

2 Richard Rorty's Postmodern Synthesis

There are a number of major postmodern writers—Heidegger, Gadamer, Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, Jameson, and Baudrillard are among the most important—but in our opinion, philosopher Richard Rorty provides the most important postmodern view of our situation in the world. Rorty's major works include *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1980); *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982); *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989); *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (1991a); and *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (1991b). He writes in a clear, democratic style which is open to the nonspecialist. In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty argues that philosophers should above all attempt to carry on a "conversation with mankind" (1980, 389), and in all of his books and articles he seems to be carrying on a conversation with just about everybody, inside and outside of philosophy, who has an idea on a postmodern theme. A reader new to postmodern thought will quickly learn the various positions of other postmoderns, and Rorty's constant dialogue with other major writers is one of the more appealing aspects of his style. But most important, Rorty establishes a connection between postmodernism and American pragmatism, and it is this connection which makes his postmodern philosophy especially valuable.

The Ubiquity of Language

In analyzing the situation of human beings in the world, Rorty follows the later Saussure and Wittgenstein in emphasizing that language provides the starting point for all organized conceptual thought about the world. As he says in *Consequences of Pragmatism*:

. . . attempts to get back behind language to something that "grounds" it, or that it "expresses," or to which it might hope to be "adequate," have not worked. The ubiquity of language is a matter of language moving into the vacancies left by the failure of all the various candidates for the position of "natural starting points" of thought, starting points that are prior to and independent of the way some culture speaks or spoke. (Candidates for such starting points include clear and distinct ideas, sense data, categories of the pure understanding, structures of prelinguistic consciousness, and the like.) (1982, xx)

Here it should be stressed that in denying all starting points of thought other than "the way some cultures speak or spoke," Rorty is not denying that babies first have private, prelinguistic sensations. What he is denying is that such sensations or "raw feels" provide the basis for an older child's conceptual thought and knowledge-claims about the world. Specifically, Rorty is not denying that babies first experience a changing swirl of color, but only that this private swirl provides the basis for later distinctions, as when the child starts saying "that's red, not orange." Thus, while not ignoring sensations prior to language, Rorty posits a sharp break in a child's mental life—a break that takes place with the internalization of a community language at about the age of three or four. Only after this event takes place is the child capable of the organized conceptual thought that enables him to make knowledge claims such as "that's red, not orange" or "that's a dog, not a cat."

In emphasizing the "ubiquity of language" Rorty is also claiming that a human being cannot later set aside her internalized language while continuing to think conceptually about the world. As Rorty says, "I cannot think of thinking as something different from using language" (Saatkamp 1995, 123), or more succinctly, "language goes all the way down" (1982, *x-xx*). In other words, Wittgenstein was right in claiming that human thinkers remain forever trapped within their linguistic fly-bottles.

Mind as a "Mirror of Nature"?

But human beings tend to ignore this and act as though they could see outside the fly-bottle, and if they go to a modern school they will be encouraged to think of knowledge as an accurate representation of what is outside—an accurate representation of nature ("modern school" = a school under the influence of Descartes and the modern epistemologically centered philosophy discussed in the previous chapter). In such a school the student will be told that human beings should strive to acquire more accurate pictures of nature, and she will also be told that philosophy teachers are experts at finding out which pictures are accurate and which are not. In other words, the student will be told that philosophy teachers can know what is outside the fly-bottle.

Like the later Wittgenstein, Rorty cannot make sense of this modern way of thinking, and thus he wants us to abandon the search for increasingly accurate pictures of nature. In his first book, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, he

claims that what gave sense to the search in the past was a metaphor which was popular throughout the modern era—the metaphor of the mind as "a mirror of nature." As Rorty says in introducing the history of modern philosophy:

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," of "phenomenological analysis," or "explication of meanings," or the examination of "the logic of our language" or "the structure of the constituting activity of consciousness" would not have made sense. It was such claims as these which Wittgenstein mocked in the *Philosophical Investigations*. . . . (1980,12)

In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare called this "great mirror" of nature our "glassy essence" (2.2.117–23), and throughout the modern era, it was assumed that our ability to mirror nature was what set us apart from the other animals. And if Rorty is right in his analysis of the history of philosophy, the same mirror imagery is what inspired the modern project of representing nature accurately—the project of studying the mirror closely with the mind's eye in order to find nature's true reflections in it. In tracing the history of this philosophy, which confused knowledge with visual perception, Rorty concludes with a discussion of the twentieth-century shift from thinking of the mirror's mental reflections (ideas or images) to thinking of its linguistic reflections (sentences). But while he is sympathetic to this "linguistic turn," he also argues that it cannot save the project of modern philosophy, for there is no reason to believe that human beings have anything resembling mirrors of nature in their heads. We do have brains, apparently shaped by the process of natural selection, but a human brain doesn't seem to be like a "glassy essence" which can be studied by a mind's eye. And as Rorty says, if we are "no longer held captive" by such mirror imagery, we will no longer be tempted to think that human beings can arrive at accurate representations of nature.

If teachers followed Rorty's postmodern discussion of representation, we would no longer encourage our students to think of "knowledge" as a belief

which is acquired through a direct confrontation between what is in the mind and what is in nature. Rather, we would say that what we call knowledge is determined by "conversation." Specifically, we would think of knowledge as an assertion which no one around us wants to question. When we say, "grass is green" or "force equals mass times acceleration," and everybody around says, "no doubt about it," we think we have arrived at knowledge, but our certainty in such matters is not a result of a confrontation between what is in the "great mirror" and what is in nature. As Rorty puts it in a more recent essay, "our sense of . . . objectivity is not a matter of corresponding to objects, but of getting together with other subjects— . . . there is nothing to objectivity except intersubjectivity" (1994, 56).

Truth?

In a world without mental mirrors, what should teachers tell their students about "truth"? Rorty's answer is the same in all of his later writings: tell them that "we should drop the topic" (e.g., 1982, *xiii–xiv*). To see why, we need to be more specific. To begin with, in making this comment Rorty is thinking of truth as it is normally defined, by common sense as well as by Plato—truth as a belief or description of the world that corresponds to the way the world actually is. Technically, this is called the "correspondence theory of truth"—where "correspondence" is synonymous with "represents or pictures the world accurately." Thus the description "the sky is blue" is true if the sky is, in fact, blue, false if it is not, just as the belief or description "I have an innate feeling of benevolence for all human beings" is true if I do, false if I don't.

In his discussion of correspondence theory, Rorty points to the same basic problem that Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Hume, and Berkeley saw, but his analysis is much more sharply focused; and since this issue goes to the heart of postmodernism, we need to look at it closely. The problem is that it is impossible to determine if a belief or description accurately represents the world as it exists independent of thought. To see why this is a problem, we need to remember that "the sky is blue" is a description that exists in my head when I think about the sky, whereas the actual sky is something that exists in the outside world. In trying to discover truth there are thus two factors involved: the linguistic description that I think in, and the world outside. There is no doubt about what the description says, but to determine its truth I would have to compare what it says with the objective sky to see if they match. The problem is that in order to make such a comparison, I would have to slip outside my mind and language and confront the objective sky directly, and since there is no way to do this, I have no way of finding out whether the

description is true. I can compare the present description with other descriptions, as when I remember what the sky looked like last night or through my sunglasses, but as a fly in the fly-bottle I cannot set aside all descriptions and directly encounter an objective, undescribed sky. Nor can I detect the correspondence between "force equals mass times acceleration" and whatever else exists in the world.

Here it should be emphasized that this argument is not denying that *something* exists in the world outside of the descriptions we think in. It is not denying that there is an objective universe which is as it is regardless of how we describe it. What is being denied is that it makes sense to talk about *something else* which is also objective and called "truth."

In taking this position on truth, Rorty repeatedly emphasizes that we have no reason to think that the language of modern science is somehow unique when it comes to corresponding to the world. This position sharply separates Rorty from Galileo, who at the beginning of the modern era argued that the new mathematical language of science was special because "the book of nature is written in the language of mathematics." But as Rorty says, there is no reason to think that nature is written in mathematics or in any other language (e.g., 1982, 191–95). This isn't to deny that scientific descriptions do enable us to make more accurate predictions and also to gain greater control over nature, but predictability and control differ from an accurate picture of nature. Why should we ever infer that a language we made can accurately describe a nature that we didn't make? Indeed, it is quite possible that prediction and control are made possible only by a language which misrepresents what actually exists in nature.

If you disagree with this position on science, if you think that the mathematical language of modern physics does correspond, are you assuming that our human-made equations are somehow "in" the external world? Perhaps they are, and perhaps there are atoms out there, and perhaps Zeus is out there—but we have no way of climbing outside of our linguistic minds to find out. Nor is there any way of finding out the truth about why the teacher murdered the students who slept in class, whether it was "because of killer genes" or "because of an unresolved Oedipus complex" or "because the Devil made him do it" or whether it was "out of his own free will." As Hume showed, we cannot discover truth about any causal relations. Since Hume's day, philosophers and scientists have been struggling to disprove him, but they haven't even been able to establish whether all causes are material, or mental, or whether there are perhaps two kinds of causes which explain what happens in the universe.

Here we might ask ourselves whether English teachers should give up on the intent to discover the true meaning of a literary work. Is there any reason to believe that through literary scholarship and historical knowledge we can arrive at what an author was really trying to say—his "original intention"? For Rorty, as for Barthes and Derrida, the answer is no, and thus he, too, tells us to "forget the question of whether one has got its [the text's] 'meaning' or 'the author's intention'" (Mitchell 1985, 134). Rorty emphasizes that as our fly—bottles change over time, so do our interpretations of a text's meaning—as is classically illustrated in the various interpretations of *Hamlet*. But he also emphasizes that there is no reason to believe that the later interpretations are more "accurate" than the earlier ones.

To conclude this attack on truth, we should not think that there is something special about the discovery of one's "true self." For Rorty, there is no reason to suppose that an introspecting human being has a direct view into her self (or mind), for here, too, "language goes all the way down." In other words, the same problem arises, and whenever I introspect and think about what I "really am," I directly encounter nothing but various descriptions of what I am—e.g., "an animal with free will," "a rational essence," "a lump of atoms," "a creature who has a natural compassion for all human beings," etc. And since I am never directly aware of an undescribed reality which exists beneath these descriptions, I can never know the truth about "the real me." In this view people who tell us that they have "found themselves" have found nothing more than a particular description in their heads which they have faith in. But as between language and the external world, the gap between language and the inner world cannot be crossed, which is why it is pointless to talk about whether one has been true to herself.

On first reading this analysis of truth, it might be easy to conclude that Rorty's postmodern philosophy is just another example of intellectual nihilism. But this isn't the case, and to see why we need to look at some of the conclusions which Rorty draws from his negative discussion of truth. We have already mentioned that he wants us to drop the topic, but he doesn't stop there, and his main concern is to shift our intellectual focus from worrying about what is true to worrying about what works in getting us what we want. If we were to make this shift, we would stop worrying about whether literature, philosophy, and science are giving us accurate pictures of the world, and instead focus on what they help us accomplish, just as we do with our other tools. All language, in this Wittgensteinian view, should be seen as a tool that we use to solve problems rather than as an accurate picture of the world, and in this respect the language of philosophy is no different from the language of literature.

Rorty's Postmodern Utopia

In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty presents his ideas about utopia, and while looking at the positive side of his thought, we can contrast these ideas to Plato's ideas about utopia in *The Republic*. To begin with, Plato's utopia—we could call it the first modern utopia—is devoted to truth. It is a society in which people are encouraged to seek out eternal essences and moral truths and to then base their lives on them. It is also a society in which individuals are tightly controlled and in which there is little room for diversity. Universal Man is welcome, but not the Other; and individual lives are to be governed by reason and the general rules that all rational animals should follow, rather than by private desires and the individual imagination. Near the end of *The Republic* Plato even tells us that the artist would be banished from utopia because his imaginative descriptions stimulate emotion and prevent reason from discovering truth. At the top of the power hierarchy is the philosopher-king, and he dictates because he is the most rational truth-finder, and therefore knows what's best for everybody. Despite his rational approach to life, Plato's philosopher-king does not see our relation to the Other as a special moral problem.

The contrast: Rorty's postmodern utopia in *Contingency* is a democratic society devoted to freedom, creativity, and the reduction of cruelty. "Freedom" here means the freedom to create and live in terms of one's idiosyncratic fantasies without obsessing on truth and the universal rules that all rational beings should follow. Rorty's utopia is thus a society which is open to change and diversity, a society in which citizens are encouraged to follow their personal desires and fantasies while creating themselves in new and interesting ways. Individual freedom rather than the reign of universal truth would be the major political preoccupation in this postmodern utopia, and the Other would be welcome. As Rorty says, "If we take care of political freedom, truth and goodness will take care of themselves" (1989, 84). In such a society, what people come to believe would be determined by a free exchange of ideas, by persuasion in an open democracy, rather than by force.

Rorty's postmodern utopia would thus be a "poeticized" rather than a "rationalized" or "scientized" utopia (1989, 53), and the poet and the creator would be the major cultural heroes, rather than the philosopher, scientist, or

any other pretentious truth-finder. Science would still be around, for we would still need to solve the problems of food production and tooth decay, but science would not be seen as the most important human activity. Nor would it be seen as giving us a language which describes the world accurately—a language which everybody should strive to copy because it gives us truth. In other words, "physics-envy will become less prevalent, and . . . distinctions between disciplines will no longer be drawn in phallogocentric terms, such as hard and soft" (1994, 55).

Finally, the ideal citizen in Rorty's utopia would be preoccupied with self-creation rather than with self-discovery, but this private concern for creating and perfecting one's self would be balanced by a public concern for human solidarity and moral improvement. This ideal citizen would be what Rorty calls a "liberal ironist" (1989, xv)—where "ironist" means someone who lives with the thought that no beliefs can be rationally justified, someone who realizes that neither she nor anyone else will ever know the truth about the world. By "liberal" Rorty means someone who believes that "cruelty is the worst thing we do" (xv) and whose moral and political behavior is motivated by a strong desire to reduce his own and his society's cruelties.

True Sentences versus a Good Vocabulary

In thinking about Rorty's postmodern utopia, it should first be obvious that the imaginative poet and the creator are the stars, while the rational philosopher and the scientist—the modern stars—get only minor roles. In justifying this reversal Rorty makes a "distinction between finding out whether a proposition is true and finding out whether a vocabulary is good" (1982, 142)—where a "good" vocabulary is defined as one which "will get us what we want" (150).

It is clear that for modernists what counts is true sentences, but Rorty sides with the pragmatists' view that what counts is good vocabulary, "new ways of speaking" that will "help get us what we want" (1982, 150). This position makes sense not only because we can never know whether our sentences are true, but also because language "goes all the way down." In other words, since all thought is linguistic, the vocabulary used to describe an object controls how we think about it—about, say, women, dark skin, homosexuality, or nature in general. From this it follows that if we improve our ways of describing these objects, we will improve how we think about them. A good vocabulary thus

becomes all-important in human life, especially if Rorty is right when he claims that "anything could be made to look good or bad, important or unimportant, useful or useless, by being redescribed" (1989, 7).

Poets and Creative Redescribers

With this claim in mind, we should look at Rorty's ideas about the vocabulary of the poet and of the creative writer. Why should their descriptions of the world be ranked above those of the philosopher in a postmodern utopia? Here Rorty emphasizes two points: first, in describing the world, the poet and creative writer rely on concrete images and specific details, and thus they center our attention on particular situations in the world rather than on what is supposedly universal. Second, they take pride in coming up with original descriptions of the world (1991b, 66–82; 1982, 139–43).

Rorty develops this point by contrasting the language of literature with that of normal science. The normal scientist (as against the few geniuses such as Darwin and Newton) uses words in a strict and denotative way, which is essential for scientific precision and for reaching agreement with other scientists. Since metaphor, irony, and, in general, old words used in new ways prevent precision and agreement, there is no room for them in normal science. For example, if in writing up a lab report a student were to say that "the gas rose like Jesus rose from the dead," his science teacher would not classify him as a great scientist. But if he wrote the same thing in a story about a student who couldn't pass science, he might be praised in his English class. The difference is that the English teacher wants to encourage good creative writing, and she knows that it is precisely such unique descriptions that make one a successful creative writer. If Salinger, for example, hadn't described growing up and adolescence in a new way, we wouldn't praise *The Catcher in the Rye*. And if Beckett hadn't come up with the original image of two babbling tramps waiting for Salvation on a road to nowhere, we wouldn't praise his existential description of modern humanity's relation to the world in *Waiting for Godot*. These literary descriptions of the world lack the precision necessary for scientific agreement, but their originality enables human beings to see the world in a new and sometimes better way.

In his essay "Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens" (1991b, 65–82) and throughout *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty stresses that the creative writer's novel and concrete way of using language is needed in utopia for several reasons. First, its novelty plays a major role in freeing us from our

pasts, from social and personal childhoods which have created problems, cruelty, and suffering. Here it should again be noted that since thought is controlled by language, human problems are inevitably rooted in that language, often in traditional tribal descriptions of the world. We need the poets and creative redescribers because, by reminding us that there are many different ways of describing the world, their novel descriptions free us from the normal tendency to think that there is only One Natural or Right Description. We also need them because some of their novel descriptions—e.g., "Black is beautiful"—replace the old descriptions, and in doing so they foster new ways of thinking which can solve the problems created by the old descriptions. Of course, philosophers have also reminded us of the arbitrary nature of symbolic descriptions, but because of their emphasis on reason and finding the One Right Description, they play down the importance of finding alternative, imaginative ways of describing the world.

Poets and creative redescribers are also important because they serve as inspiration for our private projects of self-perfection. Here we need to remember that for Rorty self-perfection does not come through self-discovery. Rather, self-perfection means self-creation—and since the self is an "incarnated vocabulary," self-perfection means self-redescription. It means finding new and interesting ways to describe oneself and one's situation in the world. In *Contingency*, Rorty singles out Nietzsche, Yeats, Proust, and Derrida as writers who managed to make themselves into something new and interesting through self-redescription, and he thinks the rest of us should do the same. The poet can serve as our inspiration because her novel metaphors and idiosyncratic language remind us that we don't have to remain a copy or clone trapped inside a self-description imposed by a tribe, parent, peer group, or media talk show. She is important because she reminds us that it is possible to escape from our pasts, specifically, from a "self" we never made—possible to give ourselves a more fulfilling and aesthetically interesting shape by coming up with our own self-redescription and then living by it. In a world without truth, a world in which people would face up to the impossibility of ever "finding themselves," the poet and creative redescriber remind us that Nietzsche was right when he said that "this world can be justified only as an esthetic phenomenon" (1956, 143).

Moral Progress and the Reduction of Cruelty

But for Rorty, a private aesthetics isn't the whole story, and thus there is another reason for his desire to make the poet and the creative redescriber our major

cultural heroes: their language is essential for increasing human solidarity and reducing cruelty. While Plato and the moderns who followed him tended to think that such moral progress is possible only through reasoning and the discovery of moral truths, Rorty argues that when human beings come together, it is because of an imaginative description of Us and the Other (1989, *xvi*).

With regard to the reduction of human cruelty, Rorty argues that there is a major problem with philosophers' abstract moral theories because they typically fail to direct our attention to the situations where we are actually cruel in everyday life. For example, while searching for Kant's eternal moral truths in his *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, while reasoning our way through his "fundamental principles of morality," we are not focusing on the daily situations in which our behavior is cruel—such as when we ignore our relations with our mates or our obligations to America's hopeless ghettos.

As Rorty says, we will reduce our cruelty only if we face it, and here we can see the problem with Kant's abstract and rational approach to moral improvement. For Kant emphasizes that moral thought is essentially a matter of deducing how we ought to act from universal principles; it is simply a matter of reasoning out what our general moral obligations are to other rational beings in all situations. The problem with Kant's approach is that it separates morality from the ability to notice and identify with the humiliation and suffering of the people around us. As noted in the previous chapter, a follower of Kant focuses his attention on whether the categorical imperative would permit him to tell a lie in *any* situation, and thus he can ignore the painful consequences of telling the truth in *this* situation.

For Rorty, the poet, the novelist, and the journalist are more likely to point us in the right direction. Lacking the philosopher's interest in a universal and eternal moral theory, these creative writers focus our attention on specific, everyday cases of cruelty, and thus they are more likely to make us see and feel the humiliation and suffering that we inflict on others.

In addition to making us look in the right direction, creative describers provide the most persuasive redescriptions of cruel situations. These redescriptions are essential to moral progress because our cruelty is the result of our traditional ways of describing ourselves and others. Above all, we typically describe the "others" as different from "us": "Yes, there is a problem in hopeless, violent, and doped-up housing projects, but that's because the blacks are not like us; they are just born with a welfare mentality." Given this description of the situation, few of "us" want to do much to change things. And at this point we can see the importance of the creative writer's redescriptions,

for they are essential to changing our thinking about an ugly and cruel situation. Specifically, if a redescription causes us to think that a person who is suffering is "one of us"—e.g., "another mother who wants the best for her child"—we will want to eliminate her pain and hopeless condition.

In putting down Kant's rational approach to moral life, Rorty's main point is that the logical space from which our moral reasoning begins is created by our traditional descriptions of the world, and as he says in "Feminism and Pragmatism," it is these descriptions that typically block moral progress. For example, if "sodomy" is described as a "bestial act," we of course will reason that we should prosecute human beings who practice it. If, on the other hand, we define it as "another act of love that some human beings go in for," then we will start thinking that sodomy laws violate the right to private sexual freedom. This idea that moral reasoning never occurs in a vacuum, that it is always based on a particular description of reality which shapes its conclusions, is one of Rorty's strongest arguments, and it helps to explain why the imaginative redescriber is essential for moral progress.

Rorty especially singles out novelists for making moral progress possible. In *Contingency*, he praises Orwell for his redescription of communism as cruelty and Nabokov for showing us that it is our lack of curiosity about others that helps to explain why it is easy for us to humiliate them. In *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, Rorty especially discusses the nineteenth-century novels of Charles Dickens, and he asks us to think of "the novel, and particularly the novel of moral protest, rather than the philosophical treatise, as the genre in which the West excelled" (1991b, 68). In developing this point Rorty contrasts Dickens with Heidegger, and he argues that a democratic utopia needs Dickens more than it needs philosophers.

Specifically, Rorty argues that a Dickens novel helps to create a democratic society in which there is freedom, equality, and tolerance—a society in which diverse human beings are comfortable with each other. For unlike the typical philosophical treatise, which tries to penetrate beneath particular appearance to universal truth and therefore encourages us to think that there is only One Right Description of the world, the work of Dickens and other novelists focuses our attention on a diversity of viewpoints—without insisting that there is only one privileged, "true" viewpoint. Novelists typically mock the upholder of the single, true viewpoint, as Voltaire mocked Leibniz in *Candide*. In other words, novelists tell us to drop the thought that there is only One Truth (which, of course, is always on "our side"), and they also tell us to take pride in our ability to shift back and forth between different viewpoints. Thus the novel encourages

us to be tolerant and open and to find comfort with any old freak, like the freaks in Dickens's novels.

Finally, instead of giving us a grand theory of moral truth, novelists give us a great deal of concrete detail about just who is suffering and where and why. As Rorty concludes: "When you weigh the good and the bad the social novelists have done, against the good and the bad the social theorists have done, you find yourself wishing that there had been more novels and fewer theories" (1991b, 80). Obviously, there have been tolerant philosophers and intolerant novelists, but perhaps, in general, Rorty is right in insisting that the novel has done more for democratic pluralism than philosophy.

Perhaps he is also right when he says about Bosnia that "the emergence of human rights culture seems to owe nothing to increased moral knowledge and everything to hearing sad and sentimental stories" (1993a, 7) like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In this same essay, "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality," Rorty also emphasizes that despite the role of such stories in manipulating moral feelings of sympathy, there are other forces which help to explain a society's moral behavior. In particular, when poverty and insecurity support a traditional description of our enemy, we are not likely to be receptive to a new sad and sentimental story about him. In other words, although the way we think about each other is under the immediate control of how we describe each other, this doesn't mean that we should ignore nonlinguistic factors in trying to explain and change these descriptions. Rorty is not a linguistic idealist.

A Pragmatist's Brand of Postmodernism

In concluding this discussion of Rorty's postmodern utopia and ideas about moral progress, a few other points should be touched upon. First, Rorty's utopia is not a socialist utopia, and it rests on market-based production. Here Rorty is not advocating total laissez-faire, but he thinks we need to face the fact that twentieth-century socialism has been a terrible failure and that we now have no workable alternative to a system which generates an "ethic of greed" (1992). As he says in "The Intellectuals at the End of Socialism," we are stuck with a capitalist society in which "public virtue . . . is going to be parasitic on private vices" (1992).

Although few, if any, postmoderns will defend twentieth-century communism, not all agree with Rorty's willingness to defend Western liberal democracies. Rorty specifically claims that during the past 300 years, liberal democracies—with institutions such as free elections, a free press, an indepen-

dent judiciary, and public education—have reduced cruelty in the world, and he also claims that these democracies continue to be the best vehicle for moral progress. In taking this position, Rorty disagrees sharply with postmoderns such as Foucault and Lyotard, who would never follow him in referring to themselves as "postmodern bourgeois liberals" (1991b, 199). As we will see in later chapters, Foucault and Lyotard picture democratic societies as little more than restrictive "disciplinary societies" which are "terror" for the Other, and thus they refuse to defend them.

In dealing with the politics of Lyotard and Foucault, Rorty doesn't deny that democratic societies are filled with injustice and inequality, and he doesn't deny that there is a continuing problem with the Other, or that Foucault is right in claiming that in the modern era there has been an increase in "normalizing" restrictions on individual behavior. But he also points out that "you would never guess, from Foucault's account of the changes in European institutions during the last 300 years, that during that period suffering has decreased considerably, nor that people's chances of choosing their own styles of life have increased considerably" (1991b, 195). Rorty also argues that the increased restrictions are compensated for by a decrease in suffering and that democratic societies continue to have the best institutions for dealing with excessive restrictions on individual behavior—and that there are no concrete alternatives.

Here another point should be noted about where Rorty differs from many other major postmodern thinkers: he sees little political value in contemporary deconstructionist literary theory and in the project of overcoming Western metaphysical philosophy. In taking this position Rorty separates himself from Heidegger, Derrida, de Man, and many deconstructionist literary critics. The reason these thinkers take deconstruction seriously is that they believe that Western metaphysical philosophy (what Derrida calls "ontotheology") has a deep and terrible influence on everything else in Western culture.

This project comes from two claims in Heidegger's later philosophy. The first is that in striving to come up with a unique, closed, and final picture of the world, in searching for strong evidence and forceful arguments, Western metaphysical philosophy has identified truth with power, assuming that "truth is somehow a matter of the stronger overcoming the weaker" (Rorty 1991b, 32), as Rorty puts it. In other words, from the time of Plato, Western philosophy has been on a sick power trip, and at the end of the tradition, Nietzsche was still trying to do what Plato started out to do, which was to knock everyone down with his powerful picture of the world. The only difference between Nietzsche

and Plato is that Nietzsche's "will to power" metaphysics made everything explicit. Heidegger's second claim is that, since philosophy is the substructure for everything else in Western culture, the West itself has been on a sick power trip. In Heidegger's view, Western science, modern technology and American pragmatism are all outgrowths of a power-hungry way of thinking—a way of thinking which a true "thinker" must constantly strive to overcome.

As Rorty tells the story, Derrida popularized these two claims in America, and they now lie behind the contemporary project of deconstruction. Rorty's response is that even if the tradition were on a power trip, and even if most of today's philosophers were still metaphysicians (which he denies), the claim that Western philosophy pervades and controls everything else in Western culture is "false" (1991b, 107). For Rorty it's absurd to think that metaphysical philosophy has that kind of cultural and political importance. Thus, while praising Derrida for his original deconstructions of past philosophers, Rorty sees these readings as having little value for today's political and moral struggles. As he says in response to de Man's claim that literary theory and critical-linguistic analysis are essential for political and moral progress:

. . . it does not take any great analytic skills or any great philosophical self-consciousness to see what is going on. It does not, for example, take any "critical-linguistic analysis" to notice that millions of children in American ghettos grew up without hope while the U.S. government was preoccupied with making the rich richer—with assuring a greedy and selfish middle-class that it was the salt of the earth. Even economists, plumbers, insurance salesmen, and biochemists—people who have never read a text closely, much less deconstructed it—can recognize [that] the immiseration of much of Latin America is partially due to the deals struck between local plutocracies and North American banks and governments. (1991b, 135)

For Rorty, what the oppressed need isn't political reformers distracted by deconstructionist literary theory and the overthrow of Western metaphysical philosophy, but rather reformers who focus directly on concrete political problems and practical action. As he says in "Movements and Campaigns" (1995), what is needed isn't reformers distracted by sweeping intellectual "movements," but rather reformers who are engaged in specific political "campaigns." Instead of a reformer who prides himself on being a proper postmodern, standing far above the old-fashioned modernist, what is needed is a reformer who can create a significant job program for kids growing up in ghetto housing projects.

Here and throughout this section, we can see where Rorty differs from many other postmoderns: he is a pragmatist who believes that thought can only be

justified in the realm of action, and, specifically, that it can only be justified by successful action in a democratic society. This pragmatism comes out in Rorty's criticisms of Marxism as well as in his criticisms of Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, and the deconstructionists. It also comes out in his comparison of Dewey and Heidegger, two philosophers who have had a major influence on Rorty, and in the rest of this section, we will look briefly at what Rorty says about them.

To begin with, for Rorty, Dewey and Heidegger are, along with Wittgenstein, the most important Western philosophers, and Rorty praises both for their criticisms of metaphysical philosophy. But when he goes on to discuss their alternatives to metaphysics, he continues to praise only Dewey and has nothing good to say about Heidegger. Specifically, he praises Dewey's pragmatic alternative, which focused on social reconstruction in a democratic society, while he is highly critical of Heidegger's later philosophy, which was preoccupied with the search for Being.

Briefly, the "Being" that Heidegger searched for can be thought of as the ultimate truth about what lies behind, and gives form to, the way human beings think and act in the world; it is "that on the basis of which beings are already understood" (Dreyfus 1991, *xi*), and it includes a society's traditional patterns of behavior as well as its traditional language games and ways of describing the world. Although it gives form to a thinker's life and thought, it cannot be fully conceptualized, and therefore the thinker can become conscious of only a small part of it. Since, ultimately, it stretches back into darkness and mystery, the search for Being is endless, yet for Heidegger, it is the only topic worthy of thought in a postmetaphysical philosophy.

But for Rorty, Heidegger's search for Being is simply a distraction from the problems of human beings, and he sees it as marked off by the same kind of mysticism and "otherworldliness" which marked off Plato's metaphysical search for the "forms." At the end of "Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger and Dewey," Rorty even concludes that "by offering us 'openness to Being' to replace 'philosophical argument' Heidegger helps preserve all that was worst in the tradition he hoped to overcome" (see Rorty 1982, 54). The point here isn't to determine whether Rorty is right about Heidegger's philosophy, but only to explain why he rejected it, and the reason is clear: for Rorty, it "has no general public utility" (1989, 118). The reason Rorty prefers Dewey's pragmatic alternative is also clear: he sees it as a philosophy which will help us in coping with the beings we encounter in a democratic society.

In defending Dewey over Heidegger, Rorty doesn't deny Heidegger's charge that Dewey's pragmatism is another expression of a will to power. But whereas

for Heidegger this just means more power sickness, for Rorty it means "an attempt to help achieve the greatest happiness of the greatest number by facilitating the replacement of language, customs, and institutions that impede that happiness" (1991b, 20). Unlike Heidegger, Rorty can see nothing inherently wrong with thought that attempts to control the world, and he claims that it is possible to "put power in the service of love . . ." (48), possible for politics to be "the appropriate vehicle for love . . ." (49). In taking this view Rorty also differs from Foucault, who, as we will see in a later chapter, assumes that the desire to control things is inevitably tied to dominance and oppression.

This brings us to a final difference between Rorty and Heidegger, a difference which also separates Rorty from many of Heidegger's postmodern followers: Rorty rejects their view of modern technology. According to this Heideggerian view, "modern technology" is much more than machine tools and practical know-how; it is also the culminating stage in the terrible will-to-power way of thinking about the world that began with Plato. As Heidegger says in "The Question Concerning Technology," modern technology is essentially an aggressive, pervasive and totalizing way of "revealing" (1977b,12) the world, a way of revealing that leads us to see everything in nature, including human beings, as nothing but a resource, something to be used and then tossed away. Growing up under this way of revealing, we inevitably seek greater control, increased efficiency, and higher rates of production, and thus everything in our world, including ourselves, is reduced to a part of the stockpile or "standing reserve" (1977b, 17). With its great practical successes, this way of revealing the world is inherently expansive, and it is rapidly driving out other cultures and ways of revealing the world. It is thus producing a leveling down of "organized Uniformity" (1977b,152), what Foucault calls the "normalization" of the world, and it should be thought of as a more centralized bureaucracy, increasing mass consumerism, and African villagers watching "Baywatch."

For Heidegger it should also be thought of as a way of revealing the world which closes us off to poetry, creative redescrptions, and the voice of the Other. In developing this claim Heidegger contrasts technological moderns with the "primordial" pre-Socratic Greeks; the latter, according to Heidegger, lived with a deep sense of the contingency of their way of life. In other words, they lived with a sense that there was nothing necessary about their traditional way of revealing or describing the world, and as a result, they also lived with an openness to alternatives, i.e., to poetry, creative redescrptions, and the voice of the Other. But for moderns, living under the spell of successful technological mastery, this sense of the contingency of our way of living in the

world is lacking. And because we assume that there is something necessary about our descriptions of the world, we are deaf to poetry, redescription, and the beauty of what is Other.

Thus, despite the economic prosperity resulting from technological advances, Heidegger describes our era as "the darkening..." characterized by "the flight of the gods, the destruction of the earth, the transformation of men into a mass . . . [and] the hatred of everything free and creative" (1977a, 37–38). Or, as Rorty puts it, "for the Heideggerians technology is the Great Bad Thing in the world that is responsible for all contemporary evils," and it is what must be "overthrown" in order to produce a new and better kind of human being (1992).

As we will see in later chapters, this Heideggerian view of modern technology has exerted a major influence on postmodern thought, but for Rorty, the whole idea that we need to overthrow a single, all-encompassing way of revealing the world is nonsense. As he said in criticizing deconstructionist politics, reformers should instead attack the little things, e.g., specific cases of destructive technological development, and greedy, selfish, and cruel human beings. And in response to Heidegger's charge that modern technology has eliminated awareness of our contingency and deafened us to poetry and the voice of the Other, Rorty points out that along with the industrial revolution went romantic poetry, constant political and artistic revolution, and in the twentieth century a liberal culture that is hostile to ethnocentrism. In thinking about Rorty's response to the later Heidegger, and in particular about his refusal to separate philosophy from practical action, and technology from poetry and love of the Other, it is easy to accept Nancy Fraser's description of Rorty as a postmodern who is somewhere "between romanticism and technocracy" (see Malachowski 1990, 303)—and here again we can see what is special about a pragmatic brand of postmodernism.

Intellectual History and Metaphor as Mutation

Before concluding these two chapters on modern and postmodern philosophy, we should summarize Rorty's nonteleological view of the intellectual history of human beings—a view which is especially influenced by Darwin, Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Hesse, and Davidson. To begin with, whereas modernists thought of intellectual history as primarily the history of changing thoughts about the world, for Rorty it is primarily the history of changing language—the history of changing vocabularies or descriptions of the world. And whereas modernists

believe that, because of reason, the scientific method, or a closer inspection of the human soul, intellectual history is essentially the progression toward greater truth about the world, for Rorty there is no such progression. Instead, there are only changing redescrptions which make possible a new kind of intellectual and social life. The new descriptions replace the old simply because human beings find a use for them and not because they are more "accurate" than the old descriptions.

It isn't reason or truth which is at the root of this intellectual history; it's the imaginative use of old words in new ways. In other words, the intellectual history of the arts, of a sense of right and wrong, and of science is primarily "the history of metaphor" (1989, 16). In thinking of some key metaphors that have reshaped the history of Westerners, you might consider the early Christian redescription of God as "love," Luther's redescription of secular work as a holy "calling," and Newton's redescription of the regularities of nature as due to "gravity" (*gravitas*). In each case, an old word was used in a new way, and the consequence was a new kind of intellectual and social life. And once again Rorty emphasizes that there is nothing special about science and Newton's scientific revolution; here, too, the new way of thinking about the world follows the new use of an old word. In the beginning was always the metaphor.

In arguing that the major transitions in intellectual history are brought about by metaphor, Rorty follows Davidson in denying that when it is first used, a metaphor has cognitive content. In other words, when a speaker or writer first uses a word metaphorically, he is not attempting to convey a concept or meaning that already exists in his mind. Rather,

tossing a metaphor into a conversation is like suddenly breaking off the conversation long enough to make a face, or pulling a photograph out of your pocket and displaying it, or pointing at a feature of the surroundings, or slapping your interlocutor's face, or kissing him. Tossing a metaphor into a text is like using italics, or illustrations, or odd punctuation or formats. (1989, 18)

The point here is that when an old word is first used in a new way, it is to produce an effect on a listener or reader and not to convey a concept. If the speaker or writer wanted to convey a concept, he would have spoken or written literally, using an expression that already had a meaning in the existing language.

In this view, when a word is first used metaphorically, it is a meaningless noise or mark. Since it doesn't have a place in the already existing language game, no one knows what it means, and it is not thought of as expressing something true or false. But after it has been used a few times and people begin to reflect on it in terms of their other beliefs and desires, a metaphorical sentence

sometimes becomes meaningful. And when this happens, people change their beliefs and desires and start thinking about the world in a new way. If reflection does make sense of a metaphor, it becomes literalized, and its users then think it expresses something that is true or false. But again, we shouldn't think of a successful metaphor as a more accurate description of anything; instead, we should see it as a human creation which makes possible a new kind of intellectual and social life. For example, after God became "love," Romans no longer took their children to watch lions tear up human beings at the Colosseum.

Here it should be noted that although Rorty denies that, on first hearing, a metaphor has cognitive content, he does not deny that there are causes which explain why someone first uses an old word in a new way. The cause could be a kink in the brain or more likely a traumatic obsession in early childhood. For an example of the second possibility, Frank E. Manuel, in *A Portrait of Isaac Newton*, emphasizes that throughout much of Newton's childhood, he yearned for distant objects (his father died and went to Heaven before Newton was born, and when Newton was only three, his mother remarried and then lived away from him in his early years). Newton's later metaphorical use of *gravitas*—his claim that every body in the universe attracts and is attracted by other bodies—could thus be explained in terms of contingent childhood events. This doesn't explain Newton's mathematical ability, but it is interesting that Newton himself claimed that he arrived at his theory of gravity while sitting in his mother's garden.

Notice that in this view a metaphor is like a mutation—a novel form which is caused but is not the product of reason. In both cases, because of natural causes, something comes into the world but not as a result of reasoning. And in both cases, the new form sometimes endures for a time because of a particular environment that is receptive to it. With a succession of mutations, a new species is sometimes the result, and with a metaphor, a new kind of intellectual and social life is sometimes the result. It should also be emphasized that in both cases it is what follows the entrance of the new form into the world that is the key to its survival. If the savanna is receptive to a mutant who walks upright, the upright posture will replace the bent-over posture which preceded it, and if the intellectual and social world is receptive to the *gravitas* metaphor, it will replace the older description of the universe. It should also be emphasized that in neither case is anything being represented accurately; like a new species, a successful metaphor is simply a form that works in the world. And since the intellectual and social world is, like the natural world, constantly changing, we need to be alert to new and useful forms, alert to metaphors

which can help us solve the old problems created by the old dead metaphors. We should also be alert to Rorty's main point about our intellectual history: "A sense of human history as the history of successive metaphors would let us see the poet, in the generic sense of the maker of new worlds, the shaper of new languages, as the vanguard of the species" (1989, 20).

An Insubstantial but Poetic Pageant

To conclude these last two chapters, if we give up on Descartes and Kant and take Rorty's postmodern turn, one thing is undeniable: everything that once was solid melts into thin air. Specifically, if we take this turn, we can no longer hang on to Descartes's certainty and Kant's rational and clear-cut moral rules. Nor can we hang on to our "true self," to our "natural feelings," or to the truth about the world. There are no foundations, and we will have to live with the thought that although we are clever animals, we do not have mirrors of nature in our heads. As teachers we will have to live with the thought that we are not passing on any eternal truths to our students.

On the other hand, none of this lack of solidity means nihilism. Nor does it mean that we should tell our students to stop reading or doing science, for both continue to be essential for solving some of our daily problems. We can also continue to praise scientists and other cultural heroes, but now they will be seen as people who are good at doing things, e.g., at healing, cleaning up the environment, teaching, redescribing, etc.—people who are good at solving problems and coping, but not people who have discovered truth.

What is gained is a freedom from what Nietzsche called a "burden"—the burden of thinking we have to find and live according to the truth, the burden of trying to force the world and its people into our rational categories, over and over again, without success. Without foundations or mirrors, what is solid has certainly melted into thin air, and what remains is obviously an insubstantial pageant, but at this point the linguistic imagination is no longer locked up in what Max Weber called "the iron cage" of reason and truth. Rather, it is freed to create a more imaginative play, perhaps with the same fantastic diversity that we find in Shakespeare.