Reading Richard Rorty: The Search for a Humanist Redescription of Philosophy and Politics

Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University

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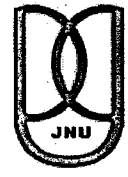

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DECLARATION

I declare that the dissertation entitled "**Reading Richard Rorty: The search for a humanist redescription of philosophy and politics**" submitted by me for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** of Jawaharlal Nehru University is my own work. The dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree of this University or any other university.

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CERTIFICATE

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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- CONTENTS -

Introduction: how not to get boxed in our context and history?

Every work revolves around some central concerns. Without these central concerns and questions, it is very difficult to weave a coherent narrative- they act as the pillars around which we tie our stories. It is these concerns and questions that decide what is included and what is ignored in a particular work.

This work also begins with a lingering concern about the affect of our historical position and context on our ideas and activities. It is feared that one is doomed to remain where one is born and there may be no escape from this 'cage of birth'; it is the feared that one may have no choice but to accept the constraints that our social and historical position brings with it; there may not be a way out of it. It is with this anxiety and dread about the limiting influence of our historical position that I come to this work.

I think this worry is the result of our encounter with marxism, feminism, post-structuralism, as well as post-modernism. These ideas severely limited our ambitions to be the spokesperson of the whole of humanity – our desire to speak for everyone and not merely the community or class to which we belong. They put to rest all our efforts to be a rational individual who can rise above his community, class or national identity and give us an objective and impartial view of things. In a word, these philosophical encounters grounded our 'self' within the specificities of our historical context.

Marxists[1] informed us that our ideas and institutional practices reflect our location in the system of production. Many of them viewed our ideas as nothing but a defense of our

[1] This is not to say that there are no differences within Marxism and Feminism on these issues. My aim is to give reader a sense of the existential situation that one might find oneself in after reading various

class-interests. This realization that our ideas are just a reflection of our 'class- interests' brought down their importance in our own eyes; we were no more able to stand up for them in the way we did earlier.

In a similar vein, many feminists could also be seen as suggesting that what we see as the neutral voice of the human person is often the male voice speaking. While Marxists boxed us in our class position, feminists were inclined to place us in our gender. Similar was the effect of criticisms by poststructuralists and postmodernists. Foucault, following Nietzsche, told us that knowledge is intermingled with power. For him, our claims to knowledge were not the result of our urge to truth, but were underpinned by our desire to control others, to exercise power over them.

All of them humbled our ambitions to truth, objectivity and universality. They put us down in our context and historical position. They made us realize that we are nothing but a collection of these very partial interests. There seemed to be no escape from this position of partiality. The activities and ideas in which one had invested so much earlier, thinking one was reflecting on the concerns of the larger humanity and not just talking about his/her self-interests, seemed like nothing but a reflection of these very self-interests. We found ourselves totally caged and constrained. There seemed to be no escape from this situation.

It is these concerns and fears that made Richard Rorty's work appealing to me. I had read that pragmatists are different from postmodernists and poststructuralists. While they agreed with poststructuralist and postmodernist critiques of Kantian enlightenment ideas

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critiques of the enlightenment ideas of progress. For this purpose I am clubbing all these ideas together. I present all of them as making us think about the impact on our ideas of our historical situation and context.

of progress, they did not agree with their nihilistic politics. While they agreed that we cannot escape from our history and context, they did not think that this would mean giving up on our ambitions to solve the problems of humanity in the way we have been doing.

For them, this fear and anxiety is simply a result of the platonist and realist way of thinking about things that we have gotten used to. They suggest that if we get rid of these ways of thinking, our fears may in fact disappear and we can carry on the task with as much energy and ambitions as we had done earlier. Only that now we wouldn't be aiming at getting out of our history and context, but shall be trying to think through them.

Pragmatists seemed to be offering more positive political positions. It is this positive message of pragmatism, and the hope that it might help us in getting out of the cage in which others were trying to box us, that attracted me towards it.

This Dissertation is an effort to understand whether or not Pragamtists, like Richard Rorty, succeed in taking us through this endeavour. In other words, the attempt is to find out whether Pragmatists offer us a way to reconcile our ambitions to solve the problems of humanity with our historical situatedness- situatedness, whose realization has dawned on us in the wake of the aforementioned critiques of enlightenment discourse.

We shall be focusing on the work of American philosopher and one of the most influential pragmatist thinkers of our times - Richard Rorty. The purpose is not to give a gist of all of Rorty's writings but to look for answers to the concerns that I discussed above. The attempt, therefore, will be to find out how Rorty's ideas can be helpful in

addressing these concerns. But before I begin a discussion of Rorty's work, let me give a brief introduction to Pragmatism.

Pragmatism is an American school of philosophy whose emergence can be traced from the 1870s onwards. Among early pragmatists we can count the names of Charles Sanders Pierce (1839-1914), William James (1842-1910) and John Dewey (1859-1952). In the Post-Second World War period, one can associate the names of philosophers such as Richard Rorty and Hillary Putnam with this school.

While there are many differences between the proponents of pragmatism, some broad similarities can easily be discerned. Pragmatist thinkers across the spectrum can be seen as giving what Robert Brandom calls an 'ontological primacy to the social'[2]. In other words, they put the social before the philosophical or the theoretical. For them, philosophical and theoretical talk should be judged by the implications it has on our daily lives and not for its relation with some ahistorical truth.

One can also see Pragmatism as a movement towards politicization of philosophy. While earlier philosophers had taken their task as pursuing truth without being bothered by its implications, pragmatists think of philosophies and theories as nothing but justifications for those activities that we find useful in our everyday life.

While earlier philosophers had thought of themselves as grounding our social and political views and practices, pragmatists want us to think of the social and political as grounding our philosophies. They want us to see a reflection of these activities in our

[2] As quoted in Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as science, as metaphor, and as politics," in his *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 11

philosophies and theories. For them, the most significant philosophical ideas are those which make a difference to how we think or live in this world. Rorty writes,

> "we can think of pragmatist as asking us to think of philosophers not as 'theoretical scientists or physicists but as social workers and engineers- the people who are trying to make people more comfortable and secure, and to use science and philosophy as tools for that purpose'."[3]

Pragmatism brings down our talk about everything to the level of the social and political. It advocates that we should link up our theories and philosophies much more closely with our daily lives. For a pragmatist, a philosophy or theory which is not closely connected with our daily practices is of little use.

This Dissertation takes this pragmatist message of giving ontological primacy to the social and political quite seriously. It reads Richard Rorty as offering us a philosophical narrative – a narrative whose purpose is to provide justifications and explanations for his humanist politics. From this perspective, Rorty is not read as offering us some foundational philosophical truths that other philosophers failed to provide; but we read him as providing us with a redescription of our traditional philosophical beliefs- a redescription that could make these traditional philosophical beliefs more compatible with his humanist concerns

One other way to put it is that we read Rorty not as offering us the ahistorical truth about the world but only as trying to make philosophy cohere better with his humanistic concerns. Or, to put it in a Rortian way, we read him as providing a humanist with a

[3] See Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as science, as metaphor, and as politics," in his *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9

philosophical narrative- a narrative that can satisfy her intellectual curiosity and provide her with arguments and explanations to defend her stand in front of others.[4]

The first chapter looks at various challenges and concerns that Rorty can be seen as responding to. We see how all his concerns can be seen as converging at his humanism- his concern with human freedom from every type of external authority, be it the dictates of a party or the foundational truths provided by philosophical theories. Bernstein calls this Rorty's "deep humanism."[5] He suggests that we can see this 'deep humanism' of Rorty as the underlying theme that connects all his works.

The next chapter describes how platonism and realism, the most dominant strands of traditional western philosophy, are antithetical to this Rortian humanism. It also elucidates the alternative philosophical narrative that Rorty offers us in place of this platonist and Realist way of looking at the world.

The last chapter looks at the implication of these Rortian views on our thinking about politics and political activity. It spells out the alternative way of thinking about transformative political activity that Rorty offers us- an alternative that fits in well with his redescrription of platonist and realist imagery of traditional western philosophy. In this chapter, through Rorty, we also try finding some answers to the concerns that I raised in the beginning; we try finding out whether this Rortian way of thinking about political activity can help us in overcoming the aforementioned fears and concerns.

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[4] P F Strawson suggests that we should think of Metaphysics as the way in which we make various parts of our world hang together with each other. Taking this definition of metaphysics seriously, we can see Rorty as providing a metaphysical perspective for a humanist. We can see him as telling us how a humanist should connect various parts of this world and make them hang together with his concern for human freedom. For P F Strawson's views on metaphysics and philosophy see P F Strawson, *Analysis and metaphysics: An introduction to philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992)

[5] Richard Bernstein, "Rorty's deep Humanism", *New Literary History*, 39 (2008), 21

Now, a brief note about the limitations of this work. This dissertation has been written in an extremely short period of time. I think it is very difficult to do justice to the work of a philosopher like Richard Rorty in a few months. Rorty is a versatile writer. His oeuvre consists not only of commentaries on hardcore philosophical issues such as the mind/body problem and the issue of analytical/synthetic statements, but writings on literary figures like Orwell, Nabokov and Proust as well. Alongside, he has written extensively on other philosophers. Here, not only has Rorty covered 'analytical' philosophers like Quine and Wittgenstein, but also 'continental' philosophers such as Heidegger and Derrida. Issues within American politics haven't escaped Rorty's gaze either. He has written an entire book dealing with issues confronting the American left.[6] So much so, that Rorty is studied not only in Philosophy departments, but in Literature courses as well.

In this dissertation I have not tried to give a gist of all of Rorty's works. Instead, I have tried to tease out and contrast a Rortian view of things with platonist and realist way of looking and thinking about the world, partly because so much of our understanding of the political and the political activity is based on these platonic and realist assumptions about the world. My effort has been to find out what alternative way of thinking about the world Rorty offers us. In bringing out this contrast between these two different ways of looking and experiencing things, I have sometimes indulged in broad generalization of certain ideas. I am aware of the differences that I have overlooked and hope that the reader will overlook these and recognize them as necessary for the purposes of this dissertation.

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[6] See Richard Rorty, *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998)

Chapter 1: Rorty's concerns

One of the central messages that comes out of Rorty's writings is that we should not understand philosophical ideas as putting us in touch with some ahistorical and antecedently given reality, but should only see them as narratives that we weave to justify practices that we find useful. The job of philosophical theories is not to represent the real and objective world to us, but to provide us with acceptable and reasonable justifications for our actions – actions, that we and our compatriots find effective in facing various challenges. Hence, philosophical ideas should be evaluated not for their correct representation of reality, but for their effectiveness in justifying activities that we find useful.

Another way to put it is that, for Rorty, it is practice that grounds theory and not the other way round. Traditionally, we had thought of theory as providing us with transcendental truths and foundations on which to build right practices. Theory enjoyed supremacy over practice; we could establish right practices only on the correct foundations provided by a correct theory. Correct theory was seen as a prerequisite for any useful and correct practice.[7] In contrast, Rorty suggests that philosophical ideas should be understood simply as a good way of justifying practices that we find useful, and not as providing us with secure foundations on which to ground them. He puts practice before theory; and robs it of the primacy that it had traditionally occupied.

However, Rorty is not the first one to bring down our theories from the high pedestal of 'truth' and 'objectivity' that they had hitherto enjoyed. Marxists, for example, were doing

[7]See Richard Rorty, "Human Rights," in his *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 171.

the same when they criticized philosophers like John Locke for providing us with ideas that are a 'mere' justification for a capitalist mode of production. They saw liberal talk of 'rights' as nothing but an ingenious way of justifying private accumulation.

Although Rorty would agree with the aforementioned Marxist approach of situating liberal philosophy in a particular historical context, and thus challenging its claim to universality, he wouldn't see anything wrong in it[8]. For him, this is the task of philosophy. Each philosophical discourse is a justification for this or that practice, and if it is not, then there is no reason for us to take it seriously. In other words, we should evaluate philosophical ideas from the point of view of their implications on our practices and not for their relation with some ahistorical and transcendental truth. That, according to Rorty, is not the task of philosophy. For him, philosophical ideas should be evaluated not for their representation of reality, but for their implications on our practice. By this token, we should not criticize liberal philosophy simply because we believe it is a mere justification for the self-interests of this or that section of society; but we should criticize it if we think we have alternatives to offer- alternatives, which can do better than liberalism.

For Rorty, philosophical progress in not a matter of getting to know the real and objective facts about the world. Instead, it is a matter of philosophers providing us with new and better ways of thinking about things – new vocabularies which either solve or dissolve the problems that we were facing with the earlier vocabularies.

[8] See Richard Rorty, "Post Modernist Bourgeois Liberalism", *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.80, No.10, Part 1: Eightieth Annual meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Divison (Oct. 1983), 585.

I suggest that in an attempt to take Rorty seriously we should do a Rortian reading of his philosophical ideas. This implies that we should not see the next two chapters as providing us with Rorty's central philosophical ideas - ideas which somehow ground his other concerns. We should not think that Rorty's views on issues such as language, objectivity and truth are more fundamental than his other concerns; we should not think that his other concerns, political or otherwise, are simply derivable from his philosophical positions. Instead, we should read these chapters as providing us with the philosophical narrative that Rorty has woven to reasonably explain and justify his concerns. We should see them as an attempt to redescribe traditional philosophical views with the aim of making them gel better with his concerns. Simply put, we should see a reflection of Rorty's politics and his other concerns in his philosophy.

Moreover, this is how Rorty wants us to evaluate his ideas[9]. He writes,

> "All I can claim to have done here is to offer you a redescription of the relation between human beings and the rest of the universe. Like every

[9] Commenting on his suggestion to feminists that Pragmatists view of progress as an act of 'creation' can serve their purposes better than the traditional conception of progress as act of finding truth or getting in touch with some ahistorical reality, Rorty writes that he is not trying to offer some fundamental philosophical truth, but is only trying to provide us with certain arguments that can satisfy our philosophical curiosity and may prove to be useful in convincing others. He writes, "But first I want to insert a cautionary remark about the relative insignificance of philosophical movements as compared with socio-political movements. Yoking feminism with pragmatism with is like Yoking Christianity with Platonism, or socialism, with dialectical materialism. In each case, something big and important, a vast social hope, is being yoked with something comparatively small and unimportant, a set of answers to philosophical questions- questions that arise only for people who find philosophical topics intriguing rather than silly. Universalists- of both the bourgeois liberal and the Marxist sort – often claim that such questions are in fact urgent, for political movements need philosophical foundations. But we pragmatists cannot say this. We are not in the foundations business. All we can do is to offer feminists a few pieces of special-purpose ammunition – for example, some additional replies to charges that there aims are unnatural, their demands irrational, or their claims hyperbolic." See Richard Rorty, "Feminism and Pragmatism," in his *Truth and Progress* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 212

other redescription, this one has to be judged on the basis of its utility for a purpose."[10]

So, what are these concerns of Rorty – concerns, whose reflection we can locate in Rorty's philosophical writings? Below, we try to map out some of these concerns[11].

A Philosophy for Rorty's Leftist Democratic Politics

One can see Rorty's writings as a narrative that he constructs to reasonable justify and explain his sort of leftist politics. This sort of leftist politics has its own peculiar features. We can call it Post-Marxist left. Leftists such as Rorty are as much disenchanted with Marxism as they were antithetical to capitalism. They emphasise on the language of 'reforms' rather than the slogans of 'revolution'. This sort of leftist politics in America has developed as much in opposition to conservatives at home, as communists abroad.

These leftists take pride in America's democratic tradition and view 'free-market capitalism' and 'communism' both as threats to this tradition of theirs. For leftist like Rorty, 'Democracy' is the central idea, and they steadfastly oppose any attempt to supercede democratic decisions – whether it is done in the name of a party's dictates or some philosophical theory. They are also severely critical of subversion of democracy by big businesses.

One can easily trace an influence of Rorty's parents on his political views. Rorty was born in 1932 to very socially active parents- both of whom were members of the Communist Party of United States. In 1932, his parents broke with the party over the

[10] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 66

[11] The list of concerns that I enlist here is not exhaustive in nature. Insightful readers will definitely be able to locate some more issues that Rorty might be responding to.

influence of the Russian Communist Party on its ideas and functioning. Hereafter, they were branded as Trotskyites' and, as Rorty writes, "they more or less accepted the description"[12]. The environment Rorty grew up in was filled with debates on capitalism, socialism and social justice. As he writes,

> "I grew up knowing that all the decent people were, if not Trotskyites, at least socialists. I also knew that Stalin had ordered not only Trotsky's assassination but also Kirov's, Ehrlich's, Alter's and Carlo Tresca's. (Tresca, gunned down on the streets of New york, had been a family friend.) I knew that poor people would always be oppressed until capitalism was overcome."[13]

Rorty hardly had friends at school. He started helping his parents and their friends with their work at quite an early age. He tells us that he used to deliver drafts of press releases from his parents office to their sympathizers in New York. These press releases were mostly about workers' issues and through these Rorty learned a great deal about "what factory owners did to union organizers, plantation owners to sharecroppers, and the white locomotive engineers' union to the coloured firemen."[14]

Rorty's parents not only initiated him into leftist ideas, but also imbibed in him a critique of Stalinist Marxism. Rorty tells us that his parents were very active within the leftist group in America which was critical of Russian Marxists and wanted Leftists in America to take their own independent stand. His father helped John Dewey in the inquiries that he conducted as head of the commission which was established to look into the atrocities committed under Stalin's regime. It was this strange leftist democratic politics that is equally antithetical to capitalism and communism that Rorty inherited from his parents.

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[12] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 6
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.

Other than his Parents, John Dewey, whom Rorty counts as his philosophical hero, also had a huge influence on him. But Rorty and Dewey's political positions are not exactly similar to each other. The difference, I believe, lies in the contexts in which they were writing.

Dewey died in 1952. While the horrors of the Stalinstic socialist experiment were known to him, the Cold War was still in the making. Dewey had seen the misery caused by two world wars as well as the effects of the great economic depression of 1929[15]. For him, American democracy faced challenges on the one side from totalitarian regimes likes Nazi Germany and Soviet Union and on the other side from larger capitalist system.

Rorty, in contrast, grew up in the Cold War era. By the time he started writing, horrors of the socialistic experiment in Soviet Union and China were deeply etched in American psyche. Now, marxist totalitarian regimes were seen as the biggest threat to American-style liberal democracy.

One thing that clearly changed between Dewey and Rorty is that in Dewey's time, despite all the information about Stalin's regime in Russia, leftists in America were still hopeful about socialism. They still saw planned economy, where private property is abolished and resources are collectively owned, as a solution to the problems inherent in capitalism. But by the time Rorty started writing, all this had changed. Now Americans considered Soviet Union as the biggest threat to their way of life.

Moreover, by the time Rorty started writing, limitations of planned economies, particularly in the wake of the Soviet and Chinese experience, were widely recognized.

[15] For a discussion of Dewey's philosophy and politics, see Sidney Hook, *John Dewey: An Intellectual Portrait* (New York: Cosimo, 2008)

As a result, while leftists in America still criticized capitalism and private property, they did not think that the solution lay in complete abolition of private property and a centrally planned economy. They started looking for other options. Alongside, the 1960s boom in the American economy and the expansion of the welfare state made Americans more optimist about their own system.

This difference in the context can be clearly mapped onto the views of John Dewey and Richard Rorty. While John Dewey was much more hopeful about socialism and severely critical of capitalism and liberalism, Richard Rorty is comparatively mellow in his criticism of American style capitalism and liberalism.

Given the specificities of this contextual setting, Rorty and other pragmatists have had to differentiate themselves from both - conservatives at home and Marxists abroad.

One of the pet charges of conservatives against leftists had been that if their policy prescriptions are followed, America would end-up like other totalitarian states. Conservatives have always tried to paint leftist reforms as a danger to the American way of life. This made it clear to pragmatists that while criticizing conservatives at home, they also have to prove that their programme is completely different from what is happening in other countries in the name of socialism. They always had to be careful about distancing themselves from the totalitarian regimes abroad.

I think it is the twin imperative of criticizing conservatives at home and distancing themselves from totalitarian regimes abroad that gave direction to the work of pragmatists like Rorty. This context, in a way set the limits for pragmatists theorizing. They knew they have to fight conservatives, but they also knew they have to distance

themselves from what is being done in other countries like china and Soviet Union in the name of revolution and radical change. I suggest that Rorty's philosophical views should be seen as a narrative that he weaves in justification for this sort of leftist-democratic politics in America – a politics which equally distances itself from communism and conservatism. [16]

The problem with this sort of reformist leftist politics is that while earlier leftist used the Marxist vocabulary of revolution and radical change, now they were left with no positive vocabulary for their purposes. Most of their ideas can be seen as some sort of patchwork between liberalism and Marxism. I think one can see Rorty's work as an attempt to offer a positive narrative for this sort of leftist politics. His effort to weave a philosophical narrative that gels with his Leftist democratic politics can be compared to Ralws' effort to provide a justification for welfare liberalism in *A Theory of Justice.* Before Rawls' work, welfare liberalism was thought of as a kind of patchwork between capitalism and marxism. Rawls tried to provide welfare liberalism with its own independent foundations. In a similar way, Rorty's work could also be seen as providing us with independent arguments in favour of his Leftist-democratic politics.

But I think other than weaving a philosophical narrative that is congruent with his leftist-democratic politics, Rorty can also be seen as responding to the debates raging within the

[16] This is what he writes about the relation between pragmatism and political liberalism- "in the form John Dewey gave it, Pragmatism is a philosophy tailored to the needs of Political Liberalism, a way of making political liberalism look good to persons with philosophical tastes. It provides a rationale for nonideological, compromising, reformist muddling-through (what Dewey called "experimentalism"). It claims that categorical distinctions of the sort philosophers typically invoke are useful only as long as they facilitate conversation about what we should do next. Such distinctions, Dewey says, should be blurred or erased as soon as they begin to hinder such conversation -- to block the road of inquiry." See Richard Rorty, "Cosmopolitanism without emancipation: a response to Jean-Francois Lyotard," in his *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 211

discipline of philosophy about Philosophy's self-image. Since the beginning of the century, philosophers from the Anglo-American world have been in a conflict with philosophers from the continent over the task of philosophy. Philosophers in the Analytical tradition have been trying to model philosophy after science. As scientists have some core problems and an acceptable method and criterion of solving those core problems, these analytical philosophers see philosophy as solving some core problems- like the issue of mind-body dualism- that they think are unique to Philosophy. Their effort has been to clear philosophy of all the metaphysics and make it as scientific and systematic as possible.

Philosophers in the continent, on the other hand, see themselves not as trying to solve some core philosophical problems, but as trying to offer us new and imaginative ways of looking at our social reality. They see philosophers job as offering us new emancipatory narratives and not as solving some core philosophical problems.

Moreover, while philosophers in the analytical tradition see progress in philosophy as a matter of solving these core problems of philosophy, continental philosophers think of progress as creating a new narrative or description of social reality. One can say that while analytical philosophers are busy solving problems that their predecessors failed at, continentals' are lost in their search for novelty.

There are limitations to both these ways of doing philosophy. Simon Critchley is right when he argues that while analytical philosophy is in danger of turning too scientistic, philosophy in the continent risks going to the other extreme and turning lunatic[17].

[17] See Simon Critchley, *Continental Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008)

According to him, philosophy has to find a middle path between these two extreme. This new conception of philosophy should be able to retain the vigour and clarity of analytical tradition, while unleashing the emancipatory potential of the continental tradition.

Rorty and pragmatists can be placed in this debate between Analytical vs. Continental philosophy. They can be seen as trying to keeping the best of both the traditions. While Rorty started his career as an insider to analytical philosophy at Princeton, he was quick to realize its limitations. Since then, he has extensively used the works of writers like Derrida, Heidegger and Nietzsche to sharpen his critique of traditional way of doing philosophy. But alongside, Rorty is also sharply aware of the limitation of continental philosophers' tendency to take a flight of imagination. We can see Rorty as trying to provide us a new conception of philosophy that could bring in the best of both the traditions. We can see him as trying to inject some 'imagination' in analytical tradition, and some 'reason' in the continental.

How to fit in 'wild Orchids' with Trotsky?

Other than the concerns that we traced in Rorty's work, Rorty himself has written about someconcerns that he developed in his childhood. We have already seen how Rorty used to help his parents in their political activities and how this had a huge influence on Rorty. But other than being surrounded by this elderly talk about social justice Rorty also had his own idiosyncratic interests. Rorty had developed interest in wild orchids. Many varieties of these orchids were available in the area in which Rortys' were living in those days. He writes,

> "Some 40 species of wild orchids occur in those mountains, and I eventually found 17 of them. Wild orchids are uncommon, and rather hard to spot. I prided myself enormously on being the only person around who knew where they grew, their Latin names and their blooming times. When in New York, I would go to the 42nd street public library to reread a nineteenth century volume on the botany of the orchids of the eastern US."[18]

Rorty was always concerned that his weird interest in wild orchids may not be appreciated by the people he was surrounded by. He was taught to think and work on the issues that concern humanity, especially the downtrodden. He didn't know how to fit in his peculiar interest in wild orchids with things or issues that he had seen his parents and their friends working on and dying for. He writes,

> "I was uneasily aware, however, that there was something a bit dubious about this esotericism- this interest in socially useless flowers. I had read (in the vast amount of time given to a clever snotty, nerdy only child) bits of Marius de Epicurean and also bits of Marxist criticisms of Pater's aestheticism. I was afraid that Trotsky (whose literature and revolution I had nibbled at) would not have approved of my interest in orchids."[19]

Rorty wanted to pursue the cause of social justice, but at the same time he didn't want to give up his secret eccentricities. This led him to desire a theory or framework that can weld both these interests together – a framework that can let him pursue both without feeling some sort of conflict between the two.

> "Insofar I had any project in mind; it was to reconcile Trotsky and the orchids. I wanted to find some intellectual or aesthetic framework which would let me – in a thrilling phrase which I came across in Yeats – '**hold reality and justice and in a single vision**'. By *reality* I meant, more or less, the Wordsworthian moments in which, in the woods around Flatbrookville (and especially in the presence of certain coralroot orchids, and of the smaller yellow lady slipper), I had felt touched by something

[18] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 7
[19] Ibid.

> numinous, something of ineffable importance. By *Justice* I meant what Norman Thomas and Trotsky both stood for, the liberation of the week from the strong, I wanted a way to be both an intellectual and spiritual snob and a friend of humanity – a nerdy recluse and a fighter for justice".[20]

It is this urge to find a framework which can hold reality and justice in a single vision that drew Rorty towards philosophy. He thought Philosophy could provide him with one such framework. But it wasn't long before he realized that only two kinds of people can succeed in holding reality and justice in a single vision: First, the religious sort, who are ready to believe in one such vision without an argument; and second, revolutionaries, for whom social justice is the only important thing in life. The others, believes Rorty, must find some sort of balance between the two. He writes,

> "There is no need to weave one's personal equivalent of Trotsky and one's personal equivalent of my wild orchids together. Rather, one should try to abjure the temptation to tie in one's moral responsibilities to other people with ones relation to whatever idiosyncratic things or persons one loves with all one's heart and soul and mind (or, If you like, the things or persons one is obsessed with). The two will, for some people, coincide- as they do in those lucky Christians for whom the love of god and of other human beings are inseparable, or revolutionaries who are moved by nothing save the thought of social justice. But they need not coincide, and one should not try too hard to make them do so. "[21]

It is this search for one foundation or framework that Richard Rorty is criticizing in his work. He thinks that most western philosophers have been trying to find one such foundation; something around which they can create a coherent framework that can connect *reality* and *justice*; something 'permanent' from which both our idiosyncratic

[20] Ibid., 8
[21] Ibid., 13

interests and our concern for social justice can be derived. But Rorty suggests that this search for something permanent around which a framework can be woven is absolutely futile. He believes we can never fit everything together in a single coherent framework. We can only create temporary frameworks that allow us to do something useful in a particular historical situation.

Above, we outlined the various different concerns whose reflection one can locate in Rorty's work. I think these different concerns don't necessarily pull us in different directions, but, if we try putting them together we can see them as converging at one central point. One can see that Rorty's central concern is with 'human freedom'- he wants a thoroughly human world, a world in which there are no antecedently given things. In this thoroughly human world everything shall be decided by human beings in conversation with each other, there shall be no external constraints. Richard Bernstein calls this Rorty's "deep humanis". He writes,

> "Whether Rorty is dealing with abstract metaphilosophical topics or the hotly debated philosophical issues concerning, truth, objectivity, and the nature of reality, or ethical and political issues concerning human rights – or even with the role of religion in our daily lives- there is a dominant theme that emerges over and over again. *There is nothing we can rely on but ourselves and our fellow human beings*. There is no outside authority to which we can appeal – whether we think of it as God, truth or reality."[22]

We can see a reflection of this concern for human freedom in Rorty's leftist democratic politics. Rorty opposes any sort of external constraints on democratic mandate- whether these constraints come in the form of a party's dictates, or some antecedently given facts

[22] Richard Bernstein, "Rorty's deep Humanism", *New Literary History*,39 (2008), 21

about the world, or the money power of big corporate houses. For him, no one else should decide how we collectively live.

Same is the case with debates in philosophy. We can see Rorty as trying to make analytical and continental philosophy more useful for our daily human life. He, and other pragmatists like John Dewey, have always made an attempt to make philosophy useful for our daily life. They view philosophy not as means to connect with some atemporal power but as tools with which we can serve humanity. He wants to make human concerns central to a philosopher's imagination.

One can also see his concern for human freedom coming out clearly in his opposition to a single framework which can fit in everything for all times to come. Such a framework will leave no place for human imagination. It would render human conversations to juggle up the world in different ways, useless. With the availability of one such framework, we would simply be required to fit in ourselves in the place allotted for us in that framework; our existence will lose all sense of autonomy and independence.

Next chapter takes a look at the antithetical relationship between these humanist concerns of Rorty and the platonist and the realist imagery of traditional western philosophy. We shall also see what re-description of traditional western philosophy Rorty offers us- a re-description that makes our traditional philosophical beliefs fits in better with Rorty's humanist concerns.

Chapter 2: A humanist re-description of Philosophy

In the last chapter we saw how humanism can be seen as the central concern of Rorty's writings. We suggested that Rorty hopes for a world where humans feel responsible only to other human beings and not to some non-human authority- he wants us to bow only in front of the wish of other human beings, and nobody else.

Rorty's utopia, therefore, would be a thoroughly human world, where belief in any sort of non-human authority becomes inconsequential to how we collectively live. In his ideal world, public life shall be organized on the basis of principles that are collectively agreed upon and not according to the dictates of some non-human authority that priests or intellectuals claim to have access to[23]. This utopia, then, would be a truly democratic community where all collective decisions are based on the community's consensus.

Rorty believes that liberal democratic forms of governments that have emerged in the west over the last three centuries, have already achieved this ideal to some extent. He approvingly writes that these democracies have successfully 'privatized' religion – that is, in these countries, religious beliefs of citizens are inconsequential to the way they are treated for public purposes[24]. These countries have evolved a way of talking about public issues that is free from the invocation of religious beliefs, and in a sense, these countries have moved a step closer to Rorty's democratic humanist utopia.

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[23] Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as Science, Metaphor and Politics," in his *Essays on Heidegger and others* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 18-19.
[24] Richard Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," in his *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 175.

But for Rorty, religion was one among a number of impediments to establishinga thoroughly human world. For him, philosophical realism and platonism - two of the most dominant strands of Western philosophy are other road blocks on the way to a humanist utopia. He suggests that the Platonist and Realist way of philosophizing is, by its very nature, anti-democratic and anti-humanist. Given this, he urges those who share his dreams of a democratic-humanist utopia to give up this Platonist and realist way of thinking. But how exactly is this Realist and Platonist way of think about things anti-democratic and anti-humanist in nature? This shall be the problematique that is addressed in the next section – an interrogation of the antithetical relationship between Realism, Platonism and Humanism.

Realism, Platonism and Humanism

Oxford English Dictionary describes Humanism as '1.a rationalistic system of thought attaching prime importance to human rather than divine or supernatural matters. 2 a Renaissance cultural movement that turned away from medieval scholasticism and revived interest in ancient Greek and Roman thought."[25]

For our purposes, we can understand Humanism as the movement that tried to put human concerns at the centre of everything. For humanists, it is only human interests that should influence our decisions. Our responsibility, according to this view, lies only to other human beings and to no one else.

In the middle centuries humanists were mainly pitted against Scholastics Scholastic philosophy revolved around the existence of God and the enumeration of the world order

[25] See *Compact Oxford English dictionary* (New Delhi :Oxford University Press, 2007)

as god had created it. For them, God was the centre of all things – humans derived the meaning of their existence by placing themselves at the right places in this divinely ordained world order. Humanism, as a movement, was born against this sort of scholasticism. Instead of God, Humanists tried to put humans at the centre of all things.

But with the arrival of the Modern era, accompanied with Enlightenment ideas, Scholasticism receded into oblivion. 'Word of the God' lost the influence and authority that it had hitherto exercised over the lives of people. Now, the public sphere came to be dominated by scientific views. Authority of the God's word was replaced by the authority of science.

Many humanists celebrated the arrival of this scientific world. They believed that a world where human concerns will reign supreme has arrived. A secular world where scientific views dominated the public culture was seen as a realization of the ideal humanist utopia. With this, humanists hoped that they have finally arrived at their resting place.

But Rorty cautions us against such a hasty conclusion. He asks us to suspend our celebrations for some more time. He thinks that religion and the accompanying scholasticism was just one example of our commonplace urge to run away from the "contingent", "temporary" and the "merely human", and to find solace and truth in the "permanent", "ahistorical" and the "non-human". For him, it is just one instance of our common fear of the merely "subjective" and yearning for the "objective"; just one example of our contempt for the merely 'local' and 'cultural' and respect and awe for the "universal" and the "transcendental".

According to Rorty, we have always yearned to find some "skyhook" from where we can have an impartial and objective look at the world – impartial and objective because it presents to us the world from a vantage point which is away from the "corrupting" influence of ourtemporal and spatial subjectivity[26].We believed that once we discover such a "skyhook", we will be able to tell which of our opinions are merely "subjective" and which are closer to the "truth." From this position of neutrality, we will be able to arbitrate in cases of conflicts that arise due to differences in our subjective opinions.

For scholastics, it was God's decree that provided us with such a skyhook. For them, the Bible told us the truth as it is untouched by the rough and tumble of daily contingent life. But, Rorty suggests that religious scholasticism of the middle-ages was just one among several ways in which this yearning for a "skyhook", manifest itself.

He suggests that now when we have pushed religion out of the public sphere, there are many other practices which are aiming to do exactly what the priests and scholastics of the middle ages had had tried, albeit in the garb of philosophy or science. These philosophers have been claiming that they can reveal to us the real structure of the world which is different from our subjective opinions about it. They have been claiming that the world works according to some natural and objective laws which philosophy must discover. Here, Rorty is specifically targeting the 'Realist' and the 'Platonist" strands of Western Philosophy. First, let us look at what we broadly mean by Realism and Platonism.

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[26] Hilary Putnam calls it the urge to get a 'Gods eye-view of the world'. See Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as Science, Metaphor and Politics," in his *Essays on Heidegger and others* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 11.

Realism can broadly be defined as the belief that there is a "true", "real" and "objective" world out there, distinct from the "subjective" world that we humans create for our purposes. The existence of this "objective" world is independent of how we describe it using our language and ideas. Realists also hope that the once we discover this true world, as it objectively is, free from our subjective influences, it can help us rank our subjective opinions- we can see which of our opinion is closer to reality and what is just a fantasy.

Platonism can roughly be understood as the idea that the things we see in this world are just a copy of the pure and abstract concept of that thing. The chair that we see in front of us, for example, is merely a copy of the ideal chair. While our sensory organs only show us this replica of the original, through reason one can access the pure concept or 'form' of that thing. Plato argued that things existed in their pure 'forms' in the ideal world. He had suggested that a philosopher should aim at knowledge of this ideal world which can only be attained by special philosophical activity. Not everyone, according to him is capable of acquiring knowledge of this ideal world.

While modern Platonism comes in many guises, it can be said that this distinction between the thing that we see in front of us and the abstract concept of which it is a replica, is central to Platonism. With this come other distinctions, uch as the difference between knowledge and opinion. For Plato, 'Knowledge' was to be of pure and permanent, while 'opinion' refers to commonplace talk about contingent issues[27].

[27] See Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies. Vol.1: The Spell of Plato* (New York: Routledge, 2006), for a discussion of Plato's philosophy.

What is important from a humanist point of view is that both Platonists and Realists divide the world in two parts – a world that we perceive from our historical positions, and the world as it exists in its 'pure', 'objective' and 'ahistorical' form. This 'pure' and 'objective' world is the real world for a Realist, and for a Platonist it is the 'ideal world' where things exist in their pure forms. Both of them, Realists and Platonists, share a contempt for the 'local', 'particular' and the 'contingent' world that we inhabit, and both find beauty and truth in the 'permanent', 'universal' and 'ahistorical' world that exists distinct from the subjective world that we perceive.

The purpose of inquiry and knowledge, for both Realists and Platonists, is to find out this 'real' or 'ideal' world and the laws that govern it. They believe that once we have the knowledge of this real world and how things work in it, we will have an objective standard from which we can judge our subjective opinions.

It is this Realist and Platonist imagery that has been central to Western Philosophy. Most of the philosophers in the western tradition have been working with these binaries of 'objective and subjective' and the 'real and unreal'. Most of them have been trying to climb up an 'impartial' 'ahistorical' point from where one can pronounce judgments about the world without being blamed for partiality or subjectivism[28]. Given this broad

[28] Davidson talks about one more dualism – that is of scheme and content. For him, most of the western philosophers have been trying to provide us with an ahistorical scheme that can fit in or accommodate all the particular experiences or facts that we have- not only those facts that we possess presently, but also those that we may encounter in the future. Commenting on Davidson's idea, Rorty writes, "this version is the claim that the philosophy can make explicit a scheme, a permanent mix neutral mix of possibilities, which lies in the background of all our enquiries and possibilities." See Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as Science, Metaphor and Politics," in his *Essays on Heidegger and others* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 14.

commonality, we shall use 'Platonism', 'Realism' and 'traditional western Philosophy' interchangeably in the rest of this dissertation[29].

It is evident from the above discussion that there is a clear conflict between Rorty's humanist concerns and the Realism and Platonism of Traditional Western Philosophy. Realists and Platonists, like scholastics, don't trust the merely 'human'. All three of them are in search of something larger than merely subjective human opinions. In the rest of the Chapter, we shall see how Rorty provides us with a re-description of the central issues in this Realist and Platonist imagery of the world – a re-description that could fit in better with his humanist aspirations.

Representationalism and traditional western philosophy

A belief in Representationalism of one or the other form is central to the Realist and Platonist imagery of Traditional Western Philosophy. Representationalism can broadly be defined as the idea that, alongside the true, real and objective world out there, there exists a world that we create for ourselves through our language and ideas. The correctness or validity of this world, according to this view, depends entirely on whether or not it replicates the real world that lies outside our subjectivities. In other words, validity or truth of our 'ideas' or 'words' or 'sentences' about the world depends on whether they correctly represent and correspond with this true objective order of the world that exists out there independent of our own existence. This is what we broadly mean by

[29] Isssiah Berlin calls it the "Jigsaw- puzzle" view of philosophy. Berlin writes, "There must be some way of putting the pieces together. The all wise being, the omniscient being, Whether God or an omniscient earthly creature – whichever you like to conceive of it – is in principle capable of fitting all the pieces together into one coherent pattern. Anyone who does this will know what the world is like: what things are, what they have been, what they will be, what the laws are that govern them, what man is, what the relation of man is to things, and therefore what man needs, what he desires, and how to obtain it." As quoted in Richard Rorty, "Grandeur, Profundity and Finitude", in his Philosophy as Cultural Politics (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 80.

Representationalism; and the analogous theory of truth is known as 'Correspondence Theory of Truth'.

Proponents of 'Correspondence theory of Truth' argue that the truth of a statement or an idea is determined by its correspondence to the real structure of the world. Here, the criterion of truth is provided by 'natural facts', as they are provided to us without any involvement of human subjectivity.

Most of the western philosophers have been Representationalists of some sort or the other. While for Descartes, it is distinct or clear thoughts that would do this job of representing the real world; for Locke, it would be 'simple ideas'. Similarly, for many philosophers in the twentieth century, it is the task of language to represent this real world to us.

The common thread running through the aforementioned philosophers is the belief that something other than or outside of our own 'ideas' or 'words' or 'language' should serve as the criterion of truth; and they all think that it is the objective order of the world which can serve this purpose.

Rorty takes a stand against this sort of Representationalism. He doesn't think that the job of our 'language', 'mental thoughts' or 'ideas' is to represent the real and objective world that exists independent of us. Nor does he think that our ideas or language should be evaluated for their correct representation of this real and objective world.

Rorty and Representationalists have a different view of relationship between human beings and the natural environment. For Representationalists, there is an 'epistemic gap' between human beings and their natural environment. They think that there is a gap

between what we humans think about the world and how the world is 'objectively speaking'. For them, the task of inquiry or knowledge is to bring our subjective views more in line with the real objective order of the world and bridge this 'epistemic gap'. They would suggest that by correctly representing the world, this 'epistemic gap' can be bridged. Therefore, for them, it is the job of our ideas, words or language to represent the real world for us and fill this 'epistemic gap'.

For Representationalists, objects can have two meanings – one that is assigned to them by their place in the 'true' structure of the world; and the other which we humans assign to them from our own historical positions. They think that if we rid ourselves of the corrupting influences of our culture and history, we can discover the true 'natural' meaning of the objects. They would believe that by reforming our language- by ridding it of all subjective influences – we can somehow discover a language that reflects the true structure of the world. An 'objective language', for a Representationalist, will be the one that calls an object by its 'natural' name.

For Representationalists, therefore, epistemology – which deals with the theories about how we can get access to the underlying structure of the world - becomes the most important branch of philosophy. Indeed, as Rorty puts it, Representationalists think of Philosophy as the discipline whose job is to "mirror" reality.[30]

Rorty doesn't agree with this Representationalist account of the relationship between humans and the natural environment. He envisages a different relation between us and the natural environment. He argues that the natural environment puts various kinds of causal

[30] He named his first major text on Philosophy as "Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature". See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979).

pressures on our body which in turn weaves different strategies to cope up with these challenges. How we talk about things and what meaning we assign to various objects has to be seen as part of this strategy. According to this view, we invent languages or vocabularies not to represent a real objective world and bridge some 'epistemic gap', but to cope with the causal pressures that nature puts on us. Rorty visualizes a much more organic relationship between humans and the natural environment. Here, we are totally linked with the natural environment and fight for our survival like other species by inventing new strategies. This is quite a Darwinian picture of human beings. In fact, Rorty acknowledges that he has been hugely influenced by Darwins views[31].

Further, for Rorty, there is no 'natural' or 'objective' language. Languages and the meanings that we assign to objects are human creations, and they need to be evaluated, not for their representation of the real world, but for their usefulness in coping with the challenges we face from the environment.

He believes that history of philosophy is the history of various narratives/vocabularies that thinkers have offered us for coping with various challenges that humankind has faced over the ages. These narratives need to be evaluated for their usefulness in dealing with challenges and not for their correspondence with some objective real world[32].

Rorty would urge us to evaluate even Natural Sciences in a similar way. He doesn't think that Natural Sciences use a language which locks up with the real structure of the world. He would ask us to view Natural sciences as one more vocabulary that we have invented to deal with the challenges that we face; success of Natural sciences, therefore, should be

[31] Richard Rorty, 'Introduction" in his *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999)
[32] See Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as Science, Metaphor and Politics," in his *Essays on Heidegger and others* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 9.

seen as a matter of how they can help us in dealing with the problems that we face and not as a matter of representing the objective world for us. He writes,

> "anti-representationalist's see no sense in which physics is more independent of our human peculiarities than astrology or literary criticism. For them, various areas of culture answer different human needs, but there is no way to stand outside of all human needs."[33]

Rorty is deeply influenced by the work of Thomas Kuhn in taking this view of natural sciences. Before Kuhn, the general perception was that natural sciences have a different status in comparison to other disciplines. Everyone believed that natural sciences talk about the objective world as it is given to us, free from the subjective involvement of humans. It was hoped that Natural sciences would ultimately progress towards unlocking the real structure of the world.

Kuhn seriously challenged this view. In his path breaking book *Structure of scientific revolutions,* he argued that scientists don't deal with an objective world free of any sort of influence of human subjectivity. Rather, the world that is available to them is in fact constructed according to the paradigm that they use. Kuhn argued that the world that is available to a scientist working under the paradigm of Aristotelian physics was completely different from the one available to someone working under the paradigm of Newtonian physics; both the scientists world is so different that we cannot even venture to make comparisons between them. Thus, the crux of the argument is that when we change our paradigms through which we look at the world, the world also changes

[33] See Richard Rorty, "Introduction: Antirepresentationalism, ethnocentrism, and liberalism," in his *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 8.

substantially for us; new paradigms give rise to new problems and make new ideas acceptable as solutions[34].

According to Kuhn, revolutions in natural sciences happen when an old paradigm is replaced by a new one. With this replacement of the old paradigm, all the old questions and their solutions become obsolete – they make no sense to the person working under the new paradigm. Moreover, for Kuhn, there is no objective world which can be viewed outside of any kind of paradigm – human subjectivity is actively involved in any kind of inquiry or knowledge-based activity.[35]

Since the publication of Kuhn's work, there has been a radical change in our perception of Natural Sciences. Although his views have been heavily contested, no one believes in the simple position that natural sciences simply represent the world in bare bones.

Rorty is asking us to evaluate these different paradigms for their usefulness in helping us deal with challenges that we face and not for the correct representation of the world.

Apart from Kuhn, another writer whose influence can be clearly traced on Rorty's views on language and how it relates with the world is, Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein in his earlier work *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* had taken a Representationalist stand and argued that the meaning of a word is determined by the

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[34] See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (New York: University of Chicago Press, 1996)

[35] In fact, Kuhn is not the first one to highlight the importance of human subjectivity in natural sciences or any other sort of inquiry. Karl Popper had talked about this even before Kuhn. Popper argued how we proceed in natural science not by collecting facts and then making generalization, but by first giving bold hypothesis and then by trying to refute them using the available facts. See Karl popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The growth of Scientific Knowledge* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963). And one can argue that even before Popper, Kant had already highlighted the importance of human subjectivity in any sort of enquiry.

object that it represents. But in his later work *Philosophical Investigations*, he completely repudiated his earlier position[36]. Now, he argued that a word doesn't derive its meaning from the object that it represents but from the language-game that it is part of. A person wearing a certain colour and regulating traffic at an intersection wouldn't mean anything unless we understand the larger context (language game) in which his actions are understood. Only then we will recognise him as a traffic policeman and the meaning of his actions and the colour of his dress will make sense to us. That is, his actions and the colour of his dress don't have a meaning of their own; they are assigned a meaning by the language game that they are part of.

Thus, in the wake of Wittgenstein's work, the earlier representationalist view that words and sentences derive their meaning from the objects they represent- has been problematized.

The importance of Wittgenstein's work for Humanists like Rorty lies in the implication that the meaning of words and sentences is created by human beings and not given by the natural environment. It leaves words and sentences at our disposal – they can be used for our purpose of human betterment. They are no longer tied to or derived from antecedently given natural objects. We can give up old vocabularies that don't serve any purpose and replace them with new ones that we find more suitable for our purposes.

Anti-representationalism and Humanism

One can see it clearly that there is a clear connection between Rorty's humanism and his anti- Representationalism. For Representationalists, the purpose of inquiry is to represent

[36] See A.C. Grayling, *Wittgenstein: A Very Short Introduction* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008)

the world that exists out there free of human existence. But for anti-Representationalists, the purpose of inquiry is not to represent anything but to deal with the problems that we face in our contingent and historical existence. Anti- Representationalists make sense of inquiry in terms of its relation with the betterment of human beings, while Represenationalists exalt inquiry to the status of something through which we can get in touch with the real structure of the world.

For Represenationalists, this real world that we discover through the right use of our language will serve as the criteria of truth in case of dispute. For humanists like Rorty, this criterion of an outside real world is an unnecessary restriction on human conversations. They think that human inquiry should only be responsible to other humans and to no one else. In fact, this is clearly reflected in how Rorty defines his brand of Pragmatism: "a doctrine that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones – no wholesale concerns derived from the nature of the objects, the mind, or the language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow inquirers."[37]

For pragmatists and Rorty, the only constraints which matter are those imposed by our fellow inquirers – we can only say what our fellow inquirers will allow us to say. 'Truth' here is not something that represents some real world properly, but something whose usefulness we all recognize. For Anti-Representationalists, our responsibility while conducting an inquiry has to be towards other human beings, for it is they who will determine whether what we are saying deserves to be awarded with the appellation

[37] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), 19.

'truth,' or not[38]. This way, anti-Representationalism is closely linked to humanism. For Rorty, this turn away from Representationalism is very important for the arrival of a thoroughly human world that Humanists like him yearn for. This is why there is so much emphasis on Anti-Representationalism in his work.

Quoting F.C.S Schiller, Rorty writes, "Pragmatism... is in reality only the application of Humanism to the theory of knowledge." He further adds, "I take schiller's point to be that the humanists claim that human beings have responsibilities only to one another entails giving up Representationalism and Realism."[39]

Rorty's new Humanist 'self'

Besides his opposition to Representationalism, Rorty's Humanism also gets reflected in his views on 'self'. In this, a Humanist Rorty challenges how the 'self' has been thought about in the western philosophical tradition and offers a new conception which gels better with his Humanist aspirations.

While talking about the 'human self', most western philosophers have tried to shun daily mundane life and instead attempted to locate the true 'human self' in another sphere – a sphere far away and free from the contingencies of this life. They have viewed the experiences of our daily lives as a corrupting influence on our pure self. They have been in search of some realm of purity and permanence, away from the temporary existence of normal human beings. Plato thought that by reflection, contemplation and the use of

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[39] Ibid.

reason, we can reactivate this true 'self' that is hidden inside all of us and is in danger of getting corrupted by quotidian experiences. The common urge among philosophers, therefore, has been to find something pure and permanent inside; something which is more than a mere reflection of our contingent experiences. They have all been searching for this permanent thing inside.

For Rorty, it is Kant, among the modern philosophers, who has given 'self' so much importance and put it on the pedestal that it now occupies. He thinks there are reasons for Kant to do so. He argues that Kant's philosophy would lose its coherence if he doesn't offer an 'absolute' self which guarantees our judgments about the world. Rorty writes,

> "The Kantian notion of self conscience divinizes the self. Once we give up, as Kant did, on the idea that scientific knowledge of hard facts is our point of contact with power not ourselves, it is natural to do what Kant did: to turn inward, to find that point of contact in our moral consciousness – in our search for righteousness rather than our search for truth. Righteousness "deep within us" takes the place, for Kant, of empirical truth "out there"."[40]

The Kantian 'self' is 'absolute' and 'necessary'; and for Kantians this sort of 'self' is necessary to underwrite our judgments. For Kant, no objective judgments are possible without this absolute coherent 'self'. It is Kant who gives us this 'permanent' 'absolute' view of 'self' – a self which organizes our experiences and endures through all the changes.

What is common to Platonic and Kantian view of 'self' is the search for something permanent that lies inside something which can stand through changes. Both of them

[40] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 30.

believed that there is a core human nature that cuts across individual subjectivities, and our true 'self' consists in this essence

Both of them speak in the dualistic language of the 'pure' and 'impure' self. Pure is what is permanent– something which can endure change. Impure is something which changes with time and place.

Rorty takes position against this exalted, absolutist view of self. He argues against searching for this permanent and pure self, away from the self that is a product of the mundane contingent life that we live daily. Given this, Rorty's suggests a Freudian conception of self in place of the Kantian and Platonic views described above.

He thinks it is Freud who has helped us in bringing the 'self' down from the pedestal of 'coherence' and 'necessity' to a much more mundane level. He writes,

> "We can begin to understand Freud's role in our culture by seeing him as the moralist who helped de-divinise the self by tracking conscience home to its origin in the contingencies of our upbringing."
>
> "He (Freud) de-universalises the moral sense, making it as idiosyncratic as the poet's inventions. He thus lets us see the moral consciousness as historically conditioned, a product as much of time and chance as of political or aesthetic consciousness."[41]

There is no dualism of 'pure' and the 'impure' self in Freud's views. For Freud, there is nothing called 'core human nature'. Every human self is the result of his/her contingent circumstances; if some similarities emerge, then that is mere coincidence and not due to some common human nature. How every human 'self' develops depends and on how

[41] Ibid.

each one of us deals with his/her contingent situation. In a word, there is no common pure 'self' hidden inside all of us.

Freud's work can be seen as a thoroughly humanist one. He brings down our talk about self from some other realm of permanence and purity, and tries to place it within our daily mundane lives. There is no other realm of permanence and purity to be found in Frued's work – we just have our contingent circumstances and their effects, there is nothing else to be found out. For Rorty, as well as for Freud, we weave a self out of these contingent and historical circumstances. As Rorty writes, this self is a 'network of beliefs, desires, and emotions with nothing behind it- no substrate behind the attributes.'[42]

Some traces of this line of critique can also be found in the works of British empiricist David Hume. Hume had also argued against searching for anything absolute and permanent inside us. He also thought that our self is nothing but a collection of contingent circumstances.

This Humean view of self is linked to his larger argument that there are no necessary causal connections in the world. According to Hume, what we see as necessary causal connections are just a result of getting used to seeing the same thing happen again and again. He argued that when we see two events happening in close conjunction with each other, repeatedly, we start thinking that there is a necessary connection between the two. Thus, for Hume, what we see as necessary connection is in fact a habit of thought. Hume suggested that in a similar way when we see same person performing some actions again and again, we start assuming that there is a permanent 'self' inside that person, who is

[42] Richard Rorty, "Post Modernist Bourgeois Liberalism", *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.80, No.10, Part 1: Eightieth Annual meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Divison (Oct. 1983), 586.

performing these actions. But according to Hume, that is not true. For him, there is no such thing as a permanent 'self'. Whatever we see as the permanent 'self' is merely a collection of all the experiences that we had of that particular person. After seeing that same person perform some actions again and again, we form a permanent view of her, but that doesn't mean there is an absolute thing inside her which is her true self. Her 'self' is nothing but a collection of all the historical experience that we had of her and that she has herself gone through, since birth; there is nothing more to it.

Similar is the Derrida's view of self. Derrida has his own 'cinders view of self'[43]. According to Derrida, our 'self' is like those cinders which are left after the wood has been burnt. Like those cinders, which are simply the result of the wood that has been burnt; our 'self' is the result of burning of all the historical experience that has passed. For Derrida, therefore, there is nothing more to our 'self' other than these historical circumstances.

One other thinker whose influence can be marked out on the Rortian view is that of Charles Darwin. Darwin's importance for Rorty lies in the fact that he was the first one to argue that human beings have evolved like other animals - by competing with each other for survival. It is Darwin who argued that there is nothing special about human beings; it is just that they have evolved into much more complex creatures. Rorty agrees with this picture of human beings when he calls them 'complex animals'.[44]

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[43] For a discussion of Derrida's philosophy See Mark Dooley and Liam Kavanagh, *The Philosophy of Derrida* (Acumen, 2007)

[44] Look at Rorty's discussion of Darwin in Richard Rorty, "Human Rights," in his *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 174.

This Darwinian picture goes against the 'Christian-theological-Kantian'understanding of human beings. This 'Christian-theological-Kantian' view puts human beings on a higher pedestal based on the belief that human beings have an innate capability called 'reason' that marks them as different from other animals[45]. Darwin wouldn't deny that human beings have the capacity to reason, but for him, it is just one more capability that human beings have developed in the course of evolution - there is nothing innate about it. For him, the difference between the human organizations and the way other animals live is the matter of degree and complexity, and not of kind. In other words, contrary to the claims of Christian theologians and Kantians, Darwin believes that there is nothing innately different about human beings.[46].

Rorty's emphasis on history while talking about self should be differentiated from Hegel's emphasis on history. Although Hegel also gives importance to history, the relationship between past and present would be different for a Hegelian and a Rortian. While for a Hegelian, the present would be a reason for the past; for Rorty, the present would just be a result of the past[47]. Hegelians have a teleological conception of history and similarly, a teleological conception of 'self'. Rorty would accept that past and history created our present 'self' but would argue that we cannot claim that our present 'self' was the reason or purpose behind past events. For Rorty, there is no pre-given direction that

[45]Rorty writes, "Plato suggested that there is a big difference between us and animals, a difference worthy of respect and cultivation. He thought that human beings have a special added ingredient that puts them in a different ontological category than brutes. Respect for this ingredient provides a reason for people to be nice to each other". See Richard Rorty, "Human Rights," in his *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 169.

[46]See Richard Rorty, "Human Rights," in his *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 174.

[47]For a discussion of two ways of relating between past and present, see Shefali Jha, "introduction," in her *Western Political Thought: From Plato to Marx* (New Delhi: Pearson Longman, 2010), 11.

we are following. Whatever 'self' we develop is the result of historical experience and is not pre-designed in any way.

Closely linked to Rorty's view of self is his take on 'rationality'. Against the traditional view which treats rational behavior as something which is in accord with some pure 'ahistorical' standard, Rorty's view of rationality is 'historical' and 'experimentational'. Proponents of the traditional view divide our self in two parts – one is the 'reasonable' self that we all have in common, while the other is the 'passionate' and 'contingent' self which is the result of our historical circumstances. As Rorty writes, "Kant splits us into two parts, one called "reason," which is identical in us all, and another (empirical sensation and desire) which is a matter of blind, contingent, idiosyncratic impressions".[48]

Proponents of this view exalt the 'reasonable' and the 'pure' part of our self. Rational behavior, according to them, is in accordance with this 'permanent' and 'pure' part of our self. They despise the 'contingent' or the 'historical' part of our self. They think that it is animals that live according to the dictates of the 'passions' and the 'contingent'. To be true human, for these writers, one should just follow reason and not get affected by contingent circumstances.

Rorty pits himself against this view of rationality. As we have seen from the above discussion, he doesn't agree with this dualism of pure and impure 'self'. There are no 'permanent' and the 'contingent' parts to his 'self'. His 'self' is whatever historical circumstances have made it; there is nothing else to it. Commenting on Freud, he writes,

[48] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 32.

"in contrast, Freud treats rationality as a mechanism which adjusts contingencies to other contingencies."[49] He adds,

> "Freud spends his time exhibiting the extraordinary sophistication subtlety, wit of our unconscious genius and psychosis- and, most importantly, morality and prudence- not as products of distinct faculties but as alternative modes of adaptation."[50]

For this Rortian self, there is no permanent thing to fall back on; it has to weave its own future while coping with the given circumstances; and it is by experiments and learning from the consequences of these experiments that this Rortian self proceeds. Rational action, for this Rortian self, is just something which is taken as success by her fellow citizens in dealing with a particular problem. Rorty draws a lot from Quine while talking about rationality. He writes,

> "She is a network which is constantly reweaving itself in the usual Quinean manner- that is to say, not by reference to general criteria (e.g., "rules of meaning" or "moral principles") but in the hit-or-miss way in which cells readjust themselves to meet the pressures of the environment. On a Quinean view, rational behaviour is just adaptive behaviour of a sort which roughly parallels the behaviour, in similar circumstances, of the other members of some relevant community. Irrationality, in both physics and ethics, is a matter of behaviour that leads one to abandon, or be stripped of, membership in some such community."[51]

So, according to Rorty, it is not by reference to some 'ahistorical' 'permanent' criteria that the rationality of an action is determined; rather, it is determined by acceptance of other similarly situated people. For him, there is nothing other than the acceptance of our fellow comrades that determines the rationality of an action.

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[49] Ibid., 33
[50] Ibid.
[51] Richard Rorty, "Post Modernist Bourgeois Liberalism", *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.80, No.10, Part 1: Eightieth Annual meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Divison (Oct. 1983), 586.

This is a 'biologistic' Darwinian picture of human beings. Here, human beings grow by interacting with their environment in various different experimental ways. According to this view, truth, rationality etc are not determined by whether or not they correspond to some ahistorical, objective criterion. These are just names that we give to ideas and things which help in coping with the problems we face in our daily lives. Truth, therefore, is something which proves to be socially useful and not something which is in accordance with some 'god's eye view of the world.'

Next, our views on 'self' and 'rationality' are deeply linked with our perspective on morality. For Kantians and Christian theologians, to be moral is to partake in the pure and true part of ourselves – a part that we share with all other human beings. For them, a moral action is one which is not governed by our contingent passions, but which reflects this 'reasonable' and 'pure' self.

Kantians and Christian theologians make a strong distinction between prudence and morality. While prudent action is local and is pressed upon by contingent circumstances, a moral act is led by the 'light of reason'. With the help of reason, we human beings are supposed to rise above our contingent circumstances and look for what is universally applicable. Only the act which passes this test of Universality can be called a moral act, while the rest are merely prudent actions driven by self-interested 'passions'.

But, above we saw that Rorty is against this division of our 'self' in two parts. For him, our self is a continuous 'network of beliefs, desires, and emotions', with no fundamental division between the permanent and temporary.

However, Rorty doesn't completely give up the morality/prudence distinction. He gives it a different turn. He thinks that there are parts of our self – this network of beliefs- that we share with other members of the community with which we identify. A moral action for him is simply the one which is driven by this shared part of us. He writes,

> "A further corollary is that the morality/prudence distinction now appears as a distinction between appeals to two parts of the network that is the self – parts separated by blurry and constantly shifting boundaries. One part consists of those beliefs and desires and emotions which overlap with those of most other members of some community with which, for purposes of deliberation, she identifies herself, and which contrast with those of most members of other communities with which hers contrasts itself. A person appeals to morality rather than prudence when she appeals to this overlapping, shared part of herself, those beliefs and desires and emotions which permit her to say "We do not do this sort of thing." Morality, as Wilfred sellars has said, a matter of "we-intentions." Most moral dilemmas are thus reflections of the fact that most of us identify with a number of different communities and are equally reluctant to marginalize ourselves in relation to any of them. This diversity of identifications increases with education, just as the members of the communities with which a person may identify increases with civilization."[52]

Rorty would argue that when a Kantian is asking us to keep our passions away and think in a rational way while thinking about moral action, he is simply referring to the beliefs that westerners share about what the meaning of moral action. For him, Kant is merely referring to the 'we-intentions' of the western society.

According to Rorty, most of the moral dilemmas' arise not because of a conflict between our local and contingent associations, and our moral duty towards the common humanity, but because we associate with a lot of different sorts of communities. These different

[52] Ibid. 587

communities have different beliefs about morality and conflict between these different beliefs leads to moral dilemmas.

For example, natives of post-colonial societies like India face these moral dilemmas quite often. City-based individuals, who are educated in western ideas, face a dilemma between two communities to which they belong. One is the largely globalised international community which speaks the language of rights and privacy, while the other is the local community that our parents belonged to and which continues to influence us. Most of our moral dilemmas can be traced to a conflict between the belief systems of these two communities. And more often than not, we don't want to give up our membership of either of these communities.

Rorty is arguing that in this, the conflict is not between a historically-situated community-based 'prudence' and an 'ahistorical' and 'universally' valid 'Morality'; Rather, it is between two historically situated moralities. He is arguing that with higher levels of education, we start identifying with more and more communities and that leads to moral dilemmas.

Linked to this view of 'morality' and 'self' is our view of 'self-realisation'. For Kantians and Christian theologians, 'self realization' is a matter of connecting with our 'transcendental' 'pure' 'moral' soul. It means getting out of the 'contingent' and unifying with the 'permanent'. But for Freudians and Nietzscheans, for whom there is nothing 'permanent' about human nature, self-realisation is not about connecting with our 'pure' 'moral' self, but about creating a new story about ourselves - a story that distinguishes us from the others.

Life as an 'experiment'

The re-description that we discussed above turns our world upside down. It offers us a completely new way of experiencing our lives. Instead of looking up or underneath, and searching for some atemporal power or fundamental and objective structure of the world, we seem to be only talking to and responding to other human beings. The purpose of life doesn't seem to be to connect with some antecedently given reality. Instead, humans life starts looking like an experiment; an experiment where we start from the knowledge of the consequences of our past actions, and try creating a better future in a hit or miss way. Our present has been shaped by our past actions and our future will be shaped by our present. There is nothing more to it.

In this radically humanized world, it is only other human beings that decide what is immoral and moral, subjective and objective, etc. We don't take these dichotomies to be antecedently given, but see them as the creation of human conversations – creations, which need to be evaluated for purposes they were expected to serve and not for their linkages with the true and objective structure of the world.

In Rortian words, while earlier we were aiming for 'objectivity' and transcendence, we now aim for solidarity; while earlier we wanted to tell a story about ourselves from an objective point, which doesn't belong to this or that community, we now see ourselves just as a member of this or that community, part of this or that moral web of doing things, etc. While earlier we wanted to get out or rise above contingent and historical conversations, now we see ourselves as nothing but constituted by these very historical and contingent conversations.

I think Rorty has, to some extent, succeeded in offering us a re-description which gels well with his humanist concerns. This new Rortian imagery is certainly better at serving humanist purposes than the traditional Platonist and realist imagery of Western Philosophy.

Chapter 3: Redefining transformative political activity

In the last chapter, we looked at Rorty's critique and humanist re-description of traditional Western philosophy – a re-description that is congruent with his humanist concerns.

Now, as a student of politics, my key interest in writing this dissertation is to look at the consequences of Rorty's thought on our perspectives on politics and political activity. In this chapter I want to spell out the alternative way of thinking about transformative political activity that Rorty offers us. First, we shall try to give a broad and general description of how we had been hitherto thinking about transformative political activity. Then we shall see how this traditional way of thinking about transformative political activity doesn't fit in with Rorty's re-description of traditional western philosophy. After this, we shall describe what redefinition of transformative political activity Rorty offers offers us- an alternative that coheres with his re-description of platonist and realist imagery of traditional western philosophy.

Traditional "Universalist" Conception of transformative political activity

Rorty points out that transformative or radical political activity is traditionally understood as an act of getting closer to the 'objective' and the 'true' and moving away from the 'subjective' and the 'false'. Its purpose was to wean us away from being concerned about our subjective and parochial self-interests and to make us think of humanity at large. Subjective preferences were seen as impediments to our ability to see the objective truth. In this vein, oppression and injustice were seen as a distortion of what is objectively true of the world and human nature – distortions which have been foisted by the certain

sections of society for their own parochial interests. 'Objectivity' and 'ahistorical truth', therefore, were thought to be the natural allies of Justice, Equality and Freedom.[53]

Radical saw their calling in speaking truth to the powers-that-be; in other words, they saw their task as clearing the distortions that certain sections have created or imposed for their own narrow self-interests. Progressive action was seen as an act of establishing institutions and practices that don't simply reflect the narrow interests of a certain section of society, but reflect the universal facts about human nature and the world – facts which are objectively true and antecedently given.

Most progressives claimed knowledge of some or the other objective fact about the world or human nature. They claimed that the powers-that-be have suppressed this truth for their own interests and saw their job as standing up and speaking out for this suppressed truth. Liberals based their politics on the 'objective' fact of human equality and freedom, and saw illiberal cultures and despotic regimes as impediments to the realization of this natural truth.

Marxists claimed the knowledge of the laws of history and saw the capitalist ideological apparatus as a smokescreen that has been created to serve the bourgeisie's selfish interests. Marxists thought of themselves as trying to rescue humanity from the 'false-consciousness' that it has been led into by bourgeoisie for its own interests. Similarly, many early feminists, like Mary Wollstonecraft talked about patriarchy as a distortion

[53]See Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in his *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 22

that has been imposed by men for their own interests.[54] Most of them saw political transformation as an act of getting away from these special-interest distortions and establishing a true and objective moral and political order – an order which is not just a reflection of the subjective interests of a particular section of society, but is based on objective and ahistorical facts about human nature and the world.

This traditional conception of transformative political action can be seen as an offshoot of the enlightenment belief that there are objective laws that govern the natural world, and scientific endeavours would someday reveal them to us. Impressed by this enlightenment idea, many thought that there can in fact be universal and objective judgments about moral and political issues – judgments that don't simply represent subjective views belonging to a particular culture or historical epoch, but are true across time and space.[55] These moral and political judgments were also thought of as somewhere locking up with the true structure of the natural world.

In this view, our acculturation in a particular tradition and its historical practices was seen as a stumbling block to the possibility of us rising up to that point of impartiality and objectivity from where we can have knowledge of true and objective views. Progress in politics and morality was seen as an act of putting in practice these universally true moral and political judgments. Rorty calls this the 'Universalist' conception of political and moral progress. He writes,

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[54] For a discussion of feminism, see Richard Rorty, "Feminism and Pragmatism," in his *Truth and Progress* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 205.

[55] See Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in his *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 22

> "They (Universalists) think of moral progress as an increasing ability to see the reality behind the illusions created by superstition, prejudice, and unreflective custom. The typical Universalist is a moral realist, someone who thinks that the true moral judgments are made true by something out there in the world. Universalists typically take this truth maker to be the intrinsic feature of human beings qua human. They think you can sort out the real from the illusory abominations by figuring out what those intrinsic features are and all that is required to figure this out is hard, clear thought."[56]

One can say that in this traditional way of thinking about transformative political activity, it is the scientist who is accorded the position of the ideal-typical role model[57]. Just as a scientist views herself as being in the business of telling us the objective truths about the natural world, progressives or radicals, thinking in this traditional way, thought of themselves as rescuing humanity from subjective self-interested views and guiding us towards the objective truth. Given this, impartiality and the capacity to rise above the local and being able to see transcendental truths is considered to be a badge of honour by both of them. Morevoer, both the scientist and the "universalist" share a deep contempt for the partial and the subjective.

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[56] Richard Rorty, "Feminism and Pragmatism," in his *Truth and Progress* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 205

[57] Rorty writes, "To most thinkers of the eighteenth century, it seemed clear that the access to nature that physical science had provided should now be followed by the establishment of social, political and economic institutions which were in accordance with Nature. Ever Since, Liberal social thought has centered around social reform as made possible by objective knowledge of what human beings are like – not knowledge of what Greeks or Frenchmen or Chinese are like, but of humanity as such. We are the heirs of this objectivist tradition, which centers around the assumption that we must step outside our community long enough to examine it in the light of something which transcends it, namely, that which it has in common with every other actual and possible human community." See Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in his *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 22

But the criticism of traditional western philosophy that we discussed in the second chapter raises serious doubts about the viability of this conception of political action. There, Rorty told us that we can never escape the lens of our language and history and look at the world from a neutral standpoint. In this view, we always access the world through the prism of language and ideas that we have been socially acculturated into. There is no escape from this position of partiality. Whatever we say about the world is always from a particular historical position. For a Rortian, therefore, there is no ahistorical point or 'skyhook' from where we can see these objective facts about the world and human nature.

But if there are no ahistorical facts about the world and human nature, how can we begin to think about transformative political activity? As we saw above, universalists base their politics on ahistorical and objective facts about human nature and the world. And non-availability of these ahistorical facts puts our universalist/traditional conception of transformative political activity in serious trouble. Now, one can no longer lay any claim to the knowledge of ahistorical 'truth' about the world and human nature. Further, no one can claim that their politics is about the establishment of the world order that reflects these objective facts and not the interests of this or that particular group. That sort of universalist transformative politics is in serious trouble. Following Rorty's critique, it is quite difficult to sustain a traditional universalist conception of transformation or progress.

Having spelled out the way in which we had been generally thinking about transformative political actitivity and the problems that this way of thinking about it faces, let us now turn to the alternative conception of transformation or progress offered

to us by Rorty- an alternative that fits in well with his re-descritption of traditional western philosophy described in the previous chapter.

Looking at Progress as an act of 'creation'

Rorty offers us a different way of thinking about radical political activity. He suggests that instead of thinking about progress as an act of finding or getting in touch with some antecedently given objective truth or real world, we should think of it as an act of creating something new – something which wasn't there earlier. Thus, contrary to the universalist's attempt to look deep inside the workings of the world to find out the truth, Rorty would suggest that a radical should look ahead and try imagining a better future – a future where the problems that we face in the present world would be overcome. For Rorty, a radical should see her calling not in clearing away the distortions that different people have foisted on the real objective world, but in offering new imaginative ways of looking at the world – new ways of talking and thinking about things that can overcome the problems that our current vocabulary has created or is facing. A radical, therefore, should see her task as 'creating' such new vocabularies. Talking about his alternative conception of political and moral progress, Rorty writes,

> " Pragmatism redescribes both intellectual and moral progress by substituting metaphors of evolutionary development for metaphors of progressively less distorted perception.....from a pragmatist angle, neither Christianity nor the Enlightenment nor contemporary feminism is a case of cognitive clarity overcoming cognitive distortion. Each is, instead, an example of evolutionary struggle – struggle guided by no Immanent teleology."[58]

[58] Richard Rorty, "Feminism and Pragmatism," in his *Truth and Progress* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 206

For Rorty and pragmatists, Christianity, Enlightenment and Feminism are all examples of vocabularies that we created to solve the problems that our prevalent vocabularies were facing. The purpose of these vocabularies was not to represent reality in a better way, but to overcome the problems that were faced by our old ways of thinking and talking about things. He fits them all in an evolutionary story about human beings.

Underlying this idea of progress as an act of 'creation' are Rorty's views on language and meaning that we discussed in the first chapter. There we saw how Rorty suggests that objects in this world don't have a meaning of their own – meaning to the objects is assigned by us because it helps us in dealing with specific problems. Thus, there is no antecedently given true meaning; meaning is a human construction and should be evaluated for its usefulness. If we realize that our current vocabulary – our way of talking and thinking about things- is creating more problems than it is solving, then we need to create new vocabularies that can overcome these limitations. This is the task that Rorty assigns to a radical. In a word, a radical should think of herself as trying to replace old ways of talking about things with new different ways which help us in overcoming our current problems.

Further, this new vocabulary is not something that comes out of the blue. Seeds of this new vocabulary are already present in the gaps and contradictions of our present vocabulary. These gaps are tension points where our various beliefs pull us in contradictory directions, thus failing to have them settle coherently. It is these gaps and contradictions that open up the possibilities for a new vocabulary. A new and better vocabulary is always an effort to fill these gaps by reweaving and relating the data in a

different way.[59] It is an effort to make our beliefs cohere with each other by looking at things in a different way.

To put it in another way, every linguistic or social practice or vocabulary has its moments of meaninglessness. These are moments when a vocabulary fails to provide us with reasonable explanations for an event; these are moments when we find currents words and meanings totally useless in describing our situation. To use a Rawlsian phrase, these are moments when we find that our general principles are not in line with our intuitions or our intuitions don't seem to be supporting our general principles. Commenting on feminist writer Fyre's description of her work as 'a sort of flirtation with meaninglessness', Rorty writes,

> "for meaninglessness is exactly what you have to flirt with when you are in between social, and in particular linguistic, practices – unwilling to take part in an old one but not yet having succeeded in creating a new one."[60]

It is to overcome these moments of meaninglessness that a new vocabulary is required. These meaningless moments and gaps of the current vocabulary encourage us to search for a new way of describing things – a way that can fill these gaps and give meaning to those meaningless moments. In Rawlsian terms, one can see this new vocabulary as an effort to achieve a new 'reflective equilibrium' between our intuitions and general

[59] We can see the debate about the relationship between the individual and the community as one of the 'tension-points' of liberal vocabulary. While most of liberal philosophers tend to regard individual as a separate autonomous right bearing agent, the institutions that they would need to implement these individual rights would definitely need strong community bonds. While they recognize individual as separate entity who is prior to the community, liberal institutions can't be imagined without strong community bonds. Most of the recent liberal philosophy can be seen as an effort to overcome this tension within liberalism.

[60] Ibid., 217

principles by revising both of them.[61] This new vocabulary, in turn, will soon have its own gaps and tensions which we are not in a position to imagine right now. A further new vocabulary will be required to overcome those problems. For Rorty, there is no end to this process of evolution. The task of a radical, therefore, is simply to further this non-teleological evolutionary conversation.

Poet over a scientist; imagination over reason

Universalists had thought of scientists as their hero. They tried to model their activity after that of a scientist. Just as a scientist claims to give us the objective knowledge about the world, a universalist radical also claimed to know the objective moral judgments, judgments which are not influenced by her subjective position but which in some way represent the objective structure of the world or human nature. Both of them saw themselves as pursuing 'truth'. Both of them aimed for the permanent and the ahistorical.

Rorty suggests that in place of a scientist, a radical should think of herself as a Poet. A poet doesn't claim to give us an objective and impartial point of view on the world. Good poetry is, more often than not, a new way of describing the reality that we are already familiar with. Poets use the language that we possess in a metaphorical way to offer us insights and meanings that we earlier didn't know or think about.[62] They don't claim to rise above the context and the language, but tell us a new story by reweaving the words and context in a different way. They explore new possibilities with the same words and meanings by rearranging them creatively.

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[61] Ibid., 204

[62] For a discussion on 'Metaphor as the growing point of language', see Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as Science, Metaphor and Politics," in his *Essays on Heidegger and others* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 12.

For Rorty, a radical should also think of herself as exploring these new and unseen possibilities. She should, like a poet, start from the web of meaning and practices in which she finds herself and try to weave a new story out of it – a story or description that is better and overcomes the problems that earlier descriptions of the same reality were creating.

While for universalists, the mark of a radical was his impartiality and the capability to use reason to have an objective viewpoint; for Rorty, the important characteristic of a radical is imagination and courage to think anew out of the old.[63]. Faculty of imagination, therefore, plays a central role in this sort of progressive activity. It takes over the role which 'reason' played in our traditional 'universalist' conception of progress.

Rorty is the not the first one to emphasize on the importance of imagination over reason. Romantics in the 18th century and later many continental philosophers, have written about the emancipatory potential of imagination.

But Rorty thinks that there is a difference between how others – Romantics and continental philosophers – have thought about imagination and how Pragmatists like him think about it. While for Romantics imagination was a worthwhile thing on its own, Pragmatist hope to use imagination for betterment of humanity. They want progressives to use imagination to suggest innovative solutions that can overcome the problems that we face. Further, Rorty doesn't want a radical thinker to simply imagine a better future; he also wants her to suggest ways and means to realize that future. He wants her to link

[63] Richard Rorty, "Feminism and Pragmatism," in his *Truth and Progress* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 215

her imagined utopia with our present by suggesting changes that can lead us to utopia. Targeting French Philosophers for their flight of imagination, Rorty writes,

> "it seems to us as if our French colleagues are too willing to find, or make, a linguistic islet and then invite people to move into it, and not interested enough in building causeways between such islets and the mainland."[64]

For Rorty, these causeways are very important. Without these causeways – which tell us what changes in our current practices will help us move towards our imaged futures - a utopia might remain only a utopia. He wants his radical to be both imaginative like a poet and have an eye for detail like 'social workers and engineers'[65].

Rortian Radical - Continuing the Conversation

We can also understand universalists as those who aimed at giving us a final description of the world. Universalists hoped that once we have this most objective and ultimate description, we wouldn't need any further enquiry or engagement. They hoped for a finality, which would bring an end to philosophical struggles and conversations between different cultures and vocabularies. They thought that things can be settled once and for all.

A Rortian radical doesn't have these ahistorical ambitions. She doesn't aim at giving a final description which can close off the need for further conversations. She sees herself as simply continuing the conversation by offering one more way of talking or looking at

[64] Richard Rorty, "Cosmopolitanism without emancipation: A response to Jean-Francois Lyotard" in his *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 221

[65] See Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as science, as metaphor, and as politics," in his *Essays on Heidegger and Others* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9.

things which might turn out to be better than our current practices.[66] There is no final or concluding conversation for her – every new idea or solution is simply a response to the consequences of ideas and solutions that our predecessors had offered. She has no ambitions to settle things for all times to come.

In fact, Rorty urges us to see Western philosophy as one such conversation. Here, every new philosopher can be seen as responding to the work of her predecessors. New philosophical works could be seen as attempting to overcome the limitations of the work of earlier philosophers. It is the work of earlier philosophers and its consequences which should serve as the criteria for evaluating new theories and philosophies, and not some antecedently given objective 'truths'.

In contrast to traditional philosophers' attempt to give us an ahistorical and permanent view of things, Rorty gives us an evolutionary and historical perspective. He wants us to get rid of our ahistorical ambitions and think in a far more grounded and historical way. This evolutionary and historical perspective of Rorty also gets reflected in his suggestions to Liberals, Marxists and Feminists.

A 'Post-Modernist Bourgeois' Liberal

A Rortian liberal can be contrasted with a Kantian liberal. A Kantian liberal considered liberalism as being founded on universally true and objective judgments about the world. For her, liberal philosophy provided foundations for liberal practices like free press, basic human rights for everyone and separation of power within the government. For her, liberal philosophy grounded liberal practice.

[66] see Richard Rorty, "Analytical and Continental philosophy", in his Philosophy as cultural Politics (New York, Cambridge University Press), 124

A Rortian liberal, in contrast, doesn't think of liberalism in this philosophical sense. She views liberalism as a set of practices that have emerged over a period of time in rich countries of the west. These liberal practices got established and institutionalised not because they were based on true metaphysical and ontological foundations, but because they proved to be useful in organizing collective life in these particular countries.

For a Rortian, liberal practices have nothing much to do with liberal philosophy. For her, these practices are the result of countless conversations and struggles about the consequences of various actions, and are in no way dependent on the universal foundations supplied by Kant or Rawls. Rather, liberal philosophy is to be looked at as an attempt to weave a philosophical narrative that can provide us with reasonable explanations and justifications for the practices that we find useful in our daily life.[67] In contrast with Kantian philosophical liberalism, Rorty calls his liberalism 'postmodernist bourgeois liberalism'. He writes,

> "I shall call the Hegelian attempt to defend the institutions and practices of the rich North Atlantic democracies without using such buttresses "postmodernist bourgeois liberalism." I call it "bourgeois" to emphasize that most of the people I am talking about would have no quarrel with the Marxist claim that a lot of those institutions and practices are possible and justifiable only in the certain historical, and especially economic, conditions. I want to contrast Bourgeois liberalism, the attempt to full fill the hopes of North Atlantic Bourgeoisie, with Philosophical Liberalism, a collection of Kantian Principles thought to justify us in having these hopes. Hegelians think

[67]See Richard Rorty, "Human Rights," in his *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 171.

> that these principles are useful for summarizing these hopes, but not for justifying them."[68]

A Rortian 'post-modernist bourgeois liberal' views liberalism as a result of social conversations that we have had over a period of time. She recommends liberalism and liberal institutions not because they are philosophically correct but because she thinks that this is the best way of organizing our collective life – best among the alternatives that have yet been imagined and tried. She doesn't search for ahistorical truth in her liberal institutions, but views them as the result of very contingent conversations and conditions, and accepts and defends them simply because they are the best institutions available[69].

This Rortian liberalism is anchored in our contingent human conversations and not some philosophical theory or antecedently given facts about the world. It is seen as a human creation, a creation that has developed over a period of time. I think this Rortian view of liberalism gels well with his critique of traditional western philosophy and his ideas on humanism. These liberals are not claiming that ahistorical facts or truth is on their side. They are simply saying that they have invented certain practices and institutional settings that they find useful in organizing their collective life, and think that they might prove useful to others as well.

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[68] Richard Rorty, "Post Modernist Bourgeois Liberalism", *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.80, No.10, Part 1: Eightieth Annual meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Divison (Oct. 1983), 585

[69] Rorty writes, "The pragmatists justification of toleration, free inquiry, and the quest for undistorted communication can only take the form of a comparison between societies which exemplify these habits and those which do not, leading up to the suggestion that nobody who has experienced both would prefer the latter. It is exemplified by Winston Churchill's defense of democracy as the worst form of government imaginable, except for all the others which have been tried so far. Such justification is not by reference to a criterion, but by reference to various detailed practical advantages." See Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in his *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 29

A 'banalised' Left in place of a Marxist 'theoretical' left

Rorty has similar suggestions for Leftists. Leftist talk, until recently, was largely dominated by theory. It was full of claims to objective knowledge about the world – whether it is the laws of history or structure of the capitalist state. Leftists claimed that their analysis is based on these true and objective facts about the world, facts which have been suppressed by the powers-that-be for their own purposes. They claimed to base their progressive politics on these fundamental and foundational precepts. Leftists, especially Marxists, tend to locate the causes of every type of oppression in the capitalist mode of production. They claimed that they have knowledge of the 'root causes' and could clearly see how everything links up with everything else. They suggest that unless we deal with these root causes, we cannot make much difference in the 'superstructure'. Without dealing with these 'root causes,' we can do nothing more than minor tinkering here and there, tinkering which wouldn't lead to much change. For them, radical change needs this special knowledge of root causes.

Rorty describes this leftist theoretical talk as the habit of tying our local and concrete fantasies about a better life with something bigger and abstract. Leftists of this sort would argue that our local and concrete fantasies wouldn't have much effect unless this something bigger and abstract permits or changes. He writes:

> "A lot of fantasies can stand on their own without being twined around some large conceptually graspable object. These are the homely, familiar fantasies shared by the educated and the uneducated, by us middle-class intellectuals in U.S and European Universities and by people living in the shantytowns outside of Lima. They are Concrete fantasies about a future in which everybody can get work from which they derive some satisfaction and for which they are decently paid, and

> which they are safe from violence and humiliation. We intellectuals have, since Plato, supplemented these small concrete, local, banal, fantasies with a larger, blurrier, more sophisticated set of fantasies. Between Plato and Hegel, these were fantasies that tied in the small concrete fantasies with a story about human beings' relation to something ahistorical – something like God or human nature or the scientifically knowable nature of reality. After Hegel, and especially after Lenin, we switched to a story about Human beings' relation to History. History itself, reified into something that has a shape and a movement, took the place of an atemporal power. But we still explain why the small fantasies haven't been realized by claiming that their fulfillment depended upon attaining a closer relation to something larger and more powerful than ourselves. We say, for instance, that our efforts have so far failed because the "right historical moment" has not yet come."[70]

This sort of Marxist left views small, local and concrete changes with contempt. They aim for total revolution and despise 'piecemeal reforms'.

One other way to put it is that for this sort of left, issues of schools, healthcare and protection from cruelty are all linked and can be traced back to the fundamental structure of the capitalist mode of production. They would argue that until and unless we replace this capitalist structure, nothing would change substantially.

I think this sort of theoretical Marxist left faces two kinds of problems. We saw in the second chapter how, for Rorty, everything is an interpretation. There is no way one can rise above our historical position and view the world from the metaphorical 'skyhook'. Accordingly, the Marxist claim to the knowledge of root causes of oppression is almost like claiming that they can rise up to this point of impartiality and tell us how everything links up with everything else, and how all the misery in this world can be seen as

[70] Richard Rorty, "The end of Leninism, Havel, and Social Hope," in his *Truth and Progress* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 232.

emerging from one fundamental source. In the wake of Rorty's critique of the Platonist and realist imagery of traditional western philosophy, it is very difficult to sustain this sort of ahistorical and objective perspective.

Furthermore, this emphasis by Marxists on the roots causes of oppression and objective laws of history gives too much importance to philosophers and intellectuals in the progressive activity. It seems as though it is only these people who can claim to have superior knowledge of root causes and objective laws. Lenin's belief in the role of the party as 'vanguard of the masses' is based on exactly this assumption. According to this view, without the guidance of the party intellectuals and leaders, the masses may just get satisfied with bourgeois style reforms and would not be able to get to the root cause of their oppression.

I think this emphasis on the need for the special knowledge of root causes of oppression for 'correct' progressive activity rebels against the democratic consensus of our age; it rebels against the idea that everyone should have an equal say in organizing collective life. This sort of Marxist theoretical talk puts theory above practice. Here, progressiveness of an action is determined not by its consequences and the popular consensus about the same, but by its place in the Marxist theoretical view of things. Here, for a progressive, common people and their opinion become secondary to Marxist theory. It doesn't leave any space for people themselves to decide what is good and how to approach and attain it. It simply supplies them with a well-knit framework or theory in which they are supposed to fit themselves in.

Rorty suggests that it would be better if leftists gave up this Marxist theoretical and scientific vocabulary. He suggests that instead of thinking of themselves as dealing with root causes and aiming to change all the problems of the world in a single, one fundamental stroke, it would be better if leftists thought of themselves as making the life of their compatriots better; better, by suggesting solutions to their current problems. He would suggest that instead of thinking of their enterprise in scientific and theoretical terms, they should think of it using metaphors from our daily lives; instead of thinking of themselves as standing up with truth and objectivity, they should simply think of themselves as fighting selfishness and human misery. He writes,

> "I think the time has come to drop the terms "capitalism" and "socialism" from the political vocabulary of the left. It would be good idea to stop talking about "the anticapitalist struggle" and to substitute something banal and untheoretical – something like "the struggle against avoidable human misery." More generally, I hope we can banalize the entire vocabulary of leftist political deliberation. I suggest we start talking about greed and selfishness rather than about bourgeois ideology, about starvation wages and layoffs rather than about the commodification of labor, and about differential per-pupil expenditure on schools and differential access to health care rather than about the division of society into classes."[71]

This banalised left would be more concerned about policies and their consequences, rather than the right theory of capitalism and state; they would be more concerned about how to get more children into schools, and in making sure that nobody sleeps hungry when enough food is available than in analyzing the contradictions inherent in capitalist society and proposing actions that may lead to its replacement by a dictatorship of the

[71] Richard Rorty, "The end of Leninism, Havel, and Social Hope," in his *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 229.

proletariat. This banalised left would be more concerned about proposing concrete solution to our concrete problems rather than waiting for fundamental change in the 'root causes' of oppression.[72]

Moreover, Rortian leftists wouldn't think of themselves as solving problems for all times to come. They would be acutely aware of their own limitations. They would think of themselves as simply being in conversations with and responding to the needs of their very historical and contingent compatriots, and not as responding to some ahistorical truth or atemporal power. They would evaluate their actions not for theoretical correctness but for their usefulness in solving the problems that their compatriots face.

This sort of a leftist would not draw sharp distinctions between 'bourgeois-style- reforms' and 'radical change'. She might dub an action as a 'bourgeois' reform if she feels that more could have been done to solve the problem in a better way, but it wouldn't be theoretical distinctions that Marxists seemed to have made- viz, distinctions between actions which deal with fundamental causes and actions which do not.

In this sort of politics, a radical does not get guidance from theory and philosophy. She gets guidance from the consequences of our past actions. It is only by keeping the bad consequences of past actions in mind, and by imagining better practices and institutions,

[72] Rorty writes, "Given the failures of central governmental planning, we can no longer make "nationalization of the means of production" a central element in our definition of "socialism." Instead, we have to use some such definition of "socialism" as Habermas's: "overcoming the.... rise to dominance of cognitive-instrumental [interests]." (Alternatively, perhaps: "overcoming the greed and selfishness which are still built into the motivational patterns impressed on our children, and into the institutions within which they will have to live.") We have to find a definition that commits us both to greater equality and a change in moral climate, without committing us to any particular economic setup. Nobody so far has invented an economic setup that satisfactorily balances decency and efficiency, but at the moment most helpful alternative seems to be government-controlled capitalism plus welfare- statism (Holland, Sweden, Ireland). There is nothing sacred about either the free-market or the central planning; the proper balance between the two is a matter of experimental tinkering." see Richard Rorty, "Thugs and Theorists: A reply to Bernstein" *Political theory*, 1987, 15, 564

that she moves forward. There is nothing else that guides her. I think this Rortian banalised left sits comfortably with his humanism. Here, the left is seen as responding to our everyday concerns and not to some atemporal power of theory. Moreover, for this sort of Rortian leftist, nothing is given in advance – there is no antecedently given framework or theory that she follows. She simply responds to problems of her community based on her experience of various policies, practices, institutions and their consequences. She doesn't have the comfort of a theory to fall back on. She goes ahead with an experimental view towards life and politics.

A 'creative' Feminism

Similar are Rorty's views on feminism. But, before considering his suggestions to feminists, let us first take a detour into how a 'universalist' would have looked at women's issues.

Universalists claimed to base their political activity on the ahistorical facts about the world and human nature. They can also be thought of as claiming that these permanent and ahistorical facts about the world and human nature provide us with a permanent and ahistorical political and moral vocabulary – a vocabulary that can be used to describe problems and make claims in all times and places. This political and moral vocabulary is an all-encompassing framework in which all our moral problems can be fitted – not only those problems which we face today, but also those that may arise in future. Rorty writes,

> "Universalist philosophers assume, with Kant, that all the logical space necessary for moral deliberation is now available- that all the important

> truths about right and wrong can not only be stated but be made plausible, in language already to hand."[73]

For example, a universalist might claim that the objective fact of 'human equality' and the rights it entails provides us with a framework which can deal with all cases of inequality across time. In Rortian words, it provides us with all the logical space through which we can describe and analyze new cases of inequality.

For universalists, therefore, there is nothing special about women's inequality. For them, the problem simply is that although theoretically women have equal rights, these haven't translated into practice.

Thus, universalists fit in the women's question in the already available vocabulary of human equality. For them, the problem is not with principles but with practice. The moral principles that we already possess are considered sufficient to deal with the issue of women's inequality. Even early feminists, like Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges, thought about women's situation in these universalist terms. Talking about them, Rorty writes,

> "Universalists would prefer to think of feminism as Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges did, as a matter of rights that are already recognizable and describable, although not yet granted."[74]

For these feminists, the problem is not with current moral vocabulary, but with its implementation. For them, the task of feminist political activity is to fight for the

[73] Richard Rorty, "Feminism and Pragmatism," in his *Truth and Progress* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 203
[74] Ibid., 202

implementation of moral ideas that we already possess but haven't been extended to women because of men's self-interest and hypocrisy.

But many later feminists contest this universalist confidence in the ability of one objective moral and political vocabulary to cover all the cases. They talk about how the universalist vocabulary which seemed appealing to earlier feminists, is in fact rather limiting in nature. They suggest that the so-called universalist vocabulary was invented by men keeping their own interests in mind, and it is very difficult for women to make their claims in that language. In this language, many rightful claims that women would like to make may sound absurd to women themselves. They argue that this moral vocabulary simply doesn't recognize women as they would like to recognize themselves, but looks at them through men's eyes. Commenting on Catharine Mackinnon's work, Rorty Writes,

> "She notes that present sex-determination law assumes that women "have to meet either the male standard for males or the male standard for females....for purposes of sex discrimination law, to be a woman means either to be like a man or to be like a lady." In my terms, MacKinnon is saying that unless women fit into the logical space prepared for them by current linguistic and other practices, the law does not know how to deal with them."[75]

For these feminists, the feminist agenda would not be served by simply putting in practice the moral ideas that we already possess. For them, 'moral ideas' that men claimed to be objective and based on natural facts about the world and the human nature, are just a reflection of the male interests. Given this, they would suggest that women and other oppressed groups should think of inventing new moral vocabularies – vocabularies

[75] Ibid.

that serve their interests better – instead of simply describing themselves in the terms of their oppressor.[76]

Rorty agrees with Mackinnon that feminists should think of themselves as offering a new vocabulary. Given this, he places feminism in his evolutionary story about human beings. He suggests that feminists shouldn't think of themselves as telling us the ahistorical and objective truth about the world and human nature, but as providing women with a better way of talking about their experience.

Indeed, there must have been what Fyre calls 'meaningless moments' for women in the earlier vocabulary. In these moments, women must have felt a gap between their feelings and the words in which these feelings can be expressed. The new vocabulary proposed by feminists should be seen as an attempt to invent new words and practices which can express women's feelings in a better way. They should be seen as providing meaning to those meaningless moments. Rorty writes,

> "To sum up: I am suggesting that we see the contemporary feminist movement as playing the same role in intellectual and moral progress as was played by, for example, plato's academy, the early Christians meeting in the catacombs, the invisible Copernican colleges of the seventeenth century, groups of workingmen gathering to discuss Tom Paine's pamphlets, and many other clubs that were formed to try out new ways of speaking and to gather the moral strength by achieving increasing semantic authority over their members, thereby increasing the ability of those members to find their moral identities in their membership in such groups."[77]

Feminists, according to Rorty, should not adopt the universalist strategy of thinking of themselves as fitting the women in the already available moral vocabulary, but as

[76] Ibid. 204
[77] Richard Rorty,"Feminism and Pragmatism," in his *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 223

creating a new vocabulary. He suggests that this pragmatist view of transformative political activity can serve women's purposes better. He thinks that it gels well with many feminists' critique of Enlightenment ideas and their claim to truth and objectivity. Many feminists had criticized these enlightenment ideas for beings male centric but didn't know what to replace them with. Against this backdrop, Rorty thinks that this pragmatist view of transformation as a creative activity can serve both these feminist purposes – it can let them criticize enlightenment ideas and not ask them to offer a more objective and rational viewpoint on world. They can just think of themselves as offering a better perspective for women – a perspective which scores over the current patriarchal vocabulary and practices.

Above, we saw how Rorty offers us a completely different way of looking at transformative political activity. I think this way of looking at transformative political activity gels well with his views on language and self – views that we discussed in the last chapter. There we read Rorty as criticizing the search for something that is antecedently 'given'. We saw how he suggests that we should see language not as representing the real world, but as a tool that we have invented to serve our purposes. That line of argument led us to this chapter, wherein we discussed how Rorty can be understood as suggesting that a radical should give up her fascination with the 'given'. Instead of searching for this 'given', she should try creating something new – something which is better than what we currently have.

Conclusion

Rorty's views provide us a completely new way of experiencing and understanding this world. In this new humanist world, there are no 'givens' – whether they are natural objects or some universally true judgments. How everything is described and looked at is determined by the conversational framework that it is part of– nothing exists outside these frameworks. These conversational frameworks are tied around concerns, belief-systems and practices that we find useful in facing everyday challenges.

Rorty can also be seen as offering us one such conversational framework – a framework which revolves around his concern for human freedom. His work can be seen as providing us with details of how a humanist like him should talk about various issues – whether they are philosophical, political or personal. Although we have already discussed quite a few details of this humanist conversational framework, I think few other points can be emphasized in this conclusion.

One of the most important aspects of this conversational framework is the recognition of the radical contingency of everything. There are no permanent and ahistorical 'givens' in this framework. Everything has its roots in our culture and history - whether it is science, language or our own 'self'. There is nothing outside our culture and history- everything comes from within. According to this view, change or transformation happens not by sorting out things by comparing them with something 'given' or 'permament' or something which exists outside this framework, but by our urge to make our conversational frameworks coherent. In other words, change or transformation is basically a matter of removing the tension-points of our current vocabulary – tension

points where our different beliefs seem to be contradicting each other – by creating new and better vocabularies which overcome these contradictions; it is matter of revising one part of this framework to make it fit better with others

This is the 'holist' perspective on things in comparison to the traditional platonist and realist perspective. In comparison to platonic and realist habit of giving meaning to objects by relating them to some antecedently given scheme of things, for a holist, things and objects get their meaning from their relation with each other. For her, there is nothing outside a framework to relate to. Moreover, for her, there is no way one can revise all of her beliefs at one time; one can only revise parts of her beliefs while keeping others constant.

What we read in last two chapters was one such effort to fit in various different parts of our culture and history with each other. It was an effort to fit in our present day belief that humans should decide things for themselves and not accept the dictates of some external authority or power with the traditional philosophical beliefs that we have inherited from philosophers like Plato. We saw how Rorty provides us with a re-description of our traditional philosophical beliefs to make them compatible with our modern day concern with human freedom. It was an effort to fit in our antithetical beliefs by revising one of them (our Platonist and realist philosophical imagery) in line with the other (concern with 'human freedom').

While recognizing the radical contingency of everything else, this humanist conversational framework also recognizes its own contingent status – Rorty would suggest that we should look at it as just one more way of talking about things; one more

way in which we have weaved a narrative to explain and justify the concerns and practices that we find useful. This brings us to our next point about the importance of an ironical attitude towards things for a humanist.

Rorty would suggest that a humanist should be ironical in her attitude towards her beliefs. By an ironical attitude he means that while she should argue and stand for her beliefs, she should also have a realization that her beliefs only serve a contingent purpose. She shouldn't take her current vocabulary as the last and the final description of things.

It is difficult for some to imagine such an ironical character. To many it may seem like a contradiction in terms. One may argue that it is impossible for one to believe and stand for something and have doubts about it at the same time.

But I think we can imagine such an ironist if we re-conceptualize the 'self' as a mixture of beliefs and doubts about these very beliefs. One can never fully believe in or doubt everything. We always move between these beliefs and doubts. We can read Rorty as emphasizing more on this 'doubting' part of our self. We can read him as suggesting that it would be better if we develop an ironical self - a self who has learned to stand up for her current beliefs and principles, while also keeping her eyes open to other beliefs and principles that may prove to be more useful. Such a self never accepts any vocabulary as final. She always maintains a skeptical and ironical attitude towards her current description of things. She only accepts her current descriptions for their utility and because she doesn't have a better description to offer at the moment.

Rorty is suggesting that such an ironical attitude towards our beliefs is far more compatible for a humanist world where there are no 'givens'; a world where everything is seen as a human creation that serves some purpose or the other.

Other than the recognition of this radical contingency and the, and development of this ironical attitude, Rorty is also providing us with a new goal for our intellectual activity. In a Platonist and realist world, intellectuals aimed for objectivity - they wanted to give an impartial view of the world which not only reflects their culture and historical position, but tells us the ahistorical and permanent truth about the world. In this humanist world which Rorty has painted for us intellectuals aim for 'solidarity' rather than 'objectivity'. In other words, instead of trying to shed light on the objective viewpoint on the world or trying to give us 'the view from nowhere', they should simply try to offer us viewpoints which are acceptable to more and more people. In fact, Rorty gives us a new definition of objectivity. He suggests that we should think of the urge for objectivity as simply an urge for justifying our beliefs to more and more people. We should think of it as our urge to continuously expand the circle of people to whom we have to justify our beliefs.

He would suggest that we should evaluate progress not in terms of 'objectivity' but in terms of increasing solidarity. We should evaluate new vocabularies in terms of their ability to justify themselves to more and more people. We could see Marxism, feminism and other narratives as just providing us with new ways of talking – new ways of talking that can be justified to more and more people; they let us feel solidarity with more and more people by bringing in workers, women and other hitherto excluded sections in our imagination of 'we'.

Rorty doesn't have a non-circular foundational argument to make in favour of this replacement of our urge for objectivity by our urge for solidarity. He simply thinks that this urge to not look local and particular is part of the western cultural imagination that he has inherited. In asking us to think of increasing solidarity as our aim, he is simply referring to this anti-local imagination of his local western culture.

It is this radically contingent humanist world that Rorty paints for us. This world is political and democratic in comparison with the theoretical and philosophical world that realists and platonists inhabited. Here we seem to be just involved in back and forth conversations with other human beings, and not as trying to relate to something other than and outside these conversations. Here, we are aware of the radical contingency of everything, have doubts about our current descriptions and hope to provide better descriptions in future.

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