians* or *natural scientists* do.² Each set of individuals, it is supposed, *discovers* something about our world, and does so in a specific way. Granted, philosophers differ slightly from natural scientists in that philosophy is more of an "armchair discipline." It does not require laboratories or expensive equipment, and the only experiments done are "thought-experiments." And, to be sure, philosophers also differ slightly from mathematicians in that philosophical questions are more often posed in ordinary language—although these questions usually turn out to be very abstract. Philosophers might inquire, for example, whether having the thought "turtle" is *exactly* equivalent to having the mental state that corresponds to having the thought "turtle," or whether there is more to having the thought. Or, philosophers might ask whether a ship that is brought into port and has a "few"—or "most"—or "all"—of its planks replaced and is then sent back out to sea is *essentially* the same ship that first came into port. Or, finally, philosophers might turn their attention to questions that seem to more clearly involve moral or ethical matters: Is torture ever justified? What are the requirements of a just war? Is abortion morally wrong?

Regardless of the types of questions asked, however, and despite the slight differences I have mentioned, philosophers still proceed in essentially the same manner as mathematicians or natural scientists. The first step in the process is to set aside entirely one's personal feelings, desires, and emotions. If mathematicians' deeply felt desires that Fermat's last theorem be true can in no sense affect the *actual* truth or falsity of the theorem, should we think that *philosophers'* deeply felt desires can affect the *actual* truth or falsity of questions they investigate—questions concerning, for example, the morality of abortion? On the view I am sketching, we should not. The next step is for philosophers to divide the problem they face into its component parts. This is certainly the most critical step. Philosophers must be sure to divide the problem in the way

2. Rorty has a tendency—in his more playful moods one supposes—to use the personal pronoun "he" to refer to "constructive philosophers," "natural scientists," "mathematicians," and the like, while using the personal pronoun "she" to refer to "nonconstructive philosophers," "literary critics," "poets," and the like. Of course, this type of playfulness inscribes its own kind of sexism: men as "hard" thinkers, women as "softer" thinkers. *Presumably* Rorty is attempting to ridicule this distinction by over-using it. I have chosen not to repeat Rorty's usage pattern, because I am not convinced that it has any positive effect.

that it should, *naturally*, be divided. They must cut the problem "at the joints"—to use a metaphor that Rorty borrows from Plato. If, for example, the question at hand concerns the morality of abortion, philosophers will, by using reason, see that this question involves relations between entities called "mothers" and entities called "fetuses" and other concepts called "rights" and "obligations." Philosophers will—again using reason—see that the question does *not* involve entities called "combatants" and entities called "noncombatants." As this process of division continues, philosophers will find themselves with a set of terms that more or less precisely represent reality. The philosophers' task is to proceed with this process, using reason and logic to locate divisions that embody finer and finer degrees of precision with respect to reality. Philosophers might further see, for example, that the entity called "fetuses" must be divided into "viable" and "nonviable" fetuses. Finally, at the conclusion of this process, philosophers are left with a set of terms that represent reality so precisely and so completely that these terms can be said to represent reality *as reality itself would wish to be represented*. With this accurate representation of reality in sight, answers to philosophical questions are self-evident. At this point, all that remains is for philosophers to write up their results. Using the most objective, impersonal, perspicacious prose they can manage, philosophers will show how, through the use of reason, they moved toward finer and finer divisions, coming finally to their conclusion. Since the ability to reason is supposedly "hardwired" into all humans in exactly the same way,³ philosophers can be certain that their conclusions will fit with those of any other person—assuming, of course, that no careless errors have been made along the way. Of course, since no self-respecting philosopher of the type I have sketched would busy himself or herself with any but the most important *and complex* problems, it should not seem surprising that the language he or she uses to write up his or her results often appears recondite, at best, if not hopelessly abstruse, *to the nonphilosopher*. This is, as I have said, to be expected. Why, philosophers might ask, should one think it any easier to understand the writings of a professional philosopher on the question of

3. A computer analogy seems somewhat fitting here. By saying that reason is "hardwired" into all humans, I mean that all nondefective humans are endowed with the *capacity* to reason, simply by virtue of the structure of their physiology. One could go further with this analogy and say that the capacity to reason is linked with the capacity to use language. I discuss this whole idea of reason more fully in chapter 3.

abortion than to understand the writings of a professional physicist on quantum theory? Both disciplines—philosophy and physics—are, after all, rigorous, complex, analytic, precisely ordered endeavors.

The traditional image I have just sketched—that of the philosopher as a *problem solver* using the same “tools” (i.e., Reason and Logic) as the mathematician and natural scientist—is, as I have said, one that Rorty wants to replace. He wants us instead to view the philosopher as a *conversational partner*—and a witty partner at that. Rorty’s new image of a philosopher looks more like a sharp lawyer or an accomplished literary critic than a hard scientist. Rorty’s nontraditional “philosophers” have an especially good way with words. Like their traditional counterparts, they *do* think that the terms that attach to any given philosophical question are of central importance. Unlike their traditional counterparts, they *do not* think that these terms attach themselves naturally. They do not think that the terms of any philosophical question are out there, in nature, waiting to be “located” by philosophers. To be sure, the *world* is out there. But, as Rorty never tires of saying, the world does not have a language. It cannot dictate its terms to us, for it has no terms. Only humans have languages; hence, only humans can decide which terms they will use to describe the world. On this view, it is no more correct to say that when philosophers address the question of abortion they should naturally speak of “mothers” and “fetuses” than it is to say that they should naturally speak of “combatants” and “noncombatants.” Again, nature cannot tell us how it should be represented, for it speaks no language. So—to carry this view to its conclusion—although traditional philosophers think they are representing reality with the various divisions they *create* (not *locate* somewhere out there), they are only fooling themselves. The goal, therefore, is not for philosophers to be rigorous, for there is nothing for them to be rigorous about. Rather, the goal is to be as clever and imaginative with language as one can be. Hence, Rorty recommends the image of the philosopher as a conversational partner. For it is most often in stimulating conversation (broadly defined) that clever and imaginative uses of language appear. This view shifts the image of the philosopher (prevalent in both the culture at large, and in the universities) away from the type of practices that are supposed to go on in science and math departments and more toward the types of practices that are supposed to go on in humanities departments. According to Rorty, this shift is one we should recognize and welcome. As he says in a 1982 article entitled “Philosophy in America

Today," "We [philosophers] are not doing something different in kind from what the professor of literature or history would or could do. . . . We are just enlarging a linguistic and argumentative repertoire, and thus an imagination. Beyond this traditional humanist task, we can do only what lawyers do—provide an argument for whatever our client has decided to do, make the chosen cause appear the better."⁴

Needless to say, Rorty has some philosophers bristling at his characterization of the discipline. Those philosophers who most strongly disagree with Rorty believe that seeing themselves as problem solvers is vital to their self-image. Two examples of such philosophers come readily to mind; each has something to say about Rorty. First, Jürgen Habermas.

Forcefully freeing himself from the straight-jacket of analytic philosophy, Richard Rorty has undertaken the most ambitious project: he wants to destroy the tradition of the philosophy of consciousness, from its Cartesian beginnings, with the aim of showing the pointlessness of the entire discussion of the foundations and limits of knowledge. He concludes that philosophers need only recognize the hybrid character of their controversies and give the field over to the practitioners of . . . politics, and daily life to be rid of the problem. Like the later Wittgenstein, Rorty sees philosophy itself as the sickness whose symptoms it previously and unsuccessfully tried to cure. But Rorty is still enough of a philosopher to give a reason for his recommendation that we avoid the *Holzweg* of philosophical justification: one shouldn't scratch where it doesn't itch. It is just this assumption, that "it doesn't itch," that I find problematic.⁵

Stephen Toulmin adopted a more whimsical tone in a lecture at Northwestern University in 1987. Toulmin confessed that, "Putting down Rorty's essays, I carry away the image of a group of ex-soldiers dis-

4. Richard Rorty, "Philosophy in America Today," in *Consequence of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 222. This essay was first delivered at a symposium with Alasdair MacIntyre on "The Nature and Future of Philosophy" in 1981, and reprinted in *The American Scholar* the following year.

5. See Habermas's reply to Rorty's article, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity," in *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard J. Bernstein (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), especially pp. 193–4.

abled in the intellectual wars, and sharing memories over a glass of wine of 'old, forgotten, far off things, and battles long ago.'"⁶

These criticisms, and others, suggest that Rorty's vision of the amiable philosopher not as a problem solver per se, but rather as simply a conversational partner and fellow traveler on the road with literary critics, novelists, historians, and others, has yet to be embraced by *all* of his colleagues. Indeed, as Habermas's work makes abundantly and energetically clear, there are still some problem solvers left who believe that somewhere along the journey, and for *reasons* as opposed to matters of mere preference, the road diverges.

The question of which view of the philosopher—sober, rational, problem solver, or witty conversational partner—will win in the end is still very much open. Rorty's most detailed attempt at influencing the outcome of this contest is presented in his first book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Accordingly, I shall devote the remainder of this section to an analysis of that work.

IN TURNING TO *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, one is immediately confronted with two related questions: *What* is Rorty doing in this book, and *how* is he attempting to do it? It would be tempting to respond that *what* Rorty is doing is arguing that we should replace our current view of philosophy as "constructive," with a view of philosophy that sees it as (to use Rorty's word) "edifying"—that is, as the type of philosophy practiced by the *second* example of the philosopher in the aforementioned discussion. This would take care of the first question. One could then proceed to show *how* Rorty fashions arguments within the pages of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in order to make his case. This would take care of the second question.

The problem with these two answers is that they run the risk of missing the larger point of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. To see why, we can begin by noting that *if* one assumes (as does Rorty) that the unavoidable method by which constructive philosophy proceeds is by way of the construction of arguments based on reason, then although it makes sense to speak of arguing against a *particular claim* (or set of claims) made by a constructive philosopher, it makes no sense to speak

6. Stephen Toulmin, "The Recovery of Practical Philosophy," *Avalon* lecture, Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill., spring 1987.

of *arguing* against constructive philosophy *as such*. Doing so would mean that one was attempting to argue against argument, and this would involve one in a performative contradiction too severe even for Rorty to tolerate.

But if Rorty is not constructing arguments in his book, we are driven back to our initial questions: What is he doing, and how is he doing it? Rorty provides a specific answer to both of these questions when he explains that his overall approach in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* will be "therapeutic rather than constructive."⁷ Therapy, according to Rorty, is a process that sets aside argumentation as such in favor of redescription—that is, placing certain ideas in different contexts. The therapy in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is designed to cure us of our neurotic impulse to take certain epistemological questions (the very "pseudoproblems" I mentioned earlier) as inescapable—inescapable precisely because our answers to them form the foundation of our culture. In Rorty's view, quite literally nothing (and most certainly not philosophy) can form the *foundation* of a culture. Thus Rorty can happily offer *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* as therapy for his readers, who, if all goes well, will come to "glimpse the possibility of a form of intellectual life in which the vocabulary of philosophical reflection inherited from the seventeenth century would seem as pointless as the thirteenth-century philosophical vocabulary had seemed to the Enlightenment."⁸

Shifting whole vocabularies is of course no mean task. It requires the creation of a context in which old words either take on new meanings or are simply forgotten. Rorty thinks that to accomplish this one must draw on the resources of *imagination* rather than on the skills involved in *argumentation*. But I think that the distinction here is quite a bit less firm than Rorty makes it sound. Indeed, I agree with Jane Heal (one of Rorty's critics), who insists that *she* will view the Rorty of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* as "proceeding in the customary fashion by offering claims and defending them with arguments," and who argues (correctly, I think) that "it is one indication of some strain in [Rorty's] position that it is extraordinarily difficult *not* to treat him as so proceeding."⁹ In order then to see just

7. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: University Press, 1979), 7.

8. *Ibid.*, 6.

9. Jane Heal "Pragmatism and Choosing to Believe," in *Reading Rorty*, ed. Alan Malachowski (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 102, emphasis in original.

how Rorty attempts to accomplish his stated task of getting us to set aside the vocabulary of constructive philosophy, I shall try *both* to reconstruct (in an extremely abbreviated way) the crucial *argument* he makes in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, and to highlight the crucial *descriptions* he provides of constructive and nonconstructive philosophy. I begin by trying to get clear on the exact nature of the neurosis for which Rorty thinks we are in need of therapy. In the opening pages of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty writes,

Philosophy as a discipline . . . sees itself as the attempt to underwrite or debunk claims to knowledge made by science, morality, art, or religion. It purports to do this on the basis of its special understanding of the nature of knowledge and of mind. Philosophy can be foundational in respect to the rest of culture because culture is the assemblage of claims to knowledge, and philosophy adjudicates such claims. It can do so because it understands the foundations of knowledge, and it finds these foundations in a study of man-as-knower, or the "mental processes" or the "activity of representation" which make knowledge possible. To know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind; so to understand the possibility and nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations.¹⁰

Constructing such representations has been the central concern of constructive philosophy since the time of Plato. But, Rorty notes, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, discussions of the method used to create such representations crystallized around a discipline called "epistemology." Since Rorty focuses his analysis on this particular method, it would be most accurate to say that *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is an attack on the discipline of epistemology as such—although, as Rorty says, his attack "strategy" can be generalized and used against all constructive philosophy. Again, that strategy involves showing how words and sentences (which, after all, are all philosophers have to work with) come to be seen as *representing* reality, instead of being seen as simply metaphors that humans create in order to help us cope with our world—metaphors that we are free to change as we see fit. With respect to epis-

10. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 3.

temology specifically, Rorty notes that seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophy came to center itself around a set of bad metaphors. Rorty claims,

It is pictures rather than propositions, metaphors rather than statements, which determine most of our philosophical convictions. The picture which holds traditional philosophy captive 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. Without this latter notion, the strategy common to Descartes and Kant—getting more accurate representations by inspecting, repairing, and polishing the mirror, so to speak—would not have made sense. Without this strategy in mind, recent claims that philosophy could consist of “conceptual analysis” or “phenomenological analysis” or “explication of meanings” or examination of “the logic of our language” or of “the structure of the constituting activity of consciousness” would not have made sense.¹¹

What John Dewey called the “quest for certainty” is intimately connected with the metaphor of the mind as the mirror of nature. According to this metaphor, certainty—or what Rorty more accurately calls “rational certainty”—is achieved when one finally gets clear on exactly what is reflected, or *re-presented*, in the mirror. “Truth” then is like an “object” to be seen. And “knowing” is the process of seeing clearly. Ocular metaphors, as Rorty and others have noted, are intrinsic to the Western notion of philosophy.¹² It is largely this set of metaphors, and all of the associations that go along with them, that Rorty wishes us to aban-

11. *Ibid.*, 12.

12. Rorty makes note of this throughout *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Martin Heidegger is probably the most well known philosopher to explore the ways in which ocular metaphors have constituted Western philosophy. See especially *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962). Jacques Derrida also devotes one of his most interesting essays to an examination of metaphors connected with “light” and “seeing” in Western philosophy. See his “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” trans. F.C.T. Moore, *New Literary History* (autumn 1974), 5–74.

don. He wants us to stop thinking of "Truth" as an object that *imposes* itself on our mind's eye, and start thinking of "truth" as a term we assign to a category of sentences—some to be found in the realm of mathematics and science, but also, some to be found in the realms of art, morality, religion, politics, and so forth—which help us cope with our world. In my reading, Rorty's philosophy makes the most sense, and is most appealing, if we understand it as saying that, in almost every case, the best way of coping with our world is by *talking* with other individuals. One need *not* see the world this way. One could imagine that coping must be largely, if not entirely, a *private* act. On this second view, coping is more a matter of introspection than conversation. But Rorty's view of the philosopher is *not* that of a taciturn scholar, a modern-day Descartes, ensconced in his private study. Rather, as I have said, Rorty envisions the philosopher as a witty conversational partner.

It will immediately be objected that this vision of philosophy is untenable. It forces us to abandon the quest for certainty altogether. For if certainty is *just* a matter of conversation, then anything that can be said can be true. Rorty would probably not disagree with this point, although he would clarify it by noting that, while anything that can be said is indeed a *possible* candidate for a true statement, one can decide if it is true *only* by engaging in more conversation. In Rorty's view, this applies to *all* statements (all possible candidates for truth), even statements in the realm of mathematics or science—statements that constructive philosophers have always believed to be true *of necessity*. This claim is central to Rorty's philosophical thinking, and it is indeed quite dramatic. This is how Rorty puts it, in what I take to be perhaps the most important passage in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*:

It is so much a part of "thinking philosophically" to be impressed with the special character of mathematical truth that it is hard to shake off the grip of the Platonic Principle [i.e., the principle "that differences in certainty must correspond to differences in the objects known"]. If, however, we think of our certainty about the Pythagorean Theorem as our confidence, based on experience with arguments on such matters, that nobody will find an objection to the premises from which we infer it, then we shall not seek to explain it by the relation of reason to triangularity. Our certainty will be a matter of conversation between persons, rather than a matter

of interaction with nonhuman reality. So we shall not see a difference in kind between "necessary" and "contingent" truths. At most, we shall see differences in degree of ease in objecting to our beliefs. We shall, in short, be where the Sophists were before Plato brought his principle to bear and invented "philosophical thinking": we shall be looking for an airtight case rather than an unshakable foundation. We shall be in what Sellars calls "the logical space of reasons" rather than that of causal relationships to objects.¹³

Although it is generally my purpose in this section to *describe* rather than *critique* Rorty's philosophy, I cannot let this passage go without some critical comment. At best, I think that the language Rorty uses here tends to obscure a very important, and valid, distinction. Although I think it would be a mistake to do so, Rorty *can* be read as arguing that the premises (i.e., the *axioms*) from which we infer the Pythagorean Theorem are exclusively matters of argument within the conversation, and *therefore* our certainty about the Theorem is *exclusively* a matter of our certainty (still within the conversation) about these axioms. But this way of describing the situation is only half right. We can perhaps argue about whether (as a *practical* matter) we should accept a certain set of axioms as "true." When we argue in this way, our arguments turn on the question of how much precision we require to meet our practical purposes. For example, if one wanted to survey a particular piece of land for the purpose of building a house, the set of axioms that defines Euclidean geometry would be quite adequate for the job. If, however, one wanted to describe interstellar space in a way that accurately related the mass of large bodies to the gravitational fields they produce, one would need to use a different geometry—that is, a geometry that was defined by a different set of axioms—if one wanted a *useful* description. But once one has accepted a given set of axioms as true, one's certainty about the truth of theorems logically derived from these axioms becomes a matter for reason, not for conversation. Rorty is surely correct to assert that Plato believed that the axioms of Euclidean geometry really existed in some "ideal" realm beyond human sensory perception. But mathematicians have now freed themselves of any such assumption. Since at least the late nineteenth century, mathematicians have come to see the difference

13. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 157.

between necessary and contingent truths, not as the difference between "things" that correspond to reality and "things" that do not, but as the difference between statements that follow *logically* from a given set of assumptions and statements that do not. Albert Einstein can help clarify this point. In his introduction to *Relativity: The Special and the General Theory*, Einstein explains,

Geometry sets out from certain conceptions such as "plane," "point," and "straight line," with which we are able to associate more or less definite ideas, and from certain simple propositions (axioms) which, in virtue of these ideas, we are inclined to accept as "true." Then, on the basis of a logical process, *the justification of which we feel ourselves compelled to admit*, all remaining propositions are shown to follow from those axioms, i.e., they are proven. A proposition is then correct ("true") when it has been derived in the recognized manner from the axioms. The question of the "truth" of the individual geometrical propositions is thus reduced to one of the "truth" of the axioms. Now it has long been known that the last question is not only unanswerable by the methods of geometry, but that it is in itself entirely without meaning. We cannot ask whether it is true that only one straight line goes through two points. We can only say that Euclidean geometry deals with things called "straight lines," to each of which is ascribed the property of being uniquely determined by two points situated on it. The concept "true" does not tally with the assertions of pure geometry, because by the word "true" we are eventually in the habit of designating always the correspondence with a "real" object; geometry, however, is not concerned with the relation of the ideas involved in it to objects of experience, *but only the logical connection of these ideas among themselves.*¹⁴

I want now to suggest that we *should* read the aforementioned passage by Rorty as chiming with the point Einstein is making here about mathematics—the point that "true" statements in mathematics should not be thought of as true *because they correspond* to something "real."

14. Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and the General Theory*, trans. Robert W. Lawson (New York: Crown Publishers, 1961), 1–2, emphasis added.

Rorty should *not* be read as trying to deny that *once one has accepted a particular set of axioms or assumptions* there is *still* no difference between necessary and contingent truths. He should *not* be read as denying that there are such things as logical contradictions. Rather, his claim that our certainty about all possible statements ultimately comes down to a matter of conversations between persons should be taken to mean that since theorems in mathematics, as well as statements in philosophy and many statements in everyday life, ultimately rest on a particular set of axioms or assumptions that themselves do not correspond to anything "real," our certainty about such statements is ultimately contingent upon our acceptance of a particular set of axioms or assumptions. But, to repeat, nothing outside of the conversation *compels* this acceptance.

Suppose one were to accept Rorty's view that, in the final analysis, all we really have is the conversation. Would such acceptance bring about the "end" of constructive philosophy by allowing us finally to end the *philosophical* search for some nonhuman reality to which we humans must be responsible? In a last-ditch effort to keep their view of the discipline alive, clever constructive philosophers might answer "no" and might simultaneously invoke the memory of Kant. It was Immanuel Kant who moved constructive philosophy from a focus on "outer" reality to a focus on "inner" reality. Kant shifted constructive philosophy's emphasis from the "objective" world to the "subject," which represents that world to itself in its consciousness. Kant's transcendental project attempted to reconstruct the a priori conditions of consciousness that make possible the subject's knowledge of any and all reality. With knowledge of such a priori conditions, the subject could generate, in a purely procedural way, *substantive* knowledge of its world. Importantly, this substantive knowledge was understood by Kant as imposing itself on the subject in the same way that earlier philosophers saw the objective world as imposing itself on the subject. Unfortunately, as his critics pointed out, Kant's own project flounders on the self-referential paradox, for it is not at all clear how a subject can reconstruct the a priori conditions of its consciousness without some a priori knowledge of those a priori conditions. Kant seems to be in something of the same situation as that faced by the hapless individual who insists that he will not go into the water until he has learned how to swim.

Still, despite its apparent problems, Kantian constructivism is alive and well in much twentieth-century philosophy. The John Rawls of *A Theory of Justice* can, for example, be read as attempting to derive *substantive* claims about just practices in a democratic society by analyzing

the purely procedural workings of an ideal bargaining game played by imaginary citizens of such a society. In a somewhat similar vein, although at a much higher level of generality, the Jürgen Habermas of *A Theory of Communicative Action* can be read as attempting to derive *substantive* claims about ethical norms by analyzing the purely procedural workings of an "ideal speech situation"—a situation in which conversation is undistorted by any of the normal, real-world problems of communication. For those concerned with Rorty's work, Habermas's philosophy is particularly interesting, because it seems to foreground that very activity Rorty sees as all important: the conversation.

But there is a critical difference. As Rorty points out, Habermas's work is yet one more failed attempt to rework Kantian philosophy. It is one more failed attempt philosophically to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Habermas, like constructive philosophers before him, still wants to find some knowledge to which humans must be responsible. For Kant, this knowledge existed *within* the subject. For Habermas, it exists *between* conversing subjects. But both approaches are equally flawed, and for the same reason. As Rorty notes,

Habermas thinks Kant was right in his aims, but wrong in his strategy. He thinks we can still get what Kant hoped for, so long as we give up the "philosophy of subjectivity" which Kant and Hegel shared, and instead develop a "philosophy of intersubjectivity." Habermas is urging a return to good old-fashioned universalistic Kant-style philosophy. He thinks that what was wrong with Kant was not—as all us Young Hegelians have been taking for granted for the last hundred and fifty years—his *Enlightenment rationalism*, but rather what all the rest of us had thought was just German philosophy's special, funny little God-surrogate "The Subject" (a quasi-person which constitutes the phenomenal world, gives itself the moral law, gradually becomes identical with The Object, continually overcomes itself, shepherds Being, deconstructs itself etc., as required). Habermas thinks we can revive Enlightenment rationalism as long as we use intersubjectivity instead of subjectivity as our philosophical starting point.¹⁵

15. Richard Rorty, "Posties," *London Review of Books*, 3 September 1987, 11, emphasis added.

Rorty believes that intersubjectivity is bound to fail, just as Kant's earlier attempts failed, for Rorty does not think that "intersubjective validity" is a concept we can know anything about—except, of course, through conversation with other persons. But, conversation about conversation is still, in Rorty's view, *only* conversation. Simply put, for Rorty there is no way of getting outside of the conversation.

That last sentence, phrased in just that way, sounds suspiciously like Derrida's proclamation that "There is nothing outside of the text." The suspicion is quite justified. Both Derrida and Rorty share a similar "philosophical" attitude toward constructive philosophy. Both think that the constructive philosopher's pretensions about getting in touch with "Truth" or "Reality" need to be deconstructed. And both go further by cautioning us against trying to construct *new* philosophical structures on the rubble of previous philosophical systems. For both Derrida and Rorty, what we are left with at the end of philosophy is simply the possibility for endless dialogue: endless conversation for Rorty, endless writing for Derrida.

Endless, perhaps, but neither meaningless nor frivolous. As Rorty claims in a 1978 essay entitled "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida," deconstruction is best seen *not* (as many have seen it) as a philosophy of language that purports to demonstrate that all writing is ultimately meaningless. Oddly, viewing deconstruction in this way would turn it into constructive philosophy by saddling it with claims about the nature of language and meaning. Rather, in Rorty's view, we should read Derrida as having little if anything to tell us about language as such, but a great deal to tell us about philosophy. What Derrida tells us is that philosophy is not a privileged form of language, it is simply one more kind of writing. At his best, Derrida's own writings are often virtuosic attempts to persuade us that (to use Rorty's words) there is no such thing as "a good piece of writing which is not an occasion for a better piece."¹⁶

But—a constructive philosopher might object—how can we know that a piece of writing is "better" if we do not have some *standard* by which to judge it? And must not such a standard for "better" ultimately include the notion of what is "best"? Yet if this is so, we are faced with the following dilemma. We may either admit a standard for what is "best"

16. Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida," *New Literary History* (autumn 1978): 159.

and thereby admit that *in principle at least* there must be an end to the conversation—although, in practice, that end may take an infinite amount of time to achieve. Or, we may reject the notion that there is a standard for what is “best” and in so doing find ourselves unable to say what is “better.”

It might be supposed that Rorty, good pragmatist that he is, would simply grasp the first horn of this dilemma and allow the constructive philosophers to have their “theoretical” standard for what is “best,” while insisting that since we can never attain such a standard in practice it does not have any *practical* relevance in the real world. Doing so, however, would put Rorty in the position of having to concede to the constructive philosophers their most important point—that is, that there is one correct theoretical vocabulary to be used when talking about “Man” or “Society” or simply “Reality,” a vocabulary that is correct because it describes reality as reality wishes to be described. Constructive philosophers will argue that even if this vocabulary is (in some everyday sense) impractical, it still provides something of a *focus imaginarius* that we can use to guide our efforts. But, as we have seen, Rorty insists that the universe does not have a language, only humans have languages. This, however, lands us right back in the middle of the dilemma, for (again) how are we to determine when something (a piece of writing, a law, a scientific theory, or whatever) is better than something else of its kind? Rorty can only answer by insisting that we make this determination by conversing with our fellows as to what *we* want to define as “better.” In other words, in Rorty’s view, since we cannot look to “reality” for help in describing itself, we must look to our fellow interlocutors. Or, as the Greek Sophist Protagoras said, in a similar vein, “Man is the measure of all things.”

To be sure, it takes a certain *kind* of philosopher to feel *satisfied* with this last statement. Constructive philosophers—who can trace their lineage back to Plato—are not of this type. What Rorty calls “edifying” philosophers are. In the last third of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty sketches the job description of the edifying philosopher. That description has quite a bit to do with simply keeping the conversation going. As Rorty notes,

... I shall use “edification” to stand for [the] project of finding new, better[!], more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking. The attempt to edify (ourselves or others) may con-

sist in the hermeneutic activity of making connections between our own culture and some exotic culture or historical period, or between our own discipline and another discipline which seems to pursue incommensurable aims in an incommensurable vocabulary. But it may instead consist in the "poetic" activity of thinking up such new aims, new words, or new disciplines, followed by, so to speak, the inverse of hermeneutics: the attempt to reinterpret our familiar surroundings in the unfamiliar terms of our new inventions. In either case, the activity is (despite the etymological relation between the two words) edifying *without being constructive*. . . .¹⁷

In other words, edifying philosophers converse in several different vocabularies without attempting to *privilege* one vocabulary over any other. And, since edifying philosophers love novelty, they also attempt to make all of their vocabularies as new as possible. Both of these gestures work to ensure (as much as that is possible) that the conversation will *continue without repeating itself*. If philosophy does have any sort of end, or telos, *that* is precisely what it is for Rorty. In what amounts to a final parting shot—an infuriating shot—at constructive philosophers, Rorty closes *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* with this last sentence: "The only point on which I would insist is that philosophers' moral concern should be with continuing the conversation of the West, rather than with insisting upon a place for the traditional problems of modern philosophy within that conversation."¹⁸

Again, I imagine that outraged constructive philosophers will rightly object by asking how Rorty—whose *only* concern seems to be with keeping the conversation going—can now speak of that concern as a *moral* concern. Constructive philosophers would point out that, while it is one thing to say that "continuing the conversation" amounts to an aesthetic or even a practical concern, it is another thing altogether to say—no, rather to *insist*—that this activity should be given the status of a moral concern. Where, they may rightly ask, does this concept of morality come from? Presumably it must be generated from the conversation—from Rorty's conversation, or from the conversation of

17. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 360, emphasis in original.

18. *Ibid.*, 394.

others. But if this is so, might we not be justified in supplementing Rorty's last sentence in the following way? "The only point on which I would insist is that philosophers' moral concern should be with continuing the conversation of the West, rather than with insisting upon a place for the traditional problems of modern philosophy within that conversation, and (ultimately) I insist this be a moral concern *just because*, after conversation with others, I have decided to insist this be a moral concern." Rorty's typical, deflationary response to this point would surely be something like, "Of course you would be justified in pointing out that my insistence that continuing the conversation be seen as a moral concern is, ultimately, based solely on an understanding of morality I have come to by way of that very conversation. What else could it be based on? What else could anyone's insistence about anything be based on?"

What else, indeed. The worldview proffered in the last section of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*—the view that all we have is the conversation, and that we should face up to this situation and not long for something more—may seem *less* dramatic than it actually is, simply because it is presented as the conclusion of a book whose main parts center around highly technical questions within the relatively specialized domain of analytic philosophy. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty does not speak explicitly to the social and political import of his challenge that we become edifying philosophers. He does, however, take up just such a discussion in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.

The Beginning of Irony

As a way of connecting what I have said so far about Rorty's philosophical outlook with the emerging lines of his later political philosophy—a philosophy that I am not *yet* ready to critique *in depth*—I shall devote the following section to an examination of the critically important similarities that exist between the sketch of the "edifying" philosopher, provided in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, and the sketch of the "ironist," provided a decade later in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Let me begin, where Rorty begins in the opening pages of that book, with a definition. He writes, "I use 'ironist' to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires—someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the

idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance."¹⁹

Because humans (ironists or otherwise) are symbol-using animals, and because language is our most pervasive and sophisticated symbol system, we can think of our "beliefs and desires" as represented by, or even constitutive of, the "vocabulary" we use to express our "selves." One's most *central* beliefs and desires will be represented by what Rorty calls his or her "*final* vocabulary."

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.²⁰

This vocabulary will be final, in the sense that it embodies one's most important set of beliefs and desires, a set of beliefs and desires that one literally cannot think of *being* without. It will also be final, as Rorty notes, "in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse. Those words are as far as he can go with language; beyond them there is only helpless passivity or a resort to force."²¹ Lastly, the most interesting parts of one's final vocabulary will contain what Rorty calls "thick," "rigid," and "parochial" terms like *Christian*, *Englishman*, *Radical Feminist*, or the like.

Given this terminology, we can now ask the following critical question: What is the precise relationship between an *ironist* and his or her final vocabulary? To answer this question, I need to quote Rorty at some length. His answer provides, I think, an excellent sense of the type of *character* he takes an ironist to be. In Rorty's view, an ironist is one about whom we can say the following:

(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 arguments phrased in her present vocabulary can neither

19. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: University Press, 1989), xv.

20. *Ibid.*, 73.

21. *Ibid.*