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## How Philosophy of Language Informs Ethics and Politics: Richard Rorty and Contemporary Theory

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**Meili Steele**

The strong textualist simply asks himself the same question about a text which the engineer asks himself about a puzzling physical object: how shall I describe this in order to get what I want?

—Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*

With the publication of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), Richard Rorty establishes himself not only as an influential reader of Western philosophy but as an original theorist in his own right. In these essays, Rorty presents a philosophy of language that becomes the guiding thread for his theory of the self and for his political vision.<sup>1</sup> The cohesiveness of Rorty's theory has not been discussed by his critics, who generally divide their analyses of his work into two parts. In the first part, they praise Rorty's critique of the foundationalist tradition in analytic philosophy, while in the other they challenge his defense of ethnocentric liberalism.<sup>2</sup> This split read-

1. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). This work is hereafter cited in my text as *CIS*.

2. See Nancy Fraser, "Solidarity or Singularity: Richard Rorty between Romanticism and boundary 2 20:2, 1993. Copyright © 1993 by Duke University Press. CCC 0190-3659/93/\$1.50.

ing not only misses important connections in Rorty's work—his critique of epistemology is informed by the same problematic as his politics—but it is indicative of the failure in contemporary theory to discriminate among various problematics for language. Commitment to a certain linguistic ontology conditions ethical and political practice. This essay will analyze this relationship in Rorty's work and then look at the way that two alternative linguistic problematics—Jacques Derrida's philosophy of the word and Jean-François Lyotard's philosophy of the sentence—inform different ethical and political assumptions. My goals are (1) to show what is entailed for our notions of subjectivity and value by the acceptance of one problematic as opposed to the others; (2) to show how each theorist makes his problematic a nonnegotiable ontological truth that is incommensurate with those of other theorists and that governs the entire linguistic and ethical field;<sup>3</sup> and (3) to break down the stalemate between poststructuralists and pragmatists by creating a metacritical space. Creating such a space will involve both showing that the integrity of each problematic is not compromised through metatheoretical reflection and supplementing the third-person, second-order accounts of subjectivity offered by both Rorty and the poststructuralists with a first-order account, so that we have not only a constructed but a constructing subject whose ontology is informed not simply by epistemology but by ethics and politics. Rorty and the poststructuralists are

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Technocracy," in *Unruly Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 93–112; Thomas McCarthy, "Private Irony and Public Decency: Richard Rorty's New Pragmatism," *Critical Inquiry* 16 (1990): 355–70; Christopher Norris, *The Contest of Faculties* (New York: Methuen, 1984); and Cornell West, "The Politics of American Neo-Pragmatism," in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, ed. John Rajchman and Cornell West (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). The following exemplary citation is from West's essay: "To undermine the privileged notions of objectivity, universality, and transcendentalism without acknowledging and accenting the oppressive deeds done under the aegis of these notions is to write a thin, i.e. intellectual and homogeneous, history—a history which fervently attacks epistemological privilege but remains relatively silent about political, economic, racial, and sexual privilege" (269).

3. The poststructuralist claims that his/her theory is so radically incommensurate with others that rigorous analysis can only take the form of rewriting other theories in terms of his/her own; pragmatists, on the other hand, evaporate differences among theories of language into "nominalism" or "nonfoundationalism."

A useful way to see the difference between these groups is to compare Rorty's reading of Derrida with the "rigorous" readings of Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), and Christopher Norris, *The Contest of Faculties*. I develop Rorty's discussion of *rigor* further on.

axiological ascetics who are reticent about utopia and the role of language in articulating it.<sup>4</sup> Poststructuralists rest their case on an ethics of difference and a politics of negative liberty, while Rorty offers only the metavalues of liberalism. How we sort out the complex hermeneutic space where various theories compete is not decided in advance by the “correct” ontology but by the specific kind of critique and recuperation the theorist wants to perform on a given text. Before getting into this complex alternative, we need to examine Rorty’s ideas on the history of philosophy, which serve as an introduction to his work, and the link he makes among language, behaviorism, and subjectivity.

### Histories of Philosophy

A crucial question for Rorty is how one reads the history of philosophy, and he outlines his view in “The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres.” The three principal genres are: the construction of historical context in which a philosopher has written, a construction that uses the terms available at the time; rational reading, in which past philosophers are read in terms of the present; and *Geistesgeschichte*, which probes the problematics, rather than the problems, that inform philosophical questions—for example, “Why should anyone have made this question of \_\_\_ central to his thought?”<sup>5</sup> This last type involves an argument about what philosophy is, not about “particular solutions to philosophical problems” (HOP, 57). The fourth genre is what Rorty calls “doxography,” which strings together thinkers into a single story line about the history of Western philosophy. While the other three types all serve important functions, Rorty thinks doxography should disappear, because it attempts “to impose a problematic on a canon drawn up without reference to the problematic or conversely to impose a canon on a problematic constructed without reference to the canon” (HOP, 62). Thus, we find histories that put contemporary questions—for example, what was each philosopher’s theory of meaning?—to texts of the past. Rorty disapproves of doxography not because it tries to make old texts

4. I do not mean *utopia* in the totalizing, Marxist sense. Paul Ricoeur’s definition will suffice for my purpose here: “Utopia is the exercise of the imagination to think an ‘other than being’ [‘autrement qu’être’; the phrase is from Levinas] of the social” (see “Ideologie et utopie,” in *Du texte à l’action* [Paris: Seuil, 1986], 388).

5. Richard Rorty, “The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres,” in *Philosophy in History*, ed. Richard Rorty et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 57. This work is hereafter cited in my text as HOP.

interesting to the present but because it “is a half-hearted attempt to tell a new story of intellectual progress by describing all texts in the light of recent discoveries. It is half-hearted because it lacks the courage to readjust the canon to suit the new discoveries” (HOP, 63).

Rorty works primarily in the second and third genres. In the latter, he takes the anthropological view of the metaphilosopher toward philosophical issues—for example, foundations of the subject—that he wants to dismiss. This involves not a hermeneutic dialogue with the issues that the texts themselves present but a genealogical investigation of the conditions that produce the questions. These genealogies—which are, of course, informed by his pragmatism—ask questions of this type, “‘What sort of people see these problems?’ ‘What vocabulary, what image of man, would produce these problems?’”<sup>6</sup> When he writes in the second type, he shows how William James, Dewey, Wittgenstein, and others were asking the right questions—the same questions that he is asking—despite some occasional lapses. The purpose informing these readings has only the negative goal of urging us to abandon hope of finding something outside of our own desires. Pragmatists are “interested not so much in what’s out there in the world, in what happened in history, as in what we can get out of nature and history for our own use.”<sup>7</sup>

For those who write in the *Geistesgeschichte* genre—Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and Rorty himself—there is “the temptation of thinking that once you have found a way to subsume your predecessors under a general idea you have thereby done something more than found a redescription of them,” that “none of the descriptions that applied to them applies to you—that you are separated from them by an abyss” (*C/S*, 107). One of the great phrases of mystifications in such a view is “conditions of possibility,” which, for Rorty, is a poetic rather than an argumentative concept: “Since that for which the conditions of possibility are sought is always *everything* that any previous philosopher has envisaged—the whole range of what has been discussed up to now—anybody is at liberty to identify any ingenious gimmick that he dreams up as a ‘condition of possibility.’”<sup>8</sup> These “gimmicks” often produce fascinating rereadings of the history of philoso-

6. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xxxiii. This work is hereafter cited in my text as *Consequences*.

7. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 359.

8. Richard Rorty, “Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 2 (1989): 211. This work is hereafter cited in my text as ID.

phy, but that is all they should claim to do. Heidegger falls into this trap, even though he is aware of the difficulty of the “ironist theorist”—that is, the attempt to be the last philosopher “to write something which will make it impossible for one to be redescribed except in one’s own terms” (*C/S*, 106). Rorty urges that we give up the theoretical dimension and write only in an ironic manner that acknowledges the contingency of language, self, and community.

This contingency means that our current philosophical, scientific, and literary paradigms, just like the ones that preceded them, were not brought about by using criteria for the comparison and assessment of competing paradigms: “Europe did not *decide* to accept the idiom of Romantic poetry, or of socialist politics, or of Galilean mechanics. That sort of shift was no more an act of will than it was a result of argument. Rather, Europe gradually lost the habit of using certain words and gradually acquired the habit of using others” (*C/S*, 6). The rhetorical structure in these sentences appears throughout Rorty’s text: He sets up a rationalist or foundationalist position and then offers a suggestive debunking formula that he does not develop. This tactic is particularly troubling when the first half is a straw person rather than another nonfoundationalist position. The effect is to displace a more challenging question at the next level in which all interlocutors are presumed to have read Thomas Kuhn. That is, Rorty not only refuses to leave the metaphilosophical level of problematics but assumes that his problematic is so different from others that no debate is possible. A similar formulation appears at the beginning of his new book, where he says that he will “show how a recognition of that contingency [of language] leads to a recognition of the contingency of conscience and how both recognitions lead to a picture of intellectual and moral progress as a history of useful metaphors rather than of increasing understanding of how things really are” (*C/S*, 9). The debate about history, however, is no longer cast in these easy terms between realists and figuralists. Rorty employs this strategy because he wants to set up a site of writing in a language game that is incommensurate with positions in contemporary debate. Incommensurability will justify his attempt to show up, rather than argue against, these positions, since argument can take place only within, and not between, language games: “Conforming to my own precepts, I am not going to offer arguments against the vocabulary I want to replace. I am going to try to make the vocabulary I favor look more attractive by showing how it may be used to describe a variety of topics” (*C/S*, 9). This move requires him to exaggerate his differences from rival views, often by simplifying them into a global foundationalism. I will discuss

what he means by “argument” and “redescription” in the next section, but first we need to see how he reworks the tradition.

Rorty’s history of philosophy seeks not to deconstruct the tradition but to overcome it. His response to those he calls “intuitive realists” (Thomas Nagel and Stanley Cavell) is not to deny that we have intuitions “to the effect that ‘truth is more than assertability’ ”; rather, “the pragmatist is urging that we do our best to stop having such intuitions, that we develop a new intellectual tradition” (*Consequences*, xxix–xxx). Such a development requires that we prune the language of the tradition as well as create new languages. We get some sense of this project through the terms he offers in place of the traditional vocabulary: “normal/abnormal,” “inquiry/conversation,” “conforming to the canons of rationality/muddling through,” “corresponding/coping,”<sup>9</sup> “categories and principles/advantages and disadvantages” (*Consequences*, 168). Notice the absence of the words *reference*, *representation*, *truth*, *being*, and *subject*, even as foils. For Rorty, this traditional vocabulary does not need to be deconstructed but avoided. Indeed, he laments that “it is as important for the deconstructors as for the realists to think that metaphysics—that genre of literature which attempted to create unique, total, closed vocabularies—is very important.”<sup>10</sup>

We can see how he rewrites traditional questions by looking at his remarks on two perennial issues: the ontology of the human and the interpretation of the text. Ontological questions need to be rewritten: “There is no inference from ‘I can get what I want out of X by thinking of it as Y’ to ‘X is in itself a Y.’ ”<sup>11</sup> Rorty closes off the possibility of a nonfoundationalist ontology by adding “in itself,” by making his opponent’s position more rigorous than it has to be. Questions about “what” something is do not disappear once one accepts Rorty’s premise that both subject and object emerge from a holistic network of belief. Yet, Rorty wants to drop ontological questions and replace them with moral/political ones: “There is no ontological break between human and nonhuman but only (to put it in somewhat misleading Kantian terms) a moral break.”<sup>12</sup> Shifting “attention from ‘the demands of the object’ to the demands of the purpose which a particular inquiry is supposed to serve . . . modulate[s] philosophical debate

9. The first two quotations are from Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 320, 365, and 371; the last two quotations are from Richard Rorty, “A Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor,” *Review of Metaphysics* 34 (1980): 39.

10. Richard Rorty, “Deconstruction and Circumvention,” *Critical Inquiry* (1984): 19.

11. Rorty, “A Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor,” 43.

12. Rorty, “A Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor,” 46.

from a methodologico-ontological key into an ethico-political key.”<sup>13</sup> In the view I will develop later, ontology is not simply a methodological issue but precisely an ethical/political one. Rorty’s willingness to speak loosely about ethics but not about ontology is part of his fear of the return of the tradition; however, this fear is itself an attachment, since it makes the old assumption about the priority of epistemology to ethics. As Charles Taylor says, “The great vice of the tradition is that it allows epistemology to command ontology.”<sup>14</sup> Rorty’s peculiar variation on this tradition is to say that he is not making a claim to truth when he criticizes others but only saying that his way is “useful” and theirs is out of date, not false.<sup>15</sup>

With regard to texts, Rorty rewrites the standard question in the same way. The “object” of concern, the text, like the human, dissolves, so that we return to the phrase that is the touchstone for all inquiry: “what I [we] want”: “The critic asks neither the author nor the text about their intentions but simply beats the text into the shape which will serve his own purposes. . . . [F]rom a full-fledged pragmatist point of view, there is no interesting difference between tables and texts, between protons and poems. To a pragmatist, these are all just permanent possibilities for use” (*Consequences*, 152, 153). Indeed, whether the issue is truth, aesthetics, or ethics, the way to proceed is to ask ourselves this question: “The question of what propositions to assert, which pictures to look at, what narratives to listen to . . . are all questions about what will help us get us what we want” (*Consequences*, xliii). What leads Rorty to repeat the phrase “what we want,” as if it ended, rather than began, a debate? In a recent essay on Heidegger, Rorty offers a metaphilosophical historical clarification. He

13. Richard Rorty, “Inquiry as Recontextualization: An Anti-Dualist Account of Interpretation,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 110.

14. Charles Taylor, “Rorty in the Epistemological Tradition,” in *Reading Rorty* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 264.

15. It is not that Rorty thinks that we cannot refer to things, though he prefers *aboutness* to *reference*: “For ‘aboutness’ is not a matter of pointing outside the web. Rather, we use ‘about’ as a way of directing attention to the beliefs which are relevant to the justification of other beliefs, not as a way of directing attention to nonbeliefs” (“Inquiry as Recontextualization,” 97). I leave aside here the straw person strategy—who still thinks that assertions do locate a world of things outside beliefs—to focus on the metaphilosophical issue. That is, the citation above accounts for reference within webs of belief, but it does not make a truth claim about webs of belief as problematic as opposed to alternative views. Rorty cannot make such a claim if his problematic is incommensurate with others, as he says; hence, he falls back on “usefulness.”

agrees with Heidegger's claim that "if you begin with Plato's motives and assumptions you will end up with some form of pragmatism"; unlike Heidegger, however, he thinks that "pragmatism is a good place to end up."<sup>16</sup> From the time of the Greeks, "we have been asking ourselves the question: what must we and the universe be like if we are going to get the sort of certainty, clarity, and evidence Plato told us we ought to have?"<sup>17</sup> The history of philosophy, however, shows that "the only thing we can be certain about is what we want."<sup>18</sup> Rorty's phrase is thus a metaphilosophical statement, not a first-order statement. To clarify the nature of Rorty's metaphilosophical problematic, we need to look at his view of language and subjectivity.

### Language, Behaviorism, and Subjectivity

Rorty defines pragmatism as a "doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones—no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of objects, or the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of fellow-inquirers" (*Consequences*, 165). Although he argues for the liberation of our "conversations" from foundationalist concerns with truth and representation, he does not give language the priority that we find in other theorists who have made the "linguistic turn."

Rorty develops his view of language through the work of Donald Davidson. For Davidson, truth concerns the internal coherence of belief rather than reference to a nonlinguistic reality. As Rorty puts it, "Nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence."<sup>19</sup> Both Davidson and Rorty accept Willard Quine's point that analytic philosophy has been on the wrong track by working with isolated sentences rather than with a holistic network of beliefs.<sup>20</sup>

16. Richard Rorty, "Heidegger, Contingency, and Pragmatism," in *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 27.

17. Rorty, "Heidegger, Contingency, and Pragmatism," 29.

18. Rorty, "Heidegger, Contingency, and Pragmatism," 29.

19. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 178. Donald Davidson approves of Rorty's reading of this work in "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," in *Truth and Interpretation*, ed. Ernest Lepore (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 310. This work is hereafter cited in my text as *Coherence*.

20. For a discussion of the development of holism and the problems it was supposed to correct, see Milton Munitz, *Contemporary Analytic Philosophy* (New York: MacMillan, 1981), especially 357–58.

Holism should lead us to abandon the scheme/content epistemological model, since this model perpetuates the view that competing conceptual schemes organize the world differently. No conceptual scheme that is intelligible to us can also be radically different from ours. This means that we, and the people we can talk to, must be, for the most part, right. As Davidson puts it, “someone with a (more or less) coherent set of beliefs has a reason to suppose his beliefs are not mistaken in the main” (Coherence, 314). Davidson and Rorty avoid solipsism by maintaining the distinction between causality and truth. “We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there. . . . To say that truth is not out there is simply to say where there are no sentences there is no truth. . . . The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not” (*C/S*, 4–5). This move permits Davidson and Rorty to say that sensations can cause beliefs but that “a causal explanation of a belief does not show how or why the belief is justified” (Coherence, 311). This split between causality and language is immediately healed, since only the misguided scheme/content view could lead us to imagine any radically divergent alternatives: “We must, in the plainest and methodologically basic cases, take the objects of a belief to be the causes of that belief. And what we, as interpreters, take them to be is what they in fact are. Communication begins where causes converge: your utterance means what mine does if belief in its truth is systematically caused by the same events and objects” (Coherence, 317–18). Since this position places conflicts among beliefs within and between holistic systems rather than between subject and object, we should expect some theory of discursive confrontation, of the dynamics of the reweaving of webs of belief, but we get very little. The best example of what Rorty and Davidson offer appears in their discussions of metaphor.

Davidson denies that metaphor is an issue of words, of tensions between literal and figurative meaning; instead, he claims that metaphor “belongs exclusively to the domain of use” and that “the meanings of the words remain what they ordinarily are.”<sup>21</sup> These aberrant uses are off the semantic chart. They produce “effects,” such as catching our attention or offering an alternative conceptual web, but these “effects” are not part of the metaphor: “The common error is to fasten on the contents of the thoughts a metaphor provokes and to read these contents into the metaphor itself.”<sup>22</sup>

21. Donald Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean,” in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford, 1984), 247.

22. Davidson, “What Metaphors Mean,” 261.

Davidson thus assimilates metaphor (language) into other disruptive behaviors: "Joke or dream or metaphor can, like a picture or a bump on the head, make us appreciate some fact—but not be standing for, or expressing, the fact."<sup>23</sup> Rorty subscribes to Davidson's view, which he characterizes as follows: "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" (*C/S*, 18). Thus, language that falls outside the language game in play at the moment has a causal, rather than a persuasive or argumentative, effect: "New metaphors are causes, but not reasons, for changes in belief" (*C/S*, 50). Metaphor, therefore, is not an issue of words or sentences but one of language games, in which metaphoric use is so unfamiliar that it fits no language game (*C/S*, 18). Thus, a behavioristic account of metaphor simply labels this figure "unusual," "unpredictable." Rorty limits his theory of metaphor to epochal shifts in paradigms of thought—for example, Copernican, Newtonian—but he offers no account for less grandiose uses of metaphor. Rorty rightly distinguishes between reasons within a language game and reasons for using a language (*C/S*, 48), but he seems to consider discursive conflict within a language game as too pedestrian to merit comment, while conflict between even local games cannot be accounted for at all.<sup>24</sup> This refusal to get "inside" a language game that is shared by anyone else parallels what we saw in the first section on the history of philosophy, where Rorty remains at the metaphilosophical level.

Rorty's commitment to the incommensurability of different language games leads him to reject argument as a discursive strategy. Interesting philosophy "is implicitly or explicitly a contest between an entrenched vocabulary which has become a nuisance and half-formed vocabulary which vaguely promises great things" (*C/S*, 9). Argument is fine for parliamentary politics or normal science, but not for radical change in politics, science, or philosophy (*C/S*, 9). He refuses to argue for his position, since the postphilosophical critic "cannot argue without turning himself into a metaphysician, one more claimant to the title of primal deepest vocabulary."<sup>25</sup> The key here is what Rorty means by "argue": "Argumentation requires that the same

23. Davidson, "What Metaphors Mean," 262.

24. I cannot address the complex debate on metaphor here. For a detailed critique of Davidson that follows the same line as my discussion, see Ian Hacking, "The Parody of Conversation," in *Truth and Interpretation*; and Hacking, "Styles of Scientific Reasoning," in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, 145–65.

25. Rorty, "Deconstruction and Circumvention," 16.

vocabulary be used in premises and conclusions—that both be part of the same language-game” (ID, 213). This means that Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida are not arguers, not “rigorous” philosophers: “I object to the idea that one can be ‘rigorous’ if one’s procedure consists in inventing new words for what one is pleased to call ‘conditions of possibility’ rather than playing sentences using old words off against each other. The latter activity is what I take to constitute argumentation” (ID, 211). Argumentation can take place only where the “logical space remains fixed,”<sup>26</sup> not between language games. “The ironist’s unit of persuasion is vocabulary not the proposition” (*CIS*, 78), and the goal of persuasion is not to convince interlocutors “that their propositions are false but that their languages [are] obsolete” (*CIS*, 78).

Rorty’s position on language creates a number of problems. First, it leaves untouched the question of whether the change he is offering is so radically incommensurate that it justifies ignoring argument. He allies himself with a host of others (Gadamer, Sartre, Dewey, and Derrida) who share his nonfoundationalism and then “re-describes” those who continue to seek grounds; however, he does not argue with those whom he identifies as participants in his language game and with whom he could—in his own terms—have an argument. For example, the move noted above of replacing *truth* with *obsolete*—which is his way of putting his claim “under erasure,” of trying to criticize without making a truth claim—could, and should, be defended against counterarguments by those who share his Davidsonian assumptions. Instead, Rorty simply points out such thinkers’ residual attachments to ontology or epistemology. He characterizes the kinds of language games played by the re-describers only negatively, as nonargumentative. Hence, all violations of language games—whether Derridean, Hegelian, Lyotardian, et cetera—are lumped together: “The method is to re-describe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it. . . . This sort of philosophy does not work piece by piece. . . . Rather, it works holistically and pragmatically. It says things like ‘try thinking of it this way’” (*CIS*, 9). Thus, Rorty’s “we” emerges in opposition to foundationalists in analytic philosophy and includes a group of profoundly different authors who share a very thin notion of nonfoundationalism. This horizon of solidarity, which is underwritten by linguistic holism, puts problems of subjectivity, desire, intentionality, and reference—which could be raised in his recurrent phrase (“what we want”)—out of play, since “we” share a common lan-

26. Rorty, “Inquiry as Recontextualization,” 94.

guage that makes “our” differences on these issues insignificant. Rorty’s solution simply displaces these problems rather than provides a problematic for their discussion, since almost no one Rorty includes in his “we” would accept his characterization of his/her position. Thus, it is not surprising that even a sympathetic critic, such as Richard Bernstein, finds Rorty’s formulations frustratingly vague: “Aren’t these substantive philosophical issues that need to be defended?”<sup>27</sup>

Secondly, the holistic Davidsonian definition Rorty gives to “language game” cannot embrace the various kinds of discourse that appear in arguments and that also provide criteria for what is in or out of bounds. Wittgenstein, whom he invokes throughout, insists on the multiplicity of language games that appear in texts. Holism, which informs Saussure’s and Chomsky’s theories, as well as Davidson’s, assumes a “linguistic utopia” (to borrow Mary Louise Pratt’s phrase), in which all meanings and practices are transparent and homogeneous: “Behind *langue*, behind Saussure’s diagram, stands the image of the modern imagined community: discrete, sovereign, fraternal—a linguistic utopia. In the Chomskyan tradition a maximally homogeneous object of study is achieved in the construct of the ideal speaker.”<sup>28</sup> The result is that “styles, registers, and varieties are typically treated not as lines which divide the community, but as shared property, a communal repertoire which belongs to all members and which all seek to use in appropriate and orderly ways.”<sup>29</sup> The debate is no longer formulated in terms of the opposition between those who study sentences in isolation and those who invoke webs of belief; rather, the problem is how to articulate these webs. As Nancy Fraser says of Rorty’s appeal to solidarity with a unified community, “Why assume a quasi-Durkheimian view according to which society is integrated by way of single monolithic and all-encompassing solidarity? Why not rather assume a quasi-Marxist view according to which modern capitalist societies contain a plurality of overlapping and competing solidarities.”<sup>30</sup> Rorty focuses on the problem of translation between alien cultures, the locus of the debate in the tradition of Quine, and assimilates it too easily to domestic disputes. It is one thing to say that we could not understand a language that is completely unintelligible

27. Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 201.

28. Mary Louise Pratt, “Ideology and Speech-Act Theory,” *Poetics Today* 7 (1986): 50–51.

29. Pratt, “Ideology and Speech-Act Theory,” 55.

30. Fraser, “Solidarity or Singularity,” 98.

in our own, and quite another to say that differences among various kinds of language games, sentences, and genres of discourse are insignificant. Important linguistic differences do not just arise among cultures but within living rooms.<sup>31</sup> One does not have to accept the scheme/content opposition in order to have a critical vocabulary that can distinguish different kinds of discourse and linguistic practices. (I'll make suggestions about this vocabulary in section three.) When he is criticizing attempts to ground solidarity on "human nature" or an "ur-language," Rorty recognizes the need for "thick descriptions of the private and idiosyncratic" that can "sensitize one to the pain of those who do not speak our language" (*CIS*, 94), but he only refers us to examples rather than characterizing their discourse. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, his chapters on literary figures (Proust, Nabokov, and Orwell) are thematic rather than linguistic. When Henry Staten charges that Rorty provides no means of making stylistic distinctions among authors, Rorty answers that "such a worry seems as unnecessary as the metaphysician's worry that the failure of causal theory of reference will make it impossible to distinguish physics and politics."<sup>32</sup> His holism thus permits him to identify *argument* with the misguided foundationalist claim that having "a neutral ground" (ID, 208) is a prerequisite for attacking an opponent and that a knock-down foundationalist proof is the only reason to undertake an argument: "The trouble with arguments against the use of a familiar and time-honoured vocabulary is that they are expected to be phrased in that very vocabulary. They are expected to show that central elements in that vocabulary are 'inconsistent in their own terms' or that they 'deconstruct themselves.' But that can *never* be shown" (*CIS*, 8).<sup>33</sup> Rorty puts the emphasis on "never," but, for me, the key is "shown." That is, the only one way to make a point in argument is foundationalist demonstration; since this is not possible, there is no point in arguing. *Argument* is not a complex discursive concept whose textual variety needs to be studied; rather, it is a style of writing that needs to be dropped, for all arguments "are always parasitic upon, and abbreviations for, claims that a better vocabulary is available" (*CIS*, 9). For Rorty, either we play the argumentative game of analytic philosophy or we do not; and if we do not and opt for the "redescription of

31. See chap. 6 of my *Realism and the Drama of Reference* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988), 81–94.

32. Richard Rorty, "The Higher Nominalism in a Nutshell: A Reply to Henry Staten," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1986): 464.

33. Rorty is very loose with his terminology, as he slips among "language game," "vocabulary," and "holism."

vocabularies,” then there is no critical terminology to describe our textual strategies, only the metaphilosophical ontology that the self is a holistic web of beliefs. (Even such limited distinctions as those proposed by narratology are never mentioned.) Rorty’s valorization of *redescription* justifies the reading strategy that we saw earlier, in which the critic simply “beats the text into the shape which will serve his own purposes” (*Consequences*, 152). Since the critic’s language game and the text’s language game are incommensurate, the critic not only is at liberty to say anything he/she wants but avoids bad faith by using an openly aggressive metaphor to describe his/her relationship to the text. As we will see in the last section, this metaphor implies that epistemological foundations are, and should be, the only constraints on, or considerations about, how we read or behave. We can clarify the relationship between linguistic ontology and ethics by comparing Rorty with Lyotard and Derrida.

The differences between Lyotard and Rorty are particularly interesting, since they both invoke Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* to underwrite their views. Lyotard, however, articulates the crucial discursive unit that falls between the word (Derrida) and the holistic web of belief (Rorty), the sentence. As opposed to Derrida’s philosophy of the word, the sentence provides a space for subjectivity (the subject of enunciation), while it also offers a means of examining kinds of textual practice that Rorty’s holism ignores. Lyotard outlines such a theory in *Le Differend*.<sup>34</sup> In this work, Lyotard rejects Rorty’s three fundamental assumptions about language (the first two of which we have already examined): (1) that it is a holistic system of beliefs; (2) that it is a tool; and (3) that it should be thought of in the context of mastering technique. I will consider Lyotard’s views on the first two points before comparing him with Rorty on the third. For Lyotard, the various language games in which we participate are incommensurate, though not unintelligible. Lyotard puts this Wittgensteinian idea in terms of his own pragmatics by making these games emerge at the level of the sentence. Speaker and listener “are situated in the universe that

34. I translate *phrase* as “sentence” rather than “phrase.” In the English translation of *Le Differend* (Paris: Minuit, 1983), Georges Van Den Abbeele uses “phrase” for reasons I find unconvincing. See *The Differend* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 194. This work is hereafter cited in my text as *D*.

Even though Lyotard’s use of the term is sometimes eccentric, *phrase* does not capture this eccentricity any better than *sentence*. Moreover, as Geoff Bennington points out, *sentence* shows the relationship of the text to the Anglo-Saxon philosophical tradition. See *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1988), 123–24.

the sentence presents in the same way as the referent and the meaning" (*D*, 27). Thus, we have a typology of sentences—the cognitive, the ethical, and the aesthetic. It is the function of genres of discourse—narrative—to provide rules for linking sentences, but these rules do not overcome the contingency of any linkage among sentences. One cannot *not* link, but any particular linkage is contingent. Hence, the space between sentences is the space of critical politics: "Politics consists in the fact that language is not language but sentences" (*D*, 200). In *Le Differend*, Lyotard corrects the privileged sense of narrative described in *The Postmodern Condition*.<sup>35</sup> He now emphasizes the obfuscatory power of narratives to cover over the competing stakes of different types. Indeed, his work gets its title from the conflict among discursive idioms: "A differend takes place between two parties when the 'settlement' of the conflict that opposes them is made in the idiom of one while the injury from which the other suffers does not signify in that idiom" (*D*, 24–25). It is not that Lyotard rejects the background practices or webs of belief that are needed to participate in language games—even if he does not discuss them—but that he does not want to operate at a level of abstraction that offers no means of bringing out important linguistic differences. (I discuss the cost of Lyotard's refusal to talk about these background practices in the last section.)

Rorty cites Lyotard's comment that "there is no unity of language but islets of language, each governed by a different order that is untranslatable into those of the others."<sup>36</sup> He claims that Lyotard confuses two different theses: (1) "there is no single commensurating language, known in advance, which will provide an idiom in which one can translate any new theory, poetic idiom, or native culture"; and (2) "there are unlearnable languages."<sup>37</sup> For Rorty, the first of these is crucial, while the second is incoherent. What Rorty does in the second thesis, however, is change the issue from the nature of language to the acquisition of language. He continues in this vein when he talks about connecting different languages: "These

35. In *Le Postmoderne explique aux enfants* (Paris: Galilee, 1986), Lyotard criticizes his earlier discussion of narrative: "It is not right to give the narrative genre an absolute privilege over other genres of discourse in the analysis of human or in particular 'language' (ideological) phenomena, and even less in a philosophical approach. Certain of my previous reflections perhaps succumbed to this 'transcendental spectre' ('Presentations,' *Instructions paiennes*, even *La condition postmoderne*)" (45).

36. Richard Rorty, "Cosmopolitanism without Emancipation: A Response to Jean-François Lyotard," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 215.

37. Rorty, "Cosmopolitanism without Emancipation," 215.

causeways do not take the form of translation manuals, but rather of the sort of cosmopolitan know-how whose acquisition enables us to move back and forth between sectors of our own culture and our own history.”<sup>38</sup> He thinks that Lyotard is wrong to think of mastery as the assimilation of rules rather than as mastery of a technique. Lyotard responds, “I have never said that genres are learned by rules. Genres are learned through sentences, through dialogical exchanges. It’s only when we try to understand genres that we try to find out what their rules are.”<sup>39</sup> By considering language in the context of learning, of mastery of technique, Rorty is able to maintain his humanistic view of the subject that spans the heterogeneity of culture. Moreover, by calling these techniques “inarticulable,” he excuses himself from discourse analysis.<sup>40</sup> Lyotard distinguishes being able to take up a subject position within a particular language game from a unified subject.

If Lyotard’s problematic of the sentence enables us to probe types of discourse, his work also presents difficulties. It reduces the subject to a discursive position by making the typical poststructuralist move of setting up the straw figure of a humanist individual. He says his goal is “to refute the reader’s prejudice, anchored in him by centuries of humanism and ‘human sciences,’ that there is ‘man,’ that there is ‘language,’ and that man uses language for his ends” (*D*, 11). Lyotard thus offers us only the constructed subject and has nothing to say about the constructing subject or about the different ways in which we inhabit language. The fact that we have theories that displace the subject in various ways does not help us decide when to invoke them, for such a decision requires a move to the metacritical level. Before exploring the possibility of metacritique, I will contrast Rorty with Derrida.

Rorty makes an important critique of those metaphysical moments in Derrida that many of Derrida’s commentators cite with authority. For example, he warns us against the famous phrase “il n’y pas de hors texte”: “taken in a weakly literal-minded sense, this claim is just one more metaphysical thesis” (*Consequences*, 154). Rorty laments the moments that Derrida offers theses and arguments, particularly about language, for these

38. Rorty, “Cosmopolitanism without Emancipation,” 216.

39. Jean-François Lyotard, “Histoire universelle et différences culturelles,” *Critique* 456 (1985): 574.

40. Rorty, “Cosmopolitanism without Emancipation,” 216. For an excellent discussion of the debate between a rule-based account of language and a naturalistic, skill-based account, see David Bloor, *Wittgenstein: A Social Theory of Knowledge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

passages have led commentators such as Rodolphe Gasché to lay out Derridean principles: “Concepts and discursive totalities are already cracked and fissured by necessary contradictions and heterogeneities” (cited in ID, 213).<sup>41</sup> Such a reading locks Derrida into a metaphysical position that withers the critical force of his work. At the same time, by reducing his work to neologistic theses about the conditions of possibility, Derrida’s defenders insulate his work from critique.

Rorty mistakenly deprives deconstruction of any critical or political force. He disputes the claims of Culler, Norris, and Gasché that Derrida is a “rigorous” philosopher: “The result of genuinely original thought, on my view, is not so much to refute or subvert our previous beliefs as to help us forget them. I take refutation to be a mark of unoriginality, and I value Derrida’s originality too much to praise him on those terms” (ID, 209). Rorty discusses the difference in their problematics by contrasting the word with the proposition, not with his own problematic of the language game. He says that Derrida’s work would count as argumentative “if one had a conception of argument as subpropositional—one which allowed the unit of argumentation to be the word rather than the sentence”—that is, the idea that “there is a ‘movement of the concept’ for the philosopher to follow, not reducible to the reweaving of a web of belief by playing beliefs off each other” (ID, 213). Rorty cites Hegel’s *Logic* as the first in this tradition, but a more fruitful example for us is Derrida’s *différance*. When Derrida says that “subjectivity—like objectivity—is an effect of *différance*,” he is talking about semiotic forces that logically precede articulation in sentences.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, all of Derrida’s strategies—paleonymic reading, reversal of binary oppositions, unraveling of the logos—are all based on operations at the level of the word.<sup>43</sup> I do not mean that Derrida simply focuses on the role of words in culture—for example, Raymond Williams’s *Keywords*—but that his ontology is the word (and its other). He breaks down the semantic containment of concepts and reads against familiar historical embeddings to show how their articulations are not natural or logical but arbitrary and ideological. He

41. The passage Rorty cites is from Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*, 136.

42. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 28.

43. See Eve Tavor Bannet’s *Structuralism and the Logic of Dissent* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 202–27, for a description of the principal moves in Derrida’s text. This description shows how Derrida’s focus is always on the differential articulations of the sign.

does not place himself, or the text, under consideration in larger ontological categories—background, life-world, web of beliefs—even though they are implicit. The omission of this context has resulted in considerable confusion concerning his work, and this omission no doubt contributes to Rorty's conflation of two issues: that argument has to be phrased in a proposition or sentence, and that all linguistic forces must operate at the level of the sentence. Deconstruction shows how certain terms are privileged in the construction of signs and how these terms infect a variety of discourses. Rorty is correct to point out that Derrida neglects other levels of linguistic analysis, but he is wrong to deny linguistic forces at the subpropositional level and, hence, wrong to deny the critical power of deconstruction. For Rorty, deconstruction is simply bizarre writing: "There is no moral to these fantasies, nor any public (pedagogic or political) use to be made of them; but, for Derrida's readers, they may be exemplary—suggestions of the sort of thing one might do, a sort of thing rarely done before" (*C/S*, 125). The value of Derrida's texts is reduced to their "deviance."

In my view, Derrida's work gets its critical bite not by ignoring linguistic codes and intentionality, or by spinning out a private fantasy but by reworking these textual elements in challenging ways. Derrida does not simply ignore rules, as he says in response to Rob Nixon and Anne McClintock's attack on his essay "Racism's Last Word": "The text of an appeal obeys certain rules; it has its grammar, its rhetoric, its pragmatics. . . . [A]s you did not take these rules into account, you quite simply *did not read my text*, in the most elementary and quasi-grammatical senses of what is called *reading*."<sup>44</sup> When Derrida performs his double writing in response to Searle—he both argues against Searle and enacts speech-acts excluded by Searle's theory—Derrida challenges the neutrality of Searle's categories of property and identity.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, by limiting his notion of the proposition to the way it is presented in analytic philosophy rather than by exploring the pragmatics of the sentence, which we find in the work of Lyotard, Benveniste, and others, Rorty misses an opportunity here to offer a critique of Derrida. For Rorty, the problematic of the sentence is just a way of acknowl-

44. Jacques Derrida, "But, beyond . . . (Open letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon)," trans. Peggy Kamuf, in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 356.

45. See Jacques Derrida, "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion," in *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), for his recent commentary on the well-known debate with Searle.

edging the fact that attacks on Derrida by those in the Anglo-American tradition, such as Searle, have a point, but that this point has nothing to do with what Derrida's writing is really about.

Rorty makes Derrida part of the group who wants to see language as a medium rather than as a tool. He denies Derrida's claim about the agency of language, for the concept "does not go to pieces; rather, we set it aside and replace it with something else" (ID, 213). In Rorty's view, language is not a mediator between self and world or an autonomous force but simply one kind of behavior: "The activity of uttering sentences is one of the things people do in order to cope with the environment. The Deweyan notion of language as a tool rather than picture is right as far as it goes" (*Consequences*, xviii–xix). Of course, he goes on to make the standard disclaimer—that we should not take this to mean that "there is some way of breaking out of language in order to compare it with something else" (*Consequences*, xviii–xix)—but he does not discuss how this disclaimer challenges the tool metaphor or what other metaphors for language might be appropriate. The objection is merely something that the tool-user should keep in mind. The tool metaphor avoids the pernicious idea that "there is a core self which can look at, decide among, use, and express itself by means of such belief and desires" (*C/S*, 10) or that there is a world before language waiting for articulation. This characterization holds for the representationalist tradition but not for Derrida, who would agree with Rorty's view that the self and world emerge through vocabularies rather than are "expressed" or "represented" by them. As we saw in the passage cited above ("subjectivity—like objectivity—is an effect of *différance*"), Rorty's real complaint against Derrida is not that language is a medium but that Derrida makes language an agent. Giving agency to language challenges Rorty's tool metaphor and his behaviorism. Rorty wants causes outside language, so that the interface between coherence and causality replaces the one between representation and object.

Hence, Rorty's and Derrida's views of language and the subject go together. While Derrida's problematic (the disseminating economy of the sign) makes the subject an effect of the system, Rorty's holism seems to produce only an instrumental subject. While Derrida offers a theory of only the constructed subject, a third-person account, Rorty's position seems ambiguous. On the one hand, he talks easily about what "we" have learned and mastered; on the other hand, he never offers an inside view of the self. Instead, he speaks of "a web of beliefs without a center," which is a second-order, third-person account. As Habermas says, "Rorty absolut-

izes the perspective of the observer.”<sup>46</sup> Rorty avoids theorizing the self from the inside because the history of such efforts has been connected to foundationalist enterprises. Nonetheless, his problematic (“webs of belief”) is compatible with a much richer first-person account than the tool-using subject he proposes. Rorty tries to make the connection between his metaphilosophical theory and his first-order theory seem inevitable. By breaking this connection, I will force the theoretical controversy out of the metaphilosophical level, where Rorty likes to keep it, and offer an alternative view of the language, subjectivity, and value. Moreover, this view will provide a space to thematize the metaphilosophical differences between Rorty and the poststructuralists. The best place to explore the relationship between the metacritical and first-order levels in Rorty’s theory is in his discussion of psychoanalysis.

### **Metaphilosophy, Ethics, and Politics**

For Rorty, the holistic language game that makes up the self is at once binding and illuminating. On the one hand, it is so deeply a part of “us” that we cannot step outside it; on the other hand, understanding and accepting a game produces the salutary self-consciousness of the ironist. Rorty defines a person as “a coherent and plausible set of beliefs and desires.”<sup>47</sup> The unconscious is not a collection of seething drives but an alternative package of beliefs—that is, an alternative self whose sets of beliefs are incommensurate with the familiar set that is available to introspection. In this domesticated view of the unconscious, there are no isolated beliefs. Rather, our relationship to the unconscious is articulated in holistic language games in the same way that our disputes with other critics are. Since psychic forces cannot appear in smaller linguistic units than this,<sup>48</sup> these forces can be called another “person” who is “outside” our familiar self. The dis-

46. Jürgen Habermas, “Questions and Counter-Questions,” in *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard Bernstein (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 195.

47. Richard Rorty, “Freud and Moral Reflection,” in *Pragmatism’s Freud: The Moral Disposition of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 4. Rorty gets his view of a person from Donald Davidson’s “Paradoxes of Irrationality,” in *Philosophical Essays on Freud* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 289–305.

48. This view is markedly different from poststructuralist readings of Freud, such as those of Lacan and Derrida, who define the subject in terms of the sign. Lacan says that the subject is “defined as the effect of the signifier” (see *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan [New York: Norton, 1978], 207).

junction between the conscious and unconscious selves means that they have only a causal relationship with each other rather than a rational justificatory relationship. That is, they have a relationship of force rather than of argument. The story told by the unconscious is not only different but incommensurate with the one told by the conscious self—for example, a story of the mother as “long-suffering object of pity” versus another that shows her as a “voracious seductress.”<sup>49</sup> Rorty characterizes this tension as “competing stories” and, through Davidson, tries to solve the well-known dilemma in psychoanalysis between meaning and force, between the agent’s internal reasons for an action and the causal explanations of that action.<sup>50</sup> Rorty revises Freud’s causal theory by making the conscious and unconscious selves “part of a single unified causal network, but not of a single person.”<sup>51</sup> (There can, of course, be more than two selves at work.) The analyst ferrets out the story of the unconscious self and links the two selves through a third narrative—what Habermas calls a “general interpretation” of the story of development—a story that may use causal language about “drives,” “cathexes,” and so on. The analysand, however, cannot use such causal language in his/her story; he/she can only compare the two stories. Rorty does not discuss the nature or validity of this third narrative, as Habermas does, for Rorty’s concern is not with “correcting” distorted communication but with generating new stories. In doing so, Rorty uses the absence of foundationalist truth to slip out of making any claim to truth; instead, he appeals to diversity.

Rorty’s reading is only from the outside, not from the analysand’s position. The question for the analysand is not whether he/she can invent *any* new stories but *which* stories will give satisfying accounts of the past and help constitute the new self the analysand is seeking to forge. Language for the analysand is a mode of being that he/she inhabits and is not simply a tool. “Inhabit” and “constitute” are not part of Rortyese; indeed, he explicitly attacks Charles Taylor’s view that certain kinds of linguistic practice are constitutive (“our emotions, aspirations, goals, our social relations and practices”) rather than descriptive (“the domain of middle-size dry goods”).<sup>52</sup> For

49. Rorty, “Freud and Moral Reflection,” 22.

50. Paul Ricoeur phrases this succinctly when he says that psychoanalysis “calls for an explanation by means of causes in order to reach an understanding in terms of motives” (see “The Question of Proof in Freud’s Psychoanalytic Writings,” in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981], 263).

51. Rorty, “Freud and Moral Reflection,” 5.

52. Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1: 275.

Taylor, “the human agent not only has some understanding (which may be also more or less misunderstanding) of himself, but is partly constituted by this understanding.”<sup>53</sup> This constitution is inevitably axiological, as well, and Taylor calls such self-interpretations “strong evaluations.” This view of the subject is opposed to utilitarian efforts to maintain a subject who is outside any context and who weighs alternatives: “Whereas for the simple weigher what is at stake is the desirability of different consummations, those defined by his *de facto* desires, for the strong evaluator reflection also examines the different possible modes of being of the agent.”<sup>54</sup> Rorty wants to drop any such distinction: “The interesting line is not between the human and the nonhuman, nor between material objects and emotions, but between behavioral patterns which you and the natives share and the patterns which you do not.”<sup>55</sup> Rorty tries to dismiss Taylor’s claim about the ontology of the subject by associating it with a foundationalist quest to mark out the true shape of beings, but this is not what Taylor is after. Taylor’s point is about the ontological dimension of “strong evaluations,” of what Rorty would call “final vocabularies”—that is, “a set of words which [humans] employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes” (*CIS*, 73). Rorty, however, never shows what it looks like to live through these vocabularies. He speaks as if the ironist theorist could acknowledge his/her embeddedness and then speak of vocabularies as matters of word choice or behavioral patterns and not as complex practices that we live in.

Rather than creating a two-tiered theory in which the metaphilosophical notion of webs of belief plays the role of critical background to the first-order ontologies of the agent, Rorty uses the problematic that the self is a web of beliefs to deny an inside view of the self. Distinguishing the first- and second-order dimensions exposes what Rorty occludes—the arbitrary connection between webs of belief and Rorty’s instrumentalism. That is, Rorty’s idea of webs of belief is consistent with alternative notions of being and axiology such as Taylor’s. We need such metalanguages to help bridge our incommensurate beings; but, as Lyotard and Taylor would add, we need to be aware of the difference between first- and second-order languages so that the cost of mediation is thematized. This does not mean that first-person constructs are unassailable; rather, the tension between first- and

53. Taylor, *Philosophical Papers*, 1: 3.

54. Taylor, *Philosophical Papers*, 1: 25.

55. Rorty, “Inquiry as Recontextualization,” 104.

third-person accounts cannot, and should not, be resolved, whether the tension comes from the third-person accounts of social science or from the competing linguistic ontologies of Rorty, Derrida, and Lyotard. By maintaining such tension, we can pursue the richness of communitarian ontologies such as Taylor's while thematizing what these ontologies cover over.<sup>56</sup>

The undefended connection between his problematic and Rorty's first-order claim about instrumental value enables him to flatten ethical/political language. He achieves this, in part, by dissolving questions of nonutilitarian value, by knocking down a straw person—for example, the distinction between moral deliberation and preidentical calculation—instead of thinking of value in terms of practices. Rorty follows Freud in seeing “science and poetry, genius . . . psychosis . . . morality and prudence not as products of distinct faculties but as alternative modes of adaptation” (*C/S*, 33).<sup>57</sup> Rorty makes the erroneous move from “there are no objects outside of linguistic practices” to “distinctions among linguistic practices have no

56. The double reading of the subject in terms of self-interpretation (first-person) and in terms of the causal accounts of social science (third-person, what goes on behind the subject's back) is a well-known hermeneutic problem. I am extending this idea of double reading to include the third-person linguistic accounts of Lyotard and Derrida, even though these readings do not explain but simply unmask self-interpretations. My point is to force poststructuralists to consider how to recuperate, as well as how to unmask, self-interpretations, and thus urge them to show how they are closing the hermeneutic circle by thematizing their own commitments and agency. I also want to preserve the poststructuralist critique of communitarian accounts such as Taylor's. In *Politics and Ambiguity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1987), William Connolly puts the tension between the two well in his comparison of Taylor's expressive approach to language with Foucault's genealogical approach: “Each of these orientations brings us, through its understanding of discourse, to a distinctive ontology of social life and then brings us, through its ontology, to a distinctive view of politics” (146). The genealogical approach makes available the following critique of Taylor: “The rhetoric of his [Taylor's] texts consistently gives hegemony to integration, and from the vantage point of an ontology at odds with the quest for attunement, the articulations he sustains function to conceal or obscure the violence done to life when the ambiguous character of communal forms of identification is underthematized” (151–52). I return to these points at the end of the essay.

57. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud looks at the instinctual sacrifices civilization demands and the ways in which civilization compensates people for these sacrifices. This economic point of view feeds utilitarianism, particularly when it is totalizing. What Ricoeur says about the limits of Freud applies to Rorty's redescription of culture in terms of his linguistic behaviorism: “Freud grasps the whole of the phenomenon of culture—and even human reality—but he does so from a single point of view” (see “Psychoanalysis and the Movement of Contemporary Culture,” in *Interpretive Social Science*, ed. Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979], 311).

force if they are deprived of foundationalist objects.” The effect is to level all cultural practices and objects of inquiry. For example, psychoanalysis, like “reading history, novels, or treatises on moral philosophy,” is “a way of getting additional suggestions about how to describe (and change) oneself in the future.”<sup>58</sup> Having dismissed the differences among all disciplines, Rorty makes the possibility of redescription become the imperative to redescribe with a utilitarian purpose.

We can see this point in terms of Rorty’s psychoanalytic theory by pointing to the necessity of a fourth narrative to supplement the three stories already mentioned—the one of the conscious self, the one of the unconscious self, and the one used by the analyst. This fourth narrative is what the analyst and analysand construct in order to reconcile the language game of the conscious self with that of the unconscious. An evaluative language of constitution must be negotiated so that the analysand not only accepts the unwelcome story of his/her unconscious self but invents a self/language game that offers a meaningful existence. The analysand does not simply understand what the unconscious self is saying and become liberated, nor does he/she delight only in the diversity of possible alternatives; rather, he/she finds a site and a language (“final vocabulary”) for integrating this story into a new one. The hidden story that the process of working through unfolds becomes available only through the utopian projection of a new self (fourth narrative). Rorty’s attempt to gloss this process as the invention of new stories suppresses the first-order agent by forcing him/her to be a liberal, metaphilosophical subject.<sup>59</sup> How does his understanding of the subject inform his discussion of ethical and political conflicts?

The most obvious link emerges in Rorty’s ethnocentrism. In “Solidarity or Objectivity?” and in “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism,” he argues against those who seek to ground human solidarity in objectivity or transcultural rationality and maintains that ethical questions, like all others, emerge within a historically specific culture. What is important in these essays is not his proposition that all discourse is positional, which is not controversial, but the political and ethical conclusions he draws from this

58. Rorty, “Freud and Moral Reflection,” 10.

59. I discuss these four narratives, as well as Rorty’s reading of Freud, in more detail in “Explanation, Understanding, and Incommensurability in Psychoanalysis,” in *Analecta Husserliana* (forthcoming). For the alternative shapes the practices of truth, beauty, and goodness in a particular text can give to subjectivity, see my essay, “Value and Subjectivity: The Dynamics of the Sentence in James’s *The Ambassadors*,” *Comparative Literature* 43 (1991): 113–33.

proposition. He tells us, for instance, that “to be ethnocentric is to divide the human race into the people to whom one must justify one’s beliefs and the others.”<sup>60</sup> To support this contention, he points to psychoanalysis and history. Freud undermines our moral concepts, such as “love” and “compassion,” by offering detailed accounts of how such vocabulary operates in personal histories. For example, when Freud discusses the “narcissistic origin of compassion, . . . he gives a way of thinking of the sense of pity not as an identification with the common core which we share with all other members of our species, but as channeled in very specific ways toward very specific sorts of people and very particular vicissitudes” (*C/S*, 31–32). In the same way, attempts to explain cruelty are better when they focus on a society’s terms of identification rather than on moral universals such as “inhumanity,” “hardness of heart,” or “lack of a sense of human solidarity.” “The point of these examples is that our sense of solidarity is strongest when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as ‘one of us,’ where ‘us’ means something smaller and more local than the human race” (*C/S*, 191). What underwrites this “ethical holism” is Rorty’s linguistic holism: “Within a language game, within a set of agreements about what is possible and important, we can usefully distinguish reasons for belief from causes for belief which are not reasons. . . . However, once we raise the question of how we get from one vocabulary to another, from one dominant metaphoric to another, the distinction between reasons and causes begins to lose its utility” (*C/S*, 48).

The capacity of Rorty’s holism for reducing difference within and between communities and disciplines is never brought out so clearly as in these passages. By remaining at the metaphilosophical level in which his adversary is a universalist or essentialist, he can play the epistemological role of routing out error, while avoiding questions about how we draw lines between “dominant metaphoric” and about the role of ethical vocabularies in shaping these alternative communities. From this Olympian view, all the forces that traverse and fragment the culture can be enclosed in the name *the West*. The text of the West and its other, the problem of the “inside and outside” of the West, the cultural and economic powers at work in dialogues with the other and with ourselves as other, are reduced to the epistemological maxim that radical difference is unintelligible.<sup>61</sup>

60. See Rorty’s “Solidarity or Objectivity?” in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, 3–19, and his “Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 197–202.

61. When Rorty is not chasing down this error about alternative conceptual schemes, he is pursuing the ascetic priest in Heidegger, and argues against massive generalizations

When the issue is an internal dispute within a political community, Rorty replaces the distinction between “we/they” with the distinction between public and private, between “we” and “I.” Rorty makes the linguistic basis of this latter distinction: “The vocabulary of self-creation is necessarily private, unshared, unsuited to argument,” whereas “the vocabulary of justice is necessarily public and shared, a medium for argumentative exchange” (*C/S*, xiv). Thus, texts fall out into those that “help us become autonomous” and those that “help us become less cruel” (*C/S*, 141). Rorty links this linguistic distinction to the liberal priority of justice over the good. This liberal principle is articulated by John Rawls: “As a practical matter no general moral conception can provide the basis for a public conception of justice in modern democratic society. . . . [S]uch a conception must allow for a diversity of doctrines and plurality of conflicting, and indeed incommensurable conceptions of the good affirmed by the members of existing democratic societies.”<sup>62</sup> Rorty wants to drop any rationalist justification based on human nature or universal rights and make the priority of justice a contingent historical matter of our tradition (Priority, 281). He says this is a plausible reading of Rawls’s recent work, where the Kantian emphasis of *A Theory of Justice* is downplayed in favor of Hegelian and Deweyan elements, and Rorty says that he agrees with the following statement of Rawls’s “metaphilosophical doctrine”: “What justifies a conception of justice is not its being true to an order antecedent to us and given to us, but its congruence with our deeper understanding of ourselves and our aspirations, and our realization that, *given our history and the traditions embedded in our public life*, it is the most reasonable doctrine *for us*” (Priority, 286–87; Rorty’s italics). What does the subject of justice look like?

Michael Sandel characterizes the Rawlsian subject as follows: “The priority of the self over its ends means that I am not merely the passive receptacle of the accumulated aims, attributes, and purposes thrown up

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about the “West”: “I am dubious about such attempts [like Heidegger’s] to encapsulate the West, to treat it as a finished off object on which we are now in a position to subject to structural analysis” (see his “Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens,” in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 67). In this essay, he proposes Kundera’s celebration of diverse particulars combined with Dickens’s fusion of particularity and commitment to social justice. We can see Fraser’s useful opposition of romantic ironist (Kundera) versus Deweyan pragmatist (Dickens) at work here.

62. John Rawls, “Justice as Fairness: Political not Metaphysical,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 (1985): 225, cited in Richard Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” in *Reading Rorty*, ed. Alan R. Malachowski (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 283. This work is hereafter cited in my text as Priority.

by experience, not simply a product of the vagaries of circumstance, but always, irreducibly, an active, willing agent, distinguishable from my surroundings, and capable of choice.”<sup>63</sup> How does Rorty square such a view with his own embedded, contingent subject? “Rawls is not interested in conditions for the identity of the self, but only in conditions for citizenship in a liberal society” (Priority, 289). In short, Rorty is saying that Rawls’s willingness to make justice a contingent, ethnocentric commitment of “our tradition” enables us to throw out not just Rawls’s language of the self but all first-order claims about the self, since this historical premise permits all such language to be rewritten in terms of Rorty’s definition of the self as a “contingent web of beliefs.” The only conception of the self that justice needs is the metaphilosophical one. The self and the good take a back seat to the metaphilosophical subject and its metavalue justice. Rorty offers no first-order account of the goods that are to be adjudicated, since for this we need a corresponding theory of self and value and not just a meta-account. Sandel says, “Like the primacy of justice, the priority of the right over the good appears initially as a first-order moral claim, in opposition to utilitarian doctrine, but comes ultimately to assume a certain meta-ethical status as well, particularly when Rawls argues more generally for deontological ethical theories as opposed to teleological ones.”<sup>64</sup>

Rorty’s linguistic politics enables him to consign the entire corpus of Heidegger, Derrida, Nietzsche, and others to the private realm of the individual’s search for autonomy rather than to the public sphere: “I agree with Habermas that as *public* philosophers [Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida] are at best useless and at worst dangerous, but I want to insist on the role they and others like them can play in accommodating the ironist’s *private* sense of identity to her liberal hopes” (CIS, 68). Rorty reduces theory to the banal arguments of the public realm and thus deprives theory of its political potential: “The later Derrida privatizes his philosophical thinking, and thereby breaks down the tension between ironism and theorizing. He simply drops theory—the attempt to see his predecessors steadily and whole—in favor of fantasizing about these predecessors, playing with them, giving free rein to the trains of associations they produce” (CIS, 125). It is precisely the public, shared vocabularies that carry historical oppression and that need to be challenged. Aren’t new vocabularies, new stories, one of the principal

63. Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 19.

64. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 17.

means by which a society becomes “less cruel?” As Iris Young says, “The repoliticization of public life does not require the creation of a unified public realm in which citizens leave behind their particular group affiliations, histories, and needs to discuss a mythical ‘common good.’ . . . [T]he perception of anything like a common good can only be the *outcome* of public interaction that expresses rather than submerges particularities.”<sup>65</sup> The connection among linguistic holism, instrumentalism, and politics is pointedly phrased by Nancy Fraser: “Rorty homogenizes social space, assuming that there are no deep cleavages capable of generating conflicting solidarities and opposing we’s. It follows from this absence of social antagonisms that politics is a matter of everyone pulling together to solve a common set of problems. Thus, social engineering can replace social struggle.”<sup>66</sup>

Since the controversies surrounding autonomy, and the distinction between public and private, are beyond the scope of this essay, I will limit myself to two points. First, Rorty fails to account for the institutionalization of the private that is exposed not only by Foucault but by the history of women’s writing under liberal democracies.<sup>67</sup> Second, his thematic discussion of writers (Nabokov for the private and Orwell for the public) fails, in part, because it tries to decide these issues from the distant view of metatheory and vague thematic commentary rather than with a first-order account of subjectivity and ethics. The only values that he discusses are the metavalues of liberalism—justice and diversity—which ask for a metasubject who seeks to avoid being situated in any particular set of cultural practices. The metasubject of justice (public sphere) tries to mediate conflicts among such practices, while the metasubject of diversity (private sphere) ironically plays one vocabulary against the other.

For example, a first-order account is required to discuss Carol Gilligan’s analysis of the alternative moral orientations of justice and care: “These perspectives denote different ways of organizing the basic elements of moral judgment: self, others, and the relationship between them. . . . [E]ach organizing framework leads to a different way of imagining the self

65. Iris Young, *Justice and Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 119.

66. Fraser, “Solidarity or Singularity,” 314–15.

67. The development of Adrienne Rich’s poetry thematizes the inseparability of the public and the private. In addition to Fraser, see McCarthy’s “Private Irony and Public Decency” for an excellent discussion of the relationship of the public/private distinction to twentieth-century philosophy and Rorty’s work.

as moral agent.”<sup>68</sup> Seyla Benhabib stresses that these alternative orientations also entail competing views of community, what she calls “the central tension between the vision of community of rights and entitlements and that of community needs and solidarity.”<sup>69</sup> In order to compare the ontological/ethical shapes of selves and communities—and there are more than just two—we need a theory that can articulate them for critique or recuperation and not one that simply ignores or dismantles them. What is crucial here (and what is left out by communitarians such as Sandel and Gilligan) is the transformative dimension of critique and utopia, a utopia that is “not a mere beyond . . . but a negation of the existent in the name of a future that bursts open the possibilities of present.”<sup>70</sup> This dimension keeps the socially embedded self from being an imprisoned, conservative one.

If I have defended my call for a first-person account, I still have not completed two parts of my initial argument: the connection of linguistic ontology to ethics/politics in Lyotard and Derrida, and the achievement of commensurability among the alternative linguistic problematics.

The key to both issues is the poststructuralist claim that subjectivity is only a site for historical, psychic, and linguistic forces. Derrida and Lyotard—like Foucault—work in the Nietzschean tradition of *The Genealogy of Morals*, in which narratives of power unmask claims to truth and goodness. Nietzsche’s critique (as well as the critiques of the poststructuralists) de-substantializes the identities of subjects and objects into a relational system and then transforms this Saussurean insight so that the neutral system becomes a force that articulates—the will-to-power. This is not a psychological principle but an ontological one.<sup>71</sup> Such a view has a

68. Carol Gilligan, “Moral Orientation and Moral Development,” in *Women and Moral Theory*, ed. Eva Kittay and Diana Meyers (Totowa, N.J.: Rowan and Littlefield, 1987), 22–23.

69. Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 350.

70. Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, 353.

71. See Nietzsche’s *Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968). Nietzsche says, “To impose upon becoming the character of being, that is the supreme will to power” (330). It is well known that Foucault follows this ontology of power that identifies the discursive and the oppressive, but it is also true of Derrida. First, Derrida offers a definition: “There is never any thing called power or force, but only differences of power and of force. . . . In short, it seems to me that one must start, as Nietzsche doubtless did, from difference in order to accede to force and not vice versa” (“Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion,” 149). Then, Derrida identifies violence and the articulation of meaning: “The repression at the origin of meaning is an irreducible

number of problems. First, it does not account for the agency of its own statements. Like statements that maintain the truth of relativism, statements that assert that we are simply constructed and not constructing are either self-refuting or incomplete. I think “incomplete” is not only the more generous reading of their works but also the correct one. What is preserved by such reticence, however, is precisely what Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault try to subvert—that is, the privileging of the ontological and epistemological over the ethical. The reasoning works something like this: Because all identities are the factitious products of power, we ought to concern ourselves with rupturing this order rather than with theorizing how such subversive action is possible or with connecting value and language in a positive way. If this view of subjectivity has been productive in unmasking power at work in a subjective, humanist ethics, it has also kept poststructuralism tied to an ethics of difference and a politics of negative freedom—that is, freedom as opportunity rather than freedom as capacity.<sup>72</sup> They offer only a critique of articulated possibilities and an appeal to go beyond them. I follow Rorty when he seconds Habermas’s claim that poststructuralism (Foucault is the example here) “filters out all the aspects under which the eroticization and internalization of subjective nature also meant a gain in expression and freedom.”<sup>73</sup> If Rorty accepts the contingent, historically situated subject only as a metaphilosophical premise and not as an ideological space, so his subject sits comfortably in its institutions; on the other hand, the utopian desires in poststructuralist texts seek forms that are so radically discontinuous with the present that they cannot be formulated. Foucault calls this the “undefined work of freedom,” while Derrida speaks of the liberating possibilities of dissemination: “I would like to believe in the multiplicity of sexually marked voices. I would like to believe in the mass, this indeterminable number of blended voices, this mobile of non-identified sexual

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violence” (“Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion,” 150). Rorty’s reading of Nietzsche emphasizes Nietzsche’s delight in our contingency and in our capacities for self-creation, while lamenting his theory of power as an unfortunate attachment to metaphysics (see *C/S*, chap. 5).

72. See Charles Taylor, “What’s Wrong with Negative Freedom,” in *Philosophical Papers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 2: 211–29, for a sensitive discussion of why we need to have a view of freedom as an “exercise concept” and as an “opportunity concept.” For example, only with a positive concept of freedom could one evaluate competing *differends*.

73. Richard Rorty, “Moral Identity and Private Autonomy: The Case of Foucault,” in *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 195.

marks whose choreography can carry, divide, multiply the body of each 'individual' whether he be classified 'man' or 'woman' according to the criteria or usage."<sup>74</sup> Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition* ends with the plea for "a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown."<sup>75</sup> For Lyotard, justice means keeping attuned to *differends* that are oppressed by discourse—what is "beneath"—while the unknown points "beyond" discourse.<sup>76</sup> Barbara Johnson phrases the deconstructionist dilemma in her essay on feminism: "On the one hand, it would be impossible to deny that experience has been undervalued. On the other, the moment one assumes one knows what female experience is, one runs the risk of creating another reductive appropriation—an appropriation that consists in the reduction of experience as self-resistance. While deconstructive discourse may be in danger of over-valuing self-resistance, feminist discourse may be in danger of losing self-resistance."<sup>77</sup> The key issues—how we know that female experience has been undervalued and what we will do about it—remain untheorized. What Nancy Fraser says of Foucault applies equally well to Derrida and Lyotard: "Why is struggle preferable to submission? Why ought domination to be resisted? Only with the introduction of normative notions could he [Foucault] begin to tell us what is wrong with the modern power/knowledge regime and why we ought to oppose it."<sup>78</sup> The ontology of the word cannot provide an ethical or political context for its use, since it views all such background practices not as simply logocentric but as oppressive. We have now reached the question of commensurability—whether the problematics of the word, sentence, and language game are so radically different that they are incommensurate.

The easiest way to pursue this question is through what I'll call the paradox of holism. On the one hand, the legacy of Heidegger and Wittgenstein has shown us that we are embedded in background practices and webs of belief that make possible our individual utterances and actions. On

74. Jacques Derrida, "Choreographies," *Diacritics* 11 (1982): 76; Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 46.

75. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 67.

76. For a detailed discussion of Lyotard's linguistic politics, see my essay "Lyotard's Politics of the Sentence," *Cultural Critique* 16 (1990): 193–214.

77. Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 46.

78. Nancy Fraser, "Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confessions," in *Unruly Practices*, 29.

the other hand, this all-embracing ontology idealizes conflicts in the web and covers up differences, as we've seen with Rorty. What Derrida and Lyotard show is how smaller linguistic ontologies can configure the discursive field so as to expose these conflicts. Since these ontologies do not permit the authors to thematize the production of their own texts, we can say, with Habermas, that they are involved in a "performative contradiction,"<sup>79</sup> but this misses the point. Of course, they need to make countless assumptions even to get their texts off the ground. They do not break with the hermeneutic circle but simply leave out the part that leads back to the subject of enunciation. These unspoken assumptions provide commensurability between them and their readers. The point is that they expose what cannot be exposed by Rorty's ontology; they challenge the facile closure of the hermeneutic circle by forcing us to attend to forms of difference that have no means of articulation in Heidegger, in Wittgenstein, or in Rorty.

Hence, I, unlike Rorty—who wants to make all nonfoundationalists into pragmatists—and like the poststructuralists, assume that the differences among these theorists are irresolvable as they are currently phrased because each problematic is incommensurate with the other. Unlike the poststructuralists, however, I do not simply redescribe everyone's theory in terms of my own, as if the others were making hopelessly misguided assumptions. That is, unlike the partisans in these discussions, I do not totalize my problematic but offer a pluralistic view of what language is. What permits me to overcome this impasse is the assumption that the "incommensurability" of these problematics is not a radical unintelligibility. Indeed, all three share many assumptions—for example, that language produces subjectivity and the world. Thus, I place them as complementary options within a horizon of choice. Obviously, this horizon is subject to deconstruction, but this possibility does not prevent its construction. As Bernstein says, "The very rationale for introducing the notion of incommensurability is to clarify what is involved when we do compare rival paradigms."<sup>80</sup> Each problematic has shown it can yield important readings of the textuality of existence. The strengths and weakness of these problematics will appear only when they

79. Habermas's most recent formulation of the idea taken from Jaakko Hintikka and Karl-Otto Apel appears in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson and Christean Lendhart (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986). In "The Ontological Turn and Its Ethical Consequences: Habermas and the Poststructuralists," *Praxis International* 11 (1992): 428–46, I discuss how the dispute between Habermas and the French is blocked at an unproductive impasse.

80. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 82.

are put in the context of utopian thinking that offers specific recuperations and critiques of the past, specifics that are missing from poststructuralists and from Rorty. Poststructuralists offer critiques that rupture all ties with the present for the sake of a utopia that cannot be articulated; Rorty's critique is oriented toward misguided epistemological arguments, and his utopian hope merely affirms diversity.

In order to envision any utopia, we need a first-person account of language, subjectivity, and value that will permit us to unfold our resources and construct alternatives to the present. None of these philosophers offers such an account, though each presupposes some view of agency. My brief sketch of what a first-person account could be is designed not only to fill this logical space but to enrich the ethical and political space left by these thinkers. Because a theorist's metaphilosophical commitment is no longer totalizing, his/her selection of a given problematic will depend as much on what he/she wants to recuperate for a given project as it does on the truth of a certain linguistic ontology. That is, the way we read the presentation of agency in a Hemingway story as opposed to the way we read the agency of Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters in Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers" is not simply a question of whether the subject *is* constructed or constructing but whether we want to recuperate or unmask the self-interpretations of the agent in question for particular reasons. Thus, this essay calls for a new kind of critical dialogue in which metaphilosophical linguistic ontologies do not structure debate but are themselves placed on the table. This table will be made of the first-order claims of a constructing subject.