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## On Rorty's Evangelical Metaphilosophy

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I have spent 40 years looking for a coherent and convincing way of formulating my worries about what, if anything, philosophy is good for.

—Richard Rorty, “Trotsky and Wild Orchids”

Richard Rorty had an unusually avid interest in metaphilosophy. Again and again he would return to questions about the practical uses (if any) to which philosophy might be put, about philosophy's role in intellectual culture, about what philosophy is or might become. His answers to these questions were famously negative: philosophy's practical uses are few, its cultural role marginal. Philosophy is or will be whatever we make of it.

Yet it is one thing to have given up on the idea of Philosophy as a *Fach* with a naturally occurring canon of problems, or in terms of the closely related conception of *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft*, and another thing to write books and essays aimed at persuading one's peers to see things the same way.<sup>1</sup> The difference here is akin to that between the atheist who, lacking belief in a God, simply goes about her daily business and the “evangelical atheist,” who wishes to convince everyone around that her lack of religious faith represents the right way to see things. Rorty certainly hoped to persuade his readers and interlocutors that his lack of faith in Philosophy was the right way to see things—though, tellingly for what I argue in this

paper, “right” must be taken to mean something like “more convenient or promising” rather than “fits more faithfully with philosophy’s real, actual prospects.” Rorty did not merely have private, idiosyncratic worries about the value of philosophy. Much more energetically, he spent decades searching for “coherent and convincing ways” of formulating them. Rorty’s skepticism about philosophy’s grand ambitions was not merely the sort of conclusion one reached, privately, when one realized that the youthful expectations one had first brought to the study of philosophy had been naive.<sup>2</sup> It was much more than the private hunch that “the whole idea of holding reality and justice in a single vision had been a mistake” (1999, 12). On the contrary, Rorty labored diligently to convince others of the futility of such synoptic, Platonic pursuits. There was an important therapeutic lesson to be gleaned from the disappointment of Rorty’s *Bildung*, a lesson from whose learning the enterprise of philosophy—and perhaps intellectual culture as a whole—would stand to benefit.

I want to argue in what follows that Rorty’s ambivalent relationship to the old Greek dualism between persuasion, or rhetoric, on the one hand, and logical demonstration or argumentation on the other, sheds light on the character and purpose of his “evangelical metaphilosophy.” I argue, further, that the significance of the rhetoric/logic dualism in Rorty’s work can be accounted for by his sometimes neurotic attentiveness to the so-called problem of self-reference and that this conclusion can be brought into sharper relief by examining a certain tension in Rorty’s thought between his repudiation of “philosophical finality” (a phrase I make precise shortly) and the language in which his urges to “drop” a whole host of dualisms, distinctions, and controversies is sometimes expressed. I do not advance this argument in the spirit of a definitive interpretation of Rorty’s metaphilosophical ambitions. My aim is not to put forward a candidate answer to the question “What is really at the heart of Rorty?” It is rather to single out for examination some philosophically interesting aspects of Rorty’s rhetorical practice, and to ask what, if anything, Rorty’s unique way of arguing might suggest about his broader philosophical program. My argument neither undermines nor minimizes the centrality of Rorty’s elegant critiques of, among other things, foundationalism, essentialism, and (capital ‘P’) Philosophy. On the contrary, I am happy to concede that those critiques, along with the deeply historicist and therapeutic perspective in which they are couched, are at the center of Rorty’s enterprise, that they, more than anything else, hold the key to what is most noteworthy about Rorty’s thought. Yet it does not violate that concession to suggest that a study of the kind I here propose is

significant as well. It is significant, I believe, not only for an appreciation of the extent to which the distinction between rhetoric and logic plays a profound role in Rorty's thinking—indeed, the extent to which the invocation of that distinction *itself* is one of Rorty's favorite rhetorical strategies—but also for appreciating the more ironic point that it is hard to make sense of many of Rorty's most daring theses without the very distinction he consistently suggests is untenable.<sup>3</sup> I do not here claim that Rorty makes use of a novel or noteworthy conception of rhetoric (though that is certainly a live possibility); rather I want to show how he deftly puts the distinction between rhetoric and logic to work in the service of his future-oriented, Romantic version of neopragmatism—that is, how he uses that distinction (or something very close to that distinction) to carve out a space within which what he calls “cultural politics” can be practiced. Let me begin by bringing into focus, preliminarily, the tension I believe I have spotted.

#### FINALITY OR FLUIDITY?

Rorty is deeply skeptical about a philosophically final and peaceful outlook.<sup>4</sup> He makes such skepticism explicit when he writes that

I am anxious to give the peace of the grave to lots of worn-out philosophical problems (for instance, those taken up by G. E. Moore), but I have no doubt that every attempt to get rid of old problems by revisionary attempts to break old inferential connections will itself generate unexpected new inferential connections, new paradoxes and (eventually) new “problems of philosophy” for the textbooks to mummify. (2000a, 348)

And similarly, he claims that

I do not believe that there is, in addition to the so-called fixations and obsessions of us philosophical revisionists, a peaceful, non-obsessed, vision of how things deeply, truly, unproblematically are. . . . If you want genuinely and permanently unproblematic peace, you should stay out of philosophy. You might try, for example, becoming a gardener in a monastery, or a hermit on a desolate shore. (2000a, 349)

All of this sounds like Hegelian *Aufhebung* without the eschatology—like the dialectical advancement of the world spirit without the final unity of subject and world. Rorty urges philosophers to give up their ambitions of finality—their self-congratulatory attempts to “see things under the aspect of eternity”—insisting that they become content instead with “grasping their time in thought” while modestly trying to contribute to humanity’s ongoing “conversation” about what to do with itself. What I have been calling Rorty’s repudiation of “philosophical finality” then, is at bottom another expression of the deep historicism that ran through his thought. To denounce a final stance in philosophy is tantamount to saying that the questions and problems that philosophers have typically regarded as fundamental or natural owe their life and momentum to nothing weightier than contingent historical circumstance. Philosophical problems have historical genealogies rather than transhistorical essences; they are transitory and optional, as are the vocabularies against whose background they became problems in the first place. “Our language and our culture are as much a contingency, as much a result of thousands of small mutations finding niches (and millions of others finding no niches), as are the orchids and the anthropoids” (1989, 16). And so it seems puzzling that one should come across passages like the following in Rorty’s books and essays.

By contrast, those of us who see Sellars’ “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind” as pretty much the last word philosophers need utter about perception, and as devastating a critique of phenomenalism as we shall ever have, see direct perceptual realism as a throwback to Cartesianism. (2000b, 90)

If Dewey had, like Ryle, and Sellars, and Wittgenstein, and Heidegger, confined himself to remarking that without the spectator model of knowledge we should never have had a mind body problem in the first place, he would have been on firm ground, and would (I think) have said all that needs to be said. (1982, 84, 85)

J. S. Mill’s suggestion that governments devote themselves to optimizing the balance between leaving people’s private lives alone and preventing suffering seems to me pretty much the last word. (1989, 63)

The later Derrida privatizes his philosophical thinking, and thereby breaks down the tension between ironism and theorizing. He simply drops theory . . . in favor of fantasizing. . . . Such fantasizing is, in my view, the end product of ironist theorizing. (1989, 125)

This Davidsonian conception [very roughly, Davidson's attempt to erase the objective-subjective distinction] should, I think, be thought of as the final stage in the assault on the Cartesian idea of the mind. (1993, 401)

James and Dewey were not only waiting at the end of the dialectical road which analytic philosophy traveled, but are waiting at the end of the road, which, for example, Foucault and Deleuze are currently traveling. (1982, xviii)

Davidson's work seems to me the culmination of a line of thought in American philosophy which aims at being naturalistic without being reductionist. (1991, 113).

Analytic philosophy culminates in Quine, the later Wittgenstein, Sellars, and Davidson—which is to say that it transcends and cancels itself. (1982, xviii)

Rorty cannot really mean what he says in these passages. Locutions like “all that needs to be said” or “the end of a dialectical road” or “the final stage” are not easily squared with Rorty's repudiation of philosophical finality. Nor is it particularly helpful to say that these passages refer to topics that Rorty thinks have “exhausted their possibilities.” Rorty cannot mean to say (as Heidegger boldly said of Nietzsche) that Davidson should be regarded as the last philosopher of mind—that the area of inquiry that flies under the banner “philosophy of mind” exhausted its possibilities with Davidson, just as metaphysics allegedly had with Nietzsche. It is difficult to imagine that Rorty thinks the phrase “exhausted its possibilities” is of much metaphilosophical use. For no one can say in advance or a priori when (or if) it is time to stop talking about a certain topic. No one can “prove” or “demonstrate” that the cluster of issues that congregate around the rubric “philosophy of mind” or “epistemology” are no longer worth thinking about—just as no one can *prove*, conversely, that we have a natural duty to work through the prevailing problems in these fields.

A fortiori, Rorty cannot really think that Davidson “solved” the mind-body problem or that Hilary Putnam or Michael Williams, say, “refuted” the skeptic. That prospect is openly at odds with Rorty’s crucial idea: roughly, philosophical problems are not solved *as such*; rather, the vocabulary in which they are stated and against whose background they became problems in the first place, is dropped or suitably altered. As Rorty writes, “Interesting philosophical change . . . occurs not when a new way is found to deal with an old problem but when a new set of problems emerges and the old ones begin to fade away” (1979, 264). So surely the sense of finality he expresses in the quoted passages must be more “rhetorical flourish” (as Rorty was fond of putting it) than a sentiment he intends literally. But what are these “flourishes” for? Does saying something like “Davidson’s conception is the final stage” in Rorty’s rhetoric *really* mean something of the form “I don’t wish to talk about this problem anymore?” or “I am anxious to give the peace of the grave to this worn-out problem?” Perhaps it does. Frankly, it is hard to imagine what else it could mean. But why should Rorty be so cryptic about this? Why not rather say what he means? What is the point of presenting his urges to “change the subject” in the dress of an important philosophical discovery? Why would someone who admittedly has only rhetoric to offer, someone primarily concerned with changing philosophy’s self-image and agenda, think it profitable to communicate his message in this way?<sup>25</sup>

I return to these questions, but here a preliminary note is in order. To ask “Why should Rorty be so cryptic?” is rather unlike the question frequently posed by bewildered Anglophones in reference to many of the so-called continental philosophers. My question about Rorty is not like a question of the form “What does Heidegger really mean when he says ‘language is the house of Being’ and why, for the love of God, doesn’t he just come out and say clearly what he means?” This question is distinct from the one I ask because Rorty’s failure to say clearly what he means is not the product of having invented a new idiom. There is no Rortian equivalent to what is sometimes called “Heideggerese,” some special, metaphorical language (or glossary of terminology) the mastery of which will explain to us why Rorty says these sorts of things when he means or believes otherwise. There are no novel uses that Rorty has for phrases like “the last word” or “the end product” such that, if only we could develop a competence or familiarity with these uses, the intended rationale of the passages I quoted would become self-evident. Most commentators will agree that Rorty ought to be read literally—some hyperbole and occasional “joshing” notwithstanding—just as

one might read Quine, Sellars, Davidson, Putnam or any other philosopher of the so-called analytic tradition.<sup>6</sup>

The question as to why he doesn't say what he means overlaps to a considerable extent with another question. Why was Rorty clear, precise, and unambiguous when debunking or deconstructing but admittedly vague, unspecific, and "fuzzy" when offering his positive ideas? In what follows I try to explain why Rorty's writings divide up this way—into the precise, negative part and the fuzzy, positive part—and try to indicate how the relationship between these two wings of Rorty's corpus helps us recognize the extent to which his thinking is organized, in part, by the rhetoric/ logic dualism. Before I move ahead with this agenda, a few remarks about the problem of methodological self-reference are in order. For it is Rorty's careful awareness of this sort of problem, I claim, that constitutes the source of his ambivalent entanglement with the rhetoric/logic dualism.

Anyone who offers a systematic account of some central philosophical topic like knowledge, truth, history, or meaning is bound to confront the problem of methodological self-reference, namely, the familiar problem of how one's philosophy is supposed to be able to take up the very standpoint that it articulates and sometimes renders inaccessible. Is Descartes' invention of clear and distinct ideas *itself* something clear and distinct? How can Kant distinguish between the empirical and transcendental, except from a perspective that adopts an illicitly transcendent point of view? If all of our categories really are historically situated, how can Hegel's thinking itself stand outside this historicity? If all human endeavors share an unwavering "Wille zur Macht," why aren't Nietzsche's books just further examples of that very same will? If the numbered propositions of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* are themselves nonsense, a ladder to be kicked aside once it has been scaled, then on what conception of meaning does this metaphorical ladder itself rest? If for the logical positivists the meaning of a proposition is its means of verification, what means of verification are available for the proposition "The meaning of a proposition is its means of verification"? If my argument is right, Rorty implicitly invokes the rhetoric/logic dualism in order to shield himself from just this sort of embarrassing question.

#### NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE PHILOSOPHY

Rorty's cavalier dismissal of a philosophical controversy or dualism typically has two separate but ultimately combinable features.



1. *The verification feature.* Can we discern what criteria would satisfy some philosophical goal X? For example, could we ever *verify* that some of our sentences (the true ones) correspond to a language-independent reality? Or could we ever discern criteria for the attainment of truth *distinct from* criteria for the attainment of justification? No?
2. *The deflation feature.* Commit it then to Rorty's flames. For it is improbable that X is going to make a difference to practice. The vocabulary in which X is stated should thus be replaced or modified. X should not be refuted or argued against because the refutation or argument will, necessarily, be expressed in the vocabulary that takes X for granted. Let's just drop "X talk."<sup>7</sup>

There is a habitual inference in many of Rorty's writings from a lack of verifiability to the conclusion that something be dropped. It is an inference of this form that animated many of Rorty's metaphilosophical polemics. Since we are utterly in the dark about what might count as a mark of success in satisfying what Thomas Nagel calls traditional philosophy's "ambition of transcendence" (1989, 9) we should simply drop the ambition. Or equally, since we are at a loss for criteria which might indicate success in attaining objective truth distinct from the criteria associated with justifying our beliefs, we should simply drop "objective truth" as the name of a philosophical goal (insofar as "objective truth" is taken to mean something like "mind- or language-independent truth"). The only ambitions we philosophers ought to have, Rorty thinks, are those for which there is a chance or a criterion of success. The point here is that when Rorty argues for the abandonment of some dualism or distinction, the only justifications he offers are verificationist ones.<sup>8</sup> The situation is different, however, when he switches to his admittedly vague ideas about what philosophy might yet become or about an exciting secularist future built on greater human solidarity. About such positive claims, all we can expect to get from Rorty is experimentalist encouragement. When Rorty champions the prospect of replacing the search for objective truth, say, with a commitment to "keep the conversation going," the most he offers in the way of reasons for doing so is something of the form "Let's give it a try, it looks promising" or "Let's experiment and see."

When Rorty makes a philosophical proposal of a positive variety, it is common for him to insist that "verifiability" or the "availability of criteria" will not be of decisive importance. What we do when we find ourselves debating the comparative merits of "an entrenched vocabulary which has

become a nuisance and a half-formed new vocabulary that vaguely promises great things" (1989, 9) is

pretty much the same sort of thing we do when we realize that we do not love our long-term spouse, and that he or she quite possibly despises us—or when we realize that we loathe our job or our profession, and wish to God we had never taken it on. In the latter cases, we may wind up changing spouses or jobs, but it is not clear that we have criteria for choosing the new ones. (2001, 30)

Whereas verifiability and the availability of criteria are the only considerations Rorty takes as salient for his negative philosophy, the only considerations that can constitute grounds for the dismissal of some philosophical problem or controversy, such considerations play no role in the evaluation of positive or reformist proposals. Such considerations apparently mean everything when Rorty wants to discard something, but they are beside the point when he wants to endorse or introduce something. Rorty is unequivocally verificationist when attacking or debunking old ideas but insists that "instead of criteria, [we] Deweyans offer inspiring narratives and fuzzy utopias" (1999, 120) when reflecting on new ones.

All of this is fine as far as it goes. There is nothing glaringly un-Rortian about maintaining that verificationist tools are appropriate for some goals (i.e., modest, "merely philosophical" goals like blurring the distinction between truth and justification) and that Romantic or Deweyan tools more appropriate for others (uplifting, large-scale goals like changing the common sense of the West or forging a more secular and democratic culture). Indeed, all of this seems to chime nicely with Rorty's reading of the pragmatist tradition as "clearing up little messes left behind by the great dead philosophers," on the one hand, and "contributing to a world-historical change in humanity's self-image," on the other (1998a, 132). What is seemingly un-Rortian, however, is the resulting worry that simultaneously advocating these assorted goals might provoke difficult questions about methodological self-reference. I interpret this worry as un-Rortian because it is at odds, I think, with the very *raison d'être* of Dewey's tool metaphor, a metaphor that Rorty is eager to defend and proliferate. Once we adopt the quasi-Darwinian picture according to which everything we say and do and believe is seen as an attempt to facilitate some sort of "coping" (in Rorty's capacious sense of that term), and the philosopher's task correspondingly as doing her best to facilitate still greater coping, Rorty's advice that we "settle

for useful tools, and take them where we can find them" (1999, 197) seems rather unexceptional. Yet this should mean that there is no need to worry if some of the tools we use (for some purposes) cannot be rendered consistent—from a synoptic, philosophical point of view—with various other tools and their appropriate uses. "A screwdriver is not the worse for being a bad hammer" (Hacking 1999, 122).

I am not arguing that Rorty fails to live up to his own quasi-Darwinian demands. Let me be clear that in making these remarks—in suggesting that Rorty has a tendency to "worry" about the problem of self-reference—I mean only to call attention to a certain recurrent preoccupation in Rorty's writings. Loyal readers of Rorty will recognize that he dedicates more energy than most to explaining precisely why he has not fallen victim to self-referential paradox, why his theses are safe from this kind of error, how he has managed to circumvent such worries, why these sorts of questions don't bear on his enterprise, and so on. Often times, this preoccupation assumes the form of a well-rehearsed theatrical dialogue: "Our opponents will assert such and such. But we pragmatists will rejoin thusly. Our opponents will accuse us of this error, but we will respond that such an error presupposes just the thing we want to discard." It is possible that worries of self-referential consistency in Rorty's work reflect more the terms in which his critics often attacked his ideas than it does his own preoccupation with that kind of problem.<sup>9</sup> Whatever its source, it sometimes seems as though Rorty shares the main concern of those whom he dubs "ironist theorists"—those whose "attempts at autonomy" make them worry about "how to finitize while exhibiting a knowledge of [their] own finitude," "how to overcome authority without claiming authority" (1989, 105).

#### RHETORIC, LOGIC, AND THE PROBLEM OF SELF-REFERENCE

From what vantage point Rorty is allowed to champion such bold theses as "There are no relations such as 'fitting the world' or 'being faithful to the true nature of the self' in which language might stand to nonlanguage" (1989, 13) or "We cannot find a skyhook which lifts us out of mere coherence—mere agreement—to something like 'correspondence with reality as it is in itself' (1991, 38)? Surely one cannot locate a skyhook that will permit one to say—from a God's-Eye View as it were—that there are no skyhooks! This is the basis for the charge that all Rorty has to offer is rhetoric, a charge Rorty is (perhaps with minor qualifications) willing to accept as accurate. Indeed, when asked by an interviewer about the intended aim of

his work, Rorty replies, “Primarily persuasion. I don’t much care whether it’s called rhetoric or logic. I think of my work as trying to move people away from the notion of being in touch with something big and powerful and non-human” (2006, 49). Thus, when Rorty is challenged about the grounds he has for asserting something like “There is no way the world is apart from how it is described,” given the seemingly self-refuting nature of that assertion, he routinely responds that he was never claiming to have been “describing reality” more accurately than his opponents. He was merely offering a “recommendation to speak differently,” a proposal that we adopt a new set of linguistic habits (a new vocabulary), the acceptance of which would render the question “Is there a way the world is apart from how it is described?” boringly quaint or unintelligible. Rorty’s pages are crammed with dialectical moves of this kind. Consider quickly just two examples.

To say that there is no such thing as intrinsic nature is not to say that the intrinsic nature of reality has turned out, surprisingly enough, to be extrinsic. It is to say that the term “intrinsic nature” is one which it would pay us not to use, an expression which has caused more trouble than it has been worth. To say that we should drop the idea of truth as out there waiting to be discovered is not to say that we have discovered that, out there, there is no truth. It is to say that our purposes would be served best by ceasing to see truth as a deep matter, as a topic of philosophical interest, or “true” as a term which repays “analysis.” (1989, 8)

Pragmatists see the Platonic tradition as having outlived its usefulness. This does not mean that they have a new, non-Platonic set of answers to Platonic questions to offer, but rather that they do not think we should ask those questions anymore. When they suggest that we not ask questions about the nature of Truth and Goodness, they do not invoke a theory about the nature of reality or knowledge or man which says that “there is no such thing” as Truth or Goodness. Nor do they have a “relativistic” or “subjectivist” theory of Truth or Goodness. They would simply like to change the subject. (1982, xiv)

To sum up, Rorty’s distinction between “making claims to truth” and “making recommendations to speak differently”—a distinction that corresponds loosely to the classical distinction between logic and rhetoric—allows

him to circumvent difficult questions about self-referential consistency. Developing that distinction permits Rorty to ask tough verificationist questions about old, philosophical views he wishes to abandon while insisting that the fuzzy, positive ideas he endorses in their place amount to little more than “recommendations” and thus are not legitimate targets for those very same verificationist questions. I am suggesting that the looming threat of self-referential paradox pushes Rorty toward what we might call the “rhetoric concession,” the concession according to which many of Rorty’s positive theses be interpreted not as approximations of the truth, as attempts to “speak nature’s own language,” but rather as rhetorical or evangelical challenges for his readers to adopt new ways of speaking.<sup>10</sup>

It is unclear whether Rorty was ever able to fully overcome his ambivalence about the distinction between rhetoric and logic. On the one hand, there are good Rortian reasons to eschew (or blur) that distinction. For those who accept the thrust of Dewey’s means/ends continuum—the thesis according to which one cannot “draw a neat line between what you want and how you will go about getting it” (2000c, 188)—that distinction seems patently useless. What will it matter whether we call it “rhetoric” or “logic,” one can easily imagine Rorty asking, so long as it is effective in helping us get what we want? Surely Rorty would be more comfortable dividing up philosophical claims and strategies along pragmatic lines, along lines delineated by use or utility, as opposed to dividing them into natural kinds called “rhetoric” and “logic.” For to insist that one is “making recommendations” implies that one might not be. It suggests that there is a philosophically pregnant difference between true propositions on the one hand and useful ideas on the other. If I understand Rortian pragmatism at all, that cannot be a difference that makes a difference.<sup>11</sup> Also noteworthy is Rorty’s view that absent a “natural order of reasons,” what counts as “logic” or “rhetoric” (particularly in the honorific and deprecatory uses of those terms, respectively) is determined by the vocabulary in which a particular argument is advanced, a point that renders any distinction between rhetoric and logic temporary, transitory, contextual—entirely dependent on contingent socio-historical circumstances. As Rorty writes in a reply to Habermas,

The distinction between logic and “mere rhetoric,” . . . is just as context dependent as that between the presence and absence of adequate justification. For a sincere Nazi can successfully use really pitiful arguments to justify infamies—arguments that nobody outside his remarkably provincial, illiterate, and stupid audience would

take seriously. They are arguments which *we* rightly describe as “mere” causal manipulation or “mere” rhetoric, even though to the Nazi and his stupid audience they seem paradigm cases of rational persuasion, *überzeugende Argumentation*. (2000d, 59, 60)

On the other hand, however, so long as Rorty takes seriously the problem of methodological self-reference he needs such a distinction in order to distinguish between what all the “metaphysical theorists” were doing when *they* succumbed to that problem—as when Hegel became the target of Kierkegaard’s jokes, for example—and what Rorty is doing by contrast when he advances theses that he *seems* to deprive himself of the right to advance.<sup>12</sup> On such occasions Rorty badly needs the distinction between “making claims to truth” and “making recommendations to speak differently”—between, roughly, “trying to say how things are” and “proposing a new way of speaking.” Absent such a distinction, Rorty’s most interesting philosophical theses appear to implode.<sup>13</sup>

#### RHETORIC, ROMANTICISM, AND CULTURAL POLITICS

In his excellent book on John Dewey, Alan Ryan says that, “Dewey’s characteristic literary product was . . . the ‘lay sermon.’”

A great deal of social and political writing has operated at one or the other of two extremes: a concentration on the legal framework of politics or a narrow focus on policy. This has left a substantial hole in the middle ground where Dewey operated. The lay sermon is at home in this middle ground; between pure philosophy and a policy paper lies the terrain of intelligent persuasion. (1995, 366)

As Richard Bernstein has insightfully pointed out, this is also a useful way to characterize much of Rorty’s writing.<sup>14</sup> Rorty is neither a systematic philosopher with an interest in erecting a grand architectonic (like Rawls or Habermas or Brandom), nor does he tend to put forward concrete policy recommendations about what Dewey called “the problems of men.” On the contrary, he frequently admits to having no such recommendations to offer. The same sort of “middle-ground” style is evident in much of what Rorty has to say about metaphilosophy. On the one hand, he has no grand theory about what constitutes a philosophical problem or about what types of questions or problems are properly deserving of the adjective “philosophical.”

On the other hand, he refrains from saying anything concrete and specific about what philosophy might (or should) look like once it has been cleansed of all the sins he attributes to it. Rorty's metaphilosophical writing often exemplifies his "principled fuzziness"—a fuzziness that accounts for the frequent occurrence of generalities, slogans, half arguments, catch phrases, innuendoes, rhetorical flourishes, and buzzwords in his prose.

Whatever readers are inclined to think about the "lay sermon" as a genre of philosophical writing, they will no doubt notice that this characterization of Rorty's rhetorical practice provides a rather tidy answer for the flurry of questions I posed at the outset, viz., why doesn't Rorty say what he means? We can now see that in the passages I singled out at the beginning, Rorty makes his point in the middle ground language of the "lay sermon."<sup>15</sup> Thus, when Rorty says that "Davidson's conception is the last stage," he neither means it literally—as if some grand philosophical discovery had been made—nor does he simply express his idiosyncratic hope that philosophers move on to more interesting things. What Rorty in fact expresses is difficult to characterize, but it surely resides somewhere in the middle: it has something to do with the vague sense that our long-term cultural-political hopes will be more fruitfully realized and that we will encourage a better self-image by accepting certain positions over others. So, again, it is not that Davidson got something right that other philosophers had gotten wrong or saw something that others had failed to see; it is rather that the possible future in which Davidson's idea comes to represent the common sense will be slightly richer and better than the possible future in which it does not. This is not to say that professional philosophy is at the vanguard of culture—it is no more central (or marginal) than any other area of culture—but merely to say that "changes of opinion among philosophical professors sometimes do, after a time, make a difference to the hopes and fears of non-philosophers" (1998a, 45).

The "lay sermon" style common to Dewey and Rorty is best understood as a tool employed in the service of what Rorty calls "cultural politics," a term that covers arguments about what words to use, as well as "projects for getting rid of whole topics of discourse" (2007, 3). Rorty's use of the lay sermon comports with his cultural-political suggestion—a suggestion that helps explain the intended rationale of passages I quote at the beginning—that "we look at relatively specialized and technical debates between contemporary philosophers in the light of our hopes for cultural change" (2007, x). Most professional philosophers will think this suggestion both reckless and wrongheaded. Yet it pays to bear in mind here that the lay sermon is

“lay”—not intended merely for the eyes and ears of specialists but also for a larger public. It is surely no coincidence that Dewey, who was memorialized as “America’s philosopher,” and Rorty, who perhaps more than any other philosopher of his generation has been read appreciatively by people outside of professional philosophy, should unite in a distaste for arcane professionalism and seek to translate the significance of recondite philosophical debates into a more common language in the service of social and cultural hopes.

## CONCLUSION

Rorty’s use of the lay sermon as a method of practicing cultural politics is largely accounted for (ironically perhaps, given the tension I have pointed to) by his repudiation of philosophical finality and the strong Romantic attitude that runs through much of his writing. Rorty forever celebrates novelty (and eschews finality) in all domains of life—personal, political, and cultural. He regards the need to “create new ways of being human, and to dream up new projects” (2001a, 154)—a need that blooms, he thought, as religion and metaphysics wane—as the most uplifting achievement of recent intellectual history.

No past achievement, not Plato’s or even Christ’s, can tell us about the ultimate significance of human life. No such achievement can give us a template on which to model our future. The future will widen endlessly. Experiments with new forms of individual and social life will interact and reinforce one another. Individual life will become unthinkably diverse and social life unthinkably free. The moral we should draw from the European past, and in particular from Christianity, is not instruction about the authority under which we should live, but suggestions about how to make ourselves wonderfully different from anything that has been.<sup>16</sup> (1998b, 24)

The idea that “the future will widen endlessly” is not only the precondition for Rorty’s evangelical metaphilosophy. It also opens up a conceptual space inside which modern-day “poets”—those inflamed by Romantic “self-creation”—can experiment with their lives and their selves.<sup>17</sup> Such impulses are perhaps best exemplified in Rorty’s portrait of the post-Philosophical intellectual, the liberal ironist. The liberal ironist, we will recall, delights in expanding her ethical horizons by learning about



different goods, interesting modes of life, and new ways of being human. Above all, the ironist is consumed by the prospect of making things new rather than discovering what has always been there. She is forever trying to enlarge her sympathies, extend her loyalties, and seek out new modes of life with which to experiment. She exhibits an almost religious "willingness to refer all questions of ultimate justification to the future, to the substance of things hoped for" (1999, 27). The ironist celebrates the idea that "there is no center to the self [;] . . . there are only different ways of weaving new candidates for belief and desire into antecedently existing webs of belief and desire" (1989, 83–84) and that the point of being human, therefore—at least in private—is to weave together the best, most interesting self that one can. Her goal is to "attempt autonomy," to "get out from under inherited contingencies . . . get out from under an old final vocabulary and fashion one which will be all [her] own" (1989, 97), to be able to declare, with Nietzsche, "Thus I willed it." Rorty's ironist is inflamed by the Romantic impulse summed up in William Blake's couplet: "I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans / I will not Reason & Compare: my business is to Create" (1977, 651). The idea is to take one's present self-image lightly (ironically) in the hope of a yet better future self-image, "to shift attention from the eternal to the future," to substitute hope for knowledge (1999, 29).

The same is true for societies and cultures, Rorty thinks, and the same is true for philosophy itself. "Cultural politics" is loosely what Romantic self-creation looks like in public, when applied to societies and cultures. Rorty's evangelical metaphilosophy is preached in exactly the same spirit: it recommends that philosophers should seek to remake their own discipline in exactly the open-ended fashion that the ironist seeks to remake herself—with hope, open-mindedness, and a refusal to accept that any such remaking represents the final word. It communicates the hope "not that the future will conform to a plan, will fulfill an immanent teleology, but rather that the future will astonish and exhilarate" (1999, 28). It is fruitfully understood as "an expression of the hope that the cultural space left by the demise of epistemology will not be filled—that our culture should become one in which the demand for constraint and confrontation is no longer felt" (1979, 315). The deepest evangelical message of many of Rorty's sermons is simply that "the end of human activity is not rest, but rather richer and better human activity" (1991, 39).<sup>18</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Rorty uses “Philosophy” with a capital “P” to signify, “following Plato’s and Kant’s lead, asking questions about the nature of certain normative notions (e.g., ‘truth,’ ‘rationality,’ ‘goodness’) in the hope of better obeying such norms.” He distinguishes this from “philosophy” with a small “p,” which means, “simply what [Wilfrid] Sellars calls ‘an attempt to see how things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest possible sense of the term’” (1982, xiv–xv).

2. In a beautiful autobiographical essay, “Trotsky and Wild Orchids,” Rorty recounts how he went to college at the age of fifteen wanting “to find some intellectual or aesthetic framework which would let me—in a thrilling phrase which I came across in Yeats—‘hold reality and justice in a single vision.’” For this reason, “I wanted very much to be some kind of Platonist, and from 15 to 20 I did my best.” Of course, as is well known, Rorty eventually came to the view that “there is . . . not much reason to hope for the sort of single vision that I went to college hoping to get” (1999, 7–14). It is interesting that Rorty’s own intellectual biography here mirrors the story of maturation he attributes to philosophy itself: one upon a time the young Rorty (like the philosophers of old) hoped to locate timeless essences, to occupy a point of view outside the realm of chance and contingent historical circumstance. Then, he grows up (as it were) and realizes that such feats are hopeless and should be abandoned.

3. Affirming a deep and enduring distinction between rhetoric and logic is for Rorty tantamount to affirming an “intrinsic nature of things, a nature which somehow precedes and underlies all descriptive vocabularies.” For Rorty, the quality of a given argument is always bound up with the audience to whom it is directed. “To say that there is no such thing as a proposition being justified *tout court*, or an argument better *tout court*, amounts to saying that all reasons are reasons for particular people, restrained (as people always are) by spatial, temporal, and social conditions. To think otherwise is to presuppose the existence of a natural order of reasons to which our arguments will, with luck, better and better approximate. . . . [W]hat counts as rational argumentation is as historically determined, and as context dependent, as what counts as good French” (2000d, 60).

4. The phrase “philosophically final and peaceful outlook” suggests at least two ideas. One is that philosophical problems can be solved in a final, non-question-begging manner. The second is the more widely held “therapeutic” idea that such problems can be, as John McDowell has put it, “revealed as illusory” (1996, 151). I treat both of these ideas and their many variants as philosophies of “finality” because both assume that a final and proper stance toward these problems is available, that philosophical problems can be solved as such or, the more popular view, shown to be unsolvable. Rorty categorically rejects both ideas.

5. Hilary Putnam seems to have been perplexed by a similar sort of question. “When Rorty argues that his own views are more helpful philosophically . . . than the views he criticizes, he is engaged in hermeneutic discourse (which is to say, in rhetoric). But what

is the purpose of his rhetoric? It may well be that we will behave better if we become Rortians—we may be more tolerant, less prone to fall for various varieties of religious intolerance and political totalitarianism [to which Rorty replied in a later essay: “This is exactly the possibility I have in mind” (1998a, 57)]. If that is what is at stake, the issue is momentous indeed. But . . . [if] our aim is tolerance and the open society, would it not be better to argue for these directly, rather than to hope that these will come as the by-product of a change in our metaphysical picture?” (1990, 24–25).

6. Habermas is surely right to observe that analytic philosophy is “the only tradition in whose language Rorty has learned to argue” (2000, 31).

7. To see these two features in synchronized action, consider the following passage: “Because we can see no way to decide which descriptions of an object get at what is ‘intrinsic’ to it, as opposed to its merely ‘relational,’ extrinsic features (e.g., its description-relative features), we are prepared to discard the intrinsic-extrinsic distinction, the claim that beliefs represent, and the whole question of representational independence or dependence” (1998a, 86).

8. The one exception that comes to mind is Rorty’s rejection of socialist or Marxian proposals. It is not that such proposals are lacking a criterion of success, Rorty thinks, but rather that they have already been adequately experimented with and have turned out to be notorious failures.

9. Rorty has more than once been attacked on the grounds that some of his philosophical views are self-referentially inconsistent. This is precisely the basis of Bernard Williams’s criticism—one said by Ronald Dworkin to summarize “Hilary Putnam’s devastating critique [of Rorty]”—that Rorty’s views “simply tear themselves apart. If . . . the correct description of the world (for us) is a matter of what we find it convenient to say, and if, as Rorty admits, we find it convenient to say that science discovers a world that is already there, there is simply no perspective from which Rorty can say, as he also does, that science does not really discover a world that is already there but (more or less) invents it” (See Rorty 1998, 56). A similar kind of argument can be found in Taylor 1990. It is impossible to say with any precision whether Rorty was himself moved by worries of self-reference or whether such worries found their way into his work merely because they represent the terms in which several prominent critics attacked his ideas. I don’t believe it is farfetched to think that it might be a little bit of both.

10. Perhaps here would be a suitable place to mention that Rorty himself, generously commenting on an earlier draft of this paper a month or so before his death, wrote: “I think you are right in saying that I have always been (perhaps needlessly) troubled by problems of self-reference, and that this has led me to perform various contortions. My guess is that this is accounted for by my idiosyncratic reading habits. Such worries are more common among people who, like me, take the Hegel-Nietzsche-Heidegger-Derrida sequence seriously, and much less common among people who learned to think with Russell and Frege.”

11. “Attributions of reality and truth are . . . compliments we pay to entities or beliefs that have won their spurs, paid their way, proved themselves useful, and therefore been incorporated into accepted social practices” (2007, 6–7).

12. “Kierkegaard said that if Hegel had prefaced the *Science of Logic* with ‘This is all just a thought experiment,’ he would have been the greatest thinker who ever lived. Striking that note would have demonstrated Hegel’s grasp of his own finitude, as well as everybody else’s. . . . [T]he problem of how to finitize while exhibiting a knowledge of one’s own finitude—of satisfying Kierkegaard’s demand on Hegel—is *the* problem of ironist theorizing. It is the problem of how to overcome authority without claiming authority” (1989, 104–5).

Rorty was at least once open about the extent to which the distinction between “claims to truth” and “recommendations to speak differently” served as a “strategy” for escaping problems of self-reference. In a reply to Hilary Putnam he notes: “My strategy for escaping the self-referential difficulties into which ‘the Relativist’ keeps getting himself is to move everything over from epistemology and metaphysics to cultural politics, from claims to knowledge and appeals to self-evidence to suggestions about what we should try” (1998a, 57).

13. I am unsure about how to make sense of the following concession from Rorty, offered in a reply to Charles Taylor. “After a good deal of wobbling and weaseling on the point I . . . am happy to say that when I put forward large philosophical views I am making ‘claims to truth’ rather than simply recommendations to speak differently” (1998a, 92n16). That the phrase “claims to truth” is placed in scare quotes is no doubt relevant here.

14. See Bernstein 2003.

15. An anonymous reviewer incisively points out that the Latin *sermones* means “conversation”—which, as he or she also points out, is a pregnant connection in a discussion of Rorty’s rhetorical practice. I am not sure whether this adds plausibility to my claim that some of Rorty’s writings are profitably understood as “lay sermons,” but it is worth mentioning that Rorty takes the “conversation” for which he famously calls very seriously indeed. “Conversation” became for him something of a professional ethos, an intellectual virtue. There was no one more openly committed to “kibitzing” with fellow philosophers, conversing with critics, patiently responding to arguments, and meeting objections.

16. Rorty is emphatic that “this Romance of endless diversity . . . not . . . be confused with what nowadays is sometimes called ‘multiculturalism.’ The latter term suggests a morality of live-and-let-live, a politics of side-by-side development in which members of distinct cultures preserve and protect their own culture against the incursions of other cultures.” With Whitman and Hegel, Rorty prefers “competition and argument between alternative forms of life—a poetic agon, in which jarring dialectical discords [might be] resolved in previously unheard harmonies” (1998b, 24–25).

17. In Rorty’s “large, generic” use of the term, a “poet” is “any maker, anyone who hopes to create something new. . . . Anyone who spends his life trying to formulate a novel answer

to the question of what is possible and important" (1989, 23). Accordingly, in Rorty's sense, Plato, Hegel, Darwin, Nietzsche, and Freud are no less "poets" than Dryden, Wordsworth, Blake, and Yeats.

18. This paper originally evolved out of discussions about Rorty with Barry Allen and Colin Koopman at McMaster University. I am grateful to them both for their wisdom and insight and for helpful criticisms on this and other work. Alex Livingston and Kai Nielsen provided valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper, as did Richard Rorty himself, to whom I dedicate this essay.



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