CHAPTER

ONE

Analytic Rorty, Psychoanalytic Theory, and the Question of the Other

This chapter has two aims that will help develop my overarching theory of friendship. First I want to look at Rorty's take on analytic philosophy, his debunking of the epistemic project and show that this position not only underlies his public/private distinction, but also sets up a notion of otherness that makes friendship more difficult. Second, I want to show that his reading of the history of philosophy puts him in the position of psychoanalyst. Rorty the analyst uses the history of philosophy as an other, I argue; from this viewpoint, Rorty's treatment of others can again be elucidated.

For Rorty, the question of whether "I am in pain" refers to a mental state or to a material state is both uninteresting and wrongheaded. He develops his discussion of the Antipodeans in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* to show this. What I find interesting about his discussion is first that it centers on pain, and second, that he creates a fictive other to illustrate a very different, but in the end, not very different, way of conceptualizing and conveying pain.

Pain is the thing in others that Rorty would have us respond to in his notion of solidarity. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, the emphasis on pain shifts to the psychic pain of

Copyrighted Material

humiliation, while in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* the pain seems to be physical.

In both cases, other people's pain can elicit from someone a variety of responses. One can believe or disbelieve the pain based on the behavior of the person in pain. Because the pain is in someone else, one acts based on a judgment about behavior rather than on direct knowledge of the pain. Pain, then, acts to separate us into nonintersubjective beings. I will recognize your pain only if I recognize you as being capable of feeling pain and only if I recognize your pain behavior as such.

If one chooses to believe the pain, and further, to empathize with the person in pain, then pain functions as a basis for unity. Indeed, in *Contingency*, Rorty's notion of solidarity rests primarily on empathizing with pain.

Because Rorty would have us make judgments about the validity of pain claims, he privileges pain over other potentially more intersubjective experiences. What seems to result is a parading of pain—not unlike what is on daytime television talk shows—in an attempt to elicit empathy. If each pain and pained subject must stand for judgment, then we end up with pain as spectacle (television news and talk shows), boredom over other people's pain (disaster burnout), and a ratcheting up of intensity to combat the boredom (talk shows leading eventually to a murder).

Because, for Rorty, we gain access to the other through pain—something we do not have access to, the other is in the position of having to prove him-/her-/itself to us. The act of proving pain becomes a major form of social entertainment whether through Rorty's novels, or through television, or sports. The role of entertainer is both racially and class charged, and instead of rescuing us from this system, Rorty bolsters it by using pain as the basis for solidarity.

The important question at this point is what if analytic Rorty decided not to use a discussion of pain to show that the materialist Antipodeans were just like the mentalist terrestrials?

Copyrighted Material

What if solidarity with the Antipodeans had nothing to do with the fact that though they seem different, they are not really so different after all? What if it did not matter to the terrestrials whether or not they could or did feel pain? What if the Antipodeans were irreducibly different? Really other?

It would seem, within Rorty's account, that we would treat the Antipodeans the way we treat all the other others—we would enslave them or eat them or fight a war with them to gain access to their resources. For Rorty, our response to otherness is based on our judgment of the worth of the other. The other is worth more if seen to be like us, and worthless if seen to be different. Rorty's liberalism tempers this because he hopes that we will accept more and more others as like us over time, but this acceptance is, again, based on their proving their worth to us.

By deprivileging privileged access, Rorty seemingly reduces the importance of the other's experience and voice. It is not interesting for him that someone's pain is felt more by that someone than by an observer and so there is less room in this account for the other to speak. Although Rorty later argues that novels and narratives are important sources of information for developing empathy, his epistemic position undermines both the need to tell one's story and the effect that stories have on readers. If privileged access is not so privileged, then other people's stories are not so important.

The anti-epistemic position has another major effect on Rorty's later writings, I would argue. Doing away with the notion of privileged, private mentalist experience forces Rorty to re-create some kind of private space elsewhere. This he does in his "firm distinction" between the public and the private. The unreachable unspeakable mental gives way to the unviewable and unjudgable living room with the shades drawn and the phone unplugged.

What this step does is to move solipsism from inside the head, as it were, to inside the house. Rorty's subject knows that

Copyrighted Material

there is a public sphere elsewhere but she exists mainly in the private space of reading and fantasizing at home. Ironically, though, the private ironist is not to speak publicly of her private thoughts and so not only does Rorty's public/private distinction re-create privileged access, it also re-creates the unspeakable of epistemology.

The difference with Rorty's move is that his unspeakable is so because of shame and fear, while the unspeakable for epistemology is so because of the structural limits of language and knowledge. Rorty's unspeakable leads to self-silencing, isolation and depression because it is negatively imposed on each subject; while epistemology's unspeakable, at worst, leads to bad philosophy or bad poetry. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* clearly is a sustained argument against bad philosophy, but it is also in effect an argument against depression. Dr. Rorty's diagnosis is that philosophy is suffering from bipolar mood disorder, and his therapeutic prescription is that philosophy give up on its dreams of grandeur and consequently on its nihilistic reactions as well. Philosophy and politics, too, must learn to be content in a modest middle.

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty identifies Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Dewey as the most important philosophers of the twentieth century. Each of these thinkers is important, for Rorty, because each overcame his youthful desire to make philosophy foundational, and moved instead toward therapy and edification (Rorty 1979, 5).

In many discussions of Rorty's work, there are references to dualisms, dichotomies, poles, and splits, and the concomitant therapeutic prescriptions for healing and overcoming. Rorty, hearkening back to Wittgenstein, talks about philosophy as therapy. Given all this language about polar opposites and healing, it might well be worthwhile to characterize Rorty's version of the history of philosophy as a diagnosis of bipolar mood disorder, which used to be called manic-depressive disorder.[1]

In philosophy's manic phases, thinkers attempt to provide foundations for all thought and all existence. There is this giddy

Copyrighted Material

feeling that everything can be accounted for, can be placed, and can be systematized. But "reality" sinks in, seeming failures abound, and the mood rapidly shifts to the depressive phase in which nihilism abounds. Nothing can be said, there are no generalizations, no commonalities. Systematic philosophy is a grand failure, a delusion. Giddiness turns morose, and we are all abandoned, isolated, and suicidal.

In characterizing the early manic projects of his three heroes, Rorty writes:

> Wittgenstein tried to construct a new theory of representation which would have nothing to do with mentalism, Heidegger to construct a new set of philosophical categories which would have nothing to do with science, epistemology, or the Cartesian quest for certainty, and Dewey to construct a naturalized version of Hegel's vision of history. (Rorty 1979, 5)

In each case, Rorty chooses language that makes these projects look grandiose. If these projects were Hollywood film treatments, they would never receive financial backing from any sane studio heads. And were they to be filmed, they would certainly be bigger flops than was *Heaven's Gate.*

In showing that the three overcame their youthful mania, Rorty writes:

> Each of the three came to see his earlier effort as self-deceptive, as an attempt to retain a certain conception of philosophy after the notions needed to flesh out that conception (the seventeenth-century notions of knowledge and mind) had been discarded. (Rorty 1979, 5)

The three heroes, then, were self-deceptive in that they were not attuned to the fact that their positions were unsupportable. Worse yet, the supports they needed dated from the

Copyrighted Material

seventeenth century. If the seventeenth century is the dawn of modernity, the infancy of science, then to hearken back to that time is to regress to infancy. Perhaps such regression is allowable for youthful work, but a mature philosopher ought really to overcome infantile desires.[2]

Rorty continues:

> Each of the three, in his later work, broke free of the Kantian conception of philosophy as foundational, and spent time warning us against those very temptations to which he himself had once succumbed. Thus their later work is therapeutic rather than constructive, edifying rather than systematic, designed to make the reader question his own motives for philosophizing rather than to supply him with a new philosophical program. (Rorty 1979, 5–6)

Rorty's choice of metaphor here is curious. There is liberation, and warning against temptations to which they had once succumbed. This is the language of sinning and saving. But Rorty quickly tempers the fervor of religious zealotry by using the terms "therapeutic" and "edifying." Fire and brimstone preaching gives way to encounter groups. What Rorty presents us with is three mature, calm adults who can counsel us out of our childish struggles with authority figures, who can help us overcome both the manic and the depressive phases of philosophy, and who can counsel us to think for ourselves and to resist the temptations of philosophic and authoritative dogma.

Rorty presents himself and his heroes as our therapists, and he presents the reading of philosophy as a process of therapy. Rorty is a peacemaker rather than a kingmaker.[3] He brings analytic and continental traditions together; he makes everyone into a pragmatist so that we can all sit on a couch and talk together; and he places himself squarely within "we" or "us."[4] Rorty is not alone, and neither is anyone else.

Copyrighted Material

In what follows, I will trace through Rorty's program of therapy as it is illustrated by his oppositional stance toward epistemology.

The "mirror" of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* is traditional philosophy's way of characterizing the relationship between thought and the world.[5] The mind—or later, language—functions as a mirror that reflects more or less accurately what is external to it. Rorty has many disagreements with this image, and with the philosophical problems that arise when philosophers attempt to clarify the mirror image. He also thinks the problems that the mirror was to solve are not really problems at all, or at least are not "interesting" problems.

Rorty's disagreement with the image of mirroring is multifaceted. He does not like the idea that we human beings are essentially knowers; he does not like the idea that the world around us is essentially knowable; and finally, he disagrees with the notion that there is any easy correspondence between knowers and the knowable. The epistemological problematic, then, is wrong on every count.

Looking once again at the bipolar explanation, we can argue that Rorty sees this correspondence between knowers and the knowable as a grandiose and poorly thought-out scheme for organizing things that are not suited to organization. The whole epistemological outlook, which suggests that there is a universal fit between knowers and the knowable, then, is a construct that is doomed to collapse when we come to our senses and realize that we are not mirrors, we are not privileged, and even if we were, there would be nothing to reflect. We need not settle for nihilism, however, because there is *something* for Rorty; it is just not epistemology.

As with many stories of philosophy, Rorty's really gets going with Descartes. Although there is some discussion of ancient and medieval thought, it is in Rorty's discussion of Descartes's dualism and what has historically followed that we can find Rorty's position.

Copyrighted Material

Cartesian dualism answers the skeptic's problem of complete doubt by limiting the realm of doubt to the physical while maintaining a region of certainty in the mental. The doubt that is relegated to the physical is by the end of the Sixth Meditation a highly circumscribed doubt. We know, for Descartes, how our senses work; we have memory; we can tell sleeping from waking. Not only can Descartes notice "all the errors to which [his] nature is liable," but also, he is "able to correct or avoid them" (Descartes, 55).

What the physical/mental distinction does for Descartes in the end is to provide boundaries for the disciplines. Philosophic inquiry tells us that theology does not belong in places where scientists congregate. Philosophy, then, is a border guard who keeps the priests out of the lab.

Cartesian philosophy is manic in that it sees itself as understanding broad swaths of human existence well enough to act as a gatekeeper. Philosophy must comprehend theology and science so that the two are kept separate. Philosophy, then, is the grandiose schemer that underlies all disciplinary distinctions, and is thus responsible for circumscribing inquiry, and hence, for limiting our reading to one floor in the university library, and even to one shelf on that floor.

After discussing Cartesian dualism, Rorty goes on to give a twentieth-century version of what he considers to be still a seventeenth-century problematic. His "Antipodeans" are like human beings in every way except that they perceive all sensation as brain states rather than mental states. These "persons without minds" are the material half of Cartesian dualism, and their experience of "c-fibers" are as uninformative as are human beings' experiences of pains.

The whole Cartesian outlook, then, has been a kind of folly. Instead of its liberating inquiry, it has stifled inquiry; and instead of informing us about the true nature of things, it has told us nothing. We are left with yet another failed mania.

In setting up the collapse of Cartesian dualism, Rorty discusses what he calls "our glassy essence" (Rorty 1979, 42–44).

Copyrighted Material

He writes that within the phrase "*Glassy Essence* . . . are all things which corpses do not have and which are distinctively human" (Rorty 1979, 44). The glassy essence is the mirrorlike part of the mind that reflects the external world and gives us a more or a less accurate picture of the world. It is equally the site of all the mysterious workings of life.

For Rorty, the glassy essence may be an acceptable part of ancient, or of seventeenth-century thought, but it most assuredly should not be a part of our contemporary world. He writes:

> To suggest that there are no universals—that they are *flatus vocis*—is to endanger our uniqueness. To suggest that the mind is the brain is to suggest that we secrete theorems and symphonies as our spleen secretes dark humors. Professional philosophers shy away from these "crude pictures" because they have other pictures—thought to be less crude—which were painted in the later seventeenth century. (Rorty 1979, 43–44)

The only reason we speak of mind/body dualism, for Rorty, is that it sounds less crude to us than would speaking of secretion. The more refined images make us into angelic or godlike beings, spiritual rather than physical. A decided preference for the angelic might well be a kind of manic desire, while settling for secretion might be evidence of depression. Secretion is an ugly term, and depression is characterized by self-loathing.

For Rorty, secretion and spirit are equally useless stories that we tell to explain things that are not worth explaining. No grand schematizing will explain in any interesting way what is going on and neither will nihilism do us any good. For Rorty, then, we should cease to ask "What is going on?" and we should, instead, find a new intellectual pursuit, which he describes in the penultimate chapter of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

This new intellectual pursuit is one of two possible roles for philosophers that Rorty identifies. The two roles are first,

Copyrighted Material

> that of the informed dilettante, the polypragmatic, Socratic intermediary between various discourses. In [this philosopher's] salon, so to speak, hermetic thinkers are charmed out of their self-enclosed practices. Disagreements between disciplines and discourses are compromised or transcended in the course of the conversation. The second role is that of the cultural overseer who knows everyone's common ground—the Platonic philosopher-king who knows what everybody else is really doing whether *they* know it or not, because he knows about the ultimate context (the Forms, the Mind, Language) within which they are doing it. (Rorty 1979, 317–318)

The second role that Rorty discusses, that of a philosopher-king, is the bad role, the one he rejects. It is this role that is manic in its attempts to schematize all human experience. Rorty calls this epistemology and wants to cure us of our epistemic temptations.

Rorty carefully states that he does not want to replace epistemology with a successor, but rather wants to leave a gap where there once was a thing we called epistemology (Rorty 1979, 315). Our new practice, which he terms "hermeneutics" is, for Rorty, a way to break out of the manic/depressive cycle.[6] It is hermeneutic modesty rather than deep melancholia.

The modesty arises from the paradox of the hermeneutic circle, which Rorty characterizes as

> the fact that we cannot understand the parts of a strange culture, practice, theory, language, or whatever, unless we know something about how the whole thing works, whereas we cannot get a grasp on how the whole works until we have some understanding of its parts. (Rorty 1979, 319)

Rorty likens this circle to "getting acquainted with a person" (Rorty 1979, 319). When we truly wish to get acquainted

Copyrighted Material

with people, we studiously try to avoid prejudice and other totalizing gestures; we open ourselves to others through conversation, and we withhold judgment to the best of our ability. In short, we are nice and we listen. The hermeneutic circle has us getting acquainted within a totalizing framework, but always being suspicious of our judgments and always ready to be proven wrong and consequently always ready to rewrite and rethink.

Hermeneutic modesty, then, provides a seeming middle ground between mania and depression, between grand schematizing and abject nihilism. And it calls for dilettantism rather than for expertise.

The therapeutic situation for Rorty, then, is not Dr. Freud in a large leather chair and Anna O. sprawled on a couch, but rather is a reading and talking room at a library with a bunch of nice, well-read, unpretentious people lounging and getting acquainted with both the exotic and the endogenous.[7]

This process of getting acquainted hermeneutically Rorty terms "edification" (Rorty 1979, 360). He writes:

> The attempt to edify (ourselves or others) may consist in the hermeneutic activity of making connections between our own culture and some exotic culture. . . . But it may instead consist in the "poetic" activity of thinking up 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. (Rorty 1979, 360)

While there seems to be room for *poesis*, for making and doing, within this account, the Rorty of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* is vastly more interested in reading than he is in writing.[8] He writes:

> So our doubts about our own characters or our own culture can be resolved or assuaged only by enlarging

Copyrighted Material

> our acquaintance. The easiest way of doing that is to read books, and so ironists spend more of their time placing books than in placing real live people. (Rorty 1989, 80)

Reading is the consumption of the already existing, and even if all that one reads is synthesized, the product of the synthesis cannot be radically new.[9] Rorty's scheme, then, limits the possibility for change. In the place of the maniacal, creative, underground revolutionary is the calm, liberal, above-board politician who proposes rules changes.

Rorty's need to cure us of our maniacal tendencies without sending us into a deep depression structurally determines his liberal politics. Liberalism carries with it the hope of incremental change over time, and the slow broadening of participation. The hope staves off depression, and the slow pace protects us from mania. Rorty's liberalism, then, is clearly the liberal consumption of the already made, and cannot become the radical making of the new.

Where there is some room for something like writing in Rorty's scheme is where he calls for redescription. He writes:

> [The ironist's] method is redescription rather than inference. Ironists specialize in redescribing ranges of objects or events in partially neologistic jargon, in the hope of inciting people to adopt and extend that jargon. An ironist hopes that by the time she has finished using old words in new senses, not to mention brand-new words, people will no longer ask questions phrased in the old words. (Rorty 1989, 78)

First, I note that the ironist incites not rioting but adoption of a "partially neologistic jargon." Second, I note that because the jargon is only partially neologistic, its revolutionary possibility is limited. The new is always spoken in terms of the old and is

Copyrighted Material

hence limited by the old. Because the old always exerts conservative force, the possibility of revolution is forestalled.

There are several strands of Rorty's thought that come together to form an antiradicalism both philosophically and politically. To help show Rorty's view, I will quote a long passage. Rorty writes:

> If we adopt this view of new philosophical paradigms nudging old problems aside, rather than providing new ways of stating or solving them, then we will see the second ("impure") type of philosophy of language as a last nostalgic attempt to hook up a new kind of philosophical activity with an old problematic. We will see Dummett's notion of philosophy of language as "first philosophy" as mistaken not because some other area is "first" but because the notion of philosophy as having foundations is as mistaken as that of knowledge having foundations. In this conception, "philosophy" is not a name for a discipline which confronts permanent issues and unfortunately keeps misstating them, or attacking them with clumsy instruments. Rather, it is a cultural genre, a "voice in the conversation of mankind" . . . which centers on one topic rather than another at some given time not by dialectical necessity but as a result of various things happening elsewhere in the conversation (the New Science, the French Revolution, the modern novel) or of individual men of genius who think of something new (Hegel, Marx, Frege, Freud, Wittgenstein, Heidegger), or perhaps the resultant of several such forces. Interesting philosophical change (we might say "philosophical progress," but this would be question-begging) occurs not when a new way is found to deal with an old problem but when a new set of problems emerges and the old ones begin to fade away. The temptation (both in Descartes's

Copyrighted Material

> time and in ours) is to think that the new problematic is the old one rightly seen. But, for all the reasons Kuhn and Feyerabend have offered in their criticism of the "textbook" approach to the history of inquiry, this temptation should be resisted. (Rorty 1979, 264)

Within this passage, there is a clear tension between Rorty's tendency for antiradicalism and the possibility of the radically new. Where there is room for the new is in his notion of the "men of genius" who come up with new sets of problems, and in his notion that the history of philosophy is comprised of a series of paradigm shifts rather than of a coherent slow narrative in which we are all trying to do the same thing. Thus, Rorty imports Hegel's world-historical individual, adds in a touch of Foucauldian historical rupture, and thinks he has come up with space for the new.

His antifoundationalism coupled with his statement that philosophy "is a cultural genre . . . which centers on one topic rather than another . . . as a result of various things happening elsewhere in the conversation" work together to contradict radical possibility.

If philosophy is not foundational, not first, then definitionally it must come only in reaction to other things. Philosophy does not lead, it follows. As follower, philosophy cannot be radical, cannot provide space for the new. This notion is bolstered by his statement that philosophy is a result of other cultural phenomena.

Since there are two opposed views, I need to show why one wins out over the other, and thus why Rorty is better thought of as antiradical than as radical. To do this, I will argue that even in his radical moment, there is a major component of antiradicalism, and that there is no radical correlate in his antiradical moment.

The notion that men of genius provide our only chance for major breaks in history is fundamentally antiradical in that

Copyrighted Material

it forces us to wait, as if for the messiah, until there is some kind of consensus about this newly emerged thing.

For Kuhn, Einstein is a major break from the Newtonian world, Einstein is new. But Einstein, like all "men of genius," is not socially accepted until he ceases to be new. Because genius requires us to wait, and because we are not capable of recognizing genius, the genius model of historical rupture cannot function as space for radical possibility.

The attempt to identify genius and simultaneously to avoid looking foolish acts as a restraint on radical change. We cannot think of ourselves as geniuses—genius is always other, and we cannot recognize genius because of its status as other. What is genius is what we do not know. The genius model, then, is a check on creativity, on all attempts to break away from the old.[10]

Copyrighted Material