
Drawing Battle Lines and Choosing Bedfellows

Rorty, Relativism, and Feminist Strategy

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[The] cultural war being waged in the United States . . . between . . . “progressivists” and . . . “orthodox” is important. It will decide whether our country continues along the [progressivist] trajectory defined by the Bill of Rights, the Reconstruction Amendments, the building of the land-grant colleges, female suffrage, the New Deal, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the building of the community colleges, Lyndon Johnson’s civil rights legislation, the feminist movement, and the gay rights movement. . . . I see the “progressivists” as defining the only America I care about.

—Richard Rorty, “Trotsky and the Wild Orchids”

Justification is only justification from the point of view of the survivors.

—Richard Rorty, “Truth Without Correspondence to Reality”

Richard Rorty’s philosophical work, over the past fifteen years in particular, has been devoted to supporting both the sorts of claims presented above.¹ One worry for those feminist philosophers who align themselves with the “progressivist” project described above is that Rorty’s claim

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about epistemic justification seems to undercut any normative force that can be brought to bear in support of his claim about progressivist politics. We might worry that, if, as in the second claim, above, epistemic justification is relative to our particular community, then we lose the objective authority needed to prescribe, beyond our own community, the progressivist political vision spelled out in the first claim. It is not obvious how we could hold both claims at the same time, nor is it obvious that we should want to.

Rorty has been at pains to argue that it is both possible and desirable to hold the two claims at the same time. It is desirable because both claims are the best on offer, and it is possible because they are not as tightly linked as we might have thought. According to Rorty, we do not need his contemporary pragmatist account of justification, or any other, for that matter, to support our progressivist political projects.

I argue that he is right that the two claims are the best on offer, but that it is rhetorically misleading for him to downplay the links between them as much as he sometimes does. Our progressivist politics do, in fact, need some epistemic support as an objective guard against relativism, though the layer of support needs to be as naturalistically informed as possible. Indeed Rorty's own neopragmatist views of justification are guarded from relativism by his commitment to an epistemic account of just the right naturalistic sort, namely, the account of objectivity provided by Donald Davidson's philosophy of language.

I should say at the outset that one of the reasons we need to build some epistemic support for our progressivist politics is that, while arcane philosophical debates about truth and objectivity have become increasingly irrelevant to people's lives, it is clear that some of the debate has spilled over into the public realm of politics, and not in a helpful way. For example, in the public realm, progressive or liberal thought is increasingly associated with relativism, a disrespect for the notion of objective truth, or both. One result of this association is the much publicized worry about the preponderance of liberal professors on American campuses. The implication of the worry is that these professors will espouse their own liberal/relativist agendas. Of course, as research centers, universities are one of the few remaining institutions that model responsibility to hypotheses supported by the best available evidence. The fact that more liberals than conservatives are drawn to such institutions should help cast the liberal perspective in a more positive light, but it does not seem to. That the general public does not typically make the connection between liberal

perspectives and responsibility to evidence shows not only an antiliberal trend in politics, but also that philosophical debates have created and perpetuated public confusion or suspicion about notions of objectivity, evidence, and truth telling, more generally.

So where is Rorty in the arcane philosophical aspects of this debate or its more volatile public showing, and how does his alliance with Davidson help feminists and other progressivists involved in the latter? In what follows I highlight some of the key features of Davidson's account, explaining how his well-placed confidence in the notion of objective truth obviates worries about the possibility of relativism, while still leaving room for, though seldom emphasizing, cultural differences, subjective idiosyncrasy, and occasional error. It is, of course, the cultural differences, subjective idiosyncrasies, and errors that Rorty emphasizes in his own work. Rorty calls for the abandonment of philosophical traditions of epistemology precisely because they attempt, incoherently, in his view, to guard against these features. But he does *not* call for an abandonment of Davidsonian-type guards against relativism.

As scholars of Rorty's work are well aware, his commitment to Davidsonian arguments against relativism, and for naturalistic, empirical notions of justification, informs Rorty's work at every turn. He has argued repeatedly against the relativist view that we could all be living in our own conceptual worlds, holding any number of competing beliefs, where "every belief is as good as every other."² Even, or perhaps, especially, if one argues that Rorty's views are relativistic, it is important to acknowledge that *he* does not think his views support relativism. As the readers of this volume are no doubt aware, many feminist theories of knowledge are accused of inviting relativism, with no acknowledgment that most feminist theories of knowledge are at least intended as a rejection of relativism, however effective or ineffective those intentions are judged to be.³

There are, of course, a number of features of Rorty's work that are of interest or concern to feminist theorists, but it is worries about the relativistic interpretations of his work that I focus on in this chapter.⁴ Following the discussion of Rorty's use of Davidson and their joint rejection of relativism, I then turn to the questions of emphasis and strategy that arise for feminist philosophers, concerning, as the title of my chapter suggests, which aspects of Rorty's battle we might want to join, which aspects we might happily leave to him, and which we might want more actively to resist.

Rorty's Use of Davidson

In the same essay in which Rorty argues that "justification is only justification from the point of view of the survivors" and that the classical pragmatists he admires "are often said to confuse truth, which is absolute and eternal, with justification, which is transitory, because relative to an audience," he follows with a caveat meant to discourage the worry that his view of justification is thereby relativistic.⁵ He writes: "I think that any 'absoluteness' which is supposedly ensured by appeal to such notions [as 'truth'] is equally well ensured if, with Davidson, we insist that human belief cannot swing free of the non-human environment."⁶

With Davidson, Rorty argues that the three-way relationship between the content of our beliefs, the world those beliefs are about, and the fellow creatures with whom we communicate and exchange beliefs, guarantees that most of our beliefs, that is, the mass of our semantically simple perceptual beliefs, are objectively true; that those beliefs would have no content otherwise. As Davidson argues, this three-way relationship is needed to pinpoint, objectively, the location of the *cause* of such a belief. This same process simultaneously "defines the content" of the belief.⁷

Davidson's semantic account is inspired by Quine; it calls up parallels with Wittgenstein's arguments against the possibility of a private language; and it "chimes with" the classical American pragmatist view shared by Rorty that interaction with one another and our shared surroundings is the key feature of any coherent account of knowledge and belief. Davidson emphasizes this triangular interaction as a way to explicate the only notion of objectivity he thinks we have or need.

Davidson's examination of belief and meaning reveals the incoherence of the picture of the individualized "Cartesian" subject—a subject replete with simple perceptual beliefs mysteriously acquired prior to any successful engagement with our fellow creatures in our mutual environs—that is, he reveals the incoherence of the notion of a subject replete with a set of basic beliefs in need of testing to establish their accuracy. If Davidson is right, the content, the *meaning*, of our most basic beliefs is established through our successful engagement with other knowers acting in a common world. It is in the context of this triangular relationship that the content of most of our beliefs is established; therefore, it is impossible that those beliefs could "swing free" from the world they are about.

Davidson's is a holistic, empirical account of language. He does not

imagine the acquisition of beliefs, even our most simple, perceptual beliefs, to proceed one belief at a time. But imagine that we did entertain such an artificial notion—a notion, for example, of someone struggling with the beginnings of her language in elementary explorations of her world, and managing, somehow, to acquire the belief that snow is black. This would be a clear case of beliefs "swinging free" of the world, if there ever was one. However, the possibility for mistaken beliefs that arises in (this highly artificial version of) Davidson's account does not mean that objective notions of truth are lost. For it is clear that in this, and any similar scenarios we could construct, the language learner's ongoing, successful interactions with her world and her colleagues would correct her mistaken belief fairly quickly. It is difficult, if not impossible, in fact, to imagine a person both (a) successfully employing the words "snow" and "black," and (b) believing that snow is black. It is this difficulty to which Davidson calls our attention. As he explains: "Any particular belief may indeed be false; but enough in the framework and fabric of our beliefs must be true to give content to the rest. The conceptual connections between our knowledge of our own minds and our knowledge of the world of nature are not definitional but holistic. The same is true of the conceptual connections between our knowledge of behavior and our knowledge of other minds."⁸

How is it, though, that we might acquire objectively false beliefs? There are a number of explanations. Davidson responds that, for example, "many beliefs are given content by other beliefs [that might be mistaken] or are caused by misleading sensations."⁹ He also explains that while the content of our individual beliefs has a public, empirically accessible genesis, the *possession* of those beliefs is necessarily individual.¹⁰ Therein lies the potential for all kinds of error and idiosyncrasy (just not too much, lest the beliefs lose their meaning).

In his essay "Truth Without Correspondence to Reality" Rorty writes eloquently about the truth of beliefs and the mental gymnastics required to hold false ones. The context for the passage of his essay that I quote below concerns his insistence on separating the adjectives "justified" and "unjustified" from what I am calling "objectively true" and "objectively false." The fallibilist in him rightly wants to note that no matter how well our beliefs are justified they still might turn out to be false. Fair enough. I think that Davidson's discussion of the objective truth of our most basic perceptual beliefs is a good reminder, however, that, fallibilism accepted, not all, or even relatively many, of our beliefs could turn out to

be false at once. And this is the relevant and important sense in which it is appropriate to speak of the objective truth of our beliefs. (The questions of rhetorical strategy that arise with respect to emphasizing truth in addition to justification are examined in the last section of the chapter). Here is the passage from Rorty quoted in full:

The fact that most beliefs are justified, is, like the fact that most beliefs are true, merely one more consequence of the holistic character of belief ascription. That, in turn, is a consequence of the fact that beliefs which are expressed as meaningful sentences necessarily have lots of predictable inferential connections with lots of other meaningful sentences. We cannot, no matter how hard we try, continue to hold a belief which we have tried, and conspicuously failed, to weave together with our other beliefs in a justificatory web. No matter how much I want to believe an unjustifiable belief, I cannot will myself into doing so. The best I can do is distract my own attention from the question of why I hold certain beliefs.¹¹

The sense of objectivity that Davidson's account reveals in the most general sense, then, is that our beliefs are objectively true or false insofar as their truth-values hold independently of "our will and our attitudes"; their truth-values are "not in general guaranteed by anything in us."¹² Wanting something to be true or false does not make it so. This level of independence also means that not only are our beliefs objectively true or false, but the process by which we identify true and false beliefs or adjudicate between competing beliefs, can, in principle, be as objective a process as anything else. That is, because the truth values of beliefs are, in principle, objective, that means that there are features outside our own wants and desires that we can point to in identifying those truth-values or in adjudicating between competing truth claims. We do not have to be neutral toward the truth of any belief in order to hold the belief up to critical scrutiny, namely, in order to give that belief or its opposite a fair hearing. Objective, rational adjudication of beliefs requires not that we be neutral, but that we be tentative and nondogmatic. The very same objective process by which we identified the truth-value of a particular belief can, in principle, be sensitive to new experiences that require us to change our minds.¹³

Davidson himself does not focus on this methodological aspect of ob-

jectivity, as it tends to be addressed in venues featuring science studies rather than epistemology and philosophy of language. Within science studies, the question usually concerns how best to choose objectively between competing theories, where an objective process of theory-choice usually indicates, at least, a nondogmatic, fallible assessment of the relevant evidence supporting each theory. Applying Davidson's account, the process would involve tracing back the public, empirically accessible route by which the content of the beliefs in question was established and assessing the relevant evidential links between these beliefs and their causes. Rorty agrees and argues, additionally, that what will count as relevant evidence in any case is itself an empirical question that can only be answered naturalistically, on a case-by case basis.¹⁴ But again, this adjudication process can, in principle, be objective, insofar as the truth-values of the competing beliefs at issue are independent of the desires of the holders of the beliefs. This naturalized analysis of the objectivity of theory choice parallels the analysis offered by a number of feminist philosophers of science, such as in Alison Wylie's discussion of the "security" of archaeological evidence.¹⁵

Of course, while the objective truth or falsity of any belief or competing beliefs is thus publicly available for objective adjudication, the more complex the process by which the content of the belief(s) was established, the trickier it is to retrace the process to make the evaluation. But, in principle, if the beliefs are meaningful, if they have any content at all, then such objective evaluation must always be possible. It is Rorty's (via Davidson's) well-placed confidence in the conceptually tight relationship between meaning and objective truth that works against the notions of relativism that most feminists (and Rorty, and Davidson) rightly reject.

It should be noted that, with respect to the arcane philosophical aspect of the objectivity-versus-relativism debate, hardcore "realists" might not be satisfied with this response to relativism. But the question here is whether this response gives enough support to feminists and other progressivists who are fighting more important public matters. Even if feminist philosophers and other of Rorty's progressivist allies can be persuaded of Rorty's commitment to Davidsonian arguments about the objective truth of most of our simplest perceptual beliefs, and the objective, because independent, nature of the truth or falsity of any particular belief, we might still wonder what these levels of objectivity tell us about more complex, culturally specific, or historically situated beliefs; beliefs about

political values; beliefs about how communities should be organized. As a feminist or other progressivist might argue, who cares that we share with socially conservative Republicans the true belief that snow is white? The problem is that they do not share with us the true but more complex and historically specific political belief that federal governments should collect tax dollars in support of women's studies programs in state universities (that is, we need greater numbers of liberal professors, not fewer!).

It turns out that the semantic holism of Davidson's account *does* take us from beliefs about the color of snow to beliefs about the value of federally supported academic programs. If we take Davidson's meaning of holism seriously, which Rorty does, then the more complex and historically situated political beliefs (from now on, "complex beliefs") are importantly linked in publicly accessible ways to our simpler perceptual beliefs about the color of snow and, more generally, to our everyday shared experiences about, and in, the world. It is this complicated but, in principle, publicly accessible set of inferential links that give our more complex beliefs their meaning. By tracing the inferential relationship between our complex beliefs and our everyday shared experiences, we can begin to adjudicate objectively the truth or falsity of those complex beliefs. As with even the most basic exchanges, the fact that we can recognize one another as holding these more complex beliefs becomes the route we take for identifying and objectively adjudicating their content. Such objective adjudication is possible, though trickier.¹⁶

Insofar as more complex beliefs *express* anything—that is, insofar as they are *meaningful*—then they too are beliefs that have been acquired through the usual process of practical engagement with the world through communication with others. Learning to identify a particular political policy as "good for the nation," or as "liberal"—learning the meaning of these value terms—involves learning through experience of the world to successfully classify something as belonging to a particular category, to assign it a property. The same process is used for learning the meaning of the more straightforward perceptual category terms "conducts electricity," "reflects light," "produces heat." Insofar as value judgments or any other kind of judgments are meaningful, they are beliefs that arise from our experience with the world—that is, they have empirical content, or are inferentially connected to beliefs that do, and that content and those links can be objectively evaluated.¹⁷

This brings us back to a related point of Davidson's, namely, that it is impossible for us to recognize others as communicating, or trying to

communicate, without, in principle, at least, being able to understand them; without being able to identify the common cause that informs their basic utterances. Of course we have to care enough to try, and our attempts might involve immersion experiences that are difficult, especially when we are confronted with folks who live in communities whose practices are very different from and perhaps even antithetical to our own. But these are, for the most part, practical problems (though not, for all that, insignificant. More on this point below). The point for now is that a relativistic scenario, whereby folks outside our communities live also in different conceptual worlds; have beliefs that are, in principle, unavailable to us; and have notions of justification that are incommensurable with our notions is, if Davidson is right, an impossible scenario. The triangulation that allows us to recognize others as speakers of a language is also the vehicle by which we can come to understand and evaluate their beliefs—an evaluative process that, again, works only against a shared backdrop of true beliefs.

The notion of objective truth that Davidson's account reveals is a feature of our most basic beliefs and, by implication, should also be a feature of the knowers who hold these beliefs, at least in principle. Again, not all our beliefs have this feature. Despite the fact that a large number of our simplest perceptual beliefs must be objectively true, we still make a variety of mistakes. The important point here is that the identification of objectively false beliefs is only possible against a backdrop of objectively true beliefs.

As the quote with which I began this chapter indicates, the "progressivist" in Rorty agrees that the complex, political disagreements that drive the "culture" wars in the contemporary United States are problems in need of a solution. He also argues, persuasively, I believe, that nonnaturalistic—what he calls "philosophical"—accounts of objectivity fail as solutions. However, he goes on to make a claim that is less persuasive, and, I think, rhetorically misleading, viz., that even his *own* contemporary pragmatist account of justification, properly informed by a naturalistic Davidsonian-type account of objectivity, fails to be either useful (or necessary) in the political struggle Rorty knows to be so important.

While I have not tried to defend the entirety of Davidson's project here, the key is that Rorty has so defended it, and assumes it in much of his work. He argues that Davidson is right about the objective truth of our perceptually simple beliefs, such as "snow is white," and he also supports Davidson's semantic holism that the meaningfulness of our more seman-

tically complex beliefs about the things we value, such as our belief about the importance of federal support for universities, is in fact related to the objectivity of our simpler perceptual beliefs about the color of snow. It follows, then, that his contemporary pragmatist account of justification supported by these Davidsonian commitments can (and should) be used to bolster the progressivist battles he properly supports.

So why does he still insist that his own views about progressive political aims have no, and need no, objective justification; that his political views are not objectively true? I think there are two, related answers: one I have already hinted at regarding Rorty's particular definitions of "philosophical theories" of objectivity, justification, or truth; the other regarding questions of rhetorical emphasis.

Definitions

In a view articulated most clearly in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Rorty argues that the discipline of academic philosophy in the West, from Plato through to Kant, has been "held captive" by a problematic model of knowers and their worlds that accepts skepticism about the external world as a coherent problem in need of a solution—can knowers ever accurately represent or mirror the world outside them, and if so, how?¹⁸ On this particular model, the more naturalistic disciplines, such as biology and sociology, are seeking merely to classify and measure the external world, without realizing that the efficacy of measuring and classifying is precisely what is at issue. The job of philosophy, on this model, is to provide metaphysical foundations for the naturalistic, empirical endeavors of scientists, and the rest of us, as we struggle to map our worlds.

Whatever the merits of his description of the metaphysical picture driving Western, academic philosophy, Rorty's alternative is compelling and, once again, parallels many feminist approaches to science studies.¹⁹ In good Quinean fashion, he argues that naturalized approaches are all we ever have, that there is no getting to some foundation outside of or beyond our lived experiences in the world, and that for academic philosophy to pretend otherwise is to make the discipline increasingly irrelevant to people's lives.

I will not summarize his arguments further, as there are numerous other places where this has been done well.²⁰ But the upshot is that Rorty

does not think that academic philosophy, as he believes it is typically practiced, can make a difference to the important political battles of our time. Insofar as philosophy aims at providing ahistorical, foundational, nonnaturalistic methodological guides for finding "Truth," "Goodness," and "Beauty," then we need to abandon philosophy and get back to naturalized studies of the historically contingent, foundationless, messy place that is our world.

This "antiphilosophical" aspect of Rorty's project needs to be kept in mind whenever readers encounter claims such as the following: "Inquiry and justification have lots of mutual aims, but they do not have an overarching aim called 'truth.' Inquiry and justification are activities we language users cannot help engaging in; we do not need a goal called 'truth' to help us do so. . . . There would only be a 'higher' aim of inquiry called 'truth' if there were such a thing as ultimate justification—justification before God, or before the tribunal of reason, as opposed to any merely finite human audience."²¹ Rorty has argued persuasively, along with the classical pragmatists with whom he aligns himself, that there is no such thing as ultimate justification; that, insofar as philosophy sees itself as searching for that goal, so much the worse for philosophy.

This takes us closer to understanding how he can make use of Davidson's work on objective truth while forswearing the usefulness of philosophical accounts of truth. Rorty does not believe that Davidson is providing such a philosophical account. He describes Davidson's approach as providing instead an "empirical explanation of the causal relations that hold between features of the environment and the holding true of sentences."²²

There is of course an ongoing debate about just how best to characterize Davidson's work. Davidson's most recent contributions to the debate can be found in a collection of his essays published posthumously.²³ But Rorty seems to get it generally right when he argues that, while Davidson's empirical account of meaning, arising out of the correlations between "verbal behaviour . . . situation and environment, as well as the linguistic behaviour of the person propounding the theory," is "genuinely explanatory," that is not to say that "the concept of truth is genuinely explanatory."²⁴

But it follows, then, that Rorty's own pragmatist account of justification, bolstered by Davidson's naturalized account of objective truth, is not, in fact, the sort of arcane philosophical account of truth, objectivity, or justification that Rorty thinks superfluous or incoherent. It is, instead,

exactly the sort of empirical, sociologically informed account of the causal forces affecting belief that could and should be called in to aid the progressivist struggle. It is exactly the sort of account that could be used by the progressivist journalists, teachers, and sociologists, whom Rorty admires, to fight the good fight. It could even be used that way by Rorty. But he has consistently resisted the invitation.

Rhetorical Emphasis

Many progressive philosophers, including feminist philosophers, have been frustrated with Rorty, thinking him a relativist about issues that matter most. I have argued that he is not, in fact, a relativist, certainly not of any worrisome sort. Still he is not an obvious ally, if, by an ally, we progressive feminists mean, for example, someone who can help us articulate in the public realm of politics what is objectively right and good about feminism (and by turn, what might not be so right and so good, when that too needs pointing out). Rorty's choice of rhetorical emphasis does not highlight objective truth as a conceptual possibility, nor, more specifically, does he highlight the objective truth of our most basic beliefs. For Rorty, adjectives such as "objectively true" call up non-naturalistic, philosophical theories of objectivity and truth from which he rightly wants to distance himself. Instead, he often takes Davidsonian notions of objectivity for granted and emphasizes instead the subjective or social elements of belief that can make persuasive conversations with others outside our own communities incredibly difficult.

The communicative difficulties he emphasizes are certainly familiar to many feminists, especially those feminists involved in debating the merits of various social and political policies with nonfeminists or antifeminists. In this, at least, his writings capture familiar truths. But while the descriptions of these sorts of difficult conversations are often illuminating, if not achingly familiar, it seems we progressivists could also use more prescriptions about how to move through and beyond these sorts of conversations.

Why, for example, when baited in discussions of relativism, does Rorty continually highlight the impossibility of conversing with Nazis? In his debate with Hilary Putnam, why does Rorty admit that on his own contemporary pragmatist account of justification, there is no "fact of the

matter" to which we can appeal that would help "adjudicate between the possible world in which the Nazis win out, inhabited by people for whom the Nazi's racism seems common sense, and our egalitarian tolerance crazy, and the possible world in which we win out and the Nazi's racism seems crazy"?²⁵ Surely, even on Rorty's own account, there is, if not a single "knock-down" fact of the matter, at least *some* relevant fact(s) of the matter to which we can appeal.

Nielsen makes exactly this point in the review of Rorty's work referred to above.²⁶ After making it clear that none of us would want to attempt such a conversation—that it would be at least distasteful; and very likely horrifying—Nielsen notes that, as any good naturalistically inclined pragmatist would remind us, the Nazis live on the same planet as we do, *and this fact matters*. They face many of the same daily constraints we all face. Nielsen asks, "Is there nothing we could say to each other? Remember that the Nazis were part of a wider civilization—they did not come down from Saturn. . . . Is there no overlap of beliefs to a sufficiently appropriate extent to make conversing and persuasion possible?"²⁷ Nielsen thinks there is, in fact, sufficient overlap. Davidson's holism tells us, *and Rorty*, that there *must* be sufficient overlap in order for us even to recognize the Nazis as communicating meaningfully; in order for us to be able to identify a number of their beliefs as false and immoral.

Nielsen follows this passage with a powerful and painful discussion of what the conversation with a Nazi might be like. The overlap between her beliefs and ours, from basic beliefs about the color of snow, to more complex beliefs about the valuing of freedom, provide the entry way for identifying inconsistencies in her beliefs; for identifying the objective falsehood of a number of her beliefs. The process is, of course, as historically contingent as any. And in the absence of non-naturalistic guarantees of the objective truth of *every one* of our own beliefs, we, as good fallibilists, might come, through this process, to recognize those of our own beliefs that fail to live up to the standards we know to be true.

That Rorty's own position is consistent with the possibility of this sort of communicative process is the sort of point that has been called to his attention by a number of scholars who, understanding that he is not a relativist, and sympathetic to his general oeuvre, consider their commentaries "friendly amendments" to Rorty's arguments.²⁸ Rorty himself generally writes appreciatively of their work, and time will tell if their amendments have any significant effect on his rhetorical strategies.²⁹

One such friendly amendment that I want to highlight for feminist

and other progressivist allies is that when Rorty writes that "justification is only justification from the point of view of the survivors," we can be confident that insofar as the members of the community of survivors are capable of communicating, it is impossible that their justification practices could be completely disconnected from the world in which they find themselves. And that, even if *we* progressivists were not the "survivors," it would be possible for us to understand the survivor's beliefs; adjudicate objectively the truth-values of those beliefs; and, if necessary, persuade the survivors to change some of their beliefs (or recognize that we need to change some of ours, as the case may be). Of course for any of this process to proceed practically, we have to care enough to try, and the survivors must be genuinely interested in having the conversation. More on this potential source of difficulty shortly.

Feminist Strategy

I have argued that (1) there is always the *possibility*, at least, that false beliefs can be objectively identified, and the causal history of those beliefs publicly retraced and evaluated, no matter who it is who holds the beliefs in question and (2) that recognition of this possibility is consistent with Rorty's own views.

One concern that might arise at this point is that the recognition of this possibility might not always be enough to help the important political struggles that feminists and other progressivists face. The possibility of detecting false beliefs and persuading the holders of those beliefs to change their minds is only that, a possibility. There are structural power differences, for example, that often materially interfere with the conversations required for this process. While Rorty makes a compelling case that nonnaturalistic accounts of truth and objectivity are of no help in this process, and I hope to have made the case that his own naturalistic approach to justification *will* help, that won't always be the whole story. Still, I argue that something like his approach, if not sufficient, remains at least a necessary part of the story (*pace* Rorty's own assessment at times).

An opposite concern that might arise for feminist strategy is whether my claims about the possibility of the objective detection of true from false beliefs, and the objective truth of beliefs generally, serves to overem-

phasize the objective at the expense of the recognition of the subjective. As I have noted above, this difference in rhetorical emphasis separates Rorty from Davidson, and it is here that feminists might occasionally find themselves more straightforwardly aligned with Rorty.

Feminists are interested in explaining a number of cases where the subjectivity of more complex beliefs comes to the fore, especially concerning the existence of highly stratified and isolated sets of beliefs arising out of particular social identities (especially in cultures such as the contemporary United States, beliefs stratified by sex/gender, racial and class divisions). Within science studies, for example, feminists have played an important role in redefining accounts of objectivity that would acknowledge and incorporate the subjective affects of social stratification on scientific theory production and justification. This is, of course, an approach to the study of belief acquisition generally, and science studies in particular, with which Rorty has considerable sympathy.³⁰ And here, both Rorty and feminist philosophers of science receive the same criticism, namely, that their joint emphasis on the subjectivity of belief is not a nuanced commitment to objectivity, but simply an embrace of relativism.

In response, Lorraine Code, for example, wonders whether her sister feminists engaged in the redefining of objectivity should simply admit the relativism of their project.³¹ One of Rorty's responses to the charge of relativism, such as the charge that accompanies his emphasis on "ethnocentrism," is a rhetorical embrace not of relativism, but of anti-*anti*-relativism, or anti-*anti*-ethnocentrism.³² Kathrin Hönig makes the same rhetorical suggestion in response to Code—that feminist philosophers of science should embrace not relativism, but "anti-anti-relativism."³³

I appreciate the subtlety of this maneuver. But I think it should be viewed as one of a number of tools we feminist philosophers should have at our disposal. So, for example, while I think that feminist philosophers should share Rorty's suspicion of the usefulness and coherence of nonnaturalistic theories of knowledge, justification, and truth, I think that we should not let this suspicion rob of us of the concept of "objective truth" tout court. Suitably naturalized in the terms described by Davidson, with data from feminist sociology and social psychology, there is no metaphysical danger in the concept of objective truth. Feminism, by definition, involves "speaking truth to power." We have a number of truth claims on our side. When you've got it, use it.

Both these strategic concerns about the account of objectivity provided by Rorty through Davidson (that the account does not go far

enough to help in the political struggles progressivists face and that the account goes *too* far by downplaying important subjective and social features of knowledge) merely reinforce the complex and contingent nature of the problems feminist philosophers need to address. In some cases, we feminist philosophers should signal the importance of Davidson's work, highlighting the objectivity of belief, including, where relevant, the objectivity of feminist beliefs. In other cases, we should, with Rorty, highlight what for both Davidson and Rorty are the important, subjective because social, features of belief that remain, once some basic notions of objectivity are established. Which aspect we emphasize is going to depend on the debate we find ourselves in. The philosophical tools we need to work on these problems need to be suitably naturalized and specialized for the task at hand. No one point of emphasis is going to cover all situations.

That brings us to a final issue of strategy, concerning the venues in which feminist philosophers might choose to continue their naturalistically informed work. It might just be in philosophy departments. As with Rorty's work, the work of feminist philosophers has changed what it means to do philosophy. With Rorty's death, it is more important than ever that some members of the progressivist team stay in philosophy departments and work to make philosophy relevant and important. And as I hope to have shown, *team* is the operative term here. We feminists and Rorty are on the same progressivist team. While he sometimes chose to emphasize different aspects of the struggle, and the importance of his choices might not always be obvious, his work should not be interpreted as fighting against us.

Notes

1. In the first epigraph above, Rorty borrows the terms "progressivist" and "orthodox" from James Davidson Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), and I continue the usage.

2. This latter claim, for example, is expressly disavowed in Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity," reprinted in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, vol. 1 of *Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1985] 1991), 23.

3. In Sharyn Clough, *Beyond Epistemology* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), I argue that, in principle, if not always in Rorty's actual practice, his use of Davidson provides a more conceptually coherent guard against relativism than that offered by a number of feminist epistemologists.

4. For such concerns, see, for instance, Nancy Fraser's discussions of Rorty's public/private distinction in Fraser, "Solidarity or Singularity: Richard Rorty Between Romanticism and Technology," *Praxis International* 8, no. 3 (1988): 257–72.

5. Rorty, "Truth Without Correspondence to Reality," reprinted in *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, [1994] 1999), 32.

6. *Ibid.*, 32. The references to Davidson throughout Rorty's work are too numerous to cite, but a good place for readers to start is Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism, Davidson, and Truth," reprinted in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1986] 1991).

7. Donald Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge," reprinted in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1991] 2001), 213.

8. *Ibid.*, 214.

9. *Ibid.*, 213.

10. *Ibid.*, 218.

11. Rorty, "Truth Without Correspondence to Reality," 37.

12. Donald Davidson, "The Problem of Objectivity," reprinted in *Problems of Rationality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1995] 2004), 7.

13. The important distinctions between being impartial, tentative, or nondogmatic, as opposed to being neutral, are discussed by a number of philosophers who write about feminism, values, and science. See, for example, Elizabeth Anderson, "Uses of Value Judgments in Science," *Hypatia* 19, no. 1 (2004): 1–24; Richmond Campbell, "The Virtues of Feminist Empiricism," *Hypatia* 9, no. 1 (1994): 90–115; and Hugh Lacey, *Is Science Value Free? Values and Scientific Understanding* (London: Routledge, 1999).

14. Richard Rorty, "Response to Haack," in *Rorty and Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*, ed. H. J. Saatkamp (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1999), 152.

15. Alison Wylie, "The Constitution of Archaeological Evidence: Gender Politics and Science," in *Thinking from Things: Essays in the Philosophy of Archaeology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002). For a recent review of naturalized approaches to objectivity in feminist science studies, see Alison Wylie and Lynn Hankinson Nelson, "Coming to Terms with the Values of Science: Insights from Feminist Science Scholarship," in *Value-Free Science: Ideal or Illusion?* ed. Harold Kincaid, John Dupré, and Alison Wylie (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2006).

16. For example, see Donald Davidson, "The Objectivity of Values," reprinted in *Problems of Rationality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1995] 2004). Portions of this argument about Davidson and the objectivity of value judgments appear in Sharyn Clough, "On the Very Idea of a Feminist Epistemology in Science (Author's Response)," *Metascience* 15 (2006): 27–37, and online in Sharyn Clough, "Commentary on Elizabeth Anderson's 'Uses of Value Judgments in Science,'" *MIT Symposium on Gender, Race, and Philosophy* 2, no. 1:1–6, <http://web.mit.edu/sgrp/2006/no1/Clough0106.pdf>—an exchange between Elizabeth Anderson, myself, Linda Alcoff, Marianne Janack, and Charles Mills; as well as in Sharyn Clough and Bill Loges, "Racist Beliefs as Objectively False Value Judgments: A Philosophical and Social-Psychological Analysis," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 39, no. 1 (2008): 77–95.

17. See Davidson, "The Objectivity of Values," 48.

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

19. Such as that of Lynn Hankinson Nelson, in *Who Knows: From Quine to a Feminist Empiricism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

20. See, for example, Kai Nielsen, "Pragmatism as Atheoreticism: Richard Rorty," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 2, no. 1 (2005): 1–33.

21. Rorty, "Truth Without Correspondence to Reality," 37–38.

22. *Ibid.*, 33.

23. Donald Davidson, *Truth and Predication* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2005).

24. Rorty, "Truth Without Correspondence to Reality," 42 n. 22.

25. Richard Rorty, "Hilary Putnam and the Relativist Menace," in *Truth and Progress*, vol. 3 of *Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 51.

26. Nielsen, "Pragmatism as Atheoreticism."

27. *Ibid.*, 21.

28. In addition to a number of essays and books by Nielsen, there is, for example, Bjorn Ramberg, "Strategies for Radical Rorty ('... but is it progress?)," in *Méta-philosophie: Reconstructing Philosophy?* ed. Jocelyne Couture and Kai Nielsen, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, supp. vol. 19 (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1993); Michael Williams, "Rorty on Knowledge and Truth," in *Richard Rorty*, ed. Charles Guignon and David Kiley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); and Michael Hyman, "Putnam and the Difficulty of Renouncing All Theory," *International Studies in Philosophy* 35, no. 4 (2005): 55–82.

29. In Rorty's e-mail comments on my chapter (see my acknowledgment at the foot of the first page of the chapter), some negative answers to this question suggest themselves. For example, while he begins his comments with his thanks for my "thoughtful and sympathetic paper," he proceeds to demur in all the ways we have come to expect from him. He comments that, my arguments notwithstanding, he still "cannot invoke the notion of 'objective truth' without coming up with an explication of 'objective' cleansed of all traces of the correspondence theory of truth." And that, while he agrees with my comments about the holistic relationship between political views and perceptual beliefs, he does not see how this relationship necessarily helps adjudicate the issue about which assertions are relevant to include in the equation. I suppose I am prepared to apply the same holistic analysis with which we both agree, up one step to the metalevel question of relevance, but clearly there is more persuasive work to be done on this point, though, sadly, not with Rorty.

30. Richard Rorty, "Science as Solidarity," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, vol. 1 of *Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

31. Lorraine Code, "Must a Feminist Be a Relativist After All?" in *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on Gendered Locations* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

32. See Rorty's response to Clifford Geertz on this point in Richard Rorty, "On Ethnocentrism: A Reply to Clifford Geertz," in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, vol. 1 of *Philosophical Papers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

33. Kathrin Höning, "Relativism or Anti-Anti-Relativism? Epistemological and Rhetorical Moves in Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 12, no. 4 (2005): 407–19.