Chapter 1

Arguments and *Readings*
Philosophy in a Postfoundational World

> To fit in with the change of events, words, too, had to change their usual meanings. What used to be described as a thoughtless act of aggression was now regarded as the courage one would expect to find in a party member; to think of the future and wait was merely another way of saying one was a coward; any idea of moderation was just an attempt to disguise one's unmanly character; ability to understand a question from all sides meant that one was totally unfitted for action.
> —Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*[1]

In the fifth century B.C. Greek historian Thucydides famously lamented the increasingly disparate relationship between Athens' words and deeds during her conflict with Sparta. With Pericles having declared in his Funeral Oration that "We Athenians . . . do not think that there is an incompatibility between words and deeds,"[2] the *History of the Peloponnesian War* shows what happens when Athens fails to live up to his boast.[3] Distilled from their connection to action, words became a heady brew, one that clouded good judgment and induced political chaos. "Any novelty in an argument," says Cleon to Athens during the debate over Mytilene, "deceives you at once, but when the argument is tried and proved you become unwilling to follow it; you look with suspicion on what is normal and are slaves of every paradox that comes your way."[4] Swayed by the cheap rhetoric of Diodotus—"(and only the most simple minded will deny this)"[5]—Athens chose a course of action that led to the physical carnage and linguistic chaos of the civil war in Corcyra. It was a time where in "order to fit in with the change of events words, too, had to change their usual meanings." Even Thucydides is led by the declining authority of the *logos* to abandon his

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usual narrative mode: rather than describing what happened and leaving us to draw our own—albeit somewhat directed—conclusions, he is forced to tell us directly what we should think about these events. In the absence of a grounding connection to life as it was lived, words, the currency of democracy, became devalued: "a great mass of words that nobody would believe."[6]

The situation of Athens is not yet—despite some claims to the contrary— the situation in which moderns and postmoderns find ourselves.[7] The linguistic turn in philosophy, and the influence of figures such as Derrida and Lyotard on a generation of thinkers, has, however, created the possibility of a similar separation of words and deeds in the contemporary polity. As with the Ancients depicted by Thucydides, arguments, underpinned by mutually acknowledged premises and shared understandings about the world and the way that we live, seem to have become less important than the rhetorical and poetic power of language to sway us one way or the other in our deliberations over politics. Avoiding the potential linguistic and political chaos of a world in which words become separated from deeds is a key concern of this study. Doing so requires that we establish a connection between the language that we use and the lives that we live, one that will serve as the basis for meaningful debate and discussion.

In order that this study's words might match its own deeds, this chapter sets out the philosophical underpinnings of the broader project. They are predicated upon on a crucial distinction between *arguments* and *readings*. It is a position that while accepting the central tenets of postfoundationalism nevertheless embraces the value of philosophical argument and rejects the postmodernist and poststructuralist claim that the death of metaphysics means the death of philosophy. It is this philosophical position—one between the extremes of Enlightenment Reason and postmodernist skepticism—that can serve as the basis for a postfoundational political thought and analysis separate from, but nevertheless informed by, the methods of literature and literary criticism. In order to establish this position, it is first necessary to say something about how we arrived at this potentially critical juncture in the recent history of political thought.

Political Philosophy and the Decline of Reason

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Anglo-American political philosophy was dominated by one man: John Rawls. His 1971 book, *A Theory of Justice*, set the terms of debate for political philosophy in Europe and America for the next twenty-five years.[8] In it, Rawls attempted to justify liberal political institutions—a system of justice as fairness—with two devices: the "Veil of Ignorance" and the "Original Position." Situated behind the Veil, agents would be denied knowledge of their skills, resources, preferences, and social status. From

this Original Position, he said, they would choose the principles of justice for a democratic society. The outcome of this process was, Rawls argued, two principles: first, that each person was to have an equal right to the most basic liberty compatible with similar liberty for others; and second, that any social and economic inequalities were to be arranged so that they were reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage and attached to positions and offices open to all.[9] It appeared to be an audacious attempt to found and justify liberal political institutions on the principle of Reason: the product of a correctly ordered mind.

The Kantian overtones of Rawls's project were clear and readily acknowledged by the author in *A Theory of Justice* and elsewhere.[10] Critics suggested that Rawls's theory was, however, too abstract, not least because it appeared to be predicated upon an empty conception of the self. So vacuous were the persons in the Original Position, it was claimed, that they could not be said to be either persons or choosers in any plausible sense of these terms.[11] As such, Rawls appeared to fall prey to a backlash against "metaphysics." Metaphysics, the claim that there are absolute values to which a certain cognitive capacity called "Reason" gives us access, had been dominant in Western philosophy since Plato enumerated his theory of the Forms. For many, however, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and their postmodernist and poststructuralist offspring had gradually undermined this notion over the last 150 years. Indeed, the claim that a faculty called "Reason" could no longer be relied upon to give us access to absolute values had become a philosophical commonplace by the time J. L. Mackie began his popular book on ethics by declaring: "There are no objective values."[12]

Mackie presented two arguments against the existence of objective values: the argument from *queerness* and the argument from *epistemology*. The first asserted that if there were indeed objective values "they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything in the universe."[13] The second said that "if we were aware of them it would have to be by some faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing anything else."[14] Even if one rejects Mackie's arguments for the nonexistence of objective values, there are many others. Most obviously, there is the high level of disagreement about the nature of these values among those who claim to have found them. Indeed, the values that people regard as being objective often seem to be directly correlated to their own prejudices and concerns. As Alasdair MacIntyre wryly noted, Immanuel Kant never questioned that the values he inherited from his virtuous parents where the ones that were objective and accessible by Reason.[15] It is little wonder that communitarian, Marxist, and feminist critics of Rawls's project concluded that "Reason" was simply a cover for the prioritization of certain individualist, elitist, and overly gendered values. The Enlightenment dream of founding a just and rational society

on metaphysical values appeared to have had its last hurrah in Rawls's work: few would, perhaps, attempt such an ambitious project again. The response to this failure can be split into two schools: first, those who attempted to rehabilitate Reason by addressing the concerns of Rawls's critics; second, those who appeared to abandon philosophy, Reason, and argument altogether.

REASON REVISITED

Foremost among the political thinkers who tried to rehabilitate a conception of political philosophy based upon an amended notion of Enlightenment Reason was Rawls himself. In a series of books and articles that followed the publication of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls responded to his critics by attempting to minimize the role of Reason and metaphysics in his theory. In a 1985 article, tellingly entitled "Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical," Rawls asserted that "the aim of justice as fairness as a political conception is practical, and not metaphysical or epistemological. That is, it presents itself not as a conception of justice that is true, but one that can serve as the basis of informed and willing political agreement between citizens viewed as free and equal."[16] On this formulation, the Original Position was no longer a metaphysical thought experiment but rather a "device of representation" aimed at identifying "ideas implicit in the public culture" about justice in liberal democracies.[17] The device, wrote Rawls memorably, "no more commits us to a metaphysical doctrine about the nature of the self than our playing a game like Monopoly commits us to thinking that we are landlords engaged in a desperate rivalry, winner take all."[18] That even Rawls—a thinker with acknowledged Kantian sympathies—should be so keen to repudiate the apparently metaphysical aspects of his thought was, of course, indicative of the extent to which metaphysics and the belief in objective values had been discredited.

Nevertheless, Rawls's apparent apostasy did not solve the difficulties in his theory. There were still many problems in his later formulations, which suggested that Rawls's conception of justice was either, from a practical perspective, unworkable or, from a philosophical perspective, still overly metaphysical. In the first instance, Rawls's liberalism seemed to fail his own key test for a workable conception of justice: that it be self-supporting. Having abandoned Reason as the basis for his conception of justice, it is not clear why or whether anyone would commit herself to the two principles that Rawls's agents choose in the Original Position.[19] When the principles were said to be the choice dictated by Reason, the basis of the decision was clear: the principles reflected the way that a properly ordered mind thought about the world. To express deviation from either of these principles was, after due reflection, literally irrational.

For the postmetaphysical Rawls, however, the principles he identifies are simply ones that he thinks are implicit in the public culture of liberal democracies and to which, he thinks, citizens will give their allegiance. Whether this would actually be the case is, however, a largely empirical, not theoretical, matter, and Rawls failed to provide any evidence to suggest that his principles would indeed be the ones chosen.[20] Nor, furthermore, is there any evidence to suggest that if these principles were chosen that they would generate sufficient public support. Indeed, Michael Sandel and Charles Taylor both suggest quite convincingly that the Rawlsian liberalism is parasitic on a liberal culture that it not only does not support but that it may actually undermine. Both argue that liberalism's excessive focus on the individual erodes the community values essential to the successful working of the liberal system. Perhaps recognizing this problem, Rawls simply asserted his hope that justice as fairness might begin as a "mere *modus vivendi*" but would "change over time, first into a constitutional consensus and then into an overlapping consensus."[21] Rather like an aged suitor in a Victorian novel, Rawls expressed his hope that the nubile citizenry would in the first instance respect his theory and in the second grow to love it, in the process transforming some of their most deeply held feelings to coincide with the tenets of his procedural liberalism.

Stripped then of their metaphysical underpinnings, it is not immediately clear why anybody would choose Rawls's principles of justice. This is not to say that *no one* would choose them, simply that Rawls's theory lacks any attempt to justify the principles independently of the claim that they reflect ideas implicit in the public culture. Furthermore, despite having abandoned the metaphysical underpinnings of his two principles, Rawls seems unable to abandon the notion that they are, in some sense at least, neutral and/or objective. He seeks, it might be argued, the objectivity of Reason without the supporting metaphysics or, indeed, without any convincing alternative source of support. As such, it is hard not to conclude with the feminists, Marxists, and communitarians, that Rawls—like Kant before him—has simply prioritized his own values and sought to justify them on the grounds of their apparent self-evidence. This leaves his attempt to reconstruct Reason without metaphysics prey to those critiques that suggest that it is atomistic, elitist, and patriarchal. Rawls had, it seemed, failed to provide either a convincing *philosophical* or *political* defense of his theory.

Martha Nussbaum has, however, made a bold attempt to show how Reason—traditionally conceived—*is* capable of taking onboard alternative social perspectives in a way that negates many of the *political* criticisms leveled against Rawls's theory. Indeed, much of her work on literature—as we shall see in chapter 2—is aimed at showing how Enlightenment Reason can incorporate these alternative perspectives without abandoning what makes it distinctive: its neutrality and objectivity. Such work is part of Nussbaum's even more daring

attempt to expand the horizons of what we traditionally conceive of as "Reason" by finding a place in rational thought for the influence and complexity of human emotions.[22] It is by incorporating alternative perspectives through a careful use of emotion that Nussbaum believes she is able to overcome the difficulties of Rawls's approach. Indeed, she outlines an approach that she calls "Aristotelian Social Democracy" consisting of a basic liberal framework—derived and defended by Reason traditionally conceived—but enhanced by a deeper understanding of human needs and capabilities. Most obviously she expands Rawls's list of "Basic Social Goods"—that which is provided to all citizens in Rawls's account as the very minimal basis of a good life—to include a list of "Basic Human Functional Capabilities." The latter are, she suggests, derived from the insights gained by incorporating various emotions—including the empathy gained from reading—into philosophical Reason.[23]

Philosophically and methodologically Nussbaum has made a *partial* literary turn. She seeks to use literature simply to *augment* philosophical Reason traditionally conceived. The extent to which emotions, even those "rational emotions" that she believes can be identified through philosophical deliberation, are indeed sufficient to overcome the political criticisms of Rawlsian liberalism is—as will be argued in chapter 2—highly debatable. For now it will simply be noted that Nussbaum's work is still predicated upon a form of metaphysics and that as such her defense of Reason does not go far enough. She neither defends Reason and metaphysics on their own terms nor does she distinguish her account from a metaphysical approach whose benefits—such as certainty—she seeks but whose costs—such as abstraction—she is not prepared to embrace. She offers a problematic *political* defense of Reason, one that suggests it can incorporate multiple perspectives, but not a *philosophical* one. The discussion of her use of literature in the next chapter will show why her position—though perhaps initially appealing as an attempt to synthesize two key philosophical traditions—is untenable.

It would then appear that, rather like the man in the old joke whose brother thinks he is a chicken but who will not take him to see a psychiatrist because he needs the eggs, the attempt to rehabilitate reason has been largely unsuccessful and half-hearted. Advocates of philosophical Reason seem willing to concede the problems of their position—not least its ontological implausibility—but do not appear willing to give up the benefits that this position would bring them if it could be shown to be valid, benefits such as objectivity, neutrality, and certainty. As such, their position appears to lack either a philosophical or a political justification. Having conceded that liberalism is a conception of the good—one that has to be defended in nonmetaphysical terms—they do not appear to want to justify it as such. It is, perhaps, the failure of these thinkers to rehabilitate Reason that paved the way for the rejection of philosophy and the turn toward literature and literary criticism as a source of insight into the political.

STRONG WORDS, WEAK ARGUMENTS

Judith Butler and Richard Rorty are two American thinkers who like many of their European colleagues and predecessors seem to have equated the death or decline of Enlightenment Reason with the death or decline of philosophy. In the absence of Reason, they seem to suggest, all that remains is *language*, and for the analysis of language, literary criticism seems ideally suited. The use of the word "seems" here is, however, deliberate, for claims about the death or decline of philosophy bring with them a number of other claims about the death, decline, or irrelevance of *argument*. As such, positions such as Rorty's and Butler's are not so much *argued for* as assumed or stated. Rorty does offer a justification for his position, but it is one based on a *reading* of certain philosophical texts, one that eschews the value of *argument*. Tracing the origins of these thinkers' claims about language, philosophy, and the world is therefore a matter of offering a genealogy. Rorty's position emerges from a *reading* of the work of a number of American pragmatists and from a *reading* of the work of the later Wittgenstein and Butler's from a *reading* of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. In addition, both thinkers' work demonstrates the influence of the wave of French theory that crashed onto American academic shores in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Despite their somewhat different origins, Butler's and Rorty's positions are in many ways quite similar. Both thinkers appear to reject philosophy, to embrace language, to dismiss argument, and to adopt *reading* and *redescription* as critical modes. As far as embracing language is concerned, both Butler and Rorty appear to predicate their claims—if this is not too much of a philosophical term—upon one of two theses about language and the world. The first is the weaker linguistic thesis:

(1) Language, by shaping our outlook on the world, helps determine the world in which we live.

The second linguistic thesis is much stronger:

(2) Language is primary: the language that we use determines the world in which we live.

As anybody who has ever stubbed her toe knows, however, the second thesis is very hard to maintain: it is, perhaps, impossible to redescribe physical pain until it goes away. Tellingly, neither Butler not Rorty makes this claim explicitly. Rather, both seem to offer some version of the first thesis: the weaker linguistic one. Both point to the ways in which the language we use helps determine

our understanding of the world. Both note the ways in which language changes over time and the power of thinkers and poets—figures such as themselves—to change the way we talk about the world and in so doing to create new ways of thinking about, looking at, and acting in the world. Nevertheless, there are also times when—consciously or unconsciously—Butler and Rorty appear to conflate the theses, presenting the more plausible weaker thesis as the basis of their claims but acting as if the stronger thesis is operational. In many ways, and particularly with regard to his account of redescription, Rorty appears much guiltier of this conflation than Butler.

For Richard Rorty, author of the decidedly upbeat *Achieving Our Country* and *Philosophy and Social Hope*, the alleged death of philosophy appears to be a source of great optimism.[24] Unconstrained by representational theories of language, humanity is now free, he suggests, to "de-divinize the world": to accept its own role in creating social and political life.[25] By "representational theories of language" is meant here, of course, the suggestion that words are labels for things in the world that exist prior to language and that the structure of language reflects the logical structure of that prelinguistic world. To say that something is true or false on this account is to say something about the correspondence between the language and the world. It is the sort of thing that Wittgenstein talks about in the *Tractatus* and the sort of thing that Rorty explicitly eschews.[26] "[S]ince truth is a property of sentences," he writes, "since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths."[27] From here it is only a short step—for Rorty at least—to the suggestion that all kinds of problems—philosophical *and* political—can be resolved through the power of *redescription*. "The method" he writes, "is to redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate forms of nonlinguistic behavior."[28] It is a claim that suggests that Rorty has moved unashamedly from the first linguistic thesis—that language helps determine the world in which we live—to the second linguistic thesis—that language is primary.

For Judith Butler, on the other hand, the death of philosophy and Enlightenment Reason seems to be a source of great pessimism. Showing a lesser tendency to conflate the strong and weak claims about language, Butler explicitly denies that she sees redescription as a political and philosophical "cureall."[29] Rather, language for her seems to be the way in which an at least partially nonlinguistic power manifests itself in everyday life. This is, of course, a rather ugly formulation of Butler's account, but there is, perhaps, no other way to capture Butler's deliberately nonanalytic position with any degree of rigor: Butler's dense prose style is designed, in part, to avoid such summaries of her work. For Butler, this partially nonlinguistic power appears insurmountable, leaving us

only with the power of words, performance, and play to subvert and resist. There is, nevertheless, no detailed account of this partially nonlinguistic power in Butler's work. Possibly taking her cue from Foucault's observation that "to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system,"[30] Butler seems to think it is impossible to give an account of this partially non-linguistic power that is not itself complicit with that power. In offering *argument*, she seems to suggest, one would simply be undermining one's own position by using terms that were, in themselves, already deeply problematic: always already implicated in an existing power structure that was seeking to resist or subvert. It is for this reason that she appears to prioritize *redescription* over argument, for the former offers at least the *possibility* of a language that is not so deeply implicated or tainted by its association with power.

Both Butler and Rorty appear to hold some position between the weak and strong theses about language and the world, leading them to reject argument, to throw out reasons with a small "r" along with Reason with a big "R." It is not a position that either thinker clearly articulates, however, precisely because to do so would be to engage in *argument*. For purposes of clarification, however, we might say that their claims about *arguments* fall into one of three possible categories:

1. *Arguments* simply cannot be given for any political or philosophical position.
2. *Arguments* can be given for political and philosophical positions, but such *arguments* are simply *readings* that have gained widespread acceptance.
3. *Arguments* can be given for political and philosophical positions, *arguments* that are simply accepted *readings*, but it is more effective to give alternative *readings*.

In order to elucidate these positions more clearly, and indeed to facilitate the rehabilitated account of argument in a postfoundational world, it is now necessary to say something about the distinction that has so far been implicit between *arguments* and *readings*.

Arguments and Readings: A Distinction

It might be noted that neither Judith Butler nor Richard Rorty makes the distinction being drawn here between *arguments* and *readings*, not least because both seem to regard the former as simply a version of the latter. This is because both regard the world as a kind of text and see the skills that one uses to read a

text as simply interchangeable with the analytical skills that one employs as a natural or social scientist: the *portability claim*. The distinction between *arguments* and *readings* is, perhaps, somewhat intuitive and as such hard to articulate. It is, however, no less important for that difficulty. In many ways it is very much akin to a distinction between *rigor* and *creativity*, or the distinction between moves *in* a language game and moves *across* language games. Such claims merely serve, however, to beg the definitional question. It will perhaps be best simply to state the distinction and to flesh it out afterward.

The distinction is as follows. An *argument* is the marshalling of reasons in favor of claims that can be evaluated against agreed-upon standards. A *reading*, on the other hand, is a critical practice best summarized by Richard Rorty's account of Harold Bloom's work: "the critic asks neither the author nor the text about their intention but simply beats the text into a shape that will serve his purpose. He does this by imposing a vocabulary . . . on the text which may have nothing to do with any vocabulary used by that text or its author."[31] In this practice of *reading*, resolving the difficulties of apparently contradictory claims is not a matter of finding some deeper sense in which the claims can be reconciled, nor of abandoning one of the claims in favor of the one that appears stronger or more plausible; rather, it is a matter of finding some way to *describe* these claims that does not generate the same contradiction, or that makes the contradiction seem irrelevant. *Readings* on this account rely largely upon their *effect* upon the reader, *arguments* upon the validity of their internal logic.

An *argument* is, therefore, somewhat constrained by what counts as a good reason. Convincing others of the validity of one's position in an *argument* is a matter of marshalling facts and evidence within the prevailing *standards of justification* to support one's claims. "Standards of justification" means the benchmark against which the plausibility of claims is judged, be it "Objective Truth" or "beyond a reasonable doubt." An *argument* is, therefore, something to do with *reasons* and *standards*, although neither this claim nor the suggestion that *arguments* rely upon their own internal logic for veracity commits us to a representational theory of truth. A *reading*, on the other hand, is constrained only by the imagination of the person giving the *reading*, or by the imagination of the audience for that *reading*. A crucial difference between an *argument* and a *reading* is that—in any given instance—the standards of justification in an argument remain more or less fixed, whereas, a creative or performative *reading* can itself alter the standards of justification in a way that an *argument* cannot. Convincing another of the value of one's *reading* is on this account less to do with the marshalling of *reasons* against an agreed-upon standard and more to do with the power of one's language: whether or not one's *reading* "clicks" or resonates with her in a way that is pleasing, given what she already believes—or what the *reading* can lead her to believe—about the world. *Readings* resonate

with readers in a way that works of art do or do not, hence the appropriateness of the turn to literature as a source of insight among those who embrace *readings* as the dominant critical mode. We might think, for example, of Sylvia Plath's poem *Stillborn*, which suggests the way in which a failed *reading* seems lifeless in contrast to the reading that resonates and captures the reader's attention and allegiance.[32]

A further important difference between *arguments* and *readings* is that—for the most part—conflicting *arguments* demand to be resolved, whereas conflicting *readings* can coexist. The standard of justification for an *argument* is, "Is it true, given what we know about the world?" The standard of justification for a *reading* is somewhat less demanding than this and certainly not as stable as that for an *argument*. It could be, for example, "Is it plausible?"; "Does it resonate?"; "Is it pleasing?"; or any manner of other criteria. This is not to suggest that literary criticism—the model for such an approach—is completely anarchic, simply that many different approaches to texts exist, and that these approaches and the readings that they engender can ultimately coexist with one another. As such, there is a difference between the depths of analysis required for *readings* and for *arguments*. "To be sure, there is justification," in Wittgenstein's famous phrase, "but justification comes to an end."[33] In the absence of a representational theory of truth, the best that we can hope for in terms of certainty is that we exhaust this process of justification. In the case of *readings* this process comes to an end far sooner and in far more ways than in the case of *arguments*, the latter demanding a more exhausting process of justification. This is because the model for *arguments* is philosophy or social science, while for *readings* it is literary criticism. The standards of justification for a *reading* or an *argument* are, that is to say, partly dictated by what is at stake in each field. Traditionally, there has been far more at stake over the questions of whether an action is just or unjust, or whether poverty causes crime—the questions of philosophy and social science—than over the questions of literature, such as who betrays Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*.[34] The former have implications for the way that we live our lives, the latter—in most circumstances outside of the Academy at least—ultimately very little import at all.

ARGUMENTS AND *READINGS*: BUTLER AND RORTY

Having identified the distinction between *arguments* and *readings*, it is now possible to say something about the status of *arguments* in the work of Judith Butler and Richard Rorty. Of the three possible positions identified earlier, Butler and Rorty both seem to hold some version of (2)—that *arguments* can be given for political and philosophical positions, but that such *arguments* are simply

readings that have gained widespread acceptance—and/or position (3)—that we can give *arguments* for political and philosophical positions, *arguments* that are simply accepted *readings*, but that it is more effective to give alternative *readings*. It is hard to imagine that anybody would sincerely hold the first position simply because it is clear that people give and make arguments all the time for various types of political and philosophical positions. Butler and Rorty both seem to suggest, however, that in so doing, such people are either offering *readings* that they misperceive as *arguments*—the second position—or that they are simply wasting their time because a better strategy is open to them—the third position.

The second position suggests that *arguments* are simply made up of *readings* that have gained widespread acceptance: that *reasons* have no special ontological status but are simply accepted *readings*. *Arguments* fail, this position suggests, fail in the same way that Plath's stillborn poems fail: they do not resonate with the reader or capture her imagination, and as such they are rejected. Although Butler does not make this claim explicit, it is a position that seems to be entailed by her work. The notion that *reasons* are simply accepted *readings* correlates strongly to her dismissal of "accepted wisdom" and "common sense." For Butler these concepts are closely related to her recurrent trope of *hegemony*. "Hegemony"—especially if it is regarded as a sort of "coercion with the consent of the governed"—seems to correlate directly to Butler's Foucaultian suggestion that the language that we use is shaped by powerful nonlinguistic forces that we do not control but that nevertheless shape the way we view the world. Human beings on this account may indeed appear to make *arguments* for positions that they hold, but the impact and scope of these arguments is largely restricted by the language in which these *arguments* are formulated. It is for this reason that Butler is so anxious to abandon ordinary language.

It also appears, however, that Butler also holds some version of the third position. It is nevertheless a position that is much more closely associated with Richard Rorty. Fittingly for a thinker who often positions himself within the American pragmatic tradition, adopting this position allows Rorty to remain agnostic on whether or not it is actually possible to make meaningful *arguments*. The third position simply holds that doing so is a waste of time. A more productive alternative is, it suggests, to offer new vocabularies in which the old *arguments* simply disappear. This is done by offering a *reading* of a given situation that makes the old *arguments* seem irrelevant or obsolete. The position suggests that the language we use—though in some sense determinative of the world in which we live—is somewhat arbitrary, malleable, and easily replaced. It is a view that Wittgenstein seems to advocate when he observes that with "different training the same ostensive teaching of these words would have effected a quite different understanding."[35] Indeed, there also appears to be a clear Wittgensteinian pedigree for the activity of redescription. Asserting that

one *"might* say: 'N' has become meaningless; and that this would mean that the sign 'N' no longer has a use in our language game," Wittgenstein adds in a crucial parenthesis, "(unless we gave it a new one)."[36] Rorty seems to have in mind passages such as these when he offers a *reading* of the later Wittgenstein to justify his rejection of *reasons* and philosophy. Such a rejection may, however, be somewhat premature.

POSTANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY: THE RETURN OF *REASONS* AND *ARGUMENTS*

That the claims about the death of philosophy have been exaggerated is suggested by the existence of an alternative to the metaphysical and postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches outlined earlier, an approach that has been called "postanalytic" philosophy.[37] Establishing the validity of this postanalytic approach is not only important for the remainder of this study but also for the practice of politics in the postfoundational world. Showing that it is indeed possible to give *reasons* and to make *arguments* for various political positions—as opposed to seeking to *persuade* others through the power of one's language—has an important political corollary in that it allows us to treat others as *ends* and not simply as the *means* of our political wills. In seeking to redescribe them and/or their beliefs in the manner advocated by Rorty we are perhaps potentially guilty of treating them in the way that he treats literary texts and characters: simply beating them into shapes that serve our purposes. While this might be acceptable for literary figures, it is not yet acceptable—at least within liberalism—for nonliterary ones. In addition, offering reasons for our positions may also help us avoid what MacIntyre described as the *shrillness* of much contemporary political discourse: giving us shared grounds on which to debate important political issues with those whom we disagree rather than simply seeking to shout them into submission. In order to establish this position, and with it the continued validity of *argument* and *reasons* within postmodernity, we turn to the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Ludwig Wittgenstein's influence on the linguistic turn in contemporary philosophy cannot be overstated. His impact on the literary turn in political thought and analysis is perhaps somewhat more indirect: largely the result of his influence on Richard Rorty. Rorty's turn to literary criticism is clearly predicated upon a *reading* of the later-Wittgenstein's work. There is, of course, a certain degree of circularity here: it is Rorty's adoption of *reading* as a critical method that leads to his *reading* of Wittgenstein, that which justifies his rejection of philosophy and his adoption of *reading* as a critical method.[38] Indeed, Rorty's Wittgenstein sounds an awful lot like a poststructuralist: he is concerned with the ways

in which our language shapes the world and confines us, and with *redescription* and *play* as a way out of this linguistic cage.[39] As such, it is perhaps fitting that we should turn to Wittgenstein as a means of showing why the postmodernist and poststructuralist claims about language and *argument*—the claims upon which both Rorty and Butler appear to predicate their turn to literary critical methods as a source of insight—are overstated. The aim here will not be to offer an account of Wittgenstein's work that is closer to some truth about his meaning in order to win the battle at the level of textual interpretation, for to do so would be to buy into the mistaken assumption upon which the turn to literature and literary criticism is based: that there is little difference between the world and a text. Rather, it will be to suggest that Wittgenstein provides us with the philosophical resources for an account of the relationship between language and the world that shows how the philosophical *argument* is both possible and useful in postmodernity, one that seeks to temper—in important ways—the faith that thinkers such as Rorty and Butler seem to place in the power of language.

The cornerstone of Rorty's account of Wittgenstein—if this is not too foundational a term—is the latter's concept of a "language game." At various points in *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein suggests that language is structured like a game. It is a telling metaphor. Just as with a game there are rules for the use of language, but these rules are neither fixed—in the sense that they can change over time—nor exhaustive: there is, as Wittgenstein notes, no rule telling us how high to throw the ball when serving in tennis. All argument and justification, Wittgenstein suggests, takes place within such language games, and these games are how we make sense of the world. "To understand a sentence," he writes, "means to understand a language. To understand a language means to master a technique."[40] For Rorty the key passages in Wittgenstein's work are those where he points to the almost arbitrary nature of language that we use, and where he suggests that human beings are free to make up new language games and to find new meanings for old words. These passages provide the impetus for Rorty to dismiss philosophical arguments on the grounds that they are simply previously rehearsed moves in language games—the second position—or alternatively, because we can avoid arguments altogether by simply inventing new language games—the third position. It is this last aspect of Wittgenstein's work that explains Rorty's belief that it is the poet and not the scientist who is the central figure of our epoch.

Precisely because she takes so much of the literary and linguistic turn for granted, Judith Butler would never seek to establish the validity of her position in the manner of Richard Rorty. Nevertheless, as has been suggested, Butler also seems to hold some perspective akin to that of the second position: that arguments are simply moves in language games—though she would never herself use this vocabulary—and that the terms or rules of such language games are set

by the powerful. In order to avoid perpetuating their power, she suggests, we should avoid using their language and focus instead upon finding new and more empowering ways of talking and being in the world, hence her concern with the value of *redescription* as a political method. Butler is, however, much more focused on the nonlinguistic aspects of power than Rorty. Her concern with "bodies that matter" and with performance indicates that although redescription remains a powerful weapon in her arsenal, she is less convinced than Rorty of the power of language alone. For this reason, her position might be better formulated as the following:

> (4) We can give *arguments* for political and philosophical positions, *arguments* that are simply accepted *readings*, but it is more effective to give alternative *performances*.

That Butler clearly regards her own *redescription* and writing as performative—an argument that will be developed in more detail in chapter 5—suggests that although she does not see *redescription* as a universal panacea in the manner of Rorty, it is still part of a resistive strategy that is predicated upon a belief in the power of language, one that suggests that *arguments* are a waste of time because they are always already implicated in existing power structures.

WITTGENSTEIN, LANGUAGE, AND THE WORLD

A closer examination of Wittgenstein's work on the relationship between language and the world shows us, however, that there is much that is problematic about these thinkers' claims. It can also give us a more plausible account of the relationship, one that suggests that not only can we make *arguments* in postmodernity, but that there are also good *reasons* for so doing. Wittgenstein's work in the *Philosophical Investigations* suggests that language is indeed a powerful tool for shaping the world: the concepts that we use to describe the world are, he suggests, key determinants in shaping both our conscious and unconscious understanding of it. Rorty's *reading* of Wittgenstein nevertheless overstates the extent to which he believes that language is malleable: language on Wittgenstein's account is much less "fluid" than Rorty believes.[41] Indeed, Wittgenstein's work offers a far more plausible account of the relationship between language and the world than that suggested by Rorty or Butler, one that makes their rejection of *argument* appear somewhat premature. Language, Wittgenstein seems to suggest, while not "fixed" in the manner he set out in the *Tractatus*, is nevertheless somewhat "viscous." This "viscosity" appears to arise from a kind of linguistic structure that emerges from our usage of it, that which

he calls "grammar." It is this account of "grammar" that paves the way for the return of *argument* to philosophy.

The structure of language that arises from our usage of it, Wittgenstein asserts, is in no way *necessary*. "Grammar does not tell us," he writes, "how language must be constructed in order to fulfill its purpose, in order to have such and such an effect on human beings. It only describes and in no way explains the use of signs."[42] Rather, it emerges simply from our past usage of it: because we have used language in certain ways more or less consistently in the past, we come to expect that it will be used that way again in the future. Nobody consciously sets out the rules for this use of language; rather, these rules simply emerge from our repeated usage of it. It is this grammatical structure of language that makes *arguments* possible, for the grammar of our usage serves to generate an internal logic for our language. Ways of speaking that follow this internal logic—*arguments*—are generally more valid than those that do not. It is this logic that allows us to choose between different positions and to select the position that seems most plausible given our experience of the world. It may be that this is precisely what poststructuralists and postmodernists mean when they assert that *arguments* are simply *readings* that have gained widespread acceptance. This is, however, simply a claim about the origins of *arguments*. It should not lead us to reject arguments in the manner of Butler and Rorty. It is important to note, however, that the basis of the rejection differs for each thinker.

Rorty rejects *arguments* because he believes that having identified their contingent origins, he is now free to invent the world. Butler does so on two grounds: first, because of her undeniable belief in the power of language to shape the world; second, because, for her, the widespread acceptance of arguments is indicative of the influence or hegemony of a partially nonlinguistic power that should be resisted. In neither case, however, do these seem to be good grounds for turning toward redescription and/or performance. In Rorty's case, just as recognizing the social constructedness of money does not lead us—most of us, at least—to abandon it, identifying the origins of arguments should not lead us to abandon them. In Butler's case, her rejection seems to eradicate all kinds of important distinctions between good arguments and bad ones and—as will be argued in greater detail in chapter 5—between all kinds of uses of power. Both approaches seem, furthermore, to prioritize novelty unnecessarily and to underestimate the continued usefulness of arguments. That we can and do use arguments to get around in the world is an important factor for maintaining their existence, both philosophically and politically. It is also indicative of another important aspect of language highlighted by Wittgenstein's work: that it is, in some sense, still connected to the world.

The claim that language is still connected to the world—redolent as it is of representationalist epistemologies—is, of course, enough to have postmod-

ernists and poststructuralists shaking their heads (or whatever it is that such figures do to indicate disagreement). Nevertheless, making this claim simply requires paying attention to those aspects of the weaker thesis about language and the world—that language, by shaping our outlook on the world, helps determine the world in which we live—to which both Judith Butler and Richard Rorty appear to subscribe. Rorty approvingly quotes Wallace Stevens's observation that language is the mind pushing back against reality.[43] Here it is merely being suggested that reality might itself push back against imagination and language. On the postmodernist and poststructuralist account of the world, language merely *helps* determine the world in which we live. Neither Butler nor Rorty, for example, comes out and says *directly* that language is primary, although Rorty in particular often writes as if he believes this to be the case. Such a claim suggests, of course, that the world in which we live is—as indeed Butler appears to hold—also partly determined by other factors: by some other nonlinguistic reality intersecting with language, with both language and the nonlinguistic reality existing in a symbiotic relationship, each affecting and being affected by the other. This is precisely what is suggested by Wittgenstein's concept of a "form of life."

"[T]o imagine a language," writes Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*, "means to imagine a form of life."[44] Although the term is never quite defined in Wittgenstein's work, it nevertheless captures the way in which the language that we use, though created by and for humans, is connected to the way that we live. Returning to Thucydides and the Greeks, we might think about the Greek concern with balance that is reflected in the ubiquitousness of binary oppositions in their poetry and prose. By presenting binary oppositions, such as in Pericles' Funeral Oration—between men and women, one and the many, life and death, and so on—the Greeks sought to find the middle ground between the two extremes. In this their language was intimately connected to their form of life and its concern with balance and harmony. Words, on this account, are tools for particular purposes. Just as a screwdriver has a particularly shaped head to fit particularly shaped screws, words are useful precisely because they fit or map onto some reality that is only partly determined by language. Indeed, if *arguments* are simply established *readings*, then it may be that this connectedness between language and the world is one of the *reasons* they resonate with us the way they do. So, although the connection between language and the world is not as fixed as Wittgenstein asserts in the *Tractatus*, it is certainly not as arbitrary as Rorty suggests. In a discussion of chess, for example, Wittgenstein declares: "When one shews someone the king in chess and says: 'This is the King,' this does not tell him the use of the piece—unless he already knows the rules of the game up to this point: the shape of the king."[45] In order to use a language, Wittgenstein suggests, we require a good deal of background knowledge about

our existence in the world—the way we interact with it and so on—background knowledge that he later calls "stage-setting" information.[46] As far as the ontological status of this "stage-setting" information is concerned, Wittgenstein is somewhat ambiguous, and we can remain agnostic. At times he appears to suggest that it is simply a matter of convention; at other times he appears to have a rather more Platonic view.[47] Either way, however, Wittgenstein's concept of a "form of life" captures the way in which the words that we use are intimately connected to our actions and the way that we are in the world. It is for this reason that Rorty's third position—that we can give *arguments* for political and philosophical positions, *arguments* that are simply accepted *readings*, but that it is more effective to give alternative *readings*—and Butler's variation—the fourth position—are both overstated. The language that we use in the world is arbitrary in the sense that it might have developed differently, but it developed in the way it did in part because it serves useful functions in the world, and it does this because of the way that it maps onto and indeed meshes with the world. As such, it is undoubtedly a useful tool for getting about in it.

In these circumstances, creating a new language game through *redescription* or simply changing the language game that we are playing at any particular time is rather more difficult than Rorty seems to suggest. The new language game would have to do everything that the old language game did and more. It is also for this reason that the fourth position is overstated. Butler seems to prioritize novelty; indeed, her position is somewhat akin to buying a new car because we have a flat tire. It is because she believes that language games are loaded in favor of the powerful that we should create new ones. The language that we use is, nevertheless, useful, precisely because we use it, and we use it because of the way that we are in the world and the type of beings that we are. To abandon argument and invent new language games whenever we run into difficulty—philosophical or political—with the current one would be to undo the very concept of language itself. Language would, in these circumstances, be so fluid as to be meaningless: we too would face the linguistic chaos of the civil war in Corcyra.

Rorty may be misled into his position by his rather thin conception of language. For him it seems that language is simply a collection of words, rather as they might appear in a dictionary. In these circumstances it is easy to see how he might think that language can be so easily manipulated. The arbitrariness of words—the fact that they could have meant something different from their current meaning—suggests that changing language is simply a matter of changing the definitions of words, which is really just a matter of getting other people to agree on the new definition. For Butler, however, there is a closer connection between language and the world than for Rorty. To extend the metaphor, for Butler, words appear in the dictionary with the definitions they do because of

nonlinguistic power. It is for this reason that she champions other forms of sub-
version, including parody and performance. Both thinkers are, however, con-
cerned with changing the world in which we live by shifting our understanding
of it through redescription, performance, or a combination of the two, for if the
world is partly—or even wholly—constituted by language, then changing the
world is a matter of getting others to agree on their new account of it.

The Wittgensteinian account of language offered here, however, offers a
much more plausible, "thicker" conception of language: words are related to the
way that human beings are in the world, and as such, they are more resistant to
change than either account suggests. Rorty's account of Wittgenstein misses, it
seems, a key definition in the latter's thought. "I shall," writes Wittgenstein, "also
call the whole *consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven*, the 'lan-
guage game.'"[48] Once language is conceived of in this way, the claim that chang-
ing the world is simply a matter of changing the language that we use to
describe it is rendered much more complex than Rorty and less necessary than
Butler seem to believe. Language, on this account, is much more viscous than
fluid. As such, it is much less likely to change with the frequency and manner
suggested by the rejection of *argument* and the turn to *redescription* in Rorty's
work. It is also much more useful than Butler's work seems to suggest. It is cer-
tainly capable of being employed in ways that might undermine the nonlinguis-
tic power with which Butler is concerned, not least because her concern with
creating new ways of speaking often seems to create a complexity that might it-
self serve to undo the concept of an intelligible language. Wittgenstein's account
of language being "woven into" the world also suggests why nonfictional human
beings are much less easily manipulated than fictional ones: they often answer
back and refuse to be beaten into the shapes that certain theorists require. Con-
sequently, this Wittgensteinian account of the relationship between language
and the world shows us why adopting a literary view of the world as a text for
political purposes may well be a mistake: language is much less flexible and
arguments much more useful than either Rorty or Butler seems to suggest.

Philosophy in a Postfoundational World

It has been suggested then that the work of the later Ludwig Wittgenstein pro-
vides us with the intellectual resources for a defense of philosophy that while
accepting the prerequisites of postfoundationalism nevertheless allows room for
arguments and *reasons*. The "grammar" or structure of language that arises from
our use of it is what makes *arguments* possible. There are, however, moments in
Wittgenstein's work where he appears to reject philosophy altogether: where he
suggests that philosophical thinking is a mistake that needs to be cured. "It is,"

he says memorably, "like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off."[49] Such comments are, however, focused on one-sided thinking—the sort of thing that, according to Thucydides, led to Athens' downfall—not philosophy per se. It is one-sided thinking that, he suggests, makes us unable to see or think our way out of a problem. As Hanna Pitkin memorably observes in *Wittgenstein and Justice*: "Wittgenstein's special genius lies in being able to hold . . . conflicting themes in balance, and teaching us ways of doing so for ourselves."[50] Overcoming such "philosophical thinking" is a matter of adopting a multiplicity of perspectives, though this is much harder than it is sometimes presented by Butler and Rorty.

Butler and Rorty both focus to too great an extent on language's undeniable capacity to help shape the world in which we live. Rorty in particular does so at the apparent expense of a nonlinguistic reality that also helps shape that language. Whether this is a rhetorical and political strategy or simply a philosophical mistake is perhaps unknowable. Wittgenstein's concept of "philosophical thinking" and the work of Butler and Rorty should, however, alert us to certain dangers inherent in doing philosophy in a postfoundational world, *political* philosophy in particular. Foremost among these is one-sidedness, the sort of thing that leads these thinkers to prioritize novelty and thereby possibly to undo the concept of language. Ironically it is precisely to avoid this one-sidedness that a number of thinkers in this study turned to literature in the first place. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein's work offers us an account of philosophy that might permit us to avoid such an approach.

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein gives an account of a philosophical method predicated upon his conception of language and its relationship to the world:

> Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one. Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions in language. Some of them can be removed by substituting one form of expression for another; this may be called an "analysis" of our forms of expression, for the process is sometimes like one of taking a thing apart.[51]

Here Wittgenstein might, perhaps, be thought to be advocating precisely the sort of redescriptive method championed by Rorty and Butler. The key phrase in this passage is, however, "some of them," as this indicates that Wittgenstein is not—as Rorty would have us believe—advocating this method as the *only* way to go about analyzing arguments and phenomena. Rather, he is suggesting

that it is simply one of many different methods, all of which involve looking to see how language is constructed and how it functions in its actual usage. Similarly, the Wittgensteinian claim, that "at some point one has to pass from explanation to mere description,"[52] which also seems to support the position adopted by Butler and Rorty, is notable for the qualifier "at some point." Rorty seems to regard such phrases as irrelevant, but by paying attention to them suggests that Wittgenstein offers us a way to do postfoundational philosophy. The time to move from explanation to description is when explanation within a language game has been completely exhausted. This is clearly something that differs according to what is under investigation. As with Wittgenstein's example about there being no rule for how high one should throw the ball while serving in tennis, there is clearly no hard-and-fast rule about when explanation is exhausted: it changes from case to case, and the only way to decide when it has been exhausted is, in Wittgenstein's phrase, to "*look and see.*"[53]

This "looking and seeing" consists of examining the theories that are being offered within existing language games—such as philosophy—and putting those theories into dialogue with our experience of the world in which we live in precisely the same way that Wittgenstein produces lots of everyday examples and looks to see if they capture something that we feel to be true about our experience of the world. If a theorist makes a claim, for example, about the power of literature to affect its readers then we should examine that theory against our experience of literature's impact upon its readers, and assess the extent to which we regard it as plausible, given what we know about readers and texts and the world. Within this language game of philosophy we can place the theory we are examining in dialogue with our experience of the world and assess the extent to which they correlate. It may be that there is little correlation; in which case we can simply abandon the theory or look for other possible explanations—constrained by what we know of the world—within that language game. We can, that is, offer reasons and arguments *within* language games for positions that we hold and measure them against our experience of the world. It is only when there are two or more apparently conflicting phenomena that resonate with our experience of the world that we cannot reconcile, that we should then look for some alternative set of terms—or language game—in which to describe them. There is, however, much work that can be done within the existing language game before we get to that point.

The only way to put some flesh on the bones of this admittedly skeletal account of philosophy in a postfoundational world is to *show by doing* in the subsequent chapters where the claims that are made on behalf of the turn to literature in political thought and analysis are critically assessed. We start with the work of Martha Nussbaum.